



Section 2

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus: A Novel*

by Stephen Marlowe

The *Memoirs of Christopher Columbus* is a fictionalized account of the life of the legendary explorer. This excerpt depicts the historic first encounter of Columbus and his crew with the Taino in 1492. As you read, imagine how you would have reacted if you had been a Taino or a crew member.

We pull steadily for the shore, ten men in each caravel's boat, a round dozen in *Santa Maria's*. For once even the slovenly Pinzón brothers, who have trimmed their beards and slicked down their hair over their close-set eyes, look presentable. They have broken out new clothes that can almost pass for uniforms—clean white jerkins, black velvet doublets, black tights. Oarsmen, musketeers and crossbowmen wear clean, sun-bleached jerkins and hose. As we approach the shore I stand in the prow to unfurl the colors of Castile and León, the golden castle and the purple lion, and the red and yellow stripes of Aragon.

Behind us *Santa Maria*, *Niña* and *Pinta* ride at anchor in a bay sheltered by reefs of a porous pink coral the likes of which no European has ever seen. Ahead is a dazzling crescent of white sand beach, and beyond the beach a wall of green jungle. The surf here on the western side of the island (where we have sailed, seeking a safe passage through the reefs) is gentle.

As we sweep close to that dazzling beach, I experience an intense yet dreamlike feeling that I have stood in this boat's prow before, and yet, paradoxically, that this is the first day of Creation.

"Up oars!" shouts Peralonso Niño and in unison eighteen oars flash skyward. A wind ruffles the royal standard; I can feel it tug at the staff. A single large green and yellow bird darts close and raucously welcomes us with a voice eerily human. The three boats simultaneously scrape bottom. I raise one bare foot over the gunwale.

But wait—this is a historic moment.

Am I prepared for it? As I take that first step ashore, do I say something deathless and profoundly appropriate, casting my words like a challenge down the corridors of history to intrepid explorers as yet unborn? Do I perhaps say, as I plant the royal banner on the beach, "One small step for a Christian, one giant step for Christendom," thus beating Neil Armstrong by almost 500 years?

As I take that first step ashore, do I say something deathless and profoundly appropriate, casting my words like a challenge down the corridors of history to intrepid explorers as yet unborn?

No, there are no half-billion T.V. viewers around

the world to watch me, no periodical has purchased the serial rights to my adventures for a king's ransom, no publisher has advanced an even greater fortune for *Columbus's Journal* (so-called), no mission control exists to monitor my every move. Only the citizens of Palos, and a few score people at that Peripatetic Royal Court visiting God-knows-where in Spain right now, even suspect we have crossed the vastness of the Ocean Sea to this small and lovely tropical island, part of the Indian archipelago, I am convinced, with fabled gold-roofed Cipango just over the horizon.

So I do not utter wisdom for the ages.

What do I say, uneasily and with reason, as I nudge Peralonso Niño, is: "There's someone in the woods over there."

We all freeze, our eyes scanning the foliage (sun-dappled, secret, alien). Again there is a flash of movement, and suddenly there they are, no longer in the woods but coming out.

"Crossbowmen, front!" says Martín Alonzo, but I raise a hand and shake my head.

These natives of the Indian archipelago are but ten in number and not only unarmed, except for

small harmless-looking spears with fish-tooth points, but naked. They are neither black-skinned (as might have been expected, according to Aristotle, since we are more or less on the same latitude as the west coast of Africa) nor white like Europeans. No, they are an indeterminate shade between, a sort of bronzy color that, with imagination and in dim light, you could almost call red. Tan then, a sort of ruddy tan. Tall, well proportioned, their coarse (but not African kinky) hair worn horse-tail long, their limbs straight and smooth-muscled. They peer at our tall-masted ships at anchor, our boats at the water's edge, ourselves taking our first steps across the dazzling (and hot underfoot) sand—their whole world, their whole conception of the nature of things altered at a stroke forever. And innocently and with a naive delight, they smile.

Inspired, I drop to my knees and thank God for sending us here safely, across that vastness of Ocean Sea, and on both sides of me the men are kneeling, and then I rise and draw my ceremonial sword, jewel-encrusted hilt catching the sunlight, and in fine theatrical style raise it skyward as I plant the royal standard and claim this island for the Kingdoms of Castile, León and Aragon, for Queen Isabel and King Fernando, for Spain, for Christianity. In thanksgiving I name it the Island of the Holy Saviour.

The Indians—for what else can I call natives of this Indies archipelago—come closer to watch the arcane ceremony.

Some crewmen remain on their knees, praying. But Vicente Yáñez Pinzón, neither rising nor praying still, does an odd sort of pivot on his knees to face me and in a humble voice speaks. I won't reproduce the precise, embarrassing words, but on behalf of the men of Niña he apologizes for not giving the Admiral of the Ocean Sea, not to mention the Viceroy of the Indies which I now am, his full trust.

One by one the landing party comes to me to ask forgiveness. Only Juan Cosa and Chachu stand silently by, watching.

"Command us, Viceroy!" passionately exclaims Constable Harana, even as he casts suspicious glances at the advancing Indians who, by this time, have ringed us close so that Martín Alonzo again

turns to his crossbowmen and again I must signal him, no.

The boldest of the bronzy-skinned men approaches me and with a smile and a mouthing of gibberish (which anthropologists will later learn is the Arawak language) touches my left sleeve, gently rolling the soft velvet between his fingers. It is clear he has never seen a man clothed before.

I call Luís Torres the interpreter forward.

"Ask him the name of this place, and of himself," I say.

Torres does so, with a show of confidence, in Latin.

The Indian responds incomprehensibly, if musically.

Torres, less confidently, tries Hebrew.

The Indian responds with equal incomprehensibility.

Torres, clearly worried, tries Ladino, Aramaic, Spanish.

Same lack of success.

We all wait for Arabic, that mother of languages.

Torres takes a deep breath and tries Arabic.

And the Indian, who I now realize is a boy of no more than fourteen, throws back his head and laughs.

We all assume this signifies comprehension. But his response is again incomprehensible, if musical.

Gentle, green-eyed, girlishly slim Luís Torres is now desperate. He has come with us, he must feel, under false pretenses.

He tries a sort of sign language, poking his chest and saying, "Torres."

The Indian, grinning, pokes his own chest. "Torres."

Luís Torres sighs and tries again. He spreads his arms broadly to include the beach, the jungle. He bends and scoops up a handful of sand, lets it trickle through his fingers, then spreads his arms again as his expressive face asks a silent question.

The Indian jumps with excitement.

"Guanahaní!" he cries. Then he pokes his own chest and makes the same sound: "Guanahaní."

Comprehension comes to Luís Torres. "Their name for this island is Guanahaní and the people call themselves that too—Guanahaní. Get it?"

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I get it. Torres and the Guanahaní spokesman continue to smile at each other in a kind of basic sub-linguistic communion.

“Ask him which way’s Cipango,” says Martín Alonzo, “ask him where’s the gold.”

But, “One thing at a time,” I tell him with a viceregal smile, and send two oarsmen back to Santa Maria’s boat for the sea chest full of trinkets, the sort that have proven so popular with the Fan people of West Africa. The chest is set on the sand and with a flourish Pedro Terreros opens it.

“Don’t,” cautions Rodrigo de Segovia, “give all your trinkets to the very first natives you encounter. Trinkets don’t grow on trees.”

The royal comptroller fails to curb Pedro’s munificence. Out of the sea chest, like a magician, he plucks red wool caps, brass rings, strings of bright glass beads and little round falconry bells.

Collective oohs and ahs come from the Guanahaní as Pedro distributes the trinkets. The bells are the clear favorite. Soon their tinkling fills the air, along with Indian laughter, very like our own.

I send to the boat again, this time for empty oak water casks. Luís Torres goes through a frenzy of sign language to indicate thirst and drinking. The Guanahaní spokesman claps his hands, grins, jumps up and down and jabbars to his cohorts, who lift the casks to their shoulders.

So laden, the Indians (or archipelagans, if you prefer) march off. Constable Harana gives them a suspicious look and I know that Martín Alonzo will call for his crossbowmen again.

“We’ll go with them,” I say to forestall him, and detail a guard to stay with the boats.

With us lumbering behind, the ten archipelagans slip silently with our casks through the deep shadows of the jungle (bird calls, strange small unidentifiable crunching sounds, cheeps and chirps and pips and squeaks, sudden slithery rushes, frail querulous cries, clicks and howls and mini-grunts, all slightly unnerving) to a spring, where we are not permitted to lift a finger. The Indians draw water, letting us sample its sweetness from a calabash; then we Spaniards sit against the broad reddish-brown

trunks of unfamiliar trees, relaxing as the complexity of jungle noises assumes its proper place as natural background music, and watch the Indians, in high good spirits, *do our work for us*. . . .

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“Where’s the gold? Ask him, will you? Where’s the gold?” Martín Alonzo demands impatiently of Luís Torres as we return to the boats, the archipelagans sagging under the weight of our full water casks.

Second time around, my viceregal smile’s a bit forced. “All in good time,” I tell Pinzón, not wild about the look on his face—an apparent compression of the small features, a meanness especially around the eyes. Gold fever if ever I saw it. . . .

Who can really blame Martín Alonzo? He knows as well as I that whatever else we find, gold is crucial to the Great Venture. Gold—gold in quantity—will alone persuade the royals to send out a second, larger expedition.

With me in command, naturally. I’m Admiral of the Ocean Sea, not to mention viceroy and governor for life.

Sometimes I dream of myself living the viceregal life in a vast, princely palace in a vast, princely realm. It could happen. In Cathay and Cipango, there’s gold aplenty. Marco Polo said so, and he was there.

But where, exactly, are *we*?

Activity Options

1. With a small group of classmates, write a skit about Columbus’s first encounter with the Tainos in 1492. To get a better sense of Columbus’s character, also refer to the excerpt from Columbus’s journal (on pages 26–27). Then assign roles and perform your skit for the class.
2. Jot down vivid descriptive details, such as what two crewmen wore (white jerkins, black velvet doublets, black tights), that you find in this excerpt. Then draw a sketch to illustrate the first encounter.