

Christopher Columbus

The First Queen Elizabeth

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Columbus***

Series 561

When three little ships sailed from Palos in 1492 they changed the course of history. This is the story of the man who commanded them, Christopher Columbus, and of the most momentous voyage ever made by man.



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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

When Christopher Columbus sailed from the little port of Palos, in Spain, on August the third, in the year 1492, he commenced a voyage which changed the course of history.

This is the story of what is perhaps one of the most important events in the long history of mankind.

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, in Italy, between the years 1440 and 1450, although the exact date is not known. Genoa is a seaport, and Columbus must have spent much of his time down in the harbour, watching the ships come and go, and talking with the sailors.

The ships of those days were, of course, sailing ships, and very much smaller than the steamships of to-day. They were gaily painted, with coloured sails and high sterns, sometimes with battlements round them like a castle on land.

It was in a ship of this kind that Columbus was to sail on his great voyage of discovery, forty years later.

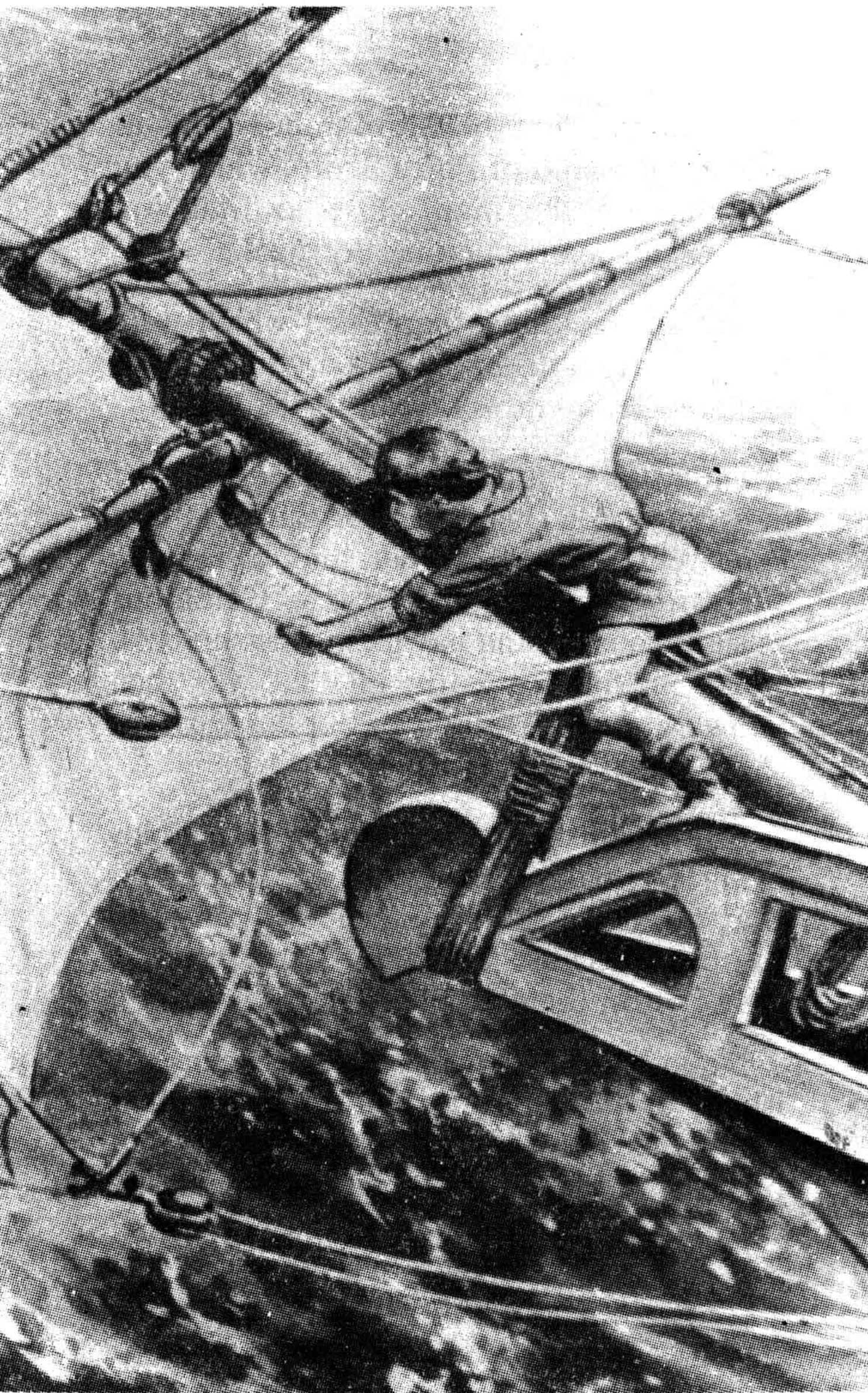


We know very little about the early life of Columbus. In a book written by his son, we read that he was a student at the University of Pavia, but Columbus himself stated that when he was fourteen years old he was a sailor.

He probably was a sailor at that age, because in those days young men did many things before they settled down to a trade. His father was a weaver, and for a time Christopher certainly worked in the family business.

We do not know what made him leave it, but the mystery of the sea must always have had a fascination for him. In those days men knew nothing of the open sea beyond a few miles from the shore.

The voyages made by Columbus took him down the west coast of Africa, where he was very nearly captured by pirates, and northward up the coasts of Spain and France. He visited England, and probably sailed as far north as Iceland.



About the year 1479 Columbus went to live on the island of Porto Santo, which you will find on the map, close to Madeira. This island was owned by Portugal.

Here many things happened which were to help Columbus in making up his mind to explore the unknown ocean to the west.

The first of these was his marriage to the daughter of a man named Bartholomew Perestrello, a sea captain and a famous navigator. By his father-in-law, Columbus was given charts and navigating instruments, and from him he learnt all that was then known about the winds and ocean currents to the west of Madeira.

During this time Columbus earned his living by making and copying maps and charts. These were, of course, very incomplete, because North and South America were not on them at all.

Nobody knew what lay between the island of Porto Santo and Japan, and as Columbus drew his charts and gazed out over the ocean, he was filled with the desire to find out.



Columbus knew, or at least believed that the earth was round. Nobody knew this for certain, because no one had ever travelled right round it; but Columbus thought that by sailing straight to the west he would come to Japan, which other explorers had reached by journeying across land and sea to the east.

No one had any idea that there was a great continent in between. But people knew that there must be some land to the west, because of strange things which were blown on to the shores of Madeira and Porto Santo by the west wind.

Columbus spent much of his time talking to sailors down in the harbour. Here he was shown strange pieces of carved wood and huge canes, each section of which would hold a gallon of water.

No one had ever seen such things before, so they must have come from unknown lands across the sea.

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He was wrong. The King of Spain was at the time engaged in fighting a war with the Moors who had occupied the country. Although he received Columbus kindly, all he would do was to form a Committee to advise him as to whether to help Columbus or not.

This Committee was composed of Spanish noblemen and priests, and for days and weeks Columbus argued and pleaded with them, moving from place to place as the Court travelled from one part of Spain to another.

The Committee was in no hurry. Some of its members refused even to believe that the earth could possibly be round. Others suggested that if the earth was round, Columbus would be sailing down hill, and as it was impossible for a ship to sail up hill, he would never get back.

It was four long years before the Committee made up its mind. It then reported to the King that the voyage proposed by Columbus was "vain and impracticable".