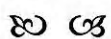
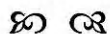


AMERICAN JOURNEYS COLLECTION



Letter of Columbus
to the Nurse
of Prince John

DOCUMENT NO. AJ-067



WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES



|| www.americanjourneys.org || www.wisconsinhistory.org ||
© Wisconsin Historical Society 2003

Letter of Columbus
to the Nurse
of Prince John

C O N T E N T S

Introduction	369
The Injustice of the Treatment accorded to Columbus.....	371
Conditions in Española upon his Arrival.....	373
The Rebellion of Adrian de Muxica	374
The Conduct of the Commander Bobadilla.....	375
His Unwise Concessions to the Colonists	376
Bad Character of Some of the Colonists	378
Bobadilla's Seizure of the Gold set apart by Columbus.....	380
The Proper Standards by which Columbus should be Judged.....	381
Richness of the Mines in Española.....	382
Seizure of Columbus's Papers	383

AMERICAN JOURNEYS COLLECTION

WISCONSIN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
DIGITAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

INTRODUCTION

THIS letter was addressed by Columbus to Doña Juana de Torres, who had been a nurse of the lately deceased royal prince John, the son of Ferdinand and Isabella, and who was the sister of Antonio de Torres, who had accompanied Columbus on his second voyage and was subsequently a commander in other voyages to the New World. It was probably written on shipboard when Columbus was sent back to Spain in irons in the autumn of the year 1500. It is at once a cry of distress and an impassioned self-defence, and is one of the most important of the Admiral's writings for the student of his career and character.

In the letter to Santangel the discoverer announces his success in his long projected undertaking; in the letter to the nurse he is at the lowest point in the startling reverse of fortune that befell him because of the troubles in Santo Domingo, and in the letter on the fourth voyage he appears as one struggling against the most adverse circumstances to vindicate his career, and to demonstrate the value of what he had previously accomplished, and to crown those achievements by actually attaining the coast of Asia. Columbus regarded his defence as set forth in this letter as of such importance that he included it in the four codices or collections of documents and papers prepared in duplicate before his last voyage to authenticate his titles and honors and to secure their inheritance by his son. The text of the letter from which the present translation was made is that of the Paris Codex of the *Book of Privileges*, as it is called. This is regarded by HARRISSE as the

best. The translation is by George F. Barwick of the British Museum, and was originally published in *Christopher Columbus, Facsimile of his Own Book of Privileges*, 1502, edited by B. F. Stevens (London, 1903). The letter remained unpublished until it was printed in Spotorno's *Codice Diplomatico* in 1822. In 1825 it appeared again in Navarrete's *Viages*, in a slightly varying text. It was first published in English in the translation of the *Codice Diplomatico* issued in London in 1823 under the title of *Memorials of Columbus*, etc.

E. G. B.

TRANSCRIPT OF A LETTER WHICH THE
ADMIRAL OF THE INDIES SENT TO
THE NURSE OF PRINCE DON JOHN
OF CASTILE

IN THE YEAR 1500 WHEN HE WAS RETURNING
FROM THE INDIES AS A PRISONER

Most virtuous Lady:—

THOUGH my complaint of the world is new, its habit of ill-using is very ancient. I have had a thousand struggles with it, and have thus far withstood them all, but now neither arms nor counsels avail me, and it cruelly keeps me under water. Hope in the Creator of all men sustains me; His help was always very ready; on another occasion, and not long ago, when I was still more overwhelmed, he raised me with his right arm, saying, O man of little faith, arise, it is I; be not afraid.¹

I came with so much cordial affection to serve these Princes, and have served them with such service, as has never been heard of or seen.

Of the new heaven and earth which our Lord made, when Saint John was writing the Apocalypse,² after what was spoken by the mouth of Isaiah,³ he made me the messenger, and showed me where it lay. In all men there was disbelief, but to the Queen my Lady He gave the spirit of understanding,

¹ An echo of the words of Jesus to Peter when he began to sink, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" *Matthew*, xiv. 31.

² *Revelation*, xxi. 1. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away."

³ "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth." *Isaiah*, lxxv. 17.

and great courage, and made her heiress of all, as a dear and much loved daughter. I went to take possession of all this in her royal name. They sought to make amends to her for the ignorance they had all shown by passing over their little knowledge, and talking of obstacles and expenses. Her Highness, on the other hand, approved of it, and supported it as far as she was able.

Seven years passed in discussion, and nine in execution.¹ During this time very remarkable and noteworthy things occurred whereof no idea at all had been formed. I have arrived at, and am in such a condition that there is no person so vile but thinks he may insult me; he shall be reckoned in the world as valor itself who is courageous enough not to consent to it.

If I were to steal the Indies or the land which lies towards them,² of which I am now speaking, from the altar of Saint Peter, and give them to the Moors, they could not show greater enmity towards me in Spain. Who would believe such a thing where there was always so much magnanimity?

I should have much desired to free myself from this affair had it been honorable towards my Queen to do so. The support of Our Lord and of Her Highness made me persevere; and to alleviate in some measure the sorrows which death had caused her,³ I undertook a fresh voyage to the new heaven and earth which up to that time had remained hidden; and if it is not held there in esteem like the other voyages to the Indies, that is no wonder because it came to be looked upon as my work.

The Holy Spirit inflamed Saint Peter and twelve others with him, and they all fought here below, and their toils and hardships were many, but last of all they gained the victory.

¹ 1485-1491 inc. and 1492-1500 inc.

² *Sy yo robara las Yndias o tierra que jaz faze ellas*, etc. In the translation *jaz faze* is taken to stand for *yace hacia*. This supposition makes sense and is probably correct. The reading of the other text is "*que san face ellas*." Navarrete says that neither one is intelligible.

³ The death of Prince John, October 4, 1497.

This voyage to Paria¹ I thought would somewhat appease them on account of the pearls, and of the discovery of gold in Española. I ordered the pearls to be collected and fished for by people with whom an arrangement was made that I should return for them, and, as I understood, they were to be measured by the bushel.² If I did not write about this to their Highnesses, it was because I wished to have first of all done the same thing with the gold. The result to me in this has been the same as in many other things; I should not have lost them nor my honor, if I had sought my own advantage, and had allowed Española to be ruined, or if my privileges and contracts had been observed. And I say just the same about the gold which I had then collected, and [for] which with such great afflictions and toils I have, by divine power, almost perfected [the arrangements].

When I went from Paria I found almost half the people of Española in revolt,³ and they have waged war against me until now, as against a Moor; and the Indians on the other side grievously [harassed me]. At this time Hojeda arrived⁴ and tried to put the finishing stroke: he said that their Highnesses had sent him with promises of gifts, franchises and pay; he gathered together a great band, for in the whole of Española there are very few save vagabonds, and not one with wife and children. This Hojeda gave me great trouble; he was obliged to depart, and left word that he would soon return with more ships and people, and that he had left the royal person of the Queen our Lady at the point of death. Then Vincent Yañez⁵ arrived with four caravels; there was dis-

¹ The name given to that part of the mainland of South America which Columbus discovered on his third voyage.

² *I.e.*, so great was their abundance.

³ On this revolt, see Bourne, *Spain in America*, p. 49 *et seqq.*, and in greater detail, Irving, *Columbus*, ed. 1868, II. 109 *et seqq.*

⁴ Hojeda sailed in May, 1499. Las Casas's account of his voyage is translated by Markham in his *Letters of Amerigo Vespucci*, Hakluyt Society (London, 1894), p. 78 *et seqq.* See also Irving, *Columbus*, III. 23-42. He was accompanied on this voyage by Amerigo Vespucci.

⁵ Vicente Yañez Pinzon set sail from Palos, November 18, 1499. For his voyage, see Irving, *Columbus*, III. 49-58.

turbance and mistrust, but no mischief; the Indians talked of many others at the Canibales [Caribbee Islands] and in Paria; and afterwards spread the news of six other caravels, which were brought by a brother of the Alcalde,¹ but it was with malicious intent. This occurred at the very last, when the hope that their Highnesses would ever send any ships to the Indies was almost abandoned, nor did we expect them; and it was commonly reported that her Highness was dead.

A certain Adrian about this time endeavored to rise in rebellion again, as he had done previously, but Our Lord did not permit his evil purpose to succeed. I had purposed in myself never to touch a hair of anybody's head, but I lament to say that with this man, owing to his ingratitude, it was not possible to keep that resolve as I had intended; I should not have done less to my brother, if he had sought to kill me, and steal the dominion which my King and Queen had given me in trust.² This Adrian, as it appears, had sent Don Ferdinand³ to Xaragua to collect some of his followers, and there a dispute arose with the Alcalde from which a deadly contest ensued, but he [Adrian] did not effect his purpose. The Alcalde seized him and a part of his band, and the fact was that he would have executed them if I had not prevented it; they were kept prisoners awaiting a caravel in which they might depart. The news of Hojeda which I told them, made them lose the hope that he would now come again.

For six months I had been prepared to return to their Highnesses with the good news of the gold, and to escape from governing a dissolute people, who fear neither God, nor their King and Queen, being full of vices and wickedness. I could have paid the people in full with six hundred thousand,⁴ and for this purpose I had four millions of tenths and somewhat

¹ The Alcalde was Roldan, the leader of the revolt. He was alcalde mayor of the city of Isabela and of the whole island, *i.e.*, the chief justice. Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, II. 124.

² On the career in Española of Adrian de Muxica and his execution, see Irving, *Columbus*, II. 283 *et seqq.*

³ Ferdinand de Guevara. See Irving, *Columbus*, II. 283 *et seqq.*

⁴ *I.e.*, maravedis, equivalent to about \$4000.

more, besides the third of the gold. Before my departure I many times begged their Highnesses to send there, at my expense, some one to take charge of the administration of justice; and after finding the Alcalde in arms I renewed my supplications to have either some troops or at least some servant of theirs with letters patent; for my reputation is such that even if I build churches and hospitals, they will always be called dens of thieves. They did indeed make provision at last, but it was the very contrary of what the matter demanded: may it be successful, since it was according to their good pleasure.

I was there for two years without being able to gain a decree of favor for myself or for those who went there, yet this man¹ brought a coffer full; whether they will all redound to their [Highnesses'] service, God knows. Indeed, to begin with, there are exemptions for twenty years, which is a man's lifetime; and gold is collected to such an extent that there was one person who became worth five marks² in four hours; whereof I will speak more fully later on.

If it would please their Highnesses to remove the grounds of a common saying of those who know my labors, that the calumny of the people has done me more harm than much service and the maintenance of their [Highnesses'] property and dominion has done me good, it would be a charity, and I should be re-established in my honor, and it would be talked about all over the world; for the undertaking is of such a nature that it must daily become more famous and in higher esteem.

When the commander Bobadilla came to Santo Domingo,³ I was at La Vega, and the Adelantado⁴ at Xaragua, where that Adrian had made a stand, but then all was quiet, and

¹ Bobadilla, the successor of Columbus as governor, who sent him back in chains.

² A mark was eight ounces or two-thirds of a Troy pound. Here it is probably the silver mark as a measure of value, which was about \$3.25. If the word is used as a measure of weight of gold, it would be about \$150.

³ Bobadilla arrived at Santo Domingo August 23, 1500.

⁴ Bartholomew Columbus.

the land rich and all men at peace. On the second day after his arrival he created himself Governor, and appointed officers and made executions, and proclaimed immunities of gold and tenths and in general of everything else for twenty years, which is a man's lifetime, and that he came to pay everybody in full up to that day, even though they had not rendered service; and he publicly notified that, as for me, he had charge to send me in irons, and my brothers likewise, as he has done, and that I should nevermore return thither, nor any other of my family; alleging a thousand disgraceful and discourteous things about me. All this took place on the second day after his arrival, as I have said, and while I was absent at a distance, without my knowing either of him or of his arrival.

Some letters of their Highnesses signed in blank, of which he brought a number, he filled up and sent to the Alcalde and to his company, with favors and commendations; to me he never sent either letter or messenger, nor has he done so to this day. Imagine what any one holding my office would think when one who endeavored to rob their Highnesses, and who has done so much evil and mischief, is honored and favored, while he who maintained it at such risks is degraded.

When I heard this, I thought that this affair would be like that of Hojeda or one of the others, but I restrained myself when I learnt for certain from the friars that their Highnesses had sent him. I wrote to him that his arrival was welcome, and that I was prepared to go to the Court and had sold all I possessed by auction; and that with respect to the immunities he should not be hasty, for both that matter and the government I would hand over to him immediately as smooth as my palm. And I wrote to the same effect to the friars, but neither he nor they gave me any answer. On the contrary, he put himself in a warlike attitude, and compelled all who went there to take an oath to him as Governor; and they told me that it was for twenty years.

Directly I knew of those immunities, I thought that I would repair such a great error and that he would be pleased, for he gave them without the need or occasion necessary in so vast

a matter; and he gave to vagabond people what would have been excessive for a man who had brought wife and children. So I announced by word and letters that he could not use his patents because mine were those in force; and I showed them the immunities which Juan Aguado¹ brought. All this was done by me in order to gain time, so that their Highnesses might be informed of the condition of the country, and that they might have an opportunity of issuing fresh commands as to what would best promote their service in that respect.

It is useless to publish such immunities in the Indies; to the settlers who have taken up residence it is a pure gain, for the best lands are given to them, and at a low valuation they will be worth two hundred thousand at the end of the four years when the period of residence is ended, without their digging a spadeful in them. I would not speak thus if the settlers were married, but there are not six among them all who are not on the lookout to gather what they can and depart speedily. It would be a good thing if people should go from Castile, and also if it were known who and what they are, and if the country could be settled with honest people.

I had agreed with those settlers that they should pay the third of the gold, and the tenths, and this at their own request; and they received it as a great favor from their Highnesses. I reproved them when I heard that they ceased to do this, and hoped that the Commander would do likewise, but he did the contrary. He incensed them against me by saying that I wanted to deprive them of what their Highnesses had given them; and he endeavored to set them at variance with me, and did so; and he induced them to write to their Highnesses that they should never again send me back to the government, and I likewise make the same supplication to them for myself and for my whole family, as long as there are not different inhabitants. And he together with them ordered inquisitions concerning me for wickednesses the like whereof

¹ Juan Aguado arrived from Spain in October, 1495. Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias*, II. 109 *et seqq.*, gives a full account of his mission. See also Irving, *Columbus*, ed. 1868, II. 77 *et seqq.*

were never known in hell. Our Lord, who rescued Daniel and the three children,¹ is present with the same wisdom and power as he had then, and with the same means, if it should please him and be in accordance with his will.

I should know how to remedy all this, and the rest of what has been said and has taken place since I have been in the Indies, if my disposition would allow me to seek my own advantage, and if it seemed honorable to me to do so, but the maintenance of justice and the extension of the dominion of Her Highness has hitherto kept me down. Now that so much gold is found, a dispute arises as to which brings more profit, whether to go about robbing or to go to the mines. A hundred castellanos² are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general, and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand, and for all ages a good price must be paid.

I assert that the violence of the calumny of turbulent persons has injured me more than my services have profited me; which is a bad example for the present and for the future. I take my oath that a number of men have gone to the Indies who did not deserve water in the sight of God and of the world; and now they are returning thither, and leave is granted them.³

I assert that when I declared that the Commander⁴ could not grant immunities, I did what he desired, although I told him that it was to cause delay until their Highnesses should receive information from the country, and should command anew what might be for their service. He excited their enmity against me, and he seems, from what took place and from his behavior, to have come as my enemy and as a very vehement one; or else the report is true that he has spent much to ob-

¹ Cf. *Daniel*, chs. III. and VI.

² The castellano was one-sixth of an ounce, or in value about \$3.

³ See Bourne, *Spain in America*, p. 50, for Columbus's bitter characterization of the Spaniards in Española in 1498, and p. 46 for the royal authorization in June, 1497, to transport criminals to the island. The terrible consequences of this policy led the Spanish government later to adopt the strictest regulations controlling emigration to the New World. Cf. *Spain in America*, ch. XVI.

⁴ Bobadilla was a knight commander of the military order of Calatrava.

tain this employment. I do not know more about it than what I hear. I never heard of an inquisitor gathering rebels together and accepting them, and others devoid of credit and unworthy of it, as witnesses against their governor.

If their Highnesses were to make a general inquisition there, I assure you that they would look upon it as a great wonder that the island does not founder.

I think your Ladyship will remember that when, after losing my sails, I was driven into Lisbon by a tempest, I was falsely accused of having gone there to the King in order to give him the Indies. Their Highnesses afterwards learned the contrary, and that it was entirely malicious. Although I may know but little, I do not think anyone considers me so stupid as not to know that even if the Indies were mine I could not uphold myself without the help of some prince. If this be so, where could I find better support and security than in the King and Queen our Lords, who have raised me from nothing to such great honor, and are the most exalted princes of the world on sea and on land, and who consider that I have rendered them service, and preserve to me my privileges and rewards; and if anyone infringes them, their Highnesses increase them still more, as was seen in the case of Juan Aguado; and they order great honor to be conferred upon me, and, as I have already said, their Highnesses have received service from me, and keep my sons in their household;¹ all which could by no means happen with another prince, for where there is no affection, everything else fails.

I have now spoken thus in reply to a malicious slander, but against my will, as it is a thing which should not recur to memory even in dreams; for the Commander Bobadilla maliciously seeks in this way to set his own conduct and actions in a brighter light; but I shall easily show him that his small knowledge and great cowardice, together with his inordinate cupidity, have caused him to fail therein.

¹ Diego Columbus had been appointed a page to Prince John in 1492. Navarrete, *Viages*, II. 17. At this time, 1500, both Diego and Ferdinand were pages in the Queen's household. *Historie*, ed. 1867, p. 276.

I have already said that I wrote to him and to the friars, and immediately set out, as I told him, almost alone, because all the people were with the Adelantado, and likewise in order to prevent suspicion on his part. When he heard this, he seized Don Diego¹ and sent him on board a caravel loaded with irons, and did the same to me upon my arrival, and afterwards to the Adelantado when he came; nor did I speak to him any more, nor to this day has he allowed anyone to speak to me; and I take my oath that I cannot understand why I am made a prisoner. He made it his first business to seize the gold, which he did without measuring or weighing it, and in my absence; he said that he wanted it to pay the people, and according to what I hear he assigned the chief part to himself and sent fresh exchangers for the exchanges. Of this gold I had put aside certain specimens, very big lumps, like the eggs of geese, hens, and pullets, and of many other shapes, which some persons had collected in a short space of time, in order that their Highnesses might be gladdened, and might comprehend the business upon seeing a quantity of large stones full of gold. This collection was the first to be given away, with malicious intent, so that their Highnesses should not hold the matter in any account until he has feathered his nest, which he is in great haste to do. Gold which is for melting diminishes at the fire; some chains which would weigh about twenty marks have never been seen again. I have been more distressed about this matter of the gold than even about the pearls, because I have not brought it to Her Highness.

The Commander at once set to work upon anything which he thought would injure me. I have already said that with six hundred thousand I could pay everyone without defrauding anybody, and that I had more than four millions of tenths and constabulary [dues], without touching the gold. He made some free gifts which are ridiculous, though I believe that he began by assigning the chief part to himself. Their Highnesses will find it out when they order an account to be obtained from him, especially if I should be present thereat. He does

¹ The younger brother of the Admiral.

nothing but reiterate that a large sum is owing, and it is what I have said, and even less. I have been much distressed that there should be sent concerning me an inquisitor who is aware that if the inquisition which he returns is very grave he will remain in possession of the government.

Would that it had pleased our Lord that their Highnesses had sent him or some one else two years ago, for I know that I should now be free from scandal and infamy, and that my honor would not be taken from me, nor should I lose it. God is just, and will make known the why and the wherefore.

They judge me over there as they would a governor who had gone to Sicily, or to a city or town placed under regular government, and where the laws can be observed in their entirety without fear of ruining everything; and I am greatly injured thereby. I ought to be judged as a captain who went from Spain to the Indies to conquer a numerous and warlike people, whose customs and religion are very contrary to ours; who live in rocks and mountains, without fixed settlements, and not like ourselves; and where, by the divine will, I have placed under the dominion of the King and Queen, our sovereigns, another world,¹ through which Spain, which was reckoned a poor country, has become the richest. I ought to be judged as a captain who for such a long time up to this day has borne arms without laying them aside for an hour, and by gentlemen adventurers and by customs and not by letters,² unless they were Greeks or Romans, or others of modern times of whom there are so many and such noble examples in Spain;³ or otherwise I receive great injury, because in the Indies there is neither town nor settlement.

¹ *Un otro mundo*. See note, p. 352 above.

² *Caballeros de conquistas y del uso, y no de letras*. This should be: "Knights of Conquests and by profession and not of letters." *I.e.*, by nobles that have actually been conquerors and had conquered territory awarded to them and who are knights by practice or profession and not gentlemen of letters.

³ What this means is not altogether clear. Apparently Columbus means that men of letters or lawyers in Greece and Rome, great conquering nations, would know what standards to apply in his case, and that there were some such men of breadth in Spain.

The gate to the gold and pearls is now open, and plenty of everything — precious stones, spices, and a thousand other things — may be surely expected, and never could a worse misfortune befall me; for by the name of our Lord the first voyage would yield them just as much as would the traffic of Arabia Felix as far as Mecca, as I wrote to their Highnesses by Antonio de Torres in my reply respecting the repartition of the sea and land with the Portuguese; and afterwards it would equal that of Calicut, as I told them and put in writing at the monastery of Mejjorada.

The news of the gold that I said I would give is, that on the day of the Nativity, while I was much tormented, being harassed by wicked Christians and by Indians, and when I was on the point of giving up everything and, if possible, escaping from life, our Lord miraculously comforted me and said, "Fear not violence, I will provide for all things; the seven years of the term of the gold have not elapsed, and in that and in everything else I will afford thee a remedy." On that day I learned that there were eighty leagues of land with mines at every point thereof. The opinion now is that it is all one. Some have collected a hundred and twenty castellanos in one day, and others ninety, and even the number of two hundred and fifty has been reached. From fifty to seventy, and in many more cases from fifteen to fifty, is considered a good day's work, and many carry it on. The usual quantity is from six to twelve, and any one obtaining less than this is not satisfied. It seems too that these mines are like others, and do not yield equally every day. The mines are new, and so are the workers: it is the opinion of everybody that even if all Castile were to go there, every individual, however inexpert he might be, would not obtain less than one or two castellanos daily, and now it is only commencing. It is true that they keep Indians, but the business is in the hands of the Christians. Behold what discernment Bobadilla had, when he gave up everything for nothing, and four millions of tenths, without any reason or even being requested, and without first notifying it to their Highnesses. And this is not the only loss.

I know that my errors have not been committed with the intention of doing evil, and I believe that their Highnesses regard the matter just as I state it; and I know and see that they deal mercifully even with those who maliciously act to their disservice. I believe and consider it very certain that their clemency will be both greater and more abundant towards me, for I fell therein through ignorance and the force of circumstances, as they will know fully hereafter; and I indeed am their creature, and they will look upon my services, and will acknowledge day by day that they are much profited. They will place everything in the balance, even as Holy Scripture tells us good and evil will be at the day of judgment. If, however, they command that another person do judge me, which I cannot believe, and that it be by inquisition in the Indies, I very humbly beseech them to send thither two conscientious and honorable persons at my expense, who I believe will easily, now that gold is discovered, find five marks in four hours. In either case it is needful for them to provide for this matter.

The Commander on his arrival at Santo Domingo took up his abode in my house, and just as he found it so he appropriated everything to himself. Well and good; perhaps he was in want of it. A pirate never acted thus towards a merchant. About my papers I have a greater grievance, for he has so completely deprived me of them that I have never been able to obtain a single one from him; and those that would have been most useful in my exculpation are precisely those which he has kept most concealed. Behold the just and honest inquisitor! Whatever he may have done, they tell me that there has been an end to justice, except in an arbitrary form. God our Lord is present with his strength and wisdom, as of old, and always punishes in the end, especially ingratitude and injuries.