

THE NEW WORLD

From the deck, Michele squinted across the calm pale waters at the speck in the distance. The tiny dot was almost obscured by the shimmering haze of the morning sun and only just barely visible to the naked eye but it was there nonetheless, still obstinately clinging to horizon like mosquito hungry to taste blood. Five weeks they had been at sea. Five weeks surrounded by nothing other than an infinite ocean and five weeks he had laid restlessly at night, pondering whether the Lord Admiral's calculations were nothing more than folly. There were times, for sure, when he wondered whether they would ever see their beloved Seville again; feel the swell of the warm Iberian air in the summer or feel the softness of his wife's lips against his cheek. She and the children, he imagined, would at this very moment be waiting anxiously at home for his return and now unbeknownst to them, all of their collective hopes and dreams rested on this single speck on the horizon that every man on deck stood and peered at with an equal measure of awe and anticipation.

To Michele, it seemed the Lord God had finally answered their prayers. He had shepherded his flock safely across the great chasm of sea and found them a new path to the Indies and now turning to Columbus, the man who he had known from boyhood in Savona, he offered his sincerest congratulations.

“My Lord Admiral, I submit humbly to your superior wisdom. Your quest has succeeded. Divine providence has shown us a New World of which you very soon will be governor. My liege, if may be bold enough to make one prediction it is that when we return to Spain you will return like a resplendent Caesar and every subject of the Spanish Empire, every heart that beats under the sovereignty of our glorious flag, will rejoice for the bountiful rewards of this, your great voyage of discovery.”

Columbus said nothing but continued to stare out nervously at the horizon.

“Sir, forgive me but you do not appear enraptured with this morning's news?” continued Michele, “Am I to conclude that your heart did not overflow with joy when

the watchman brought word that land had been sighted?"

Columbus turned to him for a moment with a flicker of anger in his eyes.

"There was no watchman who sighted land, Michele. Be certain of that! You will recall that our Queen has decreed that a pension for life will be awarded to he who first sights land. Thus, it will be recorded that it was I, Christopher Columbus, who first set eyes on the New World."

"Of course, My Lord. Forgive me. A trivial oversight on my part... Even so, I thought you would be at least feel vindicated. You have confounded your critics in the royal court, have you not? You have proved to be true what they once said was impossible."

"Damn those fools," replied Columbus with a petulant swipe of his hand, "So few of them are even acquainted with the works of Ptolemy or Aristotle. They are politicians not true men of learning. But you will find in this life, Michele, that the accuracy of a man's thoughts is not always sufficient to prevent his head being separated from the rest of his body."

Michele nodded. He had witnessed first-hand how the three years of petitioning monarchs, of navigating a course through the squabbling factions of various royal courts, and of raising the necessary finances from the wealthy wool merchants of Venice and Florence had taken its toll on his friend and yet in his heart he now felt that all their effort were now surely about to pay them a handsome reward.

"But, if you will pardon my insolence, my Lord, now with land in sight you seem strangely uncertain."

"A wise man would trade all the gold under the sun for true certainty, my friend. You are right, of course. We have found the New World. Of this I am certain. But this is merely the beginning of our story and whether this is a story which ends in tragedy we are yet to find out."

He watched as Columbus paced across the deck and sensed what was to happen next. He'd seen it before and always viewed his old friend's obsession with

prophecy with a degree of disdain. Michele himself had no time for the purported wisdom of so-called soothsayers. Even so, it was the one vagary he tolerated in the Lord Admiral.

“Bring forth the crone,” boomed Columbus down the galley hatch.

From the galley below there was some consternation and a squeal that to Micheles' ears resembled that of a piglet being slaughtered and then after a time two of the deck hands emerged through from the hatch dragging a small, disfigured woman carrying a hessian sack up to the upper deck. Michel winced to even look at her; she was stooped, her spine bent like a horseshoe, and from under clumps of matted grey hair he could make out her face which sprouted warts and foul pustules.

“I have summoned you, old hag,” said Columbus sternly, “As this morning we have sighted land around forty miles off our starboard bough. But before we set foot in these uncharted shores, I have a favour to ask you and that is that I beseech you to use all supernatural gifts of augury to tell us what awaits us is in this New World.”

Michel watched as the crumpled figure of a hag fumbled with something inside her sack, all the while babbling to herself in a low whisper.

“Ha! I cannot hear what the crone says,” said Columbus.

“You will translate for me,” he added, pointing to the nearest deckhand.

The sailor look mortified at the Admiral's command but unwilling to disobey an order edged nervously towards the crone, eventually kneeling beside her as if she were a wild beast which any minute might suddenly swipe a sharp claw at him.

“She requires fire,” said the deckhand as he strained to hear the hag's muttering.

“Very well. Bring her one of the torches,” said Columbus pointing to a couple of men at the stern of the ship.

One of the men – a thick-set rigger from Porto by the name of Clemente - eventually brought forth a torch, the embers of which were still glowing from the nightwatch. Michele watched with curiosity as the crone took out a bundle of twigs

from the sack and placed it to the embers of the outstretched torch. Within seconds she was surrounded by a pungent, fug of smoke as dense as a storm cloud that swirled around her in the morning breeze. Michel held his hand to his nose to stop himself wretching at the foul smell but he couldn't take his eyes off the spectacle. Next the women reached into the sack again and produced a lump of amber as large of a man's fist which she held aloft and began to peer at with an expression of great wonderment. In the light of the morning it appeared to glow and Michel was suddenly aware that the entire crew now stared in silence at the strange ritual as the hag peered into the amber, all the time mumbling to herself in the same strange gurgling tongue.

“Well? What do you see, old hag? What fortune awaits us on these new shores?”

The deckhand leant in again timidly to try to catch the old woman's words but his expression appeared perplexed.

“She says she sees chariots, my Lord Admiral. Many thousands of chariots in a great procession. They travel with great haste and yet..... yet they are drawn by the power of invisible horses.”

Michel turned to who Columbus who still looked agitated. Meanwhile the old crone, half obscured by the fug of foul-smelling smoke, continued to mumble and then broke into a horrible, high-pitched cackle which drew gasps and murmurs from some of the deckhands.

“What does she see now?” asked Columbus “Tell me what prophecies she beholds.”

Again, with the deckhand leant in to listen to the crone's mumblings.

“My Lord Admiral, she speaks of a dancing negro who is much revered. One who is the friend of a monkey and who is surrounded by children.”

“This is strange augury indeed,” said Columbus.

“My Lord, must we persist with this? I venture that these so-called visions are

nothing more than the demented delusions of a madness which has fuddled her brains.”

“Silence, Michele! In Cadiz I am told the hag is revered for her gifts of fortune-telling. Every captain who charts a passage out of the port consults her. What else does she see? Ask of her once more... does she have a special sign for us?”

For one final time and with great timidity, the deckhand leant towards the old woman as she gazed into the amber and mumbled in his ear.

“My lord, she says that she speaks of a pair of giant golden arches and beneath them a clown who feeds the many multitudes who flock to him.”

Columbus continued to look troubled.

“Golden arches? And a clown for a king? What kind of empire have we stumbled upon? I find these –”

“My Lord, at the risk of incurring your wrath,” Michel interrupted, “I behold that the hags sees nothing, that these so-called prophecies are without basis and that whilst we continue to keep her on-board she consumes valuable rations which, should we lose our course or find the winds not in favour, would keep us from starvation.”

Columbus stood now, rubbing his stubbly chin, deep in meditation as the rest of the crew lingered in a silence disturbed only the by the occasional creaking of timber or the lapping of the waves below. Then after a matter of minutes had passed Columbus peered out again at the horizon and nodded before turning to his trusty lieutenant.

“Fear not, my most trusted friend,” said the Lord Admiral at length, “I have weighed your judgement and must concur with you.”

Michele turned once again to the hag and noticed that she was now stared at him intently – her eyes wide and her face suddenly animated.

“Beware the virgin queen!” she shrilled as the rock of amber fell from her hand and landed on the deck with a thud, “You must beware the –”

But before her sentence had been completed Michel had drawn his sword and

despatched the old hag with one mighty blow cleaving her stumpy body in two and leaving an expanding lake of sticky, crimson blood on the deck.

“Clemente,” he shouted to the heavy-set deckhand, “Throw the body overboard. We have heard enough of her prattle to last us a lifetime.”

He watched as the Portugese deckhand scooped up the body and tossed into the ocean.

“Prepare the landing craft,” called out Columbus finally to the others on deck, “We shall see what awaits us in the New World.”