TWO INTERPRETERS

JOHN McCLELLAN
Woodstock, New York

The old-time interpreters were concerned with the meaning of dreams, as demonstrated by the biblical story of Joseph at Pharaoh's court, or the interpretation of the flights of birds preceding an important battle. Nowadays it is questionable whether 'interpreters' is the proper word for the intermediary between two persons speaking different tongues. Certainly, a VIP experiencing linguistic difficulties wants, primarily, a translator -- he prefers to interpret the verbal exchange himself. If this term is unsatisfactory, 'word-man' is equally so. There would be an immediate outcry from the distaff side, pointing out the great number of female interpreters, and that the correct term should be 'word-person'. So we bow to common usage and shall use 'interpreter' and 'interpretation' in their accepted way.

In looking over the field of interpreters, and it is a large one, a well-known Shakespearean quote comes to mind, and it is tempting to paraphrase it: some men are born interpreters, some achieve the ability, and others have interpretation thrust upon them. A case in point is Luis de Torres, and the date is 1492.

Although the date will ring a bell, the name will probably not, for History has not vouchsafed de Torres a prestigious space in its pages, and History was perhaps right: if ever a voyager was out of his depth, literally and figuratively, it was he. He was a landsman hired by Columbus as an interpreter on the famous First Voyage to the Americas, to converse with the Chinese Emperor who Columbus was most eager to meet. De Torres was a converted Jew (perhaps the Inquisition had something to do with that) and the reasons for engaging him have a medieval naivete about them. It was thought that because he knew Arabic, and because Arabic was at that time considered the mother of all languages, he would be able to chat with the Great Khan and any other dignitaries who might be encountered along the route of the expedition. Note the compounding of errors! Besides our man, Luis, Columbus took several other landlubbers, among them a Secretary supposed to keep the records of any claims made in the name of Spain, and a Butler whose functions were uncertain.

History is silent on the behaviour and actions of these three during the voyage. How did these men pass the time at sea before the landfall was finally made on October 11th? Did the Butler buttle, the Secretary practice with records, did Luis perfect his Arabic? Sure it is that they could not have been very popular with the hard-working and rugged crew.

The Admiral's first port-of-call was an unfortunate one. Several other ports had been entertained a few interpreters. Columbus had been influenced by it must not be so: it was Spain's only port. He needed more, and the word: the Admiral 'detained' several interpreters, the word 'detainees' with conversations.

Pursuing his policy, the Admiral is on this island, and after the value of Luis terminates the story of his career. His credulity, his eager but unwise proceeding, the gold he might have been offered up with what appeared to be Chinese charlatans. Columbus knew the language, and organized the men to proceed to the south around the coast of the islands of the great islands of the south.
The Admiral of this tiny fleet of three vessels spent four days at his first port-of-call in the New World, Watlings Island (Guanahani, to give it its native name) and then sailed off to the south-west to visit several other islets of the region. It is recorded that Columbus 'detained' a few natives - Taino Indians - to act as possible guides and interpreters. One wonders how Luis felt about this. The gold that Columbus had been led to believe (by sign-language) was so plentiful - for it must not be supposed that conversion of the Indians to Christianity was Spain's only reason for underwriting this epic voyage - was not forthcoming, and Luis was showing himself increasingly as a hollow reed: the Admiral seems to have been impatient for the day when the 'detainees' would become proficient enough to carry on fruitful two-way conversations.

Pursuing his south-westerly course, Cuba was finally reached and it is on this isle (named Juana by the Spaniards) that the misapprehensions about the value of Arabic came to a head, and the short-lived importance of Luis terminated. In Cuba, Columbus' idee fixe became full-blown. His credulity, as well as his Cupidity, had been noted long since by the Indians, and they made every attempt to capitalize on his wishful thinking. Gold was always 'just around the corner'. When his enthusiasm might have been dimmed by continued disappointments, an old man turned up with what appeared to be a gold nose-plug with what were thought to be Chinese characters stamped on it! Carried away by misguided ardor, Columbus knew that at last he had, in Juana, discovered Cathay and he organized the most impressive cortege his limited forces could muster to proceed to the Palace of the Great Khan, which, as usual, was just around the corner. In this case it was about 25 miles from his present situation of Gibara, in eastern Cuba.

Luis was made head of this official embassy, and one other Spaniard accompanied him. Luis carried with him the necessary diplomatic papers, passports (in Latin), letters from the Spanish King and Queen, and gifts. So we can add Latin to the language difficulties of the gentle Tainos. Remember, Berlitz is more than four hundred years in the future ... The splendid procession wended its way up a long and beautiful valley leading to Holguin, the supposed capital. On arrival, instead of a vast and costly courtyard the travelers found a hundred or so enthusiastic natives in a compound of palm-thatched huts, who joyfully bore them into the principal house and seated them on the most uncomfortable of ceremonial chairs. (Some of these are preserved in the fine ethnological museum of the Dominican Republic, in Santo Domingo. It is hard to imagine sitting in one and listening to long speeches of welcome in an unknown tongue!) From the standpoint of the natives the meeting was a tremendous success but the Spaniards were desolated. They were faced with the unpleasant duty of returning to the base camp and admitting to the Admiral their complete failure. Too, Luis had of course been quite unable to communicate with the Taino chiefs, no matter how perfect his Arabic, and had had to call on the 'detained' Indian for aid! It is hard to imagine a more unsuccessful trip.
(as we now say) and nothing is heard of interpreters and interpreting except an occasional reference to the Indians who were daily becoming more proficient in Castilian, and of increasing use to their commander. Luis is not mentioned; his aptitude in picking up the Taino language may not have been as great as that of his brown-skinned confreres in mastering his. However, on the island of Hispaniola (which today is shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic) an accident occurred which changed the whole schedule of the expedition, and with it the fate of several of our protagonists: for on Christmas Eve of 1492, the Santa Maria, flagship of the fleet, riding at anchor off Cape Haitien, was gently borne by the long rollers onto a coral reef - so gently, in fact, that the watch was unaware of what had happened until it was an accomplished fact.

We must greatly abridge what must have been one of the most important wrecks in History. It took Columbus little time to write off his flagship as a total loss, and although he seems to have had no prior intention of founding a colony in the New World, he immediately made plans for the building of a fort at Cape Haitien. At the same time he commandeered the Nina as his future flagship. That Christmas Day of 1492 was one of unremitting labor - the salvaging of stores and equipment from the Santa Maria, and the transferring of it all to the Nina and the mainland. The Navidad fort, as it was called, was built with the timbers of the mother-ship and was well equipped with her cargo, which included seeds and trading articles. 39 men were chosen to man the fort - they were volunteers. Are you surprised to learn that the Interpreter, the Secretary, and the Butler were among the chosen? Their sea-faring days were over and it seems to have been a relief to them all.

We could wish that our tale might end here on this contented (if inclusive) note; but as Columbus discovered on his return to the Americas on his Second Voyage the next year, Navidad had been burned to the ground in his absence, and all of its inhabitants killed. Prolonged questioning of the natives finally elicited the true facts: the excesses of the Spanish garrison, which must have begun shortly after the departure of the Admiral, drew down a terrible vengeance on them, and none survived to tell of the tragedy. Luis de Torres was among the victims - the Arabic that had failed him throughout the expedition, failed him to the end.

But a happier note does remain. We are glad to report that the 'detained' (or, kidnapped, if you will) Indian became increasingly useful as his knowledge of Castilian grew, and he rose to importance. He sailed back to Spain with the Admiral in 1493 and this Caribbean Horatio Alger was baptized, with five of his countrymen, in Barcelona, in the presence of the King and Queen who acted as godparents. He was given the official name of Don Diego Colon, and remained a trusted and loved member of the royal household until his death. And if this is not a success story, we've never heard one!