

An Example of Civil Authority Disregarded

The following is an example of what the consequences will be if the civil authority would not be obeyed. It is an incident from the life of Martin Pinzon, who served under Christopher Columbus as captain of the *Pinta*. This excerpt is taken from Washington Irving's *Life of Columbus*.

"On the very evening of the arrival of Columbus at Palos, and while the peals of triumph were still ringing from its towers, the *Pinta*, commanded by Martin Alonzo Pinzon, likewise entered the river. After her separation from the admiral in the storm, she had been driven before the gale into the Bay of Biscay, and had made the port of Bayonne. Doubting whether Columbus had survived the tempest, Pinzon had immediately written to the sovereigns, giving information of the discovery he had made, and had requested permission to come to court, and communicate the particulars in person. As soon as the weather permitted, he had again set sail, anticipating a triumphant reception in his native port of Palos. When, on entering the harbor, he beheld the vessel of the admiral riding at anchor, and learned the enthusiasm with which he had been received, the heart of Pinzon died within him. It is said that he feared to meet Columbus in this hour of his triumph, lest he should put him under arrest for his desertion on the coast of Cuba; but he was a man of too much resolution to indulge in such a fear. It is more probable that a consciousness of his misconduct made him unwilling to appear before the public in the midst of their enthusiasm for Columbus,

and perhaps he sickened at the honors heaped upon a man whose superiority he had been so unwilling to acknowledge. Getting into his boat, therefore, he landed privately, and kept out of sight until he heard of the admiral's departure. He then returned to his home, broken in health and deeply dejected, considering all the honors and eulogiums heaped upon Columbus as so many reproaches on himself. The reply of his sovereigns to his letter at length arrived. It was of a reproachful tenor, and forbade his appearance at court. This letter completed his humiliation; the anguish of his feelings gave virulence to his bodily malady, and in a few days he died, a victim of deep chagrin.

"Let no one, however, indulge in harsh censures over the grave of Pinzon. His merits and services are entitled to the highest praise; his errors should be regarded with indulgence. He was one of the foremost in Spain to appreciate the project of Columbus, animating him by his concurrence and aiding him with his purse when poor and unknown at Palos. He afterward enabled him to procure and fit out ships, when even the mandates of the sovereigns were ineffectual, and finally embarked in the expedition with his brothers and his friends, staking life, property, everything upon the event. He thus entitled himself to participate largely in the glory of this immortal enterprise; but unfortunately, forgetting for a moment the grandeur of the cause, and the implicit obedience due to his commander, he yielded to the incitements of self-interest, and committed the act of insubordination which has cast a shadow on his name. In extenuation of his fault, however, may be alleged his

habits of command, which rendered him impatient of control; his consciousness of having rendered great services to the expedition, and of possessing property in the ships. That he was a man of great professional merit is admitted by all his contemporaries; that he naturally possessed generous sentiments and an honorable ambition, is evident from the poignancy with which he felt the disgrace drawn on him by his misconduct. A mean man would not have fallen a victim to self-upbraiding for having been convicted of a mean action. His story shows how one lapse from duty may counterbalance the merits of a thousand services, how one moment of weakness may mar the beauty of a whole life of virtue, and how important it is for a man, under all circumstances, to be true, not only to others, but to himself" (Martin S. Sommer, *The Voice of History* [Saint Louis: Concordia, 1913] pages 76-77).