

tween the Crescent and the Cross. For many generations the kingdoms of the Spanish peninsula had been striving to expel the Moorish invader. Portugal was the first to free herself and carry the war into Africa. In suppressing Moorish piracy the Portuguese captains made their first acquaintance with longer and longer stretches of the coast of Africa and heard of Guinea and its mines of gold. A great man rose to the occasion, a man in whom missionary, merchant, statesman, pathbreaker, and scientific inquirer were combined after a fashion characteristic of that romantic age. Prince Henry of Portugal, called "The Navigator," own cousin to our Henry V. of England, was founder of the great school of explorers in which Columbus was the most illustrious disciple. The first object of these mariners was to ascertain whether Africa could be circumnavigated and a route thus found into the Indian ocean. Upon this question two different opinions were held by learned men, who were wont to settle all disputed points by referring to the wisdom of the ancients. The foremost authority on geography was still Claudius Ptolemy, who wrote in Alexandria in the second century after Christ. Ptolemy held that the southern hemisphere was in great part filled by a huge continent which at one place was joined to Africa and at another place was joined to Asia somewhere near Farther India, of which he had some vague hearsay knowledge. Thus, according to Ptolemy, the Indian ocean was a land-locked sea with no outlet, and of course if the Portuguese captains had believed this doctrine they would not have tried to sail around Africa. But a different opinion was entertained by Pomponius Mela, a native of the Spanish peninsula, who wrote in the first century of our era a little book that was highly esteemed throughout the Middle Ages, especially by

Spaniards. Mela believed in a great continent lying southward of both Africa and Asia, but he believed it to be separated from both these continents by a broad, open ocean. Still more, he chopped off the whole of Africa south of Sahara, and maintained that you could sail from the Strait of Gibraltar around into the India ocean without crossing the equator. Such was the theory upon which Portuguese navigators were allowed to feed their hopes until 1471, a few years after the death of Prince Henry. In that year, 1471, a voyage was made, the importance of which I was the first to point out. Portuguese ships had already reached the coast of Upper Guinea, where it runs for several hundred miles from west to east. Here it seemed as if Mela's opinion was correct, and as if one might go on sailing eastward to the mouth of the Red Sea. But in 1471 two captains, Santorem and Escobar, went on and followed that coast until they found it turning to the south; and on they went till—first of all Europeans—they crossed the equator and went five degrees beyond it, and still that African coast stretched before them steadily southward. It was thus made clear that Mela was mistaken, and it was possible that Ptolemy might be right. For aught they knew that coast might keep running southward all the way to the pole, and even if that were not the case one thing was clear; a route to Asia by sailing around Africa was going to be a much longer route than they had supposed. We can well believe that the prospect was discouraging. It was one of those interesting situations that make men stop and think. Now, if ever, was the natural moment for somebody to ask the question, whether there might not be some better and shorter ocean route to Asia than any that could be found by pursuing the African coast.



Now it was just about this time that Christopher Columbus seems to have found his way to Portugal. He was now between thirty and thirty-five, or, as many writers think, not more than twenty-five years old. A dozen or more towns and villages have been claimed as his birthplace, but I see no reason for doubting his own explicit statement, made in a solemn legal document, that he was born in the city of Genoa. Son of a wool-comber in very humble circumstances, he had taken to the sea at a very early age, as was natural for a Genoese boy. Somewhere and somehow he had learned Latin and geometry and as much of astronomy as that age knew how to apply to purposes of navigation. He had sailed to and fro upon the Mediterranean in merchant voyages, and had probably taken a hand in scrimmages with Turkish corsairs, which is the foundation for the ridiculous charge of "piracy" sometimes alleged against him by modern dabblers in history. His younger brother Bartholomew had led a similar life, and both had won a reputation for skill in map-making. In those days when Italian commerce, cut from its eastern roots by Turkish shears, was languishing, Italian skill and talent was apt to drift westward to Lisbon, and so it was with the brothers Columbus. Both were deeply interested in the problem of circumnavigating Africa, both sailed on more than one of the Portuguese voyages on that coast, and Bartholomew was in the first voyage that doubled the Cape of Good Hope in 1487.

Long before this his brother Christopher's scheme had been fully matured. I said a moment ago that the disappointing voyage of Santarem and Escobar furnished the occasion for asking the question if some better method of getting to Asia could be found. Now observe the eloquence of dates. Those captains returned to Lisbon in April, 1472;

and before June, 1474, that question had already been asked by the king of Portugal. The person of whom he asked that question was the greatest astronomer of the century, Paolo Toscanelli, of Florence; and Toscanelli's reply was, "Can there be a shorter route? Of course there can. If you steer westward straight across the Atlantic you will find Asia much sooner than by sailing down by Guinea;" and he drew a map, giving his idea of the situation, and sent it to the king of Portugal. Now about the same time Columbus asked the same question of Toscanelli and got the same reply. Some critics have lately tried to make out an interval of six or eight years between the two letters. I have elsewhere argued that it cannot have been more than six or eight weeks. It was probably not later than September, 1474, that Toscanelli sent to Columbus his letter, the tone of which implies that Columbus had done something more than ask a question. He had not only asked about the shorter route, but expressed a desire or intention to undertake it. The astronomer's reply was full of enthusiasm; he strongly urged the undertaking upon Columbus, and sent him a duplicate of the map which he had sent to the king of Portugal. Columbus kept this map and carried it with him upon his first voyage.

Now the question here at issue, and on which an appeal was made to Toscanelli, was not whether the earth is a sphere. That was assumed by all the parties. The question was simply as to the length of the voyage required to reach the coasts of China or Japan by sailing due west. Here the astronomer's reply was encouraging. He greatly overestimated the length of Asia. I suppose he must have misunderstood some of Marco Polo's Chinese measurer of distance. At any rate he carried his Chinese seaports so



far east as to bring them near California. As for Japan, he brought it into the Gulf of Mexico. This gigantic error was of the greatest possible aid to Columbus, as it turned out; but Columbus improved upon it. His theoretical measure of the earth's circumference was smaller than Toscanelli's, and when he put that astronomer's guess-work measure of Asia upon it, he carried Japan eastward even into the Atlantic, and held that you could reach it by sailing about two thousand five hundred miles due west from the Canary islands. This was not much longer than the voyage from Lisbon to the Guinea coast, and thus there could be no doubt as to the commercial advantage of braving the unknown terrors of the voyage across the open ocean.

Such was the scheme which Columbus had to urge upon his fellow-men for eighteen years before he could get the means for carrying it into practical operation. Like many scientific theories, as first formed it was a fairly even mixture of truth and error; but he was peculiarly fortunate in this, that the truth and the error alike helped him. Some of the Lisbon geographers urged against him that his estimate of the length of Asia was excessive. In this they were of course right; but if their wisdom had prevailed, no westward voyage would have been made, and the unknown continent between Portugal and Japan would have remained unknown until some other occasion had been evolved.

There were many elements in the complex character of Columbus beside that of the scientific navigator. The crusading spirit was strong in him. Alike as a Genoese and as a Christian he hated the Turk, and it was quite to his credit that he did so. He was an idealist, a poetic dreamer, a religious fanatic, a man hard for some people to understand. Viewed as a whole, his scheme was somewhat as follows:

God's kingdom on earth was to come. The bounds of Christendom were to be enlarged, and the unspeakable Turk was to be crushed. Old Crusaders had assailed the Infidel in front; but he would outflank him. He would gain access to the wealth of the Indies by a new and short cut across the Atlantic waves never before ploughed by European keels, and with his share of the profits of this great commercial enterprise he would equip such a vast army as would drive the Turk from Constantinople and set free the Holy Sepulchre.

Such was the noble, disinterested idea of Columbus. His young friend Las Casas, the purest and loftiest spirit of the sixteenth century, so understood it and honored its author; while modern writers, incapable of entering into the mood of a time so remote from our own, peck and carp at details wherein Columbus seems to offend their precious ideas of propriety, and wave him away with a Podsnap flourish, which of course always ends the matter. He was weak, we are told; he was selfish and avaricious, and after all he did not accomplish what he undertook to do. After all his fine promises he never set foot on the soil of Asia.

Well, it is a part of the irony with which this world is governed, that the bravest and most strenuous spirits are apt to concentrate their lives to some grand purpose, in the pursuit of which they strive and faint and die; and, after all is over, after death has sealed their eyelids and the voice of praise or blame is for them as nothing, it turns out that they have done a great and wonderful thing; but that great and wonderful thing is so far from being the object to which their arduous lives were concentrated, that if they could listen to the praise which posterity lavishes upon them, they would be daft with amazement. Well, they would say, we



never dreamt of this. These monuments that are reared to us with all this pomp and ceremony, we do not comprehend their meaning.

So might Columbus feel if he could be brought back to earth and witness what is going on to-day in all parts of this western world. What has been accomplished, as a result of his voyage of 1492, is something of which he never dreamed. He never meant to discover a New World, and he died without the slightest suspicion that he had made such a discovery. He died in obscurity and disgrace because he had not done the thing which he had set out to do; he had entailed fresh expenses upon his royal patrons instead of guiding them to boundless riches. When he died at Valladolid, on Ascension Day, 1506, the annals of that town, which mention everything of local interest great and small, from year to year, take no heed of the passing away of that great spirit. It was left for the events of later ages to clothe with adequate significance the events of 1492.

It was not until this western continent became the seat of a high civilization that the significance began to be realized, and to reflect upon the memory of Columbus the glory of which he was defrauded in his lifetime. And it was long before the course of events had taught men this new lesson. A hundred years ago little heed was paid to the anniversary of the discovery of America; but in France, amid the spasms of the Revolution, a few prize essays were written, and what, do you think, was their general purport? It was generally agreed that the discovery of America had been an almost unmitigated curse to mankind, because it had led to greater wars—such, for example, as the Seven Years' War—than had ever been seen before. Only one benefit, said these humanitarians, had come from the discovery, and that was

the use of quinine in averting fevers. But stay, said some of the prize essayists, to this general verdict of disparagement we can seem to see dimly one exception. Two or three million of English colonists are scattered along the coast of that unpromising wilderness; they have just won their independence; and in them rests the hope of mankind for the future of the western world. Theirs is the legacy of Columbus if they fulfill the promise with which they have started. Such was the purport of some of these ingenious prize essays a century ago. What will prize essayists or centennial orators a century hence be saying here in Boston?

Fellow-citizens, it rests with us to determine the answer to such a question. When one reads of Saul, who went forth to seek his father's asses and found a kingdom, one thinks of Columbus. But let the parable warn us. To Columbus we owe the fresh soil in which a nationality of the highest type has begun to be developed. Let us never forget that without the steadfast culture of the highest manhood in political life, the richest opportunities are no better than dust and chaff. The extension of God's kingdom on earth was the object nearest the heart of Columbus. It is our high duty, and privilege to accept the legacy and defend it.