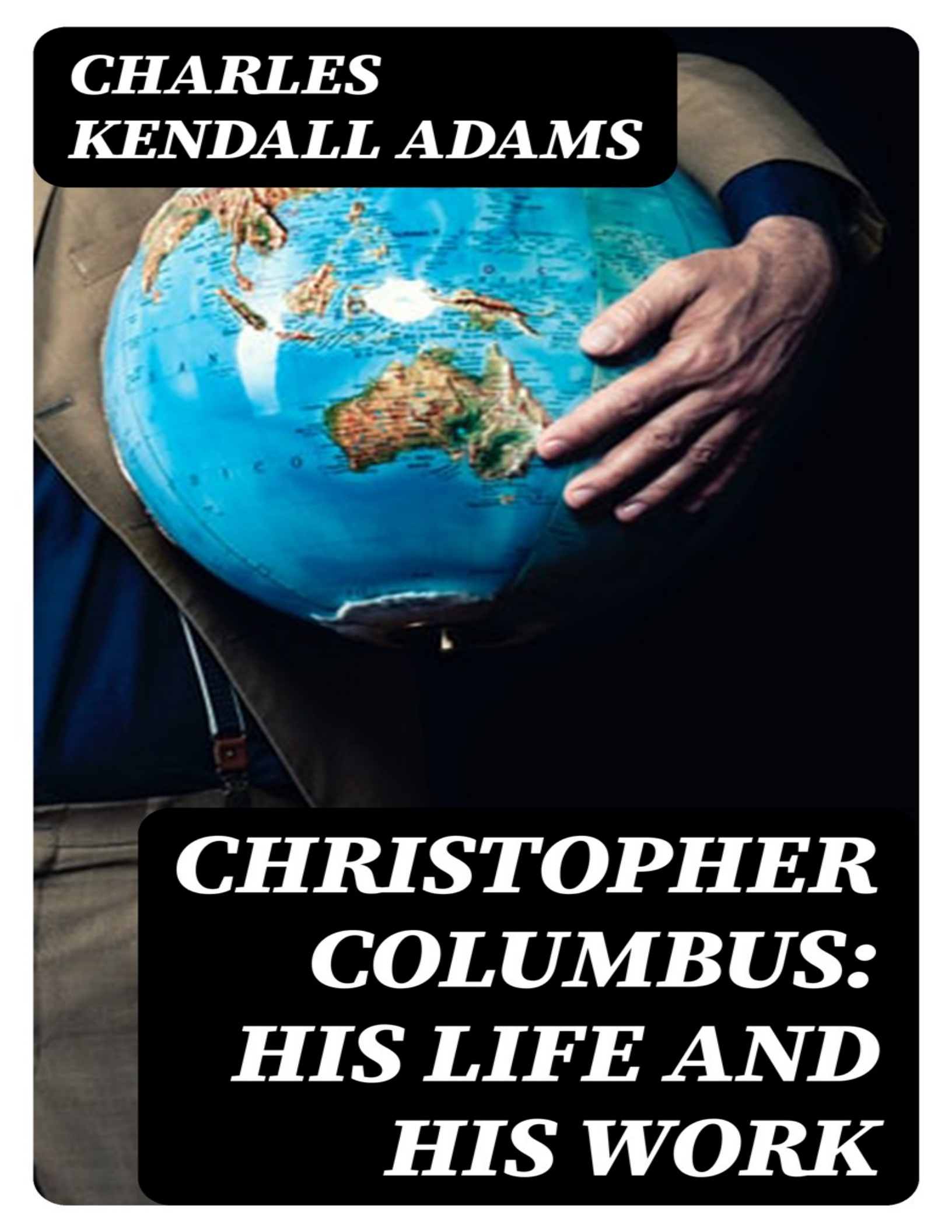


A close-up photograph of a person's hand resting on a globe. The hand is positioned over the Americas, with fingers slightly spread. The globe is tilted, showing North and South America. The background is dark and out of focus, showing parts of a suit and a blue shirt cuff.

***CHARLES  
KENDALL ADAMS***

***CHRISTOPHER  
COLUMBUS:  
HIS LIFE AND  
HIS WORK***

**Charles Kendall Adams**

# **Christopher Columbus: His Life and His Work**

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# **PREFACE.**

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In this little volume I have made an attempt to present in popular form the results of the latest researches in regard to the life and work of Columbus.

While constant use has been made of the original authorities, it has been my effort to interpret the conflicting statements with which these sources abound, in the spirit of modern criticism. The principal authorities used have been the Letters and the Journal of Columbus, the History of the Admiral purporting to be by his son Fernando, the histories of the time by Las Casas, Bernaldez, Oviedo, Peter Martyr, and Herrera, and the invaluable collection of documents by Navarrete. Of the greatest importance are the writings of Columbus and Las Casas.

As will appear in the course of the volume, the writings of the Admiral abound in passages that are contradictory or irreconcilable. In the interpretation of conflicting statements, assistance has been received from the numerous writings of Henry Harrisse. The researches of this acute critic in the manuscript records, as well as in the published writings of Italy and Spain, make his works indispensable to a correct understanding of the age of Columbus.

I have not, however, been able to adopt without reservation his views in regard to the work attributed to the son of the Admiral. The force of Harrisse's reasoning is unquestionable; but, as it seems to me, there is internal evidence that the author of the book, whether Fernando or

not, had unusual opportunities for knowledge in regard to the matters about which he wrote. While, therefore, I have used the work with great caution, I have not felt justified in rejecting it as altogether spurious.

The reader will not go far in the perusal of this volume without perceiving that I have endeavoured to emancipate myself from the thralldom of that uncritical admiration in which it has been fashionable to hold the Discoverer, ever since Washington Irving threw over the subject the romantic and bewitching charm of his literary skill. Irving revealed the spirit with which he wrote when he decried what he was pleased to call "that pernicious erudition which busies itself with undermining the pedestals of our national monuments." Irving's was not the spirit of modern scholarship. We should seek the truth at whatever hazard. While directed by this motive in the course of all my investigations into the life and work of Columbus, I have tried, on the one hand, to avoid the common error of bringing him to the bar of the present age for trial, and, on the other, not to shrink from judging him in accordance with those canons of justice which are applicable alike to all time.

C. K. A.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY,  
March 10, 1892.

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# CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

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# **CHAPTER I. EARLY YEARS.**

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At the northwest corner of the Italian peninsula the coast-line, as it approaches the French border, bends around to the west in such a way as to form a kind of rounded angle, which, according to the fertile fancy of the Greeks, resembles the human knee. It was probably in recognition of this geographical peculiarity that the hamlet established at this point received some centuries before the Christian era the name which has since been evolved into Genoa. The situation is not only one of the most picturesque in Europe, but it is peculiarly adapted to the development of a small maritime city. For many miles it is the only point at which Nature has afforded a good opportunity for a harbor. Its geographical relations with the region of the Alps and the plains of northern Italy seem to have designated it as the natural point where a common desire for gain should bring into profitable relations the trading propensities of the people along the shores of the Mediterranean. During nearly two thousand years the situation was made all the more favourable by the ease with which it might be defended; for the range of mountains, which encircles it at a distance of only a few miles, made it easy for the inhabitants to protect themselves against the assaults of their enemies.

The favouring conditions thus afforded gave to Genoa early in the Christian era a commercial prestige of some

importance. The turbulence of the Middle Ages made rapidity of growth quite impossible; but in the time of the Crusades this picturesque city received a large share of that impulse which gave so much life to Venice and the other maritime towns of Italy. Like other cities of its kind, it was filled with seafaring men. It is easy to believe that the boys who grew up in Genoa during the centuries of the Crusades and immediately after, had their imaginations and memories filled to overflowing with accounts of such wonderful adventures as those which, about that time, found expression in the writings of Marco Polo and John de Mandeville. The tales of seafaring adventurers always have a wonderful attraction for boys; and we can well imagine that the yarns spun by the returning sailors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had an altogether peculiar and exceptional fascination.

It was probably in this city of Genoa that Christopher Columbus was born. It is certain that his parents lived there at the middle of the fifteenth century. Whether his father had been in Genoa very many years is doubtful; for there is one bit of record that seems to indicate his moving into the city at some time between 1448 and 1451. That the ancestors of the family had lived in that vicinity ever since the twelfth or thirteenth century may be regarded as certain. But beyond this fact very little rests upon strict historical evidence. This uncertainty, springing as it does from the fact that the name Columbus appears very often in the records of northern Italy during the century before the birth of Christopher, has brought into controversy a

multitude of importunate claimants. If a kind of selfish pride was indicated by the fact that—

“Seven cities claimed the Homer dead,  
In which the living Homer begged his bread,”—

the same characteristic of human nature was shown in northern Italy in more than twofold measure; for no less than sixteen Italian towns have tried to lift themselves into greater importance by setting up a claim to the distinction of having been the birthplace of the Great Discoverer. But these several claims have not succeeded in producing any conclusive evidence. The question is still in some doubt. At least twice in his writings Columbus speaks of himself as having been born at Genoa; and he was generally recognized as a Genoese by his contemporaries. But his parents seem to have been somewhat migratory in their habits. The records show that the father of Christopher was the owner of some property in several of the towns along the foot of the Alps. Besides his other estates, which for the most part came from his wife, he had a house in one of the suburbs of the city of Genoa, and also one in the city itself. Within a few years the Marquis Marcello Staglieno, a learned Genoese antiquary, has established the fact that No. 37 Vico Dritto Ponticello in Genoa was owned by Dominico Columbus, the father of Christopher, during the early years of Christopher's life. But it has not yet been shown by any documentary evidence that he ever lived there. The ownership of this house, and of one in the suburbs, establishes a very strong probability that in one of them Christopher Columbus was born. It cannot be said, however,

that the exact spot has been determined with certainty; and in view of the conflicting evidence, Genoa is to be regarded as the place of his birth only in that broad sense which would include a considerable number of the surrounding dependencies. Bernaldez, Peter Martyr, Oviedo, and Las Casas speak of his birthplace as being, not the city, but the province of Genoa.

The original authorities, moreover, are as conflicting in regard to time as in regard to place. The most definite statement we have is that of Bernaldez, the contemporary and friend as well as the historian of the discoverer. Columbus at one time was an inmate of the house of Bernaldez, and hence it would seem that the historian had good opportunities for ascertaining the truth. But the information he gives in regard to the date of Columbus's birth is only inferential, and is far from satisfactory. He says that the Admiral died in 1506, "at the age of seventy, a little more or a little less." This is the statement which has led Humboldt, Navarrete, and Irving, as well as other careful writers, to believe that the date of his birth should be fixed at 1436. But the acceptance of this date is involved in serious difficulties. The discoverer, it is true, nowhere tells us his exact age; but frequently in his writings he not only mentions the number of years he had followed the sea, but he says he began his nautical career at the age of fourteen. These several statements, put together, point very definitely and consistently to a date nearly or quite ten years later than that indicated by Bernaldez. It cannot be claimed that the statements of Columbus are so exact as to be absolutely free from doubt; but in the absence of any

record of his birth, they are at least entitled to careful consideration. In a letter written in 1503 the Admiral says that he was thirty-eight when he entered the service of Spain. As he first went to Spain in 1484 or 1485, we are obliged to infer that the service he referred to began either in that year or at a later period. This would indicate that he was born in 1446 or later. In 1501, moreover, he wrote that it was forty years since at the age of fourteen he entered upon a seafaring life. This, too, would point to about 1447 as the date of his birth. These, and other statements of a similar nature, are at least enough to justify the inquiry whether the error is probably with Columbus or with Bernaldez. In the case of the historian, the very phrase "seventy, a little more or a little less," carries with it an implication of uncertainty. It seemed to imply that the author judged of the age of Columbus simply from his appearance. Now, there is abundant evidence that the superabounding anxieties and perplexities of his career had the natural effect of making him prematurely old. We have the statement of his son that his hair was gray at the age of thirty; and it is easy to believe that the perplexing vicissitudes of his career deepened and intensified the evidences of age with unnatural rapidity. If, as we have so often and so justly heard, it is anxiety and perplexity that bring on premature age and decay, surely Columbus of all men must have been old long before he reached the goal of threescore and ten. In view of all these facts, it is probable that the conjecture of Bernaldez was incorrect, though very naturally so, and that the date indicated by the figures of Columbus himself is the one that is entitled to most

credence. But all we can say on the subject is that Christopher Columbus was probably born in or about the year 1446. Harrisse, who has scrutinized all the evidence with characteristic acumen, has reached the conclusion that Columbus was born between the 25th of March, 1446, and the 20th of March, 1447.

He was the eldest son of Dominico Columbus and Susannah Fontanarossa, his wife. The other children were Bartholomew and Giacomo, or, as the Spanish call it, Diego, and a sister, of whom nothing of importance is known. The kith and kin of the family for some generations devoted themselves to the humble vocation of wool-combers. The property of the family, of which at the time Columbus was born there was barely enough for a modest competency, appears to have come chiefly from the mother. That the father was a man of exceptional energy, is evinced by the vigour with which he undertook and carried on the various enterprises with which he was connected. In his business, however, he was only moderately prosperous; and so the family was obliged to content itself with a small income.

The early life of Columbus is still quite thickly enshrouded with uncertainty. His education included a reading knowledge of Latin, but his training could have been neither comprehensive nor thorough. Many of the historians, resting upon the statement of Fernando Columbus, assert that he spent a year in the study of cosmogony at the University of Pavia. But the statement is inherently improbable, and rests upon evidence that is altogether inadequate. His father was not in condition to send him to the university without inconvenience. It was the custom of those times for the son

to be trained for the vocation of the father. Such a training the young Christopher had, and a formal knowledge of geography, or cosmogony, as the study was then more generally called, would not have added much to his chances of business success. If he went to the university at all, he must have concluded his studies before he was fourteen. Pavia at the time afforded no special advantages for the prosecution of this study,—indeed, it cannot now be discovered that it possessed any advantages whatever. On the contrary, that celebrated university was devoted with singular exclusiveness to the teaching of philosophy, law, and medicine. There is no evidence in the records of the university that Columbus was ever there. The explorer himself, though he often refers to his early studies, nowhere intimates that he was ever at the university. It was not till more than fifty years after the death of Columbus that his son made the statement on which all subsequent assertions on the subject rest for authority. That the explorer was ever at the university is overwhelmingly improbable.

We know, however, from the best of evidence that he early became interested in geographical studies. His father's business does not seem to have been very prosperous,—at least, we find him about this time selling out his little property in Genoa and establishing himself at Savona. Meantime, the youthful Christopher found himself yielding to the strong current which in those years carried so many of the Genoese into a life of maritime adventure. If our conjecture in regard to the time of his birth is correct, it was about 1460 when he took his first voyage. From that initiative experience for about ten years, that is to say until

1470, we have only glimpses here and there of the events of his life. Nor can we regard the details of this experience as important, except as they throw light upon the development of his intelligence and character. Fortunately for this purpose evidence is not altogether wanting. Bits of information have been picked up here and there, which, though it is impossible to weave them very confidently into a connected whole, still show, in a general way, the nature of the training he received during those important years. If we condense into a useful form all that is positively known of his life during the ten years from the time he was fourteen until he was twenty-four, we shall perhaps conclude that there are only three results that are worthy of note.

The first is the fact that he had considerable maritime experience of a very turbulent nature. There is some reason to believe that he accompanied the unsuccessful expedition of John of Anjou against Naples in 1459. However this may have been, it is certain that he joined several of the expeditions of the celebrated corsairs bearing the same family name of Columbus. Modern eulogists of the great discoverer have hesitated to write the ugly word which indicates the nature of the business in which these much-dreaded fleets were engaged; but the state papers of the time uniformly refer to the elder of these commanders as "the Pirate Columbus." To the younger they also refer in no more complimentary terms. Fernando Columbus is authority for the statement that his father accompanied the celebrated expedition that fought the great battle off Cape St. Vincent. But the statement is a curious illustration of the

necessity of accepting the assurances of this historian with extreme caution. He says that it was by escaping from the wreck of the fleet that his father came for the first time to his new home in Portugal. Now, we know that the battle alluded to did not take place until 1485, the year after Columbus left Portugal and went to Spain; and as he was otherwise occupied ever after he reached Spanish soil, it is not possible that the young navigator was even with the fleet during the engagement. We know, moreover, that he moved to Lisbon before 1473.

But the evidence is conclusive that the Admiral had accompanied the piratical fleets on several former expeditions. The records of Venice show that a decree was passed against the elder pirate Columbus, July 20, 1469, and another against the younger on the 17th of March, 1470. Although these fulminations did not put an end to this peculiar warfare, they are of interest in this connection as showing the school in which Columbus received a considerable part of his early nautical training and experience.

There may be some doubt as to how much importance should be attached to the circumstantial statement of Fernando in regard to his father's connection with these celebrated freebooters. The narrative certainly contains some irreconcilable contradictions; but although Fernando may have been mistaken in the details, he can hardly have been mistaken in the fact that his father accompanied several of these expeditions. A matter of that kind could hardly fail to have been talked about in the presence of the children. The boys may have received erroneous

impressions in reference to details. As time went on, it was naturally easy for events with which the father was definitely connected to become confused with those with which he had nothing whatever to do. But the great fact of his connection with the fleet, of his experience on the piratical ships, can hardly have been an invention of the son. There were two pirates by the name of Columbus,—the younger being, according to one authority, the son, according to another, the nephew of the elder. Fernando gives us to understand distinctly that his father was engaged in the service of both. He moreover considers this so much a matter of pride that he endeavours to establish the fact of a relationship between the two families. The nature of the school in which the young Columbus received a part of his training may be inferred by the fact that the younger of the corsairs in the course of a few years captured as many as eighty fleets,—a part of them in the Mediterranean, and a part in the open sea. During a large portion of the latter half of the fifteenth century, these daring corsairs were the dread of every fleet against whom they were employed.

There is also evidence of another schooling of a somewhat similar nature. During the fifteenth century the Portuguese were engaged in the slave-trade on the coast of Africa; and we are told that Columbus sailed several times with them to the coast of Guinea as if he had been one of them.

It must have been during this period also that the events occurred which Columbus described in a letter written to one of the Spanish monarchs in 1495. He says,—

“King René (whom God has taken to himself) sent me to Tunis to capture the galley ‘Fernandina.’ Arriving at the island of San Pedro in Sardinia, I learned that there were two ships and a caracca with the galley, which so alarmed the crew that they resolved to proceed no farther, but to go to Marseilles for another vessel and a larger crew. Upon which, being unable to force their inclinations, I apparently yielded to their wish, and, having first changed the points of the compass, spread all sail (for it was evening), and at daybreak we were within the cape of Carthagera, when all believed for a certainty that we were nearing Marseilles.”

This incident shows that the schooling had given him a full competency of intrepidity. It also shows that the ethics of the school had had the natural effect of relieving him of all unnecessary scruples of conscience.

Another voyage of a very different nature was probably made at a little later period. Unfortunately we are indebted for our knowledge of it entirely to Fernando. This is the celebrated voyage to the north, of which so much has been made in setting up the claim that Columbus was indebted for his idea of America to information obtained in Iceland. It would be a great satisfaction to know just what occurred in the course of that voyage; but this now seems impossible. The only record we have of the event is that contained in a letter of Columbus quoted by Fernando. The letter is not now known to be in existence; but the event alluded to seems to have taken place in the year 1477, about four or five years after Columbus went to Lisbon, and seven years before he went to Spain.

Columbus is quoted as saying that he “sailed one hundred leagues beyond the island of Tile, the south part of which was distant from the equinoctial line seventy-three leagues, and not sixty-three, as some have asserted; neither does it lie within the line which includes the west of that referred to by Ptolemy, but is much more westerly. To this island, which is as large as England, the English, especially from Bristol, came with their merchandise. At the time he was there, the sea was not frozen, but the tides were so great as to rise and fall twenty-six fathoms.”

Nothing more is known of this voyage than is contained in this letter; but notwithstanding the gross inaccuracies of the statement, it seems sufficient ground for believing that Columbus visited Iceland, or at least went beyond it. The size of the island indicates that it could have been no other. Whether he landed there, and if so, whether he obtained from the natives any knowledge of the continent lying far to the west and southwest, must, perhaps, forever be a matter of mere conjecture. It is, however, hardly probable that in the year 1477 Columbus would go to Iceland without making inquiries in regard to lands lying beyond. The Icelanders had long been the great explorers of the north. As we shall presently see, Columbus had already received the famous letter of Toscanelli, in which the practicability of reaching Asia by sailing due west was fully set forth; and we know in other ways that the mind of Columbus was already fully imbued with the idea of the westward voyage of discovery. It is certain, moreover, that the Icelanders could have given him considerable valuable information. The voyages that had been made by the Norwegians from time

to time during the eleventh and twelfth centuries must have been known at least by the more intelligent of the people of Iceland. It seems highly improbable, moreover, that Columbus, already thirsting for more geographical knowledge, would visit such an island without availing himself of every opportunity of securing further information.

But on the other hand, we must not exaggerate the importance of this conjecture. There is no evidence whatever that he even landed. In all of the writings of Columbus there is nowhere any hint of any knowledge gained from these sources; and this very important truth should not be lost sight of in the weighing of probabilities. In view of all the facts, it seems hardly possible that Columbus can have gained from this expedition anything more than at best a somewhat vague confirmation of the ideas and purposes that had already taken definite shape in his mind.

Another fact worthy of note during these earlier years was his vocation during the intervals between his voyages. He seems to have interlarded his more or less piratical expeditions on the sea with the gentle experiences of a bookseller and map-maker on the land. The art of printing had but recently been invented, and few books had been issued from the press; but there was some trade in books for all that. There is abundant evidence that this youthful enthusiast, at the period of his life between fifteen and twenty-four, availed himself of whatever knowledge came in his way in regard to the subject that was beginning to fill and monopolize his mind. During the fifteenth century, as hereafter we shall have occasion to see, a large number of books on geography became generally known. Many of the

classics, after lying dormant for a thousand years, sprang suddenly into life; and it is quite within the scope of a reasonable historical imagination to conjecture that, even during his years at Genoa, many of the leisure hours of what could hardly have been a very absorbing vocation as a bookseller were spent in gaining such knowledge as was possible concerning the shape and size of the earth. It would be out of place in this connection to consider details; it is enough to know that even in his earliest writings on the subject, he alluded freely to the geographical writers whose works he had read.

At some time between 1470 and 1473, Columbus changed his abode from Genoa to Lisbon. There were two facts that made this transfer of his activities both natural and beneficial. The first was that during the early part of the fifteenth century Portugal had placed herself far in advance of other nations, by her maritime expeditions and achievements. Prince Henry, with a courage and enterprise that have secured for him imperishable renown, had pushed out the boundaries of geographical knowledge, and had awakened an enthusiastic zeal for further discoveries. The fleets of Portugal had made themselves at length familiar with the west coast of Africa; and the bugbear of a tropical sea whose slimy depths were supposed to make navigation impossible, had been dispelled. The interest of every geographical explorer had been aroused and excited. Lisbon was the centre of this new ferment.

The second consideration of importance was the fact that Bartholomew, a younger brother of Columbus, had established himself at the Portuguese capital as a maker

and publisher of maps and charts. For the products of this handicraft there had been created an active demand. Nothing was more natural, then, than that this young enthusiast, in whom there were already welling up all kinds of maritime ambitions, should remove to that centre of geographical knowledge and interest, and ally himself with his brother in so congenial and promising a vocation.

It was during the years between 1473 and 1484 that a large part of the maritime experiences of Columbus already adverted to took place. The most of them, perhaps all of them, occurred after Columbus established himself at Lisbon. But unfortunately, there is no contemporaneous evidence to show the course of his life. In the records of the time we find his name here and there in connection with such events as those we have already mentioned; but, as yet, it is impossible to weave these scattered statements into a connected narrative that will bear the test of critical examination. We are obliged, therefore, to be content with mere glimpses of individual events and experiences.

If we have judged correctly as to the year of the Admiral's birth, he was about twenty-six or seven when he took up his abode in Lisbon. Not long after this change of residence, but in what year we cannot ascertain, an event took place which must have had an important influence, not only on his private life, but also on the development of his maritime plans. It was at about this time that he was married; but when, under what circumstances, and with whom, are questions which, notwithstanding all that has been written on the subject, cannot now be confidently determined. Following the statement of Fernando, it has

been customary for historians to say that Columbus married the daughter of an old navigator of Porto Santo, Perestrello by name, to whom Prince Henry had given the governorship of the island in recognition of explorations and discoveries on the coast of Africa. But like so many other of the statements of Fernando, this turns out on examination to be extremely improbable. Harrisse is entitled to the credit of having traced the history of the Perestrello family, and of having found the names of the daughters, and even of their husbands. Not only is the name Columbus lacking in these lists, but it contains no one of the three sisters of Columbus's wife. This, it is true, is negative evidence only, but it is quite enough to shake our confidence in the statement of Fernando. Of positive evidence there is none whatever. The first mention of his having been married at all occurs in a letter presently to be quoted; and the second was in the clause of his will providing for the saying of masses for his soul and for the souls of his father, mother, and wife. This document bears date of Aug. 25, 1505, and contains no mention of his wife's name. A name first appears eighteen years later, in the will of Diego, who calls himself the son of Christopher Columbus and his wife Donna Philippa Moñiz. Elsewhere in the same will he refers to himself as the son of Felipa Muñiz, the wife of Columbus, whose ashes repose in the monastery of Carmen at Lisbon. It is possible that Moñiz, or Muñiz, was not the father's name; but the giving of the maiden name alone in such a connection was not usual at that time, and therefore, in the absence of other evidence, it would seem improbable that the name given was the surname of the father. It was not

until nearly fifty years later that the narrative of Fernando first mentions the name of Perestrelo. Las Casas and other later writers have done nothing but copy the statement of Fernando, without further investigation. The matter would be of trifling significance but for the fact that later historians have magnified this supposed marriage into a matter of considerable professional importance. Las Casas tells us that he had learned from Diego Columbus that the Admiral and his wife lived for some time with the widow of Perestrelo at Porto Santo, and that "all the papers, charts, journals, and maritime instruments" of the old navigators were placed at his disposal. But all the evidence of this fact now obtainable consists simply of repetitions of this statement. The most careful search of all the records has failed to discover a scrap of testimony that Columbus ever lived at Porto Santo or on any of the other islands off the coast of Africa. Harrisson has devoted more than thirty octavo pages to a very critical examination of all the evidence on the marriage of Columbus; but he is unable to reach any other positive conclusion than that very many of the early statements in regard to the matter cannot possibly be correct. As the result of his investigations, he inclines to the belief that the story of the Admiral's living at Porto Santo and profiting by the maritime possessions and experiences of Perestrelo must be abandoned. Beyond the fact that the Admiral's wife bore the name of Philippa Moñiz, nothing on the subject can be regarded as absolutely known. It seems probable that Columbus was not married till after 1474; but the exact date cannot be established.

As we shall not have occasion to refer to Columbus's married life again, one fact more should here be noted. Fernando asserts that his father left Portugal in 1484 on account of the grief he experienced at the death of his wife. That the statement was incorrect, is shown by a letter, still in existence, in the handwriting of the Admiral himself. This letter, which was written to Donna Juanna de la Torre, a noble lady at the Spanish court, for the purpose of presenting his cause and arguing it with the evident expectation that his plea would reach the attention of the sovereigns, finally uses these words:—

“I beg you to take into consideration all I have written, and how I came from afar to serve these princes,—*abandoning wife and children, whom for this reason I never afterward saw.*”

This lamentable recital, written sixteen years after Columbus left Portugal for Spain, and at least nine years after he presented himself with his son Diego at La Rabida, leaves upon our minds the inevitable inference that when he fled from Portugal in 1484, he left behind him a wife and at least two children. Of his legitimate offspring, his heir and successor Diego is the only one of whom any record has been preserved. As we shall hereafter have occasion to note, Columbus left Portugal, not only in poverty, but under circumstances which made it imprudent for him to return. We are obliged to infer that his wife and children were left in indigence. Neither in the numerous writings of Columbus nor in any of the records of the time is there any allusion to the death of the wife or of the children. No letter that