

***CHRISTOPHER
COLUMBUS,
BARTOLOMÉ
DE LAS CASAS,
AMERIGO
VESPUCCI***

An engraving of Christopher Columbus, showing him from the chest up. He has a long, full beard and is wearing a cap and a heavy, draped garment. The style is characteristic of 17th-century book illustrations.

***THE LIFE
OF AMERIGO
VESPUCCI***

**Christopher Columbus, Bartolomé de las
Casas, Amerigo Vespucci**

The Life of Amerigo Vespucci

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AMERIGO VESPUCCI

I

YOUNG AMERIGO AND HIS FAMILY

1451-1470

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Cradled in the valley of the Arno, its noble architecture fitly supplementing its numerous natural charms, lies the Tuscan city of Florence, the birthplace of immortal Dante, the early home of Michael Angelo, the seat of the Florentine Medici, the scene of Savonarola's triumphs and his tragic end. Fame has come to many sons of Florence, as poets, statesmen, sculptors, painters, travellers; but perhaps none has achieved a distinction so unique, apart, and high as the subject of this volume, after whom the continents of the western hemisphere were named.

Amerigo Vespucci¹ was born in Florence, March 9, 1451, just one hundred and fifty years after Dante was banished from the city in which both first saw the light. The Vespucci family had then resided in that city more than two hundred years, having come from Peretola, a little town adjacent, where the name was highly regarded, as attached to the most respected of the Italian nobility. Following the custom of that nobility, during the period of unrest in Italy, the Vespuccis established themselves in a stately mansion near one of the city gates, which is known as the Porta del Prato. Thus they were within touch of the gay society of Florence, and could enjoy its advantages, while at the same time in a position, in the event of an uprising, to flee to their estates and stronghold in the country.

While the house in which Christopher Columbus was born remains unidentified, and the year of his birth undecided, no such ambiguity attaches to the place and year of Vespucci's nativity. Above the doorway of the mansion which "for centuries before the discovery of America was the dwelling-

place of the ancestors of Amerigo Vespucci, and his own birthplace," a marble tablet was placed, in the second decade of the eighteenth century, bearing the following inscription:

*"To AMERICO VESPUCCIO, a noble Florentine,
Who, by the discovery of AMERICA,
Rendered his own and his Country's name illustrious,
[As] the AMPLIFIER OF THE WORLD.
Upon this ancient mansion of the VESPUCCI,
Inhabited by so great a man,
The holy fathers of Saint John of God
Have placed this Tablet, sacred to his memory.
A.D. 1719."*

At that time, about midway between the date of Vespucci's death and the present, the evidence was strong and continuous as to the residence in that building (which was then used as a hospital) of the family whose name it commemorates. Here was born, in 1451, the third son of Anastasio and Elizabetta Vespucci, whose name, whether rightly or not, was to be bestowed upon a part of the world at that time unknown.

The Vespuccis were then aristocrats, with a long and boasted lineage, but without great wealth to support their pretensions. They were relatively poor; they were proud; but they were not ashamed to engage in trade. Some of their ancestors had filled the highest offices within the gift of the state, such as *prioris* and *gonfalonieres*, or magistrates and chief magistrates, while the first of the Vespuccis known to have borne the prænomen Amerigo was a secretary of the republic in 1336.

It is incontestable that Amerigo Vespucci was well-born, and in his youth received the advantages of an education more thorough than was usually enjoyed by the sons of families which had "the respectability of wealth acquired in

trade," and even the prestige of noble connections. No argument is needed to show that the position of a Florentine merchant was perfectly compatible with great respectability, for the Medici themselves, with the history of whose house that of Florence is bound up most intimately, were merchant princes. The vast wealth they acquired in their mercantile operations in various parts of Europe enabled them to pose as patrons of art and literature, and supported their pretensions to sovereign power. The Florentine Medici attained to greatest eminence during the latter half of the century in which Amerigo Vespucci was born, and he was acquainted both with Cosimo, that "Pater Patriæ, who began the glorious epoch of the family," and with "Lorenzo the Magnificent," who died in 1492.

The Florentines, in fact, were known as great European traders or merchants as early as the eleventh century, while their bankers and capitalists not only controlled the financial affairs of several states, or nations, but exerted a powerful influence in the realm of statesmanship and diplomacy. The little wealth the Vespucci enjoyed at the time of Amerigo's advent was derived from an ancestor of the century previous, who, besides providing endowments for churches and hospitals, left a large fortune to his heirs. His monument may be seen within the chapel built by himself and his wife, and it bears this inscription, in old Gothic characters: "The tomb of Simone Piero Vespucci, a merchant, and of his children and descendants, and of his wife, who caused this chapel to be erected and decorated — for the salvation of her soul. Anno Dom. 1383."

The immediate ancestors, then, of Amerigo Vespucci were highly respectable, and they were honorable, having held many positions of trust, with credit to themselves and profit to the state. At the time of Amerigo's birth his father, Anastasio Vespucci, was secretary of the Signori, or senate of the republic; an uncle, Juliano, was Florentine ambassador at Genoa; and a cousin, Piero Vespucci, so ably

commanded a fleet of galleys despatched against the corsairs of the Barbary coast that he was sent as ambassador to the King of Naples, by whom he was specially honored.

Another member of the family, one Guido Antonio, became locally famous as an expounder of the law and a diplomat. Respecting him an epitaph was composed, the last two lines of which might, if applied to Amerigo, have seemed almost prophetic:

*"Here lies GUIDO ANTONIO, in this sepulchre —
HE WHO SHOULD LIVE FOREVER,
Or else never have seen the light."*

This epitaph was written of the lawyer, who departed unknown and unwept by the world, while his then obscure kinsman, Amerigo, subsequently achieved a fame that filled the four quarters of the earth.

The youth of Amerigo is enshrouded in the obscurity which envelops that of the average boy in whatever age, for no one divined that he would become great or famous, and hence he was not provided with a biographer. This is unfortunate, of course, but we must console ourselves with the thought that he was not unusually precocious, and probably said little that would be considered worth preserving. It happened that after he became world-large in importance, tales and traditions respecting his earliest years crept out in abundance; but these may well be looked upon with suspicion. We know scarcely more than that his early years were happy, for he had a loving mother, and a father wise enough to direct him in the way he should travel.

It does not always follow that the course the father prescribes is the best one in the end, for sometimes a boy develops in unsurmised directions; and this was the case with Amerigo Vespucci. The fortunes of the family being on the wane, he was selected as the one to retrieve them, and

of four sons was the only one who did not receive a college education. The other three were sent to the University of Pisa, whence they returned with their "honors" thick upon them, and soon lapsed into obscurity, from which they never emerged. That is, they never "made a mark" in the world; save one brother, Girolamo, who made a pilgrimage to Palestine, where he lived nine years, suffered much, and lost what little fortune he carried with him.

He may have thought, perhaps, in after years, that if he had not belonged to a family containing the world-famed navigator his exploits would have brought him reputation; but it is more probable that if he had not written a letter to his younger brother, Amerigo, the world would never have heard from him at all. However, he was the first traveller in the family, and with his university education he should have produced a good account of his adventures; but if he ever did so it has not been preserved from oblivion.

Amerigo was not given a college education, but something — as it eventuated — vastly better. His father had a brother, a man of erudition for his time, who had studied for the Church. This learned uncle, Georgio Antonio Vespucci, was then a Dominican friar, respected in Florence for his piety and for his learning. About the year 1450, or not long before Amerigo was born, he opened a school for the sons of nobles, and in the garb of a monk pursued the calling of the preceptor. His fame was such that the school was always full, yet when his brother's child, Amerigo, desired to attend, having arrived at the age for receiving the rudiments of an education, he was greeted cordially and given a place in one of the lower classes. It may be imagined that he would have been favored by his uncle; but such seems not to have been the case, for the worthy friar was a disciplinarian first of all. He had ever in mind, however, the kind of education desired by his brother for Amerigo, which was to be commercial, and grounded him well in mathematics, languages, cosmography, and

astronomy. His curriculum even embraced, it is said, statesmanship and the finesse of diplomacy, for the merchants of Vespucci's days were, like the Venetian consuls, "very important factors in developing friendly international relations."

There was then a great rivalry between Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Pisa for the control of trading-posts in the Levant, which carried with them the vast commerce of the Orient, then conducted by way of the Mediterranean, the Black, and the Caspian seas, and overland by caravans with India and China. At the time our hero was growing into manhood, in the latter half of the fifteenth century, Florence, "under the brilliant leadership of the Medici and other shrewd merchant princes, gained control of strategic trading-posts in all parts of the [then known] world, and secured a practical monopoly in the trade through Armenia and Rhodes.... It was from banking, however, that Florence derived most of her wealth. For some time her bankers controlled the financial markets of the world. Most of the great loans made by sovereigns during this period, for carrying on wars or for other purposes, were made through the agency of Florentine bankers. Even Venetian merchants were glad to appeal to her banks for loans. In the fifteenth century Florence had eighty great banking-houses, many of which had branches in every part of the world."²

It is evident, therefore, that the sagacious Anastasio Vespucci had mapped out a great career for the son whom he had chosen to recreate the fortunes of his house. He was to be a banker, a diplomat; eventually he might attain, like the greatest of the Medici, to the station and dignities of a merchant prince. To this end the worthy Giorgio Antonio ever strove, and as he found his nephew a tractable and studious pupil, he congratulated himself and his family that in Amerigo they had the individual who was to restore the prestige of their ancient name.

But alas! the sequel proved that Friar Georgio was too ambitious, and had overshot the mark. In his desire to turn out a finished product, a scholar that should be a credit to his school and an ornament to his family, he not only inculcated the essentials for a commercial education, but, as has already been mentioned, led his eager follower into the wider fields of astronomy and cosmography. All he knew — and that included all the ancients knew — of these abstruse sciences he imparted to Amerigo, and in the end, so far as we can judge, the young man became more proficient in them than any other person of his age and time. So it eventuated that those studies, which were intended merely as subsidiary to the more serious pursuit, became the prime factors in shaping his career. They were his stepping-stones to greatness, as were his mercantile transactions; but, anticipating somewhat the events of his later life, we shall find that they did not conduce to the acquisition of wealth.

"In Florence," says the author previously quoted, "more than in any other Italian city during the Middle Ages, was displayed the direct influence of commerce upon the developments of all the finer elements of material and immaterial civilization. She was the Athens of Italy, and her art, literature, and science was the brightest gleam of intellectual light that was seen in Europe during that age. It was from Florence, more than from any other source, that came the awakening influence known as the Renaissance."

This truth we see exemplified in the formative period of Amerigo Vespucci's life, for, in order to become qualified to adorn the high position of a prince of commerce, he was as carefully trained as if to fill a prelate's chair or grasp the helm of state. So reluctant was his uncle, the good old monk Georgio, to relinquish his talented nephew to the world, that we find them in company as late as 1471, as attested by this letter, written in Latin by Amerigo to his father, in October of that year:

"To the Excellent and Honorable Signor Anastasio Vespucci.

"HONORED FATHER, — Do not wonder that I have not written to you within the last few days. I thought that my uncle would have satisfied you concerning me, and in his absence I scarcely dare to address you in the Latin tongue, blushing even at my deficiencies in my own language. I have, besides, been industriously occupied of late in studying the rules of Latin composition, and will show you my book on my return. Whatever else I have accomplished, and how I have conducted myself, you will have been able to learn from my uncle, whose return I ardently desire, that, under his and your own joint directions, I may follow with greater facility both my studies and your kind precepts.

"George Antonio, three or four days ago, gave a number of letters to you to a good priest, Signor Nerotto, to which he desires your answer. There is nothing else that is new to relate, unless that we all desire greatly to return to the city. The day of our return is not yet fixed, but soon will be, unless the pestilence should increase and occasion greater alarm, which may God avert!

"He, George Antonio, commends to your consideration a poor and wretched neighbor of his, whose only reliance and means are in our house, concerning which he addresses you in full. He asks you, therefore, that you would attend to his affairs, so that they may suffer as little as possible in his absence.

"Farewell, then, honored father. Salute all the family in my behalf, and commend me to my mother and all my elder relatives.

"Your son, with due obedience,
"AMERIGO VESPUCCI."³

The cause of Amerigo's absence from Florence was, it is said, the terrible plague which swept over that city and for a

time paralyzed its activities. All who were able fled to the country, and, Friar Georgio's school having been broken up by the scattering of his pupils, he and Amerigo retired to their family estate, at or near Peretola, there to await the subsidence of the epidemic.

- ¹ This name is variously spelled, as, for example: Albericus, Alberico, Almerigo, Americo, Americus, Amerigo; Despuche, Vespuche, Vespuchy, Vespuccio, Vespucius, Vespucci. The best writers use either the Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, or the Latinized, Americus Vespucius, with good authority for both.
- ² From the *General History of Commerce*, by W. C. Webster, Ph.D.
- ³ This letter was discovered by Signor Bandini, author of the *Vita e Lettre di Amerigo Vespucci*, 1745, in the Strozzi Library. HARRISSE says, "This, and two or three signatures added to receipts, which were brought to light by Navarrete, constitute the only autographs of Vespucius known." In the original paper he uses the Latin form, Vespucius; but in a letter written in 1508, when he was pilot-major of Spain, he signs himself "Amerigo Vespucci."

II AMERIGO'S FRIENDS AND TEACHERS 1470-1482

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Florence, in Vespucci's day, was the home of genius, of culture, and of art. Amerigo, doubtless, was acquainted with some of her sons whose fame, like his own, has endured to the present day, and will last for all time. The great Michael Angelo, who was born at or near Florence in 1475, and whose patron was Lorenzo the Magnificent, was his contemporary, although the artist and sculptor survived the discoverer more than fifty years. Savonarola, who came to Florence in 1482, was just a year the junior of Amerigo, and is said to have been an intimate friend of his uncle, who, like himself, belonged to the Dominican order. The young man may not have been touched by Buonarroti's art, nor have been moved by Savonarola's preaching, but, like the former, he possessed an artistic temperament, and, like the latter, he was an enthusiast.

The man, however, who, next to his uncle, shaped Amerigo's career and turned him from trade to exploration, was a learned Florentine named Toscanelli. If you have followed the fortunes of Christopher Columbus, reader, you have seen this name before, for it was Toscanelli who, in the year 1474, sent a letter and a chart to the so-called discoverer of America, which confirmed him in the impression that a route to India lay westward from Europe across the "Sea of Darkness."

It is not known just when Amerigo first met "Paul the Physicist," as Toscanelli was called in Florence; but it may have been in youth or early manhood, for aside from the fact that "all the world" knew and revered the famous *savant*, there was the inclination arising from a mutual

interest in cosmography and astronomy. Toscanelli was the foremost scientist of his age, and as he was born in 1397, at the time Amerigo met him he must have been a venerable man. He lived, however, until the year 1482, and as the younger man was in Florence during the first forty years of his life, and the last thirty of Toscanelli's, it is more than probable that their intercourse was long and friendly.

It is known, at least, that they were acquainted at the time the learned doctor wrote Columbus, in 1474, and it does not require a stretch of the imagination to fancy them together, and wondering what effect that letter would have upon a man who entertained views similar to their own. Columbus, it is thought, had then been pondering several years over the possible discovery of land, presumably the eastern coast of India, by sailing westward. "It was in the year 1474," writes a modern historian, "that he had some correspondence with the Italian savant, Toscanelli, regarding this discovery of land. A belief in such a discovery was a natural corollary to the object which Prince Henry of Portugal had in view by circumnavigating Africa, in order to find a way to the countries of which Marco Polo had given golden accounts. It was, in brief, to substitute for the tedious indirection of the African route a direct western passage — a belief in the practicability of which was drawn from a confidence in the sphericity of the earth."¹

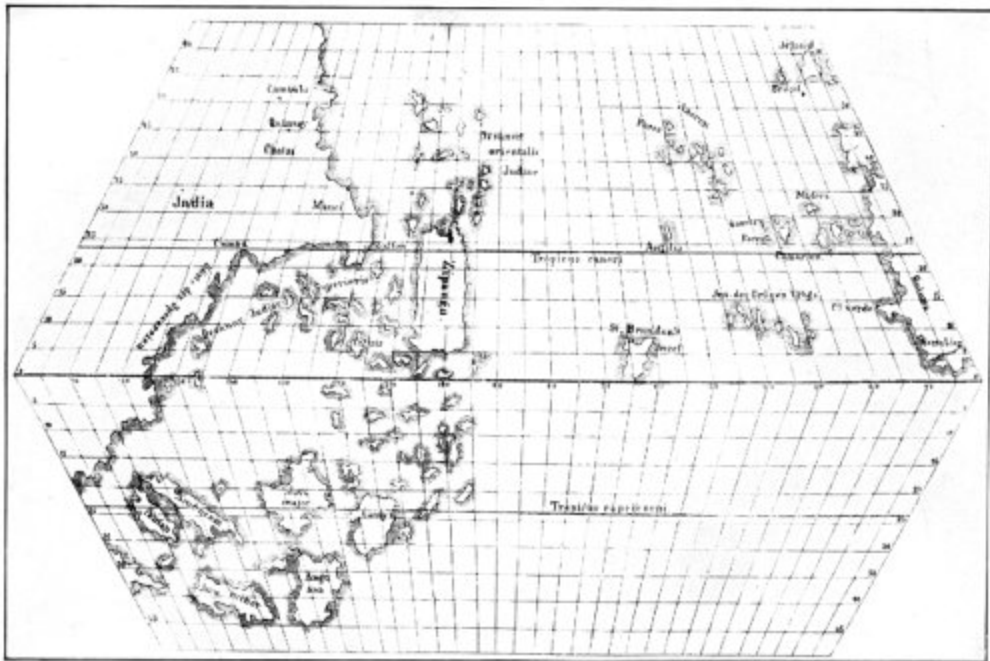
Later in life Columbus seems to have forgotten his indebtedness to Toscanelli, and "grew to imagine that he had been independent of the influences of his time," ascribing his great discovery to the inspiration of one chosen to accomplish the prophecy of Isaiah. But the venerable Florentine had pondered the problem many years before Columbus thought of it. "Some Italian writers even go to the extent of asserting that the idea of a western passage to India originated with Toscanelli, before it entered the mind of Columbus; and it is highly probable that this was the case."

There is this in favor of Toscanelli: He was a learned man, while Columbus was comparatively ignorant. He was then advanced in years, and had given the greater portion of his life to the consideration of just such questions, having had his attention called to them by reading the travels of Marco Polo and comparing the information therein contained with that derived from Eastern merchants who had traded for many years in the Orient. He was not a sailor, nor a corsair — though Columbus had been both, and had followed the sea for years — but he was an astronomer, and he knew more of the starry heavens, as well as of the earth beneath them, than any other scientist alive. "It was Toscanelli who erected the famous solstitial gnomon at the cathedral of Florence." For his learning he was honored, when but thirty years of age, with the curatorship of the great Florentine library, and for nearly sixty years thereafter he passed his days amid books, charts, maps, and globes.

As a speculative philosopher, he had arrived at a correct conclusion respecting the sphericity of the earth, and, with all the generosity of a humanitarian, he freely communicated his ideas to others. Columbus would have excluded every other human being from participating in his thoughts, and arrogated to himself alone the right to navigate westerly. This was the difference between the broad-minded philosopher and the narrow-minded sailor who by accident had stumbled upon a theory. The philosopher said, "It belongs to the world!" The ignorant sailor cried, "It is mine!"

Toscanelli advanced the theory, but it was Columbus who put it to the test, and reaped all the rewards, as well as suffered for the mistakes. For mistakes there were, and the chief error lay in supposing the country "discovered" by Columbus pertained to the Indies. He died in that belief, and also Toscanelli, who passed away ten years before the first voyage made to that land, subsequently known as America. In one sense, perhaps, the Florentine doctor was the means

of that first voyage of Columbus having been accomplished, for the chart he sent him made the distance between Europe and the western country seem so short that it was undertaken with less reluctance, and persisted in more stubbornly, than it might otherwise have been. But this was a mistake in detail only, and not in theory. A line was projected from about the latitude of Lisbon, on the western coast of Europe, to the "great city of Quinsai," as described by Marco Polo, on the opposite shores of Asia. This line was divided into twenty-six spaces, of two hundred and fifty miles each, making the total distance between the two points sixty-five hundred miles, which Toscanelli supposed to be one-third of the earth's circumference.



A CONJECTURAL RESTORATION OF TOSCANELLI'S MAP

In short, Toscanelli calculated the distance, made a conjectural chart embodying the results of his readings of Aristotle, Strabo, and Ptolemy, of his conversations during many years with Oriental travellers, and his own observations. He sent this chart to Columbus; the latter

adopted it as his guide, and by means of it, faulty as it was, achieved his great "discovery." Whose, then, is the merit of this achievement? Does it not belong as much to Toscanelli as to Columbus?

To whomsoever the credit may be given — whether to the man who conceived the idea, or to him who developed it, and whether or not Columbus intentionally appropriated the honor and glory exclusively — by the irony of fate, there stood a man at Toscanelli's elbow, as it were, when he wrote to the Genoese, who was destined to rob him of his great discovery's richest reward. This man was Amerigo Vespucci, after whom — though unsuggested by him and unknown to him — the continents of America were named, by strangers, before Christopher Columbus had lain a year in his grave!

It is not at all improbable that Vespucci was aware of the correspondence between Toscanelli and Columbus, as he was then acquainted with the former, and at the age of twenty-three was intensely interested in the pursuits of the learned physician. Next to Toscanelli, in fact, he was probably the best-informed man then living in Florence as to the studies to which his friend had devoted the better part of his life, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that he saw the letters before they were sent to Columbus.

But this is a trivial matter compared with the importance of these letters, in a consideration of the effect they produced upon the mind of Columbus, for, if they did not suggest to him the idea of voyaging westerly to discover the Indies, they certainly confirmed him in the opinion that such a voyage could be successfully made. By a strange freak of fate these letters were preserved in the *Life of Columbus*, written by his son Fernando, and there can be no question of their authenticity. They breathe the spirit of benevolence for which Toscanelli was noted, and indicate the greatness of the man — a greatness decidedly in contrast to the mean and petty nature of his correspondent, who would have

perished sooner than allow information so precious to escape from him to the world.

Toscanelli's first letter was written in Florence, June 25, 1474, and is as follows:

"To Christopher Columbus, Paul the Physicist wishes health.

"I perceive your noble and earnest desire to sail to those parts where the spice is produced, and therefore, in answer to a letter of yours, I send you another letter which, some days since, I wrote to a friend of mine, a servant of the King of Portugal before the wars of Castile, in answer to another that he wrote me by his highness's order, upon this same account. And I also *send you another sea-chart*, like the one I sent to him, which will satisfy your demands. This is a copy of the letter:

"To Ferdinand Martinez, Canon of Lisbon, Paul the Physicist wishes health.

"I am very glad to hear of the familiarity you enjoy with your most serene and magnificent king, and though I have very often discoursed concerning *the short way there is from hence to the Indies*, where the spice is produced, by sea (which I look upon to be shorter than that you take by the coast of Guinea), yet you now tell me that his highness would have me make out and demonstrate it, so that it may be understood and put in practice.

"Therefore, though I could better show it to him with a globe in my hand, and make him sensible of the figure of the world, yet I have resolved, to make it more easy and intelligible, to show the way on a chart, such as is used in navigation, and therefore I send one to his majesty, made and drawn with my own hand, wherein is set down the *utmost bounds of the earth, from Ireland in the west to the farthest parts of Guinea*, with all the islands that lie in the way; opposite to which western coast is described the beginning of the Indies, with the islands and places whither

you may go, and how far you may bend from the North Pole towards the Equinoctial, and for how long a time — that is, how many leagues you may sail before you come to those places most fruitful in spices, jewels, and precious stones.

"Do not wonder if I term that country where the spice grows, *West*, that product being generally ascribed to the *East*, because those who sail westward will always find those countries in the west, and those who travel by land eastward will always find those countries in the east! The straight lines that lie lengthways in the chart show the distance there is from west to east; the others, which cross them, show the distance from north to south. I have also marked down in the chart several places in India where ships might put in, upon any storms or contrary winds, or other unforeseen accident.

"Moreover, to give you full information of all those places which you are very desirous to know about, you must understand that none but traders live and reside in all those islands, and that there is as great a number of ships and seafaring people, with merchandise, as in any other part of the world, particularly in a most noble port called Zaitun, where there are every year a hundred large ships of pepper loaded and unloaded, besides many other ships that take in other spices. This country is mighty populous, and there are many provinces and kingdoms, and innumerable cities, under the dominion of *a prince called the Grand Khan*, which name signifies king of kings, who for the most part resides in the province of Cathay. His predecessors were very desirous to have commerce and be in amity with Christians, and two hundred years since sent ambassadors to the Pope, desiring him to send them many learned men and doctors, to teach them our faith; but by reason of some obstacles the ambassadors met with they returned back, without coming to Rome. Besides, there came an ambassador to Pope Eugenius IV., who told him of the great friendship there was between those princes and their

people, and the Christians. *I discoursed with him a long while* upon the several matters of the grandeur of their royal structures, and of the greatness, length, and breadth of their rivers, and he told me many wonderful things of the multitude of towns and cities along the banks of the rivers, upon a single one of which there were two hundred cities, with marble bridges of great length and breadth, adorned with numerous pillars.

"This country deserves as well as any other to be discovered; and there may not only be great profit made there, and many things of value found, but also gold, silver, many sorts of precious stones, and spices in abundance, which are not brought into our ports. And it is certain that many wise men, philosophers, astrologers, and other persons skilled in all arts and very ingenious, govern that mighty province and command their armies. From Lisbon directly westward there are in the chart twenty-six spaces, each of which contains two hundred and fifty miles, to the most noble and vast city of Quinsai, which is one hundred miles in compass — that is, thirty-five leagues. In it there are ten marble bridges. The name signifies a heavenly city, of which wonderful things are reported, as to the ingenuity of the people, the buildings, and the revenues.

"This space above mentioned is *almost the third part of the globe*. The city is in the province of Mangi, bordering on that of *Cathay*, where the king for the most part resides. From the island of Antilla, which you call the Island of the Seven Cities, and whereof you have some knowledge, to the most noble island of *Cipango* are ten spaces, which make two thousand five hundred miles. This island abounds in gold, pearls, and precious stones; and, you must understand, they cover their temples and palaces with plates of pure gold; so that, for want of knowing the way, all these things are concealed and hidden — and yet may be gone to with safety.

"Much more might be said; but having told you what is most material, and you being wise and judicious, I am satisfied there is nothing of it but what you understand, and therefore will not be more prolix. Thus much may serve to satisfy your curiosity, it being as much as the shortness of time and my business would permit me to say. So, I remain most ready to satisfy and serve his Highness to the utmost, in all the commands he shall lay upon me."

A second communication followed the reply of Columbus, in which Toscanelli wrote:

"I received your letters with the things you sent me, which I take as a great favor, and commend your noble and ardent desire of sailing from east to west, *as it is marked out in the chart I sent you*, which would demonstrate itself better in the form of a globe. I am glad it is well understood, and that the voyage laid down is not only possible, but certain, honorable, very advantageous, and most glorious among all Christians. You cannot be perfect in the knowledge of it but by experience and practice, as I have had in great measure, and by the solid and true information of worthy and wise men, who are come from those parts to this court of Rome, and from merchants who have traded long in those parts and who are persons of good reputation. So that, when the said voyage is performed, it will be to powerful kingdoms, and to most noble cities and provinces, rich, and abounding in all things we stand in need of, particularly all sorts of spice in great quantities, and stores of jewels. This will, moreover, be grateful to those kings and princes who are very desirous to converse and trade with Christians, or else have communication with the wise and ingenious men in these parts, as well in point of religion as in all sciences, because of the extraordinary account they have of the kingdoms and government of these parts. For which reasons, and many more that might be alleged, I do not at

all wonder that you, who have a great heart, and all the Portuguese nation, which has ever had notable men in all undertakings, be eagerly bent upon performing this voyage."

In these letters we have outlined by Toscanelli the very voyage that Columbus took in 1492, eighteen years after he had received this precious information. In his journal of that voyage he makes mention of "*the islands marked on the chart*"; he was constantly seeking the island of Atlantis, and hoped eventually to arrive at the great and noble city of Quinsai, as well as at Cipango and Cathay. As for the "Grand Khan" — of whom he had been informed by Toscanelli, who obtained his information from Marco Polo's works — he not only sent an embassy in search of him, when in Cuba, but was looking for him throughout all his voyages.

It is well known that Columbus was not aware that he had really discovered a new world, but to the end of his days believed he had merely arrived at the eastern coast of India. So persistent was he in this belief that he falsified documents, and forced his crew to swear to what they did not know — namely, that Cuba was a continent, and not an island! He believed he had arrived at Cipango, when he heard the Indian word, *cibao*, on the coast of Hispaniola; and he says, in a letter written to Luis Santangel in 1493, "In Española there are gold-mines, and thence to terra firma, as well as thence to the Grand Khan, everything is on a splendid scale." Also, "When I arrived at Juana [Cuba], I followed the coast to the westward, and found it so extensive that I considered it must be a continent and a *province of Cathay!*"

Columbus, it has been said by some investigators, was a man of one idea — and that idea not his own! "It is impossible," says Washington Irving, in his *Life of Columbus* — which is, throughout, an elegant but labored apology for its hero — "to determine the precise time when Columbus

first conceived the design of seeking a western route to India. It is certain, however, that he meditated it as early as the year 1474, though as yet it lay crude and unmatured in his mind."

The year 1474, as we know, was that in which Toscanelli sent him the letter and the chart. In that letter the route to India was laid down, and on that chart it was made clear to any seafaring man how Cathay might be reached, by merely sailing westward! By setting his helm, and persisting in a westerly course, any one might reach the coast that was supposed to lie opposite to Europe and Africa. Columbus did that, according to directions received from Toscanelli eighteen years before. He did nothing more, and he reached, not the coast of India, but the outlying islands of a new world since called America.

The idea, then, which Columbus claimed as exclusively his own was conveyed to him by Toscanelli — or, at least, it so appears — and Toscanelli obtained it from the ancients. For, says one having authority, "Eratosthenes, accepting the spherical theory, had advanced the identical notion which nearly seventeen hundred years later impelled Columbus to his voyage. He held the known world to span one-third of the circuit of the globe, as Strabo did at a later day, leaving an unknown two-thirds of sea; and if it were not that the vast extent of the Atlantic Sea rendered it impossible, one might even sail from the coast of Spain to that of India, along the same parallel."

And again: "An important element in the problem was the statement of Marco Polo regarding a large island, which he called Cipango, and which he represented as lying in the ocean off the eastern coast of Asia. This carried the eastern verge of the Asiatic world farther than the ancients had known, and, on the spherical theory, brought land nearer westward from Europe than could earlier have been supposed.... Humboldt has pointed out that neither Christopher Columbus nor his son Ferdinand mentions

Marco Polo; still, we know that the former had read his book."²

¹ Justin Winsor, in *The Narrative and Critical History of America*.

² *Narrative and Critical History of America*.

III

VESPUCCI'S FAVORITE AUTHORS

1485-1490

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Books of any sort were few and precious during the youthful period of Amerigo Vespucci's life, for the art of printing by the use of movable type was invented about the time he was born, and most of the great discoverers, including himself and Columbus, were to pass away before the printing-press was introduced into America.¹

In the library of Paul the Physicist, however, the ardent scholar, Vespucci, must have seen many manuscripts which he was permitted to read, and among them, doubtless, the account of Marco Polo's wonderful journeys. It is thought that Toscanelli may have possessed, indeed, one of the first copies of *Marco Polo* ever printed, as it issued from a German press in 1477; or at least of the second edition, which appeared in 1481, the year before he died. A copy of the first Latin edition was once owned by Fernando Columbus, and has marginal marks ascribed to his father. This edition was printed in 1485, the year in which Hernando Cortés was born, and when Vespucci was thirty-four years old. Another Latin edition was brought out in 1490, an Italian in 1496, and a Portuguese in 1502, followed by many others.

Marco Polo, the Venetian, exercised a strong and lasting influence upon the minds of Toscanelli, Columbus, Vespucci, and, through them, upon others, although he died in the first quarter of the century in which the first-named of this distinguished triad was born. All these had this birthright in common: they were Italians; and, moreover, it was in Genoa, the reputed birthplace of Columbus, that Marco

Polo's adventures were first shaped into coherent narrative and given to the world.

These adventures have been stigmatized as romances; but surely nothing could be more romantic than the manner in which they came to be published, finally, after existing many years in the crude form of notes and journals made by the traveller during his journeyings. In the year 1298, three years after he had returned from his wanderings and settled down in Venice, Polo was called upon to assist in the defence of Curzola, during the hostilities which existed between his own republic and that of Genoa. To oppose the Genoese admiral, Doria, who had invaded their seas with seventy galleys, the Venetians fitted out a fleet under Andrea Dandolo, and a great battle was fought off the island of Curzola. Marco Polo commanded a galley of his own, and fought with valor; but, in common with the commanders of more than eighty Venetian vessels, he was defeated, the Genoese winning an overwhelming victory.

Taken as a prisoner to Genoa, he was cast into prison, where he remained immured for a year. That was the year in which his wonderful travels were woven into a story, for the entertainment of the young Genoese nobility, who, when they learned that the famous Marco Polo was a prisoner, flocked to his cell to see and converse with him. Yielding to their solicitations, he sent to Venice for his notes of travel, and during the days of his captivity dictated an account of his experiences to a fellow-captive, one Rusticiano, of Pisa.

The delighted young nobles devoured his wonderful story with avidity, and they could scarcely wait its unfolding from day to day, for it was to them a veritable tale of the *Arabian Nights*. From the Italian, in which the traveller dictated his story, it was translated into Latin and French, and scattered over Europe for others to enjoy. Thus Marco Polo acquired fame through the misfortune which befell him when fighting for Venice, and long before printing was invented his name became almost a household word in Europe. As one who,

though indirectly, stimulated by his Oriental researches the first great ventures into the Occident, Marco Polo deserves a monument, or, at least, should not be omitted from a memorial group that contains such famous Italians as Columbus, Vespucci, Toscanelli, and Verrazano. Admittedly, he deserves a chapter in this biography, and we cannot do better, perhaps, than glance at his history.

If Marco had been consulted in the choice of his immediate ancestry, he could not have done better than fortune served him in the person of his father, Nicolo Polo, who was a nobleman and a merchant of Venice. He was a traveller prior to the birth of his son, for just previous to that event, which occurred nearly two hundred years before Amerigo Vespucci was born, he and his brother set out for Constantinople. Thence they went into Armenia, and around the south coast of the Caspian Sea to Bokhara, where they met some Persian envoys who were bound for Cathay, or China, and who persuaded them to go along.

At Peking, it is supposed, they met the great and powerful Kublai Khan, Emperor of the Mongols, and Tartars, who received them kindly and at whose court they remained a year. They were the first Europeans he had ever seen, and such was his interest in their stories of strange peoples and governments that he commissioned them as envoys to the pope, giving them letters in which he expressed his desire that Europeans learned in the arts and sciences should be sent for the instruction of his people. Then they were reluctantly dismissed, with gifts of gold and spices, and after many perilous adventures finally reached their home in Venice. They had been gone almost ten years, and when Nicolo Polo first saw his son, on his return to Venice, Marco was a youth at school, well advanced in his studies.

Two years later, when Marco was about twelve, the three Polos set out on their return to Cathay, accompanied by two friars, who were "endowed with ample powers and privileges, the authority to ordain priests and bishops, and

to grant absolution in all cases, as fully as if the pope were personally present." They took with them rich presents for the khan, including a bottle of precious oil from the holy sepulchre in Jerusalem, which was supposed to possess miraculous virtues. The journey was commenced in or about the year 1271, but, owing to innumerable and vexatious delays on the way, the Polos did not reach the court of the grand khan until the spring of 1275. They were more than three years in making the journey, but in spite of difficulties and dangers these remarkable men persisted until the object of their travels was accomplished. The friars had become alarmed at the prospect of peril to themselves, and early in the undertaking beat a retreat to Acre, so the three Venetians alone arrived at Chambalu, and delivered to the grand khan the letters and presents from the pope. They were received with extreme cordiality by the khan, who was especially pleased with young Marco, and accepted the presents with delight, the holy oil from Jerusalem being reverently cherished.

Marco was introduced to the khan by Nicolo, as "your majesty's servant and my son"; but had he been a son of the ruler himself he could not have received greater honors than were bestowed upon him by the emperor. Having a natural aptitude for acquiring languages, he soon could read and write four different dialects, and being possessed of great intelligence and shrewdness withal, he was sent by the khan on important missions to various parts of his kingdom. He acquitted himself so well on these embassies, some of which required his absence from the capital for many months, and he brought back such interesting accounts of the people he met and their customs, that he was constantly employed.

In this manner he acquired, during many years of service in high positions, a most intimate acquaintance with the khan's dominions, and became immensely rich. His father and uncle shared wealth and honors with him, for they