

**AMERICA IS BORN**

***Books by  
Gerald W. Johnson***

***A HISTORY FOR PETER***

***America Is Born***

***America Grows Up***

***America Moves Forward***

***GOVERNMENT***

***The Presidency***

***The Congress***

***The Supreme Court***

***The Cabinet***

AMERICA  
IS BORN

by

*Gerald W. Johnson*

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# *America Is Born*



# *Peter van den Honert*

for whom this book was written.

Dear Peter:

You were born in the State of Massachusetts and that makes you a citizen both of the United States and the State of Massachusetts. The law says so, and since the law was written many years before you were born, you had nothing to do with it. Just being born here made you a citizen of the United States, and nobody can deny it.

But the law did not make you an American. Many people think it did, but they are wrong; that part of the law does not even mention the word *American*. Citizens of the United States are, in fact, called Americans, but many other people live in America, too. Canadians and Mexicans, for example, have as much right to be called Americans as you

## *A Letter to*

and I. The United States grew so fast and became so strong that people in Europe fell into the habit of forgetting the people in the other countries of America when they spoke of Americans.

So you see being an American is not exactly the same as being a citizen — it is that, but it is something more. The law can make you a citizen, and people will call you an American because you are a citizen of the United States. Citizens of the United States have done things that other people have remembered. It isn't the law that makes you an American; it is the fact that you are connected with the things done in America that nobody forgets.

This book tells of some of those things and tries to explain how they all fit together to make a story that has a beginning and a middle, but no end as yet, because it is still going on. You yourself, Peter, are part of that story, and by the time you have a grandson, you will have added something to it that you can tell him but that I cannot tell you, because it hasn't happened yet.

That is what being an American means: being part of a continued story that goes back from you to George Washington, and beyond him to

*Peter van den Honert*

Captain John Smith, and beyond John Smith to Christopher Columbus. Part of the story is very fine, and other parts are very bad; but they all belong to it, and if you leave out the bad parts you will never understand it all. Yet you must understand it if you are to make your part one of the fine parts, which is what every father and mother and grandparent hope and expect of a boy.

G. W. J.

Baltimore, 1958



## CHAPTER ONE

# *The Unknown Land*

FIVE HUNDRED years ago the land that is now the United States had not a single city, nor even a brick house; not a paved road, not a factory, not a ploughed field. Of course there were no railroads or automobiles or airplanes, for those things had not been invented; but in other parts of the world there were plenty of cities and roads and fields. There were canals with barges on them, and rivers with great ships. There were workshops where skillful men made beautiful and useful things. There were books and pictures, fine clothes, fine horses and carriages — most of the things that people needed to live in comfort.

But that was in the Eastern Hemisphere. If you take a globe of the world and draw a line from the North Pole down the middle of the Atlantic Ocean to the South Pole and then up through the middle

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of the Pacific back to the North Pole, that part of the globe that contains Europe, Asia, and Africa is the Eastern Hemisphere, and there lived the people who had discovered or invented most of the things that we use every day.

In our half of the world, which we call the Western Hemisphere, there was no civilization five hundred years ago except in Mexico and Peru, where people built cities with houses of stone and knew how to carve statues and paint pictures. They had a kind of writing, very different from ours, but still writing; they knew arithmetic and geometry, and they had engineers who built large and wonderful temples and palaces for their kings.

But in what is now the United States there were no people except those we call Indians. They were savages with dark skins — not black, but copper-colored — and there were not many of them for so large a stretch of land.

Here and there the Indians had cleared away the forest from some small spots, but in general the land was covered with great trees. They came down almost to the water's edge on the Atlantic coast, and they stretched back over a flat plain, in some places narrow but in others extending for hundreds of miles, until the hills began. Trees covered the

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hills too, for many miles, until the hills rose into mountains. These mountains were not one single range, but many ranges, most of them running side by side, but some crisscrossing. We call the whole system by an Indian name, the Appalachians, and the different ranges by other names, such as the Blue Ridge, the Alleghenies, the Great Smokies, and others. The Appalachians are fairly high mountains, rising to more than 6000 feet in what is now New Hampshire and to nearly 7000 in North Carolina; but they are not so high that trees cannot grow, even on their tops.

The forest kept on across the mountains and down the valley on the western side. There the land sloped gradually for hundreds of miles to a great river in the middle of the continent, a river so huge that the Indians called it the Mississippi, which in their language meant "Father of Waters." On the western side of the Mississippi the land sloped up again, but the slope was so gradual that you would hardly notice it and might think that the country was quite flat. Still, it was slowly rising, and some hundreds of miles west of the Mississippi it broke into another mountain system, and this time a huge one.

People, especially in the East, have the habit

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of calling them the Rocky Mountains, but the fact is the Rockies are only a small part of the whole system. The mountains go on, range after range, almost to the Pacific Ocean, and in places they are so high that no trees can grow on their highest peaks, which in California rise to nearly 15,000 feet. That is almost three miles up, and it is so cold and windy up there that nothing can grow; the peaks are bare rock, the rock is almost straight up and down, but where it is fairly level the snow lies and doesn't melt all summer.

At the far western edge of the continent the last mountain range slopes down steeply to hills that are lower and lower until one comes to the coast of the Pacific Ocean. This is the shape of the United States as one goes from east to west — up from the Atlantic to the Appalachians, down to the Mississippi River, up again to the Rockies, and down again to the Pacific. It is very large — almost 3000 miles from east to west and almost 1600 miles from north to south — and parts of it are so different from one another that they do not seem to be the same country. For example, some hundreds of miles west of the Mississippi River the forest stopped, because the soil and the rainfall were not right for growing trees; but grass grew there and in places was so high

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that a man on horseback could barely see above it. If you looked at him from a little distance you could not see his horse at all. As the land grew higher, the grass grew shorter until, on what we call the High Plains, close to the Rocky Mountains and about 4000 feet high, all that was left was buffalo grass, growing close to the ground. It got its name because it was fine food for the wild animals that the first settlers called buffalo (actually they were bison), and later for cattle. Then in certain places, especially in the Southwest, there was so little water that even the buffalo grass could not grow and the land was sandy or stony desert, with nothing growing except a few desert plants, such as cactus, mesquite, and sagebrush.

Five hundred years ago all this was unknown to anyone in the Eastern Hemisphere. In Europe men didn't even know that America existed. They knew, or at least educated people knew, that the world was round, but they supposed that water extended from the coast of Spain to the coast of China with no land except, perhaps, some islands in between. They all thought that the water was so wide that nobody could get across it.

This was not as silly as it seems to us today. There were no steamships and no very large sailing ships.

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Many of the ships they had were moved by oars, not by sails. To go far out to sea in such craft was dangerous, and only a few ships were large enough to carry water and food for a long voyage.

Then there was the difficulty of finding one's way. When you are out of sight of land the sea looks the same in all directions. Of course, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, so if you could see which way the sun was moving you knew which way your ship was going. At night you could steer by the North Star, which in the old days was called Polaris because it was almost over the North Pole. As long as your ship was pointed toward the North Star you knew that to your right was east, to your left west, and at your back was south.

But suppose the sky was cloudy and the air foggy, as it often is at sea for many days together. You could see neither sun nor stars, and what then? Sailors had solved that problem by what they called the compass. They had discovered that certain chunks of iron ore, which they called lodestones, were natural magnets, and if you took a steel needle and rubbed it on a lodestone, the needle, if free to move, would turn until it pointed almost north and south. To make it free to move they fastened the needle to something light, such as a bit of cork,

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and let it float in a bowl of water. They used a round bowl, which they fastened firmly on the ship at a place where the man steering could see it, and on its rim they cut notches, or made marks, dividing it into 360 equal parts, to represent the 360 degrees of a circle. One notch was in line with the prow of the ship, and counting from that, Notch Number 90 pointed to the right and Number 180 pointed toward the stern. As the ship turned, the rim of the bowl turned with it, but the floating needle did not. So the steersman knew that if the needle pointed to Notch Zero the ship was going north, while if it pointed to Notch 90 the direction was west, and if it pointed to 180 it was south.

On a modern compass north is marked, not by a zero, but by a fleur-de-lis. The reason is that the Italians, who developed the mariner's compass, found that in Italy the needle always pointed toward the Alps, north of Italy. They guessed that it was pointing at something beyond the mountains, the Italian word for which was *tramontane*. So they marked that point with a T, instead of a zero. Later compass makers began to make the T fancier and fancier, until finally they turned it into the fleur-de-lis, which looks something like a very fancy T.

Yet even with the compass, sailing out of sight of

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land was pretty risky business, for while you could always tell which way you were going you had no good way of telling how far you had gone. You could make a rough guess by judging the speed of the ship through the water and multiplying it by the number of hours you had been sailing, but that was only a very rough guess, and men didn't like to risk their lives on it.

So, for the most part, the ships in those days kept pretty close to shore, where the pilot could see some kind of landmark, a high hill, perhaps, or when close to shore a church steeple or a very tall tree, which would tell him where he was. Even so, some daring sailors had gone a long way out. They had discovered Iceland in the north, and the Canary and Cape Verde islands in the south. Some had even pushed down the whole length of Africa, to the Cape of Good Hope.

But of America they knew nothing at all and for a long time nobody really cared to know. They had enough to do in building up Europe, where the great nations of France, Spain, and Austria were beginning to take shape. As yet the little island of Britain didn't amount to much: it was off to one side, and nobody paid much attention to what was going on there. Holland was thought to be more

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important, and so were the half dozen kingdoms into which Italy was split up. Few Europeans guessed that in that island of Britain a set of ideas was slowly developing that later would make England great. Through England, these ideas would spread to cover a continent containing one country as large as all Europe except for Russia, and with more inhabitants than any European country except Russia.

Most of the men of Europe thought that what lay beyond the rim of the world, as men viewed it from the coasts of Portugal and Ireland, was nobody's business. Vast America lay unknown and unsuspected. The great forest trees sprang up, lived for centuries, died, and were followed by others. Wild animals roamed through the woods, hardly disturbed by the bows and arrows of a few copper-colored men. Storms howled across the land, such storms as Europe hardly knew. Fiercer heats than Europe knew baked it in the summers, and fiercer cold than any part of Europe knew, except the extreme north, locked it in ice during the winters. The vast Mississippi rolled down to the sea bearing no kind of boat except an occasional Indian canoe. The island of Manhattan was dense forest, swamps spread where Chicago and New Orleans stand now, no civilized man had ever looked upon San

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Francisco Bay.

Vast, dark, unknown, the land lay for thousands of years, hardly used at all by men and women, for the few Indians never knew how to use it and never cared to learn. The wolf, the bear, the panther, and the bison flourished and increased faster than people. The land waited for a master who did not come for a long, long time.

\* \* \*

In the year 1453 something happened thousands of miles to the east that led to the discovery of America. For many hundreds of years there had been fairly constant warfare between the Christians of Europe and the Moslems (the followers of Mohammed), who came out of Asia, first in the armies of the Arabs and later in those of the Turks. The great fortress protecting Europe, and at the same time the great gateway between Europe and Asia, was the city sometimes called Byzantium, sometimes Constantinople, and today Istanbul.

For more than eleven centuries Asiatics had been trying to capture it, without success; and for eleven centuries Europeans had poured through it now and then to carry war into Asia. But between fights it was the great market town where cloth

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from Flanders, sword blades from Spain, wines and leather from France and Italy, were exchanged for ivories and silks and muslins and spices from Asia. In war or in peace, Byzantium was important, immensely important, to all the rest of Europe. The Scythians knew it, the Persians knew it, the Mongols knew it, and all of them tried to take it. The Moslems knew it best of all, and they fought for nearly seven hundred years to get it. Finally, in 1453, they succeeded, and the first thing they did was to shut off Europe from Asia. Some trade was permitted, but only on terms fixed by the Turks, and those terms were not easy. They were so harsh, in fact, that all over Europe people began to long for some other way of getting to the East.

Where this state of affairs hit the Europeans hardest was in their eating. After all, silks and muslins and ivory chessmen and pearls and jewels were fine things, but one could get along without them. What the people in Europe wanted most of all from the East was spice. Salt they had, but nothing else to season their food — no pepper, nor cloves, nor cinnamon, nor nutmeg, all of which came from the East. What we now know as the Moluccas were then called the Spice Islands. They lay far beyond the country of the Turks, but their spices were brought

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into Europe through Byzantium and the Turks could, and did, cut them off unless the Europeans paid very high prices for them.

One reason why people were so fond of spices was the fact that their meat was usually pretty bad. In those days they knew very little about keeping food. Of course they had no electric refrigerators and they had not yet learned how to make ice in summer. They had no iron cookstoves and the cooking was done at open fireplaces. It was usually bad, even in kings' palaces and the houses of rich noblemen. So they used great quantities of spices to give the food a better taste, and they hated having to beg the Turks to let the spices come through.

Some people had always believed that there was a way to the Spice Islands by sea, without going anywhere near Turkey. In fact, a Greek named Herodotus wrote a book in which he quoted an assertion made by some Egyptian sailors that Africa had an end and that they had reached it. Herodotus himself doubted that statement because these men said they came to a place where, as they sailed west, they had the sun on the right hand, and Herodotus couldn't believe that there was any such place. Of course, if you are below the equator when you go

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west the sun is on your right; but he didn't know about the equator.

However, after 1453, when Byzantium fell to the Turks, people began to take more interest in these old tales. They now had a real reason for wishing to get to the East by sea, so anyone with an idea of how to do it was listened to as he had never been before. Somewhat before the success of the Turks there was a prince in Portugal, a brother of the king, who became so much interested in geography that he spent most of his life studying it. He studied the compass and made improvements in it. He studied shipbuilding and designed ships that were stronger and more seaworthy than any others. He spent a great deal of money sending ships down the coast of Africa. His captains discovered the Madeira Islands and the Cape Verde Islands, and they almost reached the equator. All the new lands they discovered they claimed for Portugal, and some of them proved to be very rich, so all the other kings of Europe began to look at Portugal enviously and to wish that they had somebody like this Prince Henry the Navigator to help them find new kingdoms.

When Prince Henry died, an Italian boy of fourteen was somewhere at sea learning the trade of a sailor. He learned it so well that by the time he

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was thirty years old he was a famous captain. He liked Portugal and at thirty-one he decided to make his home in the city of Lisbon, where he married a Portuguese girl. This Italian sailor came to be known in Portugal, not by his Italian name of Cristoforo Colombo, but by its Spanish form, Cristobal Colon. Of course in English it is Christopher Columbus.

As a sailor he heard much talk about this idea of going to the Spice Islands by sea. Some claimed that the way to do it was to go north, sailing around Norway; others said no, the thing to do was to go south, sailing around the southern end of Africa. It was known that beyond the tip of Norway the cold was terrible, and the sea was full of ice. On the other hand, it was known that as one sailed down the coast of Africa the climate got hotter and hotter, and some believed that you would finally come to a place where the sea would be boiling. It was still some years before a Portuguese sailor named Diaz would sail right through the tropic zone, coming to cooler weather and at last to the Cape of Good Hope and the end of Africa.

Columbus, though, had an idea of his own. If the world was round, as the wisest men of the time agreed, why go either north or south? Why not sail due west? If the world was round and if

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you sailed long enough, you would be bound to bump into the coast of Asia somewhere. He asked the king (not the brother of Prince Henry, for he had died years before, but another king, who was much less interested in such matters) to fit out a ship and let him try to reach the East that way. It was known that beyond India lay a great many islands, known in Europe as the Indies, and it was these that Columbus proposed to reach.

The king listened at first, but then all sorts of people rose up with all sorts of objections. Some said that it had never been proved that the world was round. Nobody really knew what lay beyond the horizon, and if it turned out that the world was flat, a ship sailing west might sail off the edge. Others said that even if the idea was good, it would cost too much. Many said that Columbus was crazy and the king should not encourage a madman, certainly not give him a great deal of money to try out such a wild scheme.

So the king of Portugal made the worst mistake of his life, by listening to people who thought they knew more than a man who had been studying the subject for many years. He refused to help Columbus and thereby missed great riches, a great extension of his kingdom, and great fame in the world. Yet

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of all the kings in Europe he should have been the one best able to understand what Columbus was talking about, because Prince Henry the Navigator had already shown Portugal what wonderful things might be done by boldly striking out and exploring the unknown parts of the world. Because of this mistake he is remembered as someone who showed that even a king may be a silly fellow.

When he found that the king of Portugal would do nothing, Columbus tried others and at last went across the mountains into Spain. Shortly before that time Spain, which had been divided into two kingdoms, had become one country when Ferdinand, King of Aragon, married Isabella, Queen of Castile. After their marriage they ruled as Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain.

If the truth must be told, these were not very nice people. Ferdinand, especially, was a bloody tyrant. He drove the Moors and the Jews out of Spain, and he set up the Inquisition to persecute everybody who disagreed with his religion. Isabella was not much better; she consented to her husband's cruel treatment of the Moors and Jews and even added some ideas of her own.

But it cannot be denied that they were smart. They had taken note of how the Portuguese were

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drawing riches from their possessions in Africa, and they wished the Spanish could do likewise. So they were inclined to listen when Columbus came to them with his idea of sailing west. They did not accept his plan at once, though. Here, as in Portugal, there were many people, wise in their own conceit, who cried out against Columbus's scheme as crazy, useless, and probably sinful. Some, no doubt, really did believe that he was a wild man, but a great many were thinking of themselves, not of Columbus. In those days nearly everybody was trying to get something out of the king and queen, and they thought that if money were given to Columbus there would be that much less for them. So they did everything they could to oppose him.

They were successful for a long time. Columbus hung about the court for four years. He did not have money enough of his own to fit out an expedition; in fact, he spent about all he had while waiting for the king and queen to make up their minds. He had almost given up hope and had decided to leave and try somewhere else, when the decision came. There is a tradition that it was the queen who saved Columbus. The court treasurer had said, falsely, that there was not money enough in the royal treasury to fit out the ships; but Queen Isabella had become

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really interested and believed in Columbus. The story is — but nobody knows that it is true — that she said if there was no money in the treasury, she would borrow it, giving her jewels as security.

At any rate, early in the year 1492 Spain decided to try it. Columbus was given the money. He lost no time. He was given the money in April, and by August he had not one but three ships fitted out. On August 3 he sailed from the little port of Palos, Spain.

Yet to say that Columbus had three ships is enough to make a modern sailor laugh; he wouldn't call those things ships. The United States Navy looks on a destroyer as a small ship, and it *is* small when you put it beside a cruiser, a battleship, or an aircraft carrier. Yet you could have loaded all three of Columbus's ships on one destroyer and had lots of room to spare.

Two of them, named the *Nina* and the *Pinta*, were what the Portuguese called caravels; the third, named the *Santa Maria* was a *nao*, or ship. The *Santa Maria* was a little larger than the others, but not much. Columbus did not write down much about his ships, so we do not know their exact measurements, but it seems likely that none was over 75 feet long, and the largest, the *Santa Maria*, is supposed to have rated about 100 tons. To gain

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some idea of what this means, compare the figures with those of the *Queen Elizabeth*, the largest ship in the world as this book is written — *Santa Maria*, 75 feet and 100 tons; *Queen Elizabeth*, 987 feet and 83,000 tons.

These were not by any means the best ships of the time. There were many larger and stronger, but the king and queen were not disposed to risk a fine ship on an adventure so dangerous, and they put Columbus off with just as little as they could manage. Yet as it turned out this was not altogether a bad thing. After he made his first voyage, Columbus himself said that big ships were not the best for exploring; smaller ones could sail closer to the coast, and slip through places where the big ones could not go without striking the bottom; so you could learn more in a small ship.

At the same time, the idea of crossing the Atlantic in vessels as small as those of Columbus was enough to frighten brave men. In 1492 there were thousands of sailors willing to risk crossing those bodies of water nearly surrounded by land: the Mediterranean Sea, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, the North Sea, and so on. But when it came to trying to cross the limitless body of water stretching west from Europe, which they called the Ocean Sea, there

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had been none before Columbus who had done it and lived to tell the tale. It is probable that in Palos, on August 3, 1492, there were few who expected ever to see Columbus or any of his men again.

Indeed, the men themselves began to doubt that they would ever see their homes again, as the voyage went on and on. All through the month of August they sailed westward, and all through the month of September. They got into the trade winds that blow steadily from east to west, and the sailors began to wonder how they could hope to get back against these winds. By the end of September their fright was almost panic, and Columbus, when he made his calculations at noon every day, began to cut down the number of miles he figured that they had actually sailed, so that the men would not realize how far they were from Spain. At last it came to the point when some of the men were in favor of committing mutiny: that is, rising against the Captain and forcing him to turn back. If he would not, some were in favor of throwing him overboard and turning back anyhow.

October came, and they were still sailing west, but Columbus was having more and more trouble with the crews. He threatened, and when threats began to fail he begged and pleaded with them to

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go just a little farther. Finally, on October 11, the two Pinzon brothers, captains of the *Nina* and the *Pinta*, came to him and said they could do no more. They were brave men, but they were losing control of their crews, for, as they said, “We have run 800 leagues and have found no land, and these people say that they are going to be lost.” To them Columbus replied, “Do me this favor! Stay with me this day and night, and if I don’t bring you to land before day, cut off my head and you shall return.” But on October 12 they sighted land.

Many years later an American poet, Joaquin Miller, wrote some verses about this incident which are famous. The poem begins:

*Behind him lay the gray Azores,  
Behind the Gates of Hercules;  
Before him not the ghost of shores,  
Before him only shoreless seas.  
The good mate said: “Now must we pray,  
For lo! the very stars are gone.  
Brave Admiral, speak, what shall I say?”  
“Why, say ‘Sail on! sail on! and on!’ ”*

Americans like this poem because it is a fine expression of the courage that made the discovery of America possible.

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Columbus, of course, thought he had arrived at some unknown part of Asia or at one of the islands off the Asian coast. The country was new and his instruments were not very good. From the records he left, we are not quite sure which of the many islands in the West Indies was the one he first saw, but we think it was what is now called Watling Island, one of the Bahamas. At any rate, Columbus went on and discovered Haiti, which he named Hispaniola, and Cuba. There is no doubt about this, because he described them both well enough for us to recognize them.

He was amazed and delighted with what he saw, but he couldn't find any places like those that had been described by the Europeans who had traveled in the East. This is no wonder, since he was still on the other side of the world from India, although he didn't know it. He was so sure he knew where he was that he named the whole group of islands the Indies, and he called the people he found there Indians. It was years before the truth came out, and by that time people were used to the names and they have stuck ever since. The only change they made was to call them the West Indies, while those islands that really were near Asia became the East Indies; but the people kept the name of Indians and are so

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called to this day.

If Columbus and his men were amazed, the Indians were even more amazed. At first they did not believe that the Spaniards were men at all, but thought them some kind of gods; and as neither the sailors nor the natives could speak the other's language they had a hard time making each other understand, and got all sorts of wrong ideas. For one thing, Columbus never discovered his mistake, and for the rest of his life he believed that he had reached Asia. But he collected all sorts of strange plants and animals and birds and persuaded some Indians to go back with him to prove that he had discovered, as it came to be called, a New World. He found some gold, too, and a few pearls; and as he and his men learned the Indian language they were told all sorts of stories about wonderful lands farther to the west. A good many of these tales were lies, but after what they had seen, Columbus and his men were ready to believe anything.

So they sailed back to Spain, getting there early in 1493, and you can imagine the excitement — no, you can't imagine it, for nothing like Columbus's voyage has happened in our time. The first thing that occurred to Ferdinand and Isabella was that they must keep this news secret, for fear that the

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Portuguese and the French and the English and other nations that had ships would rush in and seize the new country, which they wished to keep for Spain. So they kept Columbus's report locked up and allowed nothing to be printed. Then they made haste to fit out another and larger expedition for Columbus and they sent other sailors to examine the new country.

But of course you couldn't keep a thing like that secret very long. Although nobody saw Columbus's report, the sailors talked, and their families and friends talked, and travelers in Spain heard the talk and took the story back to other countries. So within a few years word spread all over Europe that there was a New World across the Atlantic and bold sailors of many nations set out to find it. Among them was an Italian named Amerigo Vespucci, who made four voyages in the next few years, and then wrote a book about his travels which was printed at the little town of St. Dié, in France, and was the first real story of the discoveries that people outside of Spain had ever seen. It was in Latin and the author's name was given in the Latin form, Americus Vesputius. Most people thought that Vesputius had discovered the land himself, so they gave it the name of "Americus' land," which

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soon became America.

By the time the truth was known, the name America was so well established that it couldn't be changed to Columbia, which would have been the right name. America it has remained ever since.

Poor Columbus, in fact, lost a great deal more than the right to have his name given to the new country. As soon as the king and queen began to favor him, others became jealous and envious; they told Ferdinand and Isabella all kinds of lies. They said Columbus was concealing most of the gold that he found and that he intended to make himself a king. The Spanish monarchs were the kind that would believe stories against anybody; so in the end they had Columbus arrested and sent home in chains. Years later his son proved that the stories were a pack of lies, but by that time Columbus had died, poor and neglected.

But his name has endured, as the name of one of the most famous men in the world.

The Spaniards, getting there first, did very well for themselves in the New World. They spread rapidly through the West Indies and pushed on to Mexico. There they found a very different country and very different people. The Aztecs, who lived

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in Mexico, were not naked savages by any means; they could read and write; they had great cities built of stone; they had artists and astronomers and mathematicians; they knew how to work metals, to refine gold, to smelt copper, to make weapons. Yet for some strange reason they had never invented a wheel, so their best machines were a long way behind those of Europe.

A man named Cortes, a very hard character, was one of those who came to America a dozen years after Columbus's first voyage. The story goes that Cortes, with 500 men, conquered Mexico, but that is not quite right. It is true that he had only 500 Spaniards, but at the moment when he landed there was a civil war raging among the Aztecs and half of them joined Cortes and helped him. At that, he was a bold and determined fellow; as soon as he had landed his Spaniards he set fire to the ships that had brought them and burned them completely. The idea was to make the Spaniards fight bravely, for if they were tempted to run away they could not, because there was nowhere to run. With no ships they could not get away from Mexico, so they had to conquer or die.

They conquered and gained immense riches. One item given as a present to Cortes by Montezuma,

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king of the Aztecs, was a circular plate of gold, representing the sun, which the Spaniards described as "large as a carriage wheel" and which they valued at 20,000 *pesos de oro*. A *peso de oro* was a gold coin a little bigger than an American ten-dollar gold piece and worth, in our money, about \$11.67. This figure was worked out by the American historian Prescott, whose book, *The Conquest of Mexico*, is not only good history but also one of the finest adventure stories ever written in this country. So the value of this great image of the sun was close to \$235,000; and it was only one item in a long list of valuable articles sent at the same time.

When he got other ships, Cortes sent gold to Spain by shiploads. A few years later a man named Pizarro, very much like Cortes, conquered Peru and sent back even more gold and silver. It made Spain for a time the richest country in Europe.

Yet all the gold and silver, pearls and precious stones, were not worth as much as something the Spaniards hardly noticed in the beginning. The Aztecs were fond of a drink the like of which no one in Europe had ever seen. It was made by boiling a certain substance in water and then whipping it to a froth. The Spaniards tasted it, liked it, and sent some home; and out of that grew a trade more

valuable than all the gold mines in both Mexico and Peru. The strange stuff was chocolate.

Cortes was a harsh master. He killed Montezuma and most of his generals, priests, and noblemen, and made slaves of the common people. He divided the land among his officers and soldiers, and with each estate he gave a certain number of Indians to work it, so that the owner could live at ease. To ourselves, who are living in the twentieth century, that seems a pretty dreadful way to act; but all this happened more than four hundred years ago, when most people thought it all right for a king to take anything he was strong enough to take and hold; and Cortes was acting — at least he was supposed to be acting — for the king of Spain.

Ferdinand and Isabella were both dead by the time Mexico was conquered, and their grandson, Charles, was king. He was not the man to worry about what Cortes was doing to the Indians, for he himself at various times fought the French, the Dutch, the Pope, and the Turks. He put the king of France and the Pope in prison and did not hesitate to make slaves of captured Turks. He is less well known as Charles I of Spain than by his other title, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor. Today that title seems rather a joke, but the man wasn't. Charles V

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was certainly not holy, and he was not Roman, but there is no doubt that he was an emperor. He conquered most of Europe and terrified all of it.

So in judging Cortes and the other conquistadores (the Spanish word for conquerors) we should keep in mind the old saying, "like master, like man." Humane feelings were not to be expected from officers of Charles V. As a matter of fact, they were not much worse than the others of their time. Later the English and the French were about as hard on the Indians as the Spaniards were. It was a harsh age, and the conquistadores acted pretty much as conquerors of all other nations acted.

Besides, the story is not all blood and tyranny. Rough soldiers conquered the country with great cruelty and had no other thought than to wring wealth out of the wretched inhabitants. But along with them came men of a different sort. One of the finest was Bartolomé de Las Casas, who came to Hispaniola as a planter, but who was so moved by pity for the Indian slaves that after a few years he became a priest and spent the rest of his life fighting the slavery system and trying to secure justice for the Indians. Las Casas was a great and good man, perhaps the greatest and best of the Spaniards who followed Cortes, but there were others who

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were neither greedy nor cruel. Some were priests, some teachers, some doctors, some scholars. They founded the University of Mexico in 1551, many years before there was an Englishman in North America; they set up schools, they printed books, and they preached Christianity all through Central and South America.

The Spanish conquest had its good as well as its bad side. It horrified the English, who came later, but as much because the English hated the Spaniards as because of the wickedness of the Spanish rule. The English were little, if any, better; but because the history books that most of us read were written by the English, many Americans still believe that the Spaniards were bad beyond all example. It is not true; they were no worse than all the other Europeans, and they had at least two good qualities — they were brave and very strong.