

AMERIGO VESPUCCI.

BY EUGENE LAWRENCE.

WHILE yet a young man, Amerigo Vespucci, learned, ambitious, poor, yet the friend of nobles and princes, awoke to his true destiny at the summons of Columbus. His literary talent and his readiness with his pen gave him a renown above all his contemporaries. As the author of the first extended account of the new world he has been allowed to name it. Except for his scholastic training he does not seem to have possessed any unusual mental power. His narrative is obscure, untrustworthy, and gained its wide contemporary interest chiefly from its wonderful theme. But its author owed evidently all his fame, all his projects of discovery, to the superior genius of Columbus. Vespucci was born at Florence 1451, and died 1512. A Florentine of the age of the Medici, he studied under his uncle Antonio, canon of the cathedral, whose other scholars were nobles and princes. It is quite probable that René II. of Anjou was among them. Vespucci became a merchant, saw Columbus at Seville in 1493, and sailed as pilot and trader with Ojeda in 1499. He printed a narrative of his four voyages in 1507, the year of the death of Columbus, and in 1509 was hailed at Strasburg, in the dominions of his friend the Duke René, as the discoverer of the new world. A Strasburg geographer gave the name of America to the continent. "Why," he said, "should it not be called from its discoverer?" In his cosmography he named it "America." And thus the ready pen of the Florentine has won for him the renown for which he sighed.*

A bitter contest has arisen over the character and exploits of Vespucci. His high destiny of giving his name to half the globe has aroused the keen scrutiny of a long line of critics. To some he seems only a pretender and an impostor. He never saw America, they assert; he wrote a narrative full of improbable lies; or at least he was only an obscure pilot or trader in the service of Ojeda, who strove to carry off the fame that properly

* The first mention of the name *Americus* is in the cosmography of Glaconilus. Et quarta orbis pars, quam quia Americus invenit, Amerigem quasi Americi terram sive Americam nuncupare licet, Navarrete, iii., p. 184; and in several other places the cosmographer asserts the prior discovery by Vespucci, and gives his name to the West.

belonged to another. Santarem, Charlevoix, and Navarrete unite in doubting or depreciating his discoveries. His vanity and his want of good faith, his apparent neglect to mention his benefactor Columbus in his narrative, his extravagance and fables, have all tended to proclaim him to many as unworthy of his wide renown. They declare that America has been named from an impostor.*

But to the Florentine Bandini, to Goodrich, and several other writers of good repute, we owe the opposite extreme of the picture. They would have Vespucci one of the wisest and most learned of his contemporaries. He was educated with nobles and princes under his illustrious uncle at Florence. He was the favorite of Fonseca and Ferdinand II. He was the first European who really found the new world. Columbus was only the discoverer of a few islands. His narrative of his first voyage was accurate; his own toils and perils unsurpassed. He might worthily claim to give his name to the land of the unknown West. It is indeed impossible to reconcile the two opposing theories. But we may conclude that Vespucci was at least a more cultivated man than any of the explorers that visited Brazil, and wrote the first account of it, and that the happy accident of his friendship with René II. gave his book a high reputation in Lorraine. In this way we have received our name. From a Florentine we are Americans; and Florence, if she did not discover the new world, has at least become linked with it forever. It is a pleasant circumstance to remember that just before he died Columbus wrote a kind letter for Vespucci, recommending him to his son because he was "unfortunate," and he was made "Royal Pilot" by the king.†

* Santarem's bitter attack upon Vespucci is well known. Navarrete, iii., 333, says of Vespucci: El trastano de las fechas y de los nombres propios—his ignorance of history and absurd errors—las cosas maravillosas—his fables, his contradictions, and all tend to discredit much of his narrative.

† Bandini, *Vita*, Amerigo Vespucci, and Goodrich, *Columbus*, give all that can be said for Vespucci. Bandini's work is a perpetual *éloge*. But it is plain that Vespucci loaded his ships with slaves, and was as cruel and unscrupulous as any of his contemporary explorers. The title of the book in which the name is given to America is *Cosmographie Introductio*, etc.