

# Here Goes Another Hero!---Columbus Was a Humbug

BY FRANCIS WARRINGTON DAWSON.

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PARIS, March 31.—Christopher Columbus a man of limited intelligence and untruthful proclivities! Thus is bowled over one of the few remaining heroes of history. Columbus is not accused of discovering America by proxy, as Shakespeare is alleged to have written his plays. He is only charged with profiting by the discoveries of others and distorting facts according to his fancy in order to pose before the world as the genius which he was not.

Such are the statements now boldly made, after forty years of careful research, by Henry Vignaud, who for nearly thirty years has been secretary of the American embassy in Paris. From early youth Mr. Vignaud has devoted nearly all his leisure time to the study of Columbus. He has in his library, one of the finest private collections in Europe, comprising more than 12,000 volumes, all known works relating to Columbus. And for many years he has been recognized as one of the greatest living authorities on Columbus.

In 1901 Mr. Vignaud started Columbian scholars by the publication of his book "Toscanelli and Columbus," proving that the well-known letter attributed to the Italian astronomer, which represents Columbus as endeavoring to proceed to India by sailing westward, was a forgery, and that instead of plunging into the unknown in search of the eastern coasts of Asia he started out from Palos possessed with information, how procured is not exactly known, but which gave him the certainty that he would find the island he was in quest of and which he discovered.

Throwing an entirely new light on the life and character of Columbus, this was already disconcerting for those who had been brought up to revere the discoverer of America as one of the transcendent geniuses of all time. But Mr. Vignaud had been merely clearing the way for more important revelations. In a forthcoming work he has developed the real character of Columbus as displayed in his youth, and it is far from being wholly creditable. Having this much off his hands, Mr. Vignaud is now gathering evidence for the crown-

ing work of all, which, giving for the first time the full and authentic history of the discovery of America, will, Mr. Vignaud says, shatter Columbus as a great genius and leave him only as the instrument of a great deed.

## History "Doctored" by Columbus.

"I have not sought to attack Columbus, but to separate fiction from history," Mr. Vignaud said to me when I questioned him concerning his ideas and intentions. "The object which I

have had in mind for many years is to prove that the history of Columbus is imperfectly known and that the most erroneous ideas prevail as to the true causes of the discovery of America.

"Like all men who have left notes and papers on the events in which they have played a part, Columbus arranged things as he wanted them to be known. It is with the utmost difficulty that critical study has succeeded in setting aside from this doctored history numerous facts which Columbus and the interpreters of his ideas had introduced.

This work of rectification progresses slowly; it commenced long since and still continues." My ambition is to complete it.

"The conclusion which I reach is that Columbus never intended to go to the Indies, and that it was only after he thought he had reached India that he announced that he always wanted to go there. What he really hoped to accomplish was to discover new lands concerning which he thought he had information.

"The glory of Columbus is certainly diminished by these studies. As a man he was neither truthful nor of superior attainments. Columbus can only be called a great man if we understand by that term those who have accomplished great things. But if one means a man whose intelligence can grasp the hidden connection of things, which gives wisdom and which is the veritable form of genius, then Columbus was not a great man. He displayed superiority in two things alone—energy and perseverance, qualities which are often characteristic of mediocre men.

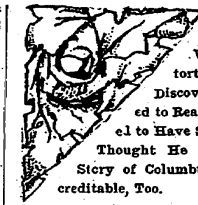
"In his whole career Columbus never took the point of view of genius. He was mistaken in all his provisions and persisted in his errors even after making discoveries which should have sufficed to open his eyes.

"But," I interrupted, "might not an objection be raised? The sources of Columbian history are surely accessible to every one. Washington Irving, Harrisse and Fiske, to mention only the American authors, must have been acquainted with them all?"

## Faulty History.

"However enlightened one may be, there is always something to learn," answered Mr. Vignaud. "This is particularly true of history, which consists not of material facts alone, but whose importance depends upon the meaning with which these facts are invested. This meaning varies with the development of our ideas and the extension of our sphere of knowledge. Within the past thirty or forty years our opinions on many subjects have been modified. Furthermore, it is not true that all the sources of Columbian history were known when the eminent men you have mentioned wrote.

"For a long time the history of Columbus, which is that of the discovery of America, was known solely through Columbus himself; that is to say, through the papers which he left, and which were set forth by his first two biographers, his son Fernando and Las Casas. The books which these two wrote gave us our Columbian traditions and served as foundation for our best



## Striking Proof Afforded by His Autograph Notes on Pages of Historical

Works that He Got His Glory by Distorting Truth and Profiting by the Discoveries of Others—Never Intended to Reach Indies, and Only Pretended to Have Set Out for Asia When He Thought He Had Arrived There—Story of Columbus's Youth Is Discreditable, Too.



works on Columbus. But little by little it was observed that many facts advanced from this source were erroneous, and with time the number of facts thus contradicted by criticism became so great that it was necessary to revise carefully all that tradition had to say about the discoverer of America and his work.

"But how is it that the writers who have heretofore devoted their attention to Columbus should have failed to do all this, and should have neglected the task which you are only now undertaking?"

"Some of these authors noted most of the errors which form the Columbian legend, and their labors contribute toward the present rectification. If they did not urge this task of historical reform as far as I it is, first, because the legends of Columbus are endowed with the prestige of old and accepted facts, and, secondly, because the writers were not in a position to carry the work to the end.

## A Self-Proved Humbug.

"When Humboldt wrote his 'Critical Examination,' which inaugurated Columbian criticism; when D'Azaveca wrote his little monographs, so solidly and so ingeniously put together, which gave a new direction to American studies in France; when Henry Harrisse published his 'Columbus,' which produced so great an impression in the world of savants, all the writings of Columbus were not known, and the rest could not be studied exhaustively.

"The documents published by the 'Recoleta Colombiana' and those brought to light by the Duchess d'Albe completely changed the situation, in rendering accessible to students papers until then unknown or imperfectly known, and which were for the first time presented in fac-simile—that is, in their original form. Among these papers there are some whose importance was not suspected and which throw much light on the formation of Columbus's ideas.

"There are the autograph notes which

he put on the margins of the books he studied. These notes are very numerous. When they are 89 on the 'Historia Rerum' of Pius II., 88 on the 'Imago Mundi' of Cardinal Ailly, and 256 on his copy of 'Marco Polo.'

"Apparently insignificant for the most part, they show the source of Columbus's conceptions. Thanks to them, one can see the formation of his system, and perceive the origin of each thought composing it. It is a vast field which has scarcely been explored, and yet which offers a rich harvest.

"It was perhaps these notes which gave you the idea of writing on Columbus?" I suggested.

"The idea of writing a new history of the discovery of America came to me in my youth. For more than forty years I have been accumulating the material necessary, and this work has occupied me uninterruptedly ever since. I had decided to call my resumé, and when time has been left to me by my official functions."

"And have you always thought of Columbus what you think now?"

"No, indeed," said Mr. Vignaud, with a laugh. "My views on the true part played by Columbus in the discovery of the New World took form slowly, and they were definitely fixed only after the publication of the 'Recoleta.'"

"It was at first my intention to limit myself to a critical history of Columbus's great design and to show his genuine character. But I realized that I should have to show first how Columbus filled the early years of his life, during which he is supposed to have conceived and matured this plan. This is the object of the book I am about to publish, and which will serve as an introduction to the principal work developing Columbus's design and setting forth its origin and its true nature. It is in this which I hope to complete the task which I have set for myself in re-establishing the truth as regards Columbus and the discovery of America."

Henry Vignaud, who is now passing

a long old age in peaceful diplomatic work and historical research, has had a most adventurous career. Born at St. Orens in 1830 of an old Louisiana family, he began teaching in the public schools when he was 22 years old, and four years later turned his attention to newspaper work, editing first L'Union de Lafourche and then Le Renaissance Louisianais. At the outbreak of the civil war he enlisted in the Confederate service and was appointed captain in the Sixth Louisiana regiment. Captured and restored to provisional liberty in New Orleans in 1862, he learned that he was about to be arrested by the Federal authorities and went to Ship Island as a prisoner, on account of his strong patriotic sentiments. Before the arrest could be effected he bribed an official to supply him with a pass enabling him to leave the city, and escaped to Paris.

Mr. Vignaud was appointed secretary of the Confederate Diplomatic committee in Paris, and retained this post as long as the Confederacy required his services. During this period feeling ran high in Paris among the Americans settled there, and northerners and southerners were divided as sharply as in the United States. The measures taken by the government after reconstruction left Mr. Vignaud free to return home when he wished, but he had by this time established firm ties in Paris.

In 1868 he was appointed secretary of the Roumanian legation in Paris. His splendid diplomatic work attracted the attention of his own countrymen, then reunited, and he served on the Alabama Claims Commission in 1872. In February, 1875, General Grant wiped out old scores and paid a generous tribute to Mr. Vignaud's ability by appointing him secretary of the American embassy in Paris.

In the successive changes which have passed over the embassy, Mr. Vignaud has been the only man to remain constantly at his post, while ambassadors have retired or other secretaries have been transferred to other points. He has seen American representation in France develop from a simple ministry to an important embassy, and he has contributed in making its history.

So absorbed is Mr. Vignaud in his diplomatic work that he has never been known to take a holiday. Perfectly content to remain at the embassy on weekdays from 10 until 3, he spends his evenings and Sundays quietly at his home in Bagneux, a charming suburb of Paris, where he has had a remarkable library, modeled after the big public libraries, constructed to contain his large collection of books.



THE HOUSE IN MADRID, WHERE COLUMBUS LIVED.

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