

**CHRISTOPHE
COLOMB**

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Christophe Colomb by A. de Lamartine

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A. DE LAMARTINE

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PAR

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(1436-1506)

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NOTICE

ON

LAMARTINE'S "CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS."

OF all the historical biographies written by Lamartine, none possesses more interest than that of Christopher Columbus. The author's poetical language gives a peculiar charm to the incidents he describes, and is admirably suited to the romantic career of his hero.

As Lamartine here shows, the world was ripe for geographical discovery when Columbus appeared upon the scene. The existence of land beyond the Atlantic, which was not discredited by some of the most enlightened ancients, had become matter of common speculation at the close of the fifteenth century. Maritime adventure was then daily disclosing the mysteries of the deep, and bringing to light new regions that had only existed in fancy. Columbus's hypothesis rested on much higher ground than mere popular belief. What, indeed, was credulity with the vulgar and speculation with the learned, amounted in his mind to a settled

practical conviction that made him ready to peril life and fortune on the result of the experiment. Indeed, his imagination, as will be seen from this memoir, by feeding too exclusively on this lofty theme, acquired an unnatural exaltation which raised him above the sober realities of existence, leading him to spurn difficulties which in the end proved insurmountable, and to colour the future with those rainbow tints which too often melted into air. This exalted state of the imagination was the result in part, no doubt, of the peculiar circumstances of his life ; for the glorious enterprise which he had achieved almost justified the conviction of his acting under the influence of some higher inspiration than mere human reason, and led his devout mind to discern intimations respecting himself in the dark and mysterious annunciations of sacred prophecy.

That the romantic colouring of his mind, however, was natural to him, and not purely the growth of circumstances, is evident from the chimerical speculations in which he seriously indulged before, and even after, the accomplishment of his great discoveries. His scheme of a crusade for the recovery of the Holy Sepulchre was most deliberately meditated and strenuously avowed from the very first date of his proposals to the Spanish Government. His enthusiastic communications on this subject must have provoked a smile from a Pontiff like Alexander VI. ; and may sug-

gest some apology for the tardiness with which his more rational projects were accredited by the Castilian Government. "But these visionary fancies," says Prescott,* "never clouded his judgment in matters relating to his great undertaking; and it is curious to observe the prophetic accuracy with which he discerned, not only the existence, but the eventual resources, of the Western World."

Whatever were the defects of his mental constitution, the finger of the historian will find it difficult to point to a single blemish in his moral character. His correspondence breathes the sentiment of devoted loyalty to his Sovereigns. His conduct habitually displayed the utmost solicitude for the interests of his followers. His dealings were regulated by the nicest principles of honour and justice. His last communication to the Sovereigns from the Indies remonstrates against the use of violent measures, in order to extract gold from the natives, as a thing equally scandalous and impolitic. The grand object to which he dedicated himself seemed to expand his whole soul, and raised it above the petty shifts and artifices by which great ends are sometimes sought to be compassed. There are some men in whom rare virtues have been closely allied, if not to positive vice, to degrading weakness.

* Prescott's "History of Ferdinand and Isabella."

Columbus's character presented no such humiliating incongruity. It will be seen from this biography that in its public or private relations, in all its features, it wears the same noble aspect. It was in perfect harmony with the grandeur of his plans, and their results were more stupendous than those which Heaven has permitted any other mortal to achieve