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 Edited by Clements R. Markham
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LETTER
 OF
 AMERIGO VESPUCCI
 ON THE ISLANDS NEWLY DISCOVERED IN HIS
 FOUR VOYAGES.

FIRST VOYAGE OF AMERIGO VESPUCCI.¹



MAGNIFICENT LORD.² I submit First Voyage
 humble reverence to you and offer
 due recommendations. It may be
 that your Magnificence will be
 astonished at my temerity that I
 should dare so absurdly to write
 the present long letter to your Magnificence, knowing
 that your Magnificence is constantly occupied in the high
 councils and affairs touching the lofty Republic. And I
 may be considered not only presumptuous but also idle in
 writing things not convenient to your condition nor agree-
 able, and written in a barbarous style. But as I have
 confidence in your virtues and in the merit of my writing,

¹ Latin edition: "To the most illustrious René, King of Jerusalem and Sicily, Duke of Lorraine and Bar."

² Supposed to be Pietro Soderini, Gonfaloniere of the Republic of Florence in 1504, who had studied with Vespucci. See *Bandini*, p. xxv.

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which is touching things never before written upon either by ancient or modern writers, as will be seen, I may be excused by your Magnificence. The principal thing that moved me to write to you was the request of the bearer, who is named Benvenuto Benvenuti, our Florentine, who is very much the servant of your Magnificence, as he tells me, and a great friend of mine. He, finding himself here in this city of Lisbon, requested me to give an account to your Magnificence of the things by me seen in different parts of the world, during the four voyages that I have made to discover new lands; two by order of the Catholic King Ferdinand, by the Great Gulf of the Ocean Sea towards the west, the other two by order of the powerful King Manoel of Portugal, towards the south. He assured me that you will be pleased, and that in this I might hope to serve you. It was this that disposed me to do it, being assured that your Magnificence would include me in the number of your servants, remembering how, in the time of our youth, I was your friend, and now your servant, going together to hear the principles of grammar under the good life and doctrine of the venerable religious friar of St. Mark, Friar Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, whose counsels and doctrine, if it had pleased God that I had followed, I should have been another man from what I am, as Petrarch says. *Quomodo-cunque sit*, I am not ashamed, because I have always taken delight in virtuous things. Yet if these my frivolities are not acceptable to your virtue, I will reflect on what Pliny said to Mæcenas, "Formerly my witticisms used to entertain you." It may be that, though your Magnificence is continually occupied with public affairs, you may find an hour of leisure, during which you can pass a little time in frivolous or amusing things, and so, as a change from so many occupations, you may read this my letter. For you may well turn for a brief space from constant care and assiduous thought concerning public affairs.

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VESPUCCI AS A MERCHANT.—GOES TO SEA. 3

Your Magnificence must know that the motive of my ^{First Voyage.} coming into this kingdom of Spain was to engage in mercantile pursuits, and that I was occupied in such business for nearly four years, during which I saw and knew various changes of fortune. As these affairs of commerce are uncertain, a man being at one time at the top of the well, and at another fallen and subject to losses, and as the continual labour that a man is exposed to who would succeed, became evident to me, as well as exposure to dangers and failures, I decided upon leaving the mercantile career, and upon entering on one that would be more stable and praiseworthy. I was disposed to see some part of the world and its wonders.

Time and opportunity offered themselves very conveniently. The King Don Fernando of Castille,¹ having ordered four ships to be dispatched for the discovery of new lands towards the west, I was chosen by his Highness to go in this fleet to help in the discovery. I left the port of Cadiz on the 10th of May² 1497, and we took our way for the Great Gulf of the Ocean Sea, on which voyage I was engaged for eighteen months, discovering a great extent of mainland, and an infinite number of islands, most of them inhabited, of which no mention had been made by ancient writers, I believe because they had not any clear information. If I remember rightly, I have read somewhere that this Ocean Sea was without inhabitants. Our poet Dante was of this opinion, in the 26th chapter of the *Inferno*, where he treats of the death of Ulysses.³ In this voyage I saw many wonderful things, as your Magnificence will

¹ Fernando is never called King of Castille in any document of the period.

² The Latin version has 20th.

³ *Inferno*, Canto 26, l. 116:

“ Non vogliate negar l’ esperienza
 Diretro al Sol, del mondo senza gente.”

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4 VOYAGE ACROSS THE ATLANTIC.

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understand. As I said before, we left the port of Cadiz in four ships, and began our navigation to the Fortunate Islands, which are now called the Grand Canaria, situated in the Ocean Sea, on the confines of the inhabited west, within the third climate.¹ Over which place the Pole rises from the north, above the horizon 27° and a half, and it is distant from this city of Lisbon 280 leagues,² between south and south-west. Here we staid for eight days, providing ourselves with wood, water, and other necessaries. From thence, having offered our prayers, we weighed, and spread our sails to the wind, shaping our course to the west, with a point to south-west.³ Our progress was such that at the end of thirty-seven days⁴ we reached land which we judged to be the mainland, being distant from the island of Canaria, more to the west, nearly 1,000 leagues,⁵ outside that which is inhabited in the Torrid Zone. For we found the North Pole was above its horizon 16°; and more to the westward than the island of Canaria, according to the observations with our instruments 70°.⁶

¹ The third climate of Hipparchus was between the parallels of Syene and Alexandria.

² The distance shows that, like Columbus, he reckons four miles to a league.

³ "Ponente figliando una quarta di libeccio." Varnhagen makes this $0\frac{1}{4}$ S. O. A course W.S.W. for 1,000 leagues would have taken him to the Gulf of Paria, which is a little over 900 leagues W.S.W. from Grand Canary. He would not have reached land in 16°* N. and 70° W. even if he had steered the right course, and there had been no intervening land, by going 1,000 leagues. Such a distance would have left him 930 miles short of that position.

⁴ Twenty-seven days (Latin version).

⁵ Equal to $133\frac{1}{3}$ leagues of three geographical miles.

⁶ 70° W. of Canaria, or 85° W. of Greenwich, would be in the

* The part of the mainland in 16° is in the Gulf of Honduras. In his second voyage he alleges that he reached 15°, which is probably the reason why he chose 16° for a landfall on this voyage.

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We anchored with our ships at a distance of a league and a half from the shore. We got out the boats, and, filled with armed men, we pulled them to the shore. Before we arrived we had seen many men walking along the beach, at which we were much pleased ; and we found that they were naked, and they showed fear of us, I believe because we were dressed and of a different stature. They all fled to a hill, and, in spite of all the signs of peace and friendship that we made, they would not come to have intercourse with us. As night was coming on, and the ship was anchored in a dangerous place, off an open unsheltered coast, we arranged to get under weigh the next day, and to go in search of some port or bay where we could make our ships secure. We sailed along the coast to the north, always in sight of land, and the people went along the beach. After two days of navigation we found a very secure place for the ships, and we anchored at a distance of half a league from the land, where we saw very many people. We went on shore in the boats on the same day, and forty men in good order landed. The natives were still shy of us, and we could not give them sufficient confidence to induce them to come and speak with us. That day we worked so hard with this object by giving them our things, such as bells, looking-glasses, and other trifles, that some of them took courage and came to treat with us. Having established a friendly understanding, as the night was approaching we took leave of them, and returned on board. Next day, at dawn, we saw that there were an immense number of people on the beach, and that they had their women and children with

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Pacific Ocean ; but this is a specimen of Vespucci's romancing. There was no observation for longitude with instruments in those days. Columbus observed the time occasionally, when there was an eclipse, comparing it with the time at some place given in his almanac, but the result was too rough to be of any use.

^{First Voyage.} them. We went on shore, and found that they all came laden with their food supplies, which are such as will be described in their place. Before we arrived on shore, many of them swam out to receive us at a cross-bow shot's distance; for they are great swimmers, and they showed as much confidence as if we had been having intercourse with them for a long time; and we were pleased at seeing their feelings of security.

What we knew of their life and customs was that they all go naked, as well the men as the women, without covering anything, no otherwise than as they come out of their mothers' wombs. They are of medium stature, and very well proportioned. The colour of their skins inclines to red, like the skin of a lion, and I believe that, if they were properly clothed, they would be white like ourselves. They have no hair whatever on their bodies, but they have very long black hair, especially the women, which beautifies them. They have not very beautiful faces, because they have long eyelids, which make them look like Tartars. They do not allow any hairs to grow on their eyebrows, nor eyelashes, nor in any other part except on the head, where it is rough and dishevelled. They are very agile in their persons, both in walking and running, as well the men as the women; and think nothing of running a league or two, as we often witnessed; and in this they have a very great advantage over us Christians. They swim wonderfully well, and the women better than the men; for we have found and seen them many times two leagues at sea, without any help whatever in swimming.

Their arms are bows and arrows, well made, except that they have no iron, nor any other kind of hard metal. Instead of iron they use teeth of animals or of fish, or a bit of wood well burnt at the point. They are sure shots, and where they aim they hit. In some places the women use these bows. They have other weapons like lances, hardened

by fire, and clubs with the knobs very well carved. They wage war among themselves with people who do not speak their language, carrying it on with great cruelty, giving no quarter, if not inflicting greater punishment. When they go to war they take their women with them; not because they fight, but because they carry the provisions in rear of the men. A woman carries a burden on her back, which a man would not carry, for thirty or forty leagues, as we have seen many times. They have no leader, nor do they march in any order, no one being captain. The cause of their wars is not the desire of rule nor to extend the limits of their dominions, but owing to some ancient feud that has arisen among them in former times. When asked why they made war, they have no other answer than that it is to avenge the death of their ancestors and their fathers. They have neither king nor lord, nor do they obey anyone, but live in freedom. Having moved themselves to wage war, when the enemy have killed or captured any of them, the oldest relation arises and goes preaching through the streets and calling upon his countrymen to come with him to avenge the death of his relation, and thus he moves them by compassion. They do not bring men to justice, nor punish a criminal. Neither the mother nor the father chastise their children, and it is wonderful that we never saw a quarrel among them. They show themselves simple in their talk, and are very sharp and cunning in securing their ends. They speak little, and in a low voice. They use the same accents as ourselves, forming their words either on the palate, the teeth, or the lips, only they have other words for things. Great is the diversity of languages, for in a hundred leagues we found such change in the language that the inhabitants could not understand each other.

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Their mode of life is very barbarous, for they have no regular time for their meals, but they eat at any time that

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they have the wish, as often at night as in the day—indeed, they eat at all hours. They take their food on the ground, without napkin or any other cloth, eating out of earthen pots which they make, or out of half calabashes. They sleep in certain very large nets made of cotton,¹ and suspended in the air; and if this should seem a bad way of sleeping, I say that it is pleasant to sleep in that manner, and that we slept better in that way than in coverlets.² They are a people of cleanly habits as regards their bodies, and are constantly washing themselves. When they empty the stomach they do everything so as not to be seen, and in this they are clean and decent; but in making water they are dirty and without shame, for while talking with us they do such things without turning round, and without any shame. They do not practise matrimony among them, each man taking as many women as he likes, and when he is tired of a woman he repudiates her without either injury to himself or shame to the woman, for in this matter the woman has the same liberty as the man. They are not very jealous, but lascivious beyond measure, the women much more so than the men. I do not further refer to their contrivances for satisfying their inordinate desires, so that I may not offend against modesty. They are very prolific in bearing children, and in their pregnancy they are not excused any work whatever. The parturition is so easy, and accompanied by so little pain, that they are up and about the next day. They go to some river to wash, and presently are quite well, appearing on the water like fish. If they are angry with their husbands they easily cause abortion with certain poisonous herbs or roots, and destroy the child. Many infants perish in this way. They are gifted with very handsome and well-propor-

¹ Bombix.

² *Coltroni*. Varnhagen suggests the Spanish word *colchones*, mattresses; but *coltroni* is a good Italian word, and suitable.

tioned bodies, and no part or member is to be seen that is not well formed. Although they go naked, yet that which should be concealed is kept between the thighs so that it cannot be seen. Yet there no one cares, for the same impression is made on them at seeing anything indecent as is made on us at seeing a nose or mouth. Among them it is considered strange if a woman has wrinkles on the bosom from frequent parturition, or on the belly. All parts are invariably preserved after the parturition as they were before. They showed an excessive desire for our company.

We did not find that these people had any laws; they cannot be called Moors nor Jews, but worse than Gentiles. For we did not see that they offered any sacrifices, nor have they any place of worship. I judge their lives to be Epicurean. Their habitations are in common. Their dwellings are like huts, but strongly built of very large trees, and covered with palm leaves, secure from tempests and winds. In some places they are of such length and width that we found 600 souls in one single house. We found villages of only thirteen houses where there were 4,000 inhabitants. They build the villages every eight or ten years, and when asked why they did this, they replied that it was because the soil was corrupted and infected, and caused diseases in their bodies, so they chose a new site. Their wealth consists of the feathers of birds of many colours, or "paternosters" made of the fins of fishes, or of white or green stones, which they wear on their necks, lips, and ears; and of many other things which have no value for us. They have no commerce, and neither buy nor sell. In conclusion, they live, and are content with what nature has given them.

They have none of the riches which are looked upon as such in our Europe and in other parts, such as gold, pearls, or precious stones: and even if they have them in their

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^{First Voyage.} country, they do not work to get them. They are liberal in their giving, for it is wonderful if they refuse anything, and also liberal in asking, as soon as they make friends. Their greatest sign of friendship is to give their wives or daughters, and a father and mother considered themselves highly honoured when they brought us a daughter, especially if she was a virgin, that we should sleep with her, and in doing this they use terms of warm friendship.

When they die they use several kinds of burial. Some bury their dead with water and food, thinking they will want it. They have no ceremonies of lights, nor of weeping. In some other places they practise a most barbarous and inhuman kind of interment. This is that when a sick or infirm person is almost in the throes of death, his relations carry him into a great wood, and fasten one of those nets in which they sleep to two trees. They put their dying relation into it, and dance round him the whole of one day. When night comes on they put water and food enough for four or six days at his head, and then leave him alone, returning to their village. If the sick man can help himself, and eats and lives so as to return to the village, they receive him with ceremony, but few are those who escape. Most of them die, and that is their sepulchre. They have many other customs, which are omitted to avoid prolixity. In their illnesses they use various kinds of medicines, so different from ours that we marvelled how anyone escaped. I often saw a patient ill with fever, when the disease was at its height, bathed with quantities of cold water from head to foot. Then they made a great fire all round, making him turn backwards and forwards for two hours until he was tired, and he was then left to sleep. Many were cured. They also attend to the diet, keep the patient without food, and draw blood, not from the arm, but from the thighs and loins, and from the calves of the legs. They also provoke vomiting by