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THE FIRST YEARS OF PORTUGUESE GREATNESS

“ Notre (France) politique continentale, sous peine de ne nous valoir que des déboires, doit être désormais essentiellement défensive. C’est en dehors de l’Europe que nous pouvons satisfaire nos légitimes instincts d’expansions. Nous devons travailler à la fondation d’un grand Empire Africain, et d’un moindre Asiatique.”—LEROY BEAULIEU, “de la Colonization,” ed. 1891, p. ix.

Early Explorers—Henry the Navigator—Albuquerque—Relations
With Africa and the Far East

THE early years of Portuguese exploration, conquest, and missionary enterprise read almost like a fairy tale, so crowded are they with dazzling feats performed by a handful of men against what appear to be gigantic odds. What has become of those heroes? The boundaries of Portugal are to-day what they were then; the Church that inspired missionary zeal is, if possible, richer and more powerful to-day than when St. Francis Xavier landed in Macao; she yet holds vast unexplored territories keenly coveted by other countries, yet from day to day her power slips from her grasp like a sword from the hand of a dying man.

Portugal, at the accession of Queen Elizabeth, included the whole coast of Africa from Morocco around

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the Cape to the Red Sea; India from the mouth of the Indus to that of the Ganges; the richest islands of the Malay Archipelago, and a fortified station at the very gates of Canton. This takes no note of Brazil, a vast empire by itself. Looked at on the map, the colonial power of Portugal seemed to embrace everything worth having, excepting what Spain claimed in America and the Philippines. She appeared to be a power to whom could be compared only the England of to-day, in the extent of her possessions and the enterprise of her people.

And it was by the son of an English woman that she was thrust into the front rank of nations. Henry, *the Navigator*, as this Portuguese prince was called, was born in 1394. His mother was Philippa, sister of the English Henry IV. He grew up in the midst of a generation which was just resting from more than a century of warfare against the Moors, a struggle that enlisted the savagery of religious zeal no less than the love of plunder. It was a time when local liberty still existed and when promotion came to others than mere favorites of the Court and the Church. Portugal was but an insignificant part of the Iberian Peninsula and her population was only 1,000,000; but big men are not necessarily the product of big countries, for in that case Russia would be the nursery of European heroes.

This remarkable prince did not himself take part in the expeditions, but from a secluded workshop at Cape St. Vincent he inspired the men whom he fitted out for distant enterprises, and himself raised the funds and calculated the chances of success from a profound study

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of all the information about the world and its products which was then accessible.

In early days the Far East was a vague country, to which Christians had access only through Venetian and Genoese traders, who sailed to the ends of the Mediterranean, to Constantinople, to Egypt, and there exchanged the wares of Europe for products which had been brought by caravans across China, or on Arab dhows from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

Nothing very distinct was known of the Far East, but that little was calculated to create a strong desire for nearer acquaintance. Early travellers reported fabulous wealth, and that, combined with the fact that this wealth was being appropriated exclusively by infidels, was enough to give the Church, also, a lively interest in the question.

The Turks were then the terror of all Christian nations, from Vienna to Lisbon, and the Church regarded with particular favor any person or government that accomplished anything calculated to injure Mohammedan influence. Therefore the idea of seeking access to the Far East by way of the African shores was one particularly congenial to the people of that time, for the reason that all the approaches to the treasures of India were guarded by the Arabians, who recognized the Sultan as the head of their Church.

History delights in telling of heroic deeds, and we are all inclined to give the hero his due. But heroes must have money in order to fit out the expeditions necessary for the exhibition of their peculiar virtues. Expeditions are costly things, and even Portugal of the fifteenth century, backed as it was with the wealth of

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the Church, could not afford to send out exploring-ships that did not come back with produce enough to pay expenses. Much as we to-day glory in the deeds of our pioneering ancestors, we may as well recognize the truth that the early navigators and explorers did next to nothing that was not directly connected with the procuring of pecuniary profit.

Prince Henry was forty-seven years old before his efforts for discovering the sea route to India met with any success. He had made a few attempts to work his way down the African coast, but found no great encouragement until 1441, when his ships got well within the tropics on the Guinea coast and laid the foundation of his country's greatness by kidnapping some native chiefs. These were subsequently ransomed for a handsome cargo of slaves, gold dust, and other precious things, and on returning to Lisbon, the people, from the King down, became enthusiastic in the cause of an exploration which promised kindred results. The Pope cheerfully gave his blessing to the enterprise, and, furthermore, gave Portugal a monopoly of all trade round Africa to India. The slave-trade was found to be the most profitable element of the early ventures, and from this date cargoes of negroes were sold in Portugal, the proceeds of which enriched the Church as well as the heroes, who needed the money for new conquests. Discovery was the best paying investment of the day, particularly the discovery of negroes.

In 1446 trade was established with the African coast near Cape Verde on an island called Arguim, the same which two hundred years later was occupied by Prussians from Brandenburg—but not for long.

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In 1487 the Cape of Good Hope was rounded, and further voyages received still more ample government support, from the fact that in 1492 the voyage of Columbus created a well-grounded fear that the Spaniards might dispute the control of the Eastern trade. At one time, Portugal fitted out a great fleet for the purpose of preventing Spain from sending ships across the western ocean, for that was then presumed to be another way to the Far East. The Papal Bull of 1493, which divided the new world in half between these two people, did not satisfy the Portuguese, and they sent an ultimatum to Madrid insisting that the world should be divided not into eastern and western halves, but into *northern and southern*—the south to belong to Portugal, the north to Spain. Had the Pope adopted this view, Cortés and Pizarro might have secured Massachusetts Bay and Virginia instead of Mexico and Peru, and Portugal might have colonized Australia! South Africa would now be talking Portuguese and Canada would be talking Spanish!

The Great Prince Henry died in 1460, but the evil genius which presided over Portugal would have it that another great man, the noble Albuquerque, should take up his work. This pioneer is conspicuous in Portuguese history because he was honest in his official relations. Six years after the discovery of America, Vasco da Gama anchored a Portuguese fleet in a harbor of India, and within a few years Albuquerque had completed the work of that navigator by establishing the right to trade at pretty nearly every port of the coast.

The King, by virtue of this, took the title which must

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have sounded large even to people of that day—"Lord of Conquest, Navigation, and Commerce over Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and China."

This was mainly "bunkum," for all the conquest consisted in the right to establish factories or trading stations. At Macao the Portuguese were regarded as vassals of the Chinese Emperor, paying tribute annually.

In 1510 Albuquerque, after great difficulties, secured Goa, on the West Coast of India, as a harbor for Portugal. Some six thousand Arabians who had settled there, were by him put to death, and he divided their confiscated property among his friends, the new settlers,—compelling them at the same time to marry natives and identify themselves with the country. This method had a certain immediate advantage, but the result was not calculated to dignify the white man in the eyes of the people he had conquered. The native was elevated a very little bit; the white man was degraded. Hence it is that to-day throughout the East, Goa is a by-word for a mixed breed, part Indian, part negro, part white, which furnishes ships-stewards, barbers, and a class of nondescript menials who are regarded with more pity than respect—a people with neither pride of ancestry nor hope in posterity.

Henry died at the age of sixty-six, Albuquerque at sixty-three. They are the two great names of Portuguese history—with perhaps one other—that of the poet Camoens. Albuquerque, like Camoens,* died in

* In Macao I was shown a beautiful garden and grotto overlooking the sea, where this poet is said to have written a portion of the *Lusiad*, a national epic glorifying the early Portuguese navigators. This poem, a wearisome copy of Homeric methods, is yet interesting from having been

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poverty, if not disgrace—both were honest men, and both made enemies by trying to stem the tide of official corruption.

Albuquerque died in Goa, in 1515. With him died the spirit that made his country great; his loss was never replaced. The career of Portugal went on for a while under the impulse which he had imparted, but the corruption which he had sought to suppress gained the upper hand, until her rule soon became little more than despotism tempered by corruption.

produced in part so near to the equator. Macaulay, Kipling, Stevenson—a few names only occur to one in this connection; it would be interesting to discuss at length the effect of the tropics upon the intellectual capacity of the white man.