

THE FABULOUS STRAITS OF ANIAN.

I.

IT is becoming quite the fashion to sneer at the North Pole, or, more properly, to doubt the existence of such a piece of geographical furniture, and speak disrespectfully of the efforts made to reach it by enthusiastic explorers and scientific "cranks." Even "Symmes' Hole," now almost forgotten by the general public, comes in for a share of the ridicule; though there are not a few firm adherents to the theory of that thoughtful officer—and it certainly is hard to disprove—who hope some day to visit that wonderful world in the interior of the earth, when science has conquered the icy dragon which guards the portal. For half a century the public mind of Europe and America has been kept constantly upon the rack, because of some exploring expedition headed Poleward, and the necessary half dozen secondary expeditions dispatched to the rescue of the first from the disasters which almost invariably overtake them. Yet this long interest in one geographical enigma, and the sustained effort to solve it, are far from equaling similar interest and exertions made in the same general direction many years ago, resulting from another practical application of theoretical geography. The search for the Northwest Passage extended over nearly three centuries of time, and included some of the most memorable expeditions the annals of geographical exploration bear. To trace it through all its shifting aspects, and to detail in full each successive step which added to the positive knowledge of geographers, and in consequence demolished all their old theories and furnished a foundation upon which new and equally erratic ones were erected, would require a bulky volume. In this article it is proposed only to present the leading and most interesting of its constantly varying phases, and to speak of those memorable voyages which finally accomplished its solution, gave to us our first knowledge of the great extent of the North American Continent, unraveled the mystery of the Pacific Ocean, and finally determined the exact relation it bears to the Atlantic and the great sea of ice surrounding the goal of more modern explorers.

The fifteenth century saw many revolutions in scientific ideas, but nothing so great as the revelation made near its close that there existed a vast continent of which the great civilizations of centuries had been ignorant. In 1492 the Genoese navigator, Christopher Columbus, a firm believer in the unpopular idea that the world was a sphere, sailed westward to reach that land of fabulous riches, the Indies, which every one knew lay to the eastward, and landed upon a little island of the West Indies. Little did he dream that he had stumbled upon one of the outlying pickets of a new continent, but supposed he had simply encountered one of the little islands that were known to abound in the waters washing the eastern coast of the famed Indies. English, Spanish and Portuguese navigators soon discovered the mainland of both North and South America, which were for some time believed to be entirely disconnected. The latter received the name of America, in honor of Amerigo Vespucci, whose

claim to such an honor was, to say the least, far from meritorious; while the former was called *Novus Mundus*, the New World, and was generally supposed to be a portion of the continent of Asia. To be sure, this would make of Asia a continent of prodigious size, but at that time the extreme Orient was as much a matter of geographical speculation as was Central Africa a few years ago. From the natives it was soon learned that a vast ocean lay beyond the continent then called America, and as this was supposed to be bounded on the north by this vast eastern projection of Asia, it was entered upon the maps as the "Great South Sea" several years before the reports of its existence were verified by actual observation. In 1513 Balboa first gazed upon its broad expanse from the heights of Panama, proving not only the fact of its existence, but that America and *Novus Mundus* were united by an isthmus. The result was that the latter title was dropped and the former extended to comprehend the entire New World.

A new belief began now to take possession of the map makers—that America was a distinct continent and could be circumvented, and the South Sea entered, by sailing either to the north or south. Since it was the fabulous wealth of Cathay and the Indies and the treasures of the magnificent Island of Cipango upon which the thoughts of Europe were bent, a route by which this great obstructing continent could be passed was sought for with unremitting diligence. As early as 1500 a Portuguese named Gaspar Cortereal coasted along the shore of *Novus Mundus* and entered Hudson's Bay through the straits of the same name. Upon these he bestowed the title of the "Straits of Anian," though for what reason, or what is the significance of the name, is a mystery to the present day. This he reported to communicate directly with the Indian Ocean, a body of water now known to lie more than ten thousand miles to the southwest. Even with the scant geographical knowledge of those times the idea was scouted by educated men; yet upon the maps of the period such a passage was indicated in the latitude of sixty degrees, leading indefinitely westward from the Atlantic, and variously named "Straits of Anian," "Straits of Labrador," or "Straits of Cortereal." In 1519 a navigator named Magellan, a Portuguese, who had several times visited the Indies by passing eastward around the Cape of Good Hope, sailed under the flag of Spain to search for a southern passage into the South Sea. Three years later one of his vessels returned, having entered the Pacific through the Straits of Magellan, crossed it to the Indies, and reached home by passing around the southern extremity of Africa. This voyage contributed more to geographical knowledge than any other expedition before or since. It demonstrated that America was a distinct continent, separated from Asia, on the south at least, by an ocean of gigantic proportions; that the Indies could positively be reached by sailing westward, and that the world was not only a sphere, but there was a salt water highway by which vessels could sail completely around it.

The prevailing opinion that there existed a Northwest