

## CHAPTER I.

## BIRTH, PARENTAGE AND EDUCATION OF COLUMBUS.

OF the early days of Christopher Columbus nothing certain is known. The time of his birth, his birth-place, his parentage, are all involved in obscurity; and such has been the perplexing ingenuity of commentators, that it is difficult to extricate the truth from the web of conjectures with which it is interwoven. Judging from the testimony of one of his contemporaries and intimates,<sup>1</sup> he must have been born about the year 1435 or 1436. Several places contend for the honour of having given him birth, but it seems satisfactorily established that he was a native of the ancient city of Genoa. A like contention has arisen with respect to his lineage. More than one noble family has laid claim to him, since his name has become so illustrious as to confer rather than receive distinction. It is probable that all these branches may have sprung from one common stock, though shaken asunder, and some of them cast down, by the civil wars of Italy. It does not appear that there had been any nobility in his family, within the knowledge of himself or his contemporaries; nor is the fact material to his fame. It is certainly more honourable to his memory, to be the object of contention among various noble families, than to be able to designate the most illustrious descent. His son Fernando, who wrote his history, and who made a journey to investigate the subject, tacitly relinquishes all claims of the kind; pronouncing it better that his family should date its glory from the Admiral, than look beyond him, to ascertain whether his predecessors had been ennobled, and had kept hawk and hound; for "I am of opinion," he adds, "that I should derive less dignity from any nobility of ancestry than from being the son of such a father."<sup>2</sup>

The immediate parentage of Columbus was poor, though reputable and meritorious, his father being a wool-comber, long resident in the city of Genoa. He was the eldest of four children, having two brothers, Bartholomew, and Giacomo, or, as his name is translated into Spanish, Diego, and one sister, of whom nothing is known, excepting that she was married to a person in obscure life, called Giacomo Bavarello.

The family name in Italian is Colombo; it was latinized into Columbus by himself in his earlier letters, and by others in their writings concerning him, in compliance with the usage of the times, when Latin was the general language of correspondence, and that in which every name of historical importance was written. The discoverer, however, is better known in Spanish history as Cristoval Colon, having altered his name when he removed to Spain. The principal reason given by his son for this altera-

tion, was, that his descendants might be distinguished from collateral branches of the family. For this purpose, he recurred to what was supposed to be the Roman origin of the name, *Colonus*, which he abbreviated to *Colon*, to adapt it to the Castilian tongue. From his variety of appellations, the name of Columbus is retained in the present history, as that by which he has been most generally known throughout the world.

His education was but limited, but as extensive, probably, as the indigent circumstances of his parents would permit. While quite a child, he was taught to read and write; and wrote so good a hand, says Las Casas, who possessed many of his manuscripts, that with it he might have earned his bread. To this succeeded arithmetic, drawing, and painting; and in these, observes Las Casas, he likewise acquired sufficient skill to have gained a livelihood.<sup>3</sup> He was sent for a short time to Pavia, the great school of learning in Lombardy. Here he studied grammar, and became well acquainted with the Latin tongue. His education, however, was principally directed to those sciences necessary to fit him for maritime life. He was instructed in geometry, geography, astronomy, or, as it was at that time termed, astrology, and navigation.<sup>4</sup> He had, at a very early age, evinced a strong passion for geographical science, and an irresistible inclination for the sea, and he pursued with ardour every congenial study. In the latter part of his life, when, in consequence of the great events which were brought about by his agency, he looked back upon his career with a solemn and superstitious feeling, he mentions this early determination of his mind, as a secret impulse from the Deity, guiding him to the studies, and inspiring him with the inclinations, which should fit him for the high decrees he was chosen to accomplish.<sup>5</sup>

In tracing the early history of a man like Columbus, whose actions have had so vast an effect on human affairs, it is interesting to notice how much has been owing to the influence of events, and how much to an inborn propensity of the mind. The most original and inventive genius grows more or less out of the times; and that strong impulse, which Columbus considered as supernatural, is unconsciously produced by the operation of external circumstances. Every now and then, thought takes some sudden and general direction; either revisiting some long-neglected region of knowledge, and exploring and reopening its forgotten paths, or breaking with wonder and delight into some fresh and untrodden field of discovery. It is then that an ardent and imaginative genius, catching the impulse of the day, outstrips all less gifted contemporaries, takes the lead of the throng by which it was first put in motion; and presses forward to achievements, which feebler spirits would never have adventured to attempt. We find an il-

<sup>1</sup> Andres Bernaldez, commonly known as the Curate of Los Palacios. For remarks on the birth, birth-place, and parentage of Columbus, see the Illustrations at the end of this work.

<sup>2</sup> Hist. del Almirante, cap. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Las Casas, Hist. Ind., l. i, c. 3. MS.

<sup>4</sup> Hist. del Almirante, cap. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to the Castilian Sovereigns, 1501.