

THE SECRET OF COLUMBUS

HAS VIGNAUD LEARNED IT?



BY STERLING HEILIG.

PARIS, July 5.—For more than a quarter of a century, the United States enjoyed a kind of permanent ambassador to France, unknown, except to Americans in Paris, all of whom sooner or later came to appreciate him.

It was Henry Vignaud, Washburn's private secretary till 1872, second secretary of legation from 1875, first secretary from 1882, charge d'affaires in all interims, and retired this year.

The incoming ministers and ambassadors found that self-effacing fellow American in charge of everything, authoritatively cognizant of every question, docketed with every precedent, friendly with every foreign diplomat and French functionary. And their first words "Leave it to Vignaud!" became habitual. The consuming energy of the true expert was satisfied by working in the shadow.

Every American in Paris knows it; so when, this year, Henry Vignaud finally retired at seventy-nine, without the pension due all diplomats except those of our land, a group of the great ones of the colony came forward with \$20,000, to make a comfortable income for his remaining years; to relieve him of anxiety for his family; and to permit him, in scholarly retirement, to ride the life hobby that was the secret of his modesty as an official. He had bread to eat which ambassadors knew not of.

It was his Christopher Columbus library. Bagneux, cream colored town, all shutters up, sleeps in the sun. We went two blocks before we saw a soul. There are no gardens. Silent streets, immaculately clean, go bare, severe, between cream houses and high cream walls.

We knocked at a low door flush with the sidewalk. The ancient house seemed insignificantly small; we did not know that the three adjoining houses to the left were part of it. It has three front doors, three dining rooms, salons and waiting rooms that are confusing; but it is one charming house.

Through its intricate twilight, we came to a massive door—and suddenly were in a park that blazed with flowers, where fountains tinkled on green lawns, where century old trees made an aeolian harp for breezes; and the best loved American of Paris, the possessor of a thousand family secrets, welcomed us to the retreat of his old days.

An Old Chateau.

We were astonished. It is the park and garden of an old French chateau. In one cool spot, trees and shrubbery made an open air hall of grateful shadow. Here sat cousins, nephews, nieces, the Parisian contingent of a summer Sunday. It was the realm of Mme. Vignaud. The learned retirement of the great American student has its own place.

An exterior stairway climbs an ivy covered wall. The ivy covered wall is long; it seems to shut the garden from the street; but high up are six ancient stained glass windows in a row.

It is no wall, but part of what in 1485, was the Bagneux palace of justice. Its foundations contain dungeons whose iron rings for chaining prisoners are still in place. Bagneux is full of ancient walls and rooms—not entire houses.

"Christopher Columbus might have stood upon my actual library floor," said Mr. Vignaud, "it is a fit place for ancient books and atlases."

The outside stairway climbs up to it—the learned hobby of the man who was not dazzled by the life of Paris—brilliant. Five long narrow rooms, en suite, in noble perspective, give a vista of books, books, terrestrial globes, old wood cuts and old maps in ink, hand colored. Here are busts of Franklin and Columbus. There is Washington. See the copper plates of ancient navigators. Here is all America—the old America.

There are 14,000 books, all chosen for a purpose. Every volume has its listed value. Many, bought cheap forty years ago, have become precious. Here is a great infolio Du Val Atlas, dated 1578, by the geographer of Henry III of France. It had small value in 1877. Yesterday its fellow sold for 450 francs. Yet it is not one of the classic America atlases.

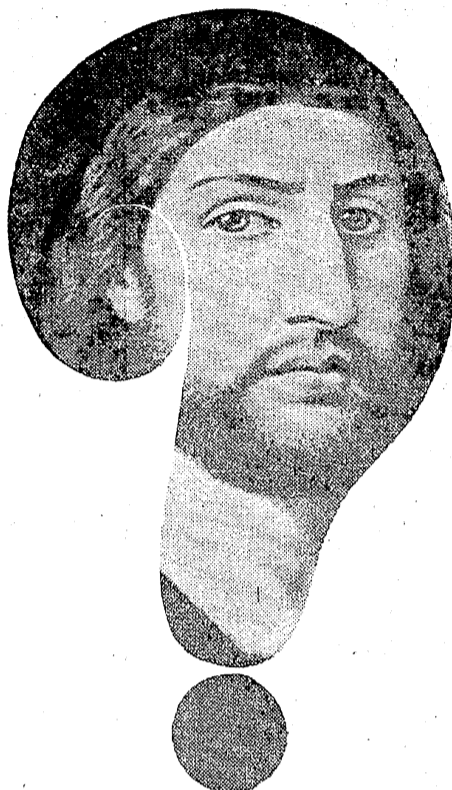
America! This noble library, in its antique European setting, is devoted to America. Seated at his desk, the green old American-abroad went into reminiscences:

"From the beginning this library was formed solely to write the history of the discovery of America," said Mr. Vignaud. "I was a poor man; I had not the advantage of buying it all together. I had to watch my chance, pick up one book here, one atlas there. Nevertheless, the library now contains all the original sources of information, in whatever languages, mostly Spanish and Portuguese. Every work on the subject worth having is here."

A Remarkable Library.

He showed me famous original editions; Peter Martyr, Oviedo, Las Casas, Gomara. Beside them were the modern reprints, with notes and references.

"A peculiarity of my library is its richness in atlases of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," said Mr. Vignaud. He pulled them out on their rollers, immense old infolios from Antwerp, The



SUPPOSED PORTRAIT OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.

Hague, Rome, Madrid, London, Paris, Lisbon. Here are atlases for which millionaires pay heavy prices; Mercator, Ortelius, Blaeu, Jonschius. Many come on the market less than three times a century. All together, they could scarcely be duplicated. The mere section of "Brochures"—thin printed controversial essays—is amazing. On the single subject: "Where is Christopher Columbus buried?"

I copied at random a few names of the many authors, in English, Dutch German, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, to the obscure press of little capitals of

"It is a vast subject," replied he who has been at it forty years; "my attention was directed particularly to Columbus; so I neglected the rest and may never write it."

What Did Columbus Seek?

"What is the trouble about Columbus? Why should he require so much investigation?" I asked.

"The accepted history of Columbus—as written by Washington Irving and his followers—is that he started across the Atlantic with the idea of reaching Asia," replied Mr. Vignaud. "I have been constrained to show that he had no such idea."

"What did he start out to do?"

"He sailed to discover the very island that he did discover. He knew that it was there."

"How?"

"I know it by the study of his writings; by contemporaneous writings; by the documents of the times. Most authors have followed the biography of Columbus by his son—who presented things as he wanted them to be known. Columbus was, in many respects, a humbug."

"How?"

"He himself originated the story that his plan was, not to discover America, but to go to Asia. Why? To give himself more romantic aspect; to prove himself to be an original thinker; indeed he was obliged to do it—should he admit sailing to discover America, he would have to tell where he got the information. And that is something that Columbus never told! The plain facts are that he had sure clues as to the existence of the Antilles, etc. He went to find them; and he found them."

"Clues?" I asked.

"Here is fascination," said Mr. Vignaud. "Although Columbus talks a lot about his youth, he tells mighty little of his life. He concealed the date of his birth, not to have it known he was the son of a simple weaver. I proved the date of his birth and it was later confirmed by the discovery of a document. He was born in 1451."

"And there is mystery in his life?"

"He pretended to have been forty years at sea—to be an experienced seaman. In truth, he had hardly ever traveled. His life was insignificant—until he got that clue. It gave him a purpose and a livelihood. The purpose was to take possession of a valuable island in the Atlantic for one of the great powers. And his livelihood was to raise money, meanwhile, on the secret."

"And he did it?"

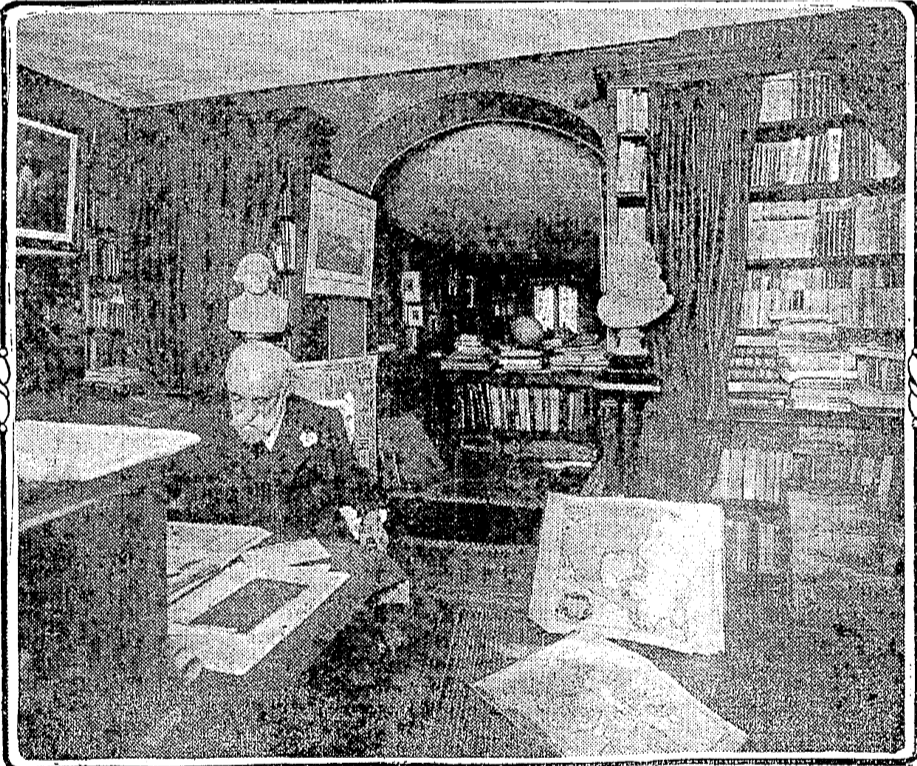
"He lived fifteen years on his secret, before sailing off to hunt his island," said Mr. Vignaud. "His nearest approach to working was to make maps for sailormen when he was hard up. But there are quantities of receipts showing how he touched subscriptions, gifts and payments on account. Even his brother received for a large sum from the King of France—on account of discoveries to be made."

That Mysterious Secret.

"Where did they get their secret?" I asked.

"Fascinating question! 'From an unknown pilot' is the answer of the documents that have come down to us. Las Casas says it was 'a certain pilot.' Martin Behaim knew the pilot. Gomara promises to tell promises to tell his name—and does. The old world whispers of that nameless pilot. I am listening to those whispers."

Who was he? What had he seen? Where had he



HENRY VIGNAUD AT WORK ON HIS "CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS"

South America: Curtis, Rossi, HARRISSE, Podesta, Francini, Prieto, de Echeverri, Shea, Van Brocken, Fossati, Travers, Asserato, Abbe Casabianca, Twis, and Tejera.

"Where is Columbus buried?" I asked.

"He was first buried in Spain, and his remains were taken to St. Domingo. That is sure. The doubt is, were they afterward removed from St. Domingo to Havana? In my opinion," said the profound student, "they are still at St. Domingo."

"Here is a book that is becoming rare," he said, "and it is very interesting. It is the famous 'Chronicle of Nuremberg.'"

I opened the heavy black letter folio, packed with information on all subjects, endless gothic wood cuts of mythical monsters, giants, men with two heads, winged beasts, the wonders of the world in 1493.

"The year of the discovery of America," he said.

"But such a book can have no bearing on the discovery of America," I said.

"Not much," he smiled, "but it has one very important paragraph. It is a paragraph on Martin Behaim, the celebrated cosmographer who knew Columbus well in Portugal. He is suspected of having given precious information to Columbus."

Behaim, a fascinating personality, has had a dozen books written about him. Mr. Vignaud showed them all to me; the latest "Martin Behaim, His Life and His Globe" by E. G. Ravenstein, F. R. G. S., is a volume with expensive plates, published only in 1908.

"That globe that Behaim made is a unique thing," said Mr. Vignaud. "It exists still in Nuremberg. It shows the world as it was understood to be at the eve of the discovery of America. Years ago the French government had a copy of it made for the National Library; and for the Chicago exposition I was entrusted with having it exactly reproduced. My copy is now at the Smithsonian institute; and as the original is fading so that it can scarcely be read, my globe will be the only source of information."

"You started to write the history of the discovery of America," I said.

leen? Why did he disappear? Why did he claim nothing? Mr. Vignaud would talk no more about him. Has Mr. Vignaud a secret?

No one would imagine Mr. Vignaud to be nearly eighty years of age. Yet he was born in New Orleans in 1830, and is himself a part of the history of our country.

Before the war, he was a newspaper man, owning two weekly papers and making a literary name in Paris and New Orleans publications. When the war broke out, he went with his fellows.

During two years, he was captain in the confederate army. He was captured and escaped.

A year later, he went to Paris as secretary of the confederate diplomatic commission. He never left Paris, where he for a time earned his living doing musical and critical reviews.

He was secretary of the Romanian legation; he was connected with the Alabama claims commission; and was delegate to the metric conference.

Then he became Washburn's private secretary and entered the American legation—to quit it only yesterday.

"Now you have leisure for Columbus," I said.

"I have published a 'Life of Columbus' from his birth to his settlement in Portugal," he answered, "and in the work I am now finishing, I take up the formation of his plans and his negotiations with the governments. I drop him with the discovery of America. From there on, all is known."

"The second volume will come out this autumn."

"What shall you do next?" I asked.

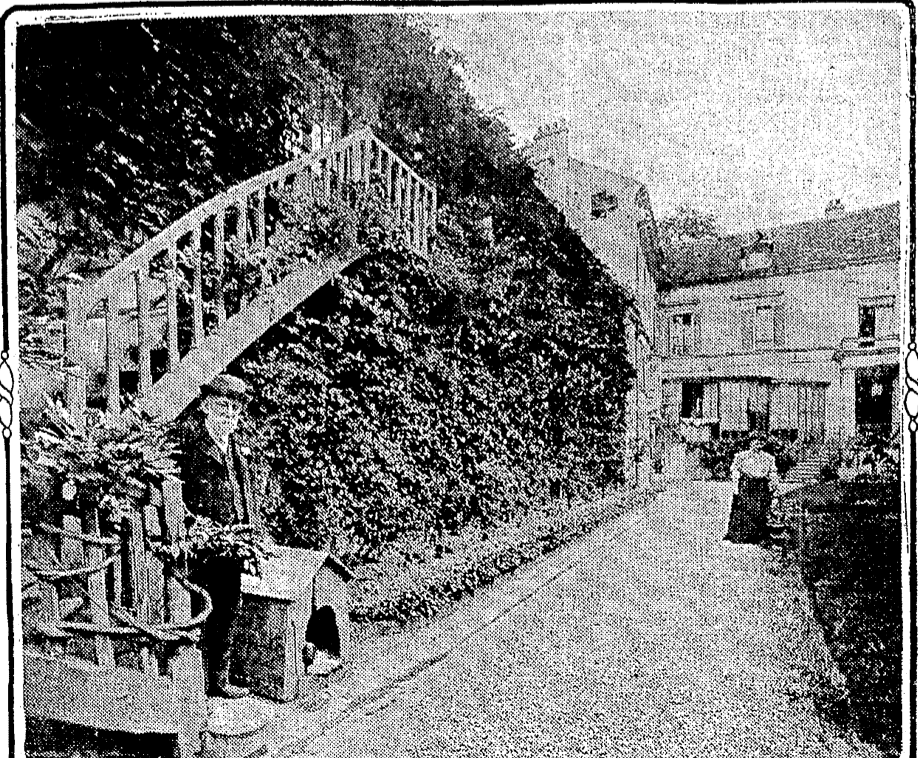
"I propose to combine the two works, published in French, in one English book, adding all the new information I may come on."

"And then?"

"I shall be over eighty years of age," he mused. "Yes, I know what I shall do. I shall make a critical catalogue of my library. I am concerned about my library. It is richer than is known. I should like to present it to my native state, but I have not the means."

"You can think of that later," I said.

"True, I am only eighty," he smiled.



VIGNAUD'S OLD FRENCH GARDEN, OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY.