SPICES AND CHRISTIANS
By KLAUS MEHNERT

One of the greatest battles of all time is now being fought for the control of the Indian Ocean, which Japan with her mighty blows against the British Navy is wresting from Britannia. But this is not the first battle to be waged over this vast ocean which links the continents of Africa, Asia, and Australia. In the following article the story is told of the first European power to reach and conquer the Indian Ocean. It is an exciting and important page of history.

IN THE silence of the night the Prince lay on his couch, buried in thoughts and plans. His brain was whirling, as if from feverish dreams. Shapes of men and ships surged before his sleepless eyes. Suddenly he jumped up. His shouts brought the servants running into his chamber. In amazement they heard their Prince ordering them, as if by divine inspiration, to prepare ships for a journey along the coast of Africa.

With this dramatic scene in the life of Prince Henry, so wrote the old chroniclers of the kingdom, began Portugal's march to the Pacific. And even among those historians who were skeptical about this anecdote, many were at first inclined to believe that the Portuguese expansion toward the Indian Ocean had been the result of a definite plan of this Prince. In this way the following notion arose and endured for a long time: the Euro-Pacific land route, made famous by Marco Polo, was lost due to the decline of the Mongol Empire and the rising supremacy of the Mohammedan Turks in the Near East. This in turn compelled Christian Europe, accustomed to the treasures and spices of the Far East, to discover a sea route to the Pacific; Prince Henry the Navigator was the first far-sighted leader of this trend.

In recent times this conception has been attacked and, as usual, the dispute resulted in the modern historian having a far more complicated picture of the events than his predecessors.

RISE OF A NATION
The beginnings of Portugal, situated on the outer edge of Europe, were modest. Originally nothing but a part of Spain, the county of Portugal—what is today northern Portugal—was given in 1095 in fief to Henry of Burgundy, one of the numerous crusaders then aiding the kings of Spain against the yoke of the Moors, who were ruling the southern and eastern parts of the peninsula. In 1147 his son, Alfonso I, who made Portugal practically an independent kingdom, wrested Lisbon, the future capital, from the Moors. He was assisted by an army of crusaders composed of Englishmen, Germans, and Flemings which was on its way to the Holy Land. And while the Crusades themselves did not lead to any lasting successes, their by-product, Portugal, became one of the few enduring
monuments of European co-operation. A hundred years later, the Crescent had been forced out of southern Portugal too, and the kingdom had achieved its final European borders.

The poverty of the Portuguese soil; the length of her coast and her favorable situation on the sea route from the Mediterranean to northern Europe; the blood of Roman, Suebic, Gothic, and Moorish conquerors; frequent hostilities with her Spanish neighbors, Castile and Leon, who controlled her land routes to the Continent; relations with northern countries originating in Crusade times and outlasting them: all this led the Portuguese to the sea, encouraged by their kings who recognized that the destiny of their country lay on the ocean.

King Diniz had trees planted for future ship-building, and in 1317 he appointed the Genoese Manoel Pessanha hereditary admiral of the Portuguese Fleet, with high pay and many honors. His descendants abided by the agreement, and Pessanha, and after him his heirs, drew other seafarers from Genoa to Portugal. This resulted in close relations between the two states for many generations and, in 1341, in the Portuguese expedition to the Canary Islands led by a Genoese, which was the first step to be taken by Portugal on the Atlantic.

King Ferdinand encouraged shipping by granting ship-builders numerous privileges in 1377. John I devoted his main attention to the Navy. And the maritime development of Portugal reached a peak in her conquest of the African stronghold of Ceuta, which represented the first reaching out of Europe into Moorish Africa. It was here that the royal princes, among them Henry—who had English blood through their mother, the sister of Henry IV of England—earned the honor of being knighted.

HENRY THE ENIGMA

Prince Henry, who is known to history by the not very suitable name of "the Navigator," is one of the most disputed figures of the late Middle Ages. Was he the visionary genius who perceived a sea route to the Pacific? Had he designs only on Africa? Was he perhaps no better than a low slave-trader? On the basis of the scanty material now available the following can be said.

It is possible but not proved that Henry, whose brother Pedro had received in Venice a copy of Marco Polo's book of travels, had India and the Orient as a distant goal in mind when he ordered the coastal voyages along Africa. His two immediate aims are more obvious: first, to reach the coast of Guinea, so rich in gold and ivory, by circumnavigating the Mohammedan stronghold of North Africa; and secondly, to co-operate politically and militarily against these hereditary enemies with the legendary "Prester John," who was supposed to be somewhere beyond the Moors. The rapidly prospering slave trade benefited Henry's plans for discovery by directing the hitherto slumbering attention of the Portuguese towards the economic significance of the African coast, but later had unfortunate moral and racial consequences for the Portuguese nation.

THE REAL ACHIEVEMENT

No matter how much historians disagree on Henry's motives and aims, there can be no doubt as to his importance in history. It does not lie in the length of that part of the African coast which was opened up to Portuguese knowledge by his untiring and often disappointing activities: the 1,250 miles or so from Cape Bojador, which was already known, to the southernmost point in Sierra Leone, reached under Henry—the result of the forty-five years from the conquest of Ceuta to the Prince's death—are nothing compared to the vast stretches discovered in the following decades. Yet Henry deserves his place in the history of the world as the man whose lifework is the foundation, not only for the great voyages of the Portuguese
to the southwest Pacific, but also—indirectly, through the impressions absorbed by Columbus in Portugal—for the discovery of America.

It was owing to the Prince that the former circum-African adventures, which we shall speak about shortly, were replaced by the systematic geographical and political conquest of the coast of the Dark Continent. That Cape Bojador—really quite harmless but endowed by tradition with all the terrors of the unknown—was rounded in 1434 was entirely due to his personal influence. With this an obstacle had been overcome which, although it only existed in superstitious imagination, had hindered navigation much longer and more obstinately than even the Cape of Tempests. The barren desert coast of the Sahara gave way to the inhabited and wooded coast of Senegal.

Henry's efforts were directed towards the training of sailors, the collecting of nautical knowledge, the development of more seaworthy craft, and, aided by experienced geographers, the improvement of maps. He inoculated the blood of his people with the conviction of navigare necesse est and made navigation and discovery a national cause. And just as centuries later the will of the dead Peter drove on his Russians along the Arctic coast of Asia and across the North Pacific, so Henry's ghost sailed in the ships of Diaz and da Gama.

**EQUATORIAL HORRORS**

The first nine years after Henry's death saw only one important coastal voyage, which went several hundred miles beyond Sierra Leone. In 1469 the King gave a five-year lease on the trade with the Gold Coast to a rich Lisbon merchant by the name of Gomes, on condition that he should discover a hundred miles of coast every year. Gomes was zealous in carrying out this task. It was a bitter disappointment when the coast unexpectedly turned south in Cameroon and the dream of a southern coast of Africa running north of and parallel to the equator dissolved. Fortunately it was necessary to cross the equator. And they were greatly afraid of this, for at that time there were fantastic ideas about the deadly heat of the equator and the slope of the earth on its southern hemisphere. But after a brief hesitation the voyages were continued. The equator was conquered, and nothing terrible happened.

**PERFECT JOHN**

Among the members of the Portuguese royal house, John II, known as "the Perfect," was Henry's true spiritual heir. Gifted with Henry's thirst for geographical knowledge and, in
contrast to him, in possession of the royal power—which, moreover, in accordance with the times, was taking on increasingly absolute forms—he carried the work of his great-uncle a great deal further. His importance in the Portuguese expansion is threefold.

First of all he made the previous discoveries safe by erecting Fort Mina on the rich Gold Coast of Guinea (1482). By seeing to it that a mass was read every day for Henry in the church of this outpost he stressed his relationship to that prince.

Secondly he equipped—chiefly with the gold from Guinea—three large expeditions along the African coast: the first two under Diego Cão (1482-87) extended Portugal's knowledge of Africa in a great double thrust as far as Cape Cross (about 22 degrees southern latitude); the third, under Bartholomew Diaz (1487-88), rounded the Cape of Tempeasts, which the King symbolically renamed the Cape of Good Hope, and reached the Great Fish River on the southeastern coast of the Dark Continent.

And thirdly, in 1487, the King sent out Pedro da Covilhan on a journey, in the course of which, sailing from Aden to Canaanore (India), da Covilhan became the first Portuguese to set foot on Indian soil. On his way back, after adventurous voyages on the Indian Ocean which took him as far south as Sofala in the Mozambique of today, he was also to be the first member of his nation to visit the legendary Prester John, who, instead of being the powerful Christian ally one had hoped for, turned out to be the powerless Negus of Abyssinia.

IN QUEST OF INDIA

We cannot tell with certainty when Portugal turned her gaze from the immediate goal of Africa to the distant goal of India. Some historians, including the Portuguese eulogists, believe that they can discern an Indian plan as early as Prince Henry's times, while others find only later indications of it, some as late as John II. But there is no doubt that for the latter India was the goal. It is true that he, too, sought a connection with Prester John, first overland from West Africa and then by sending out Covilhan and Diaz. But for him Prester John was only a stop on the way to India.

"It seemed to the King," wrote Barros, the first great historian of Portugal, in the sixteenth century, "that by way of Prester John he might find an entrance into India, because through Abyssinian friars who had gone from Portugal to Jerusalem with orders to obtain news of this Prester John, he had learnt that his country was beyond Egypt and stretched to the southern sea."

The two expeditions sent out in 1487 confirmed the King's hopes. Diaz brought the welcome news that Africa could be circumnavigated, and Covilhan's voyages proved that the domain of Prester John touched upon a sea on which one could sail to India as well as southward along the east coast of Africa. The Portuguese now knew the entire coast of the Dark Continent, with the exception of the 1,250 miles between the Great Fish River and Sofala, the southernmost point reached by Covilhan. The sea route to India was almost a certainty: the way had been cleared for Vasco da Gama.

WHY INDIA?

There is a pause of nine years between the return of Diaz and da Gama's fleet's putting to sea, a pause which is surprising if one thinks of the quick succession of expeditions during the first six years of John's rule. But this pause can be explained: the mistaken belief of Columbus that he had found Asia on his first voyage (1492) suddenly raised the possibility that Marco Polo's treasures could be reached to the west by an incomparably shorter route than that around the Cape of Good Hope. The partition of the world into Portuguese and Spanish spheres of influence in the treaty of Tordesillas (1494) also took time. Moreover, in spite of his
From the fact that King John put great energy and a lot of money into discovering a sea route to India, it is but a step to the next question: why to India? Why did India exert so great an attraction on the imagination of the Occident? What did they hope to find there? "Spices and Christians" was the famous reply to this question given by the scout sent ashore by Vasco da Gama the day he first reached India. In their hope, grown out of their struggle against the Crescent, to find or win Christians in India, the Portuguese were disappointed (at which they did not fret for long); not, however, in their desire for spices.

THE PRECIOUS SPICES

There is hardly any branch of trade that can be compared in age and historical importance with the spice trade. Its history covers a vast period. It is indeed a long and eventful road from that scene in the Old Testament where Jehovah ordered Moses on Mount Sinai to compound an anointing oil of spices ("Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh... and of sweet cinnamon... and of sweet calamus... and of cassia... ") to that other scene in 409 where Alaric, the victorious leader of the Visigoths, promised to spare conquered Rome for a ransom of gold, silver, and three thousand pounds of pepper; to King Edward I of England, whose household, during the times of Marco Polo, consumed spices worth almost £1,600 a year; to the centuries in which the white powers fought each other bitterly for the possession of the spice islands; to modern times, when anyone can for a few cents buy all the spices he desires at the corner grocery shop; up to the present day, when a great war is being fought again for these very same islands.

As if imbued with magic power, the spice trade brought wealth and flowering of culture with its coming and decline with its going—to the Arabian Levant and northern Italy, to Portugal and the Netherlands. It is strange that so far there has been no historian to deal with this extraordinarily rich and important material. The following pages make no pretense at filling this noticeable gap in history, for this can only be done in a lengthy study. They only wish to serve as an introduction to the subject of spices, which is woven like a scarlet thread into the history of the Pacific.

We cannot go back to those prehistoric times when spices began to play an important role. Skipping ancient times, we must be content with the fact that during the Middle Ages, especially after the Crusades, spices had turned from luxury articles into expensive necessities and had achieved an importance which we can scarcely imagine today. For our standards, prices were out of all proportion. In the England of Marco Polo's times, a pound of pepper or ginger cost as much as a whole sheep, while nutmeg cost as much as three and cloves as much as seven sheep.

WHY THEY LIKED THEM

It is easy to explain our ancestors' predilection for spices. Not only were they very limited in their choice of food, compared with today, but it was also difficult to preserve food before the invention of cans and refrigerators. Spices offered the threefold advantage of giving food greater variety of taste, of preserving it longer, and of making it edible even in a very "high" condition. During the centuries when there were no bathtubs, their perfume helped to
overcome other odors. Moreover, spices, coming as they did from unknown fairylands and costing so much more than other medieval victuals, carried the same social prestige as caviar does today. They made their owners just as proud and satisfied as we would be if we had in our larders some of these outlandish condiments that had been fetched in fantastic circumstances from the moon by a rocket-ship.

It was also believed that spices contained magic powers. When the German Emperor Henry VI entered Rome, the streets were fumigated with nutmeg and other spices; and when the Black Death was ravaging Europe in the fourteenth century the doctors prescribed meat prepared with ginger, cloves, and pepper. There are countless examples of the use of spices to be collected from medieval literature. They leave no doubt that spices were among the most desirable goods and the most important articles of trade of that time.

For hundreds of years Europe was content to know that spices came from "somewhere," far away toward where the sun rises. Then the time of the Mongol supremacy with its extensive journeys into Asia brought somewhat more exact information. It was especially Marco Polo who returned to Europe with much news about the home of spices, although he did make a few mistakes (in saying, for instance, that nutmeg and cloves came from Java). At any rate, the West gained a more or less accurate impression, namely, that the home of spices was to be found in southern and southeastern Asia, that their chief ports of transshipment were in India, and that their trade routes were in the hands of Europe's religious and political hereditary enemies—the Mohammedans.

PHARAOHS AND GENOESE
The idea of sailing round Africa goes far back into antiquity. Herodotus relates that Phoenician mariners, at the command of the Pharaoh Neku (609-593 B.C.), carried it out successfully, and, although doubt was cast on this fact later on, it remained in the subconscious of Europe as a possibility. The hope that it might be possible to circumnavigate the Dark Continent was later strengthened by rumors that Moorish caravans crossing the Sahara had found that the coast to the south of West Africa ran from east to west.

Ancient and medieval man was not interested in discovery for its own sake. Hence definite reasons in the sphere of trade or politics were neces-
sary to drive him out onto the high seas. Thus Strabo tells of a man called Eudoxos in the second century before Christ who wanted to break Egypt’s monopoly in the trade with India and lost his life in the attempt to sail around Africa from the Pillars of Hercules. Almost fifteen hundred years later a similar commercial and political situation was responsible for a repetition of this episode. Once again Egypt, this time under the Mohammedan Mamelukes, was placed in a strategic position in the trade between Europe and Asia. With the indignation of good Christians and keen commercial rivals, the Genoese saw their deadly enemies, the Venetians, peacefully cooperating with an Islamic power and accumulating large profits as the main agents of Oriental goods in the eastern Mediterranean. In 1291 two ships under Vivaldo put out to sea from Genoa ut per maro oceanum iron ad partes Indiae, mererrnonia utilia inde deferentes. They sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar and followed the African coast to the south, where they disappeared—alia certa nova non habuerunt de ets.

VAIN EFFORTS

Whether it was the disappointing outcome of the Vivaldo expedition or her concentration on the decades of strife with Venice, we know of no further attempts on the part of Genoa to find the sea route around Africa. But while she was being locked ever closer in the exhausting struggle with her rival, her heir and pupil grew up unnoticed and unconsciously in the southwestern corner of Europe. Almost exactly two hundred years after Vivaldo’s disappearance, Diaz sailed into the Indian Ocean.

An ironic fate gives and takes according to its own whims and seldom according to our desires. The aim in life of Manuel I of Portugal (1495-1521) was to bear the royal crown of a united Portuguese-Spanish Empire. To this end he married three Spanish princesses in succession, by whom he begot numerous children. Not long before he died, however, he was obliged to see Charles of Hapsburg mount the Spanish throne. And yet history has dubbed him “the Lucky,” for a whim of fate threw the prize of Henry’s and John’s efforts, the sea route to India, in his lap. And he knew how to make use of this stroke of good fortune. Against the judgment of the majority of his advisers, and perhaps as a reply to the voyages of Columbus, he took the final, decisive step.

VASCO DA GAMA REPORTS

It was one of the greatest hours in the history of the West, and the crowning of the efforts of many generations of Portuguese, when Vasco da Gama triumphantly entered Lisbon in the late summer of 1499 and made his report to the King. In little more than two years he had successfully carried out the longest sea voyage known till then, from the Tagus round Africa to India and back; with his tiny fleet of three ships, and thrown entirely upon his own resources, he had shown his mettle in the rear of the mortal enemies, the Mohammedans, and on the seas ruled by them; he had convinced the ports along the coasts of Africa (including those in Mozambique) and India of the daring of the Portuguese; he had established relations with Indian princes and—for the first time in history—had brought back spices directly from the Indian Ocean to Europe, the value of which exceeded the cost of the whole expedition by many times.

On the other hand, the triumph was not quite complete: hardships and disease, above all scurvy, had carried off a large part of the crew as well as Vasco’s brother; the “Christians” of India had all kinds of curious habits which made their Christianity seem somewhat doubtful (later it was discovered that the Hindus had been mistaken for Christians); and above all the entire trade in the waters between Africa and India, especially the trade in spices, was firmly in the hands of the hated Mohammedans, who, moreover, had great influence with the
Indian princes and the population of the ports, and who—there could be no doubt about this—would not give up their monopoly without a bitter struggle.

**OUTBURST OF ENERGY**

Portugal was equal to her task. The next ten years passed in a dream. In a supreme effort, the little country sent one fleet after another into the Indian Ocean: in March 1500, Cabral with thirteen ships and the pick of Portuguese mariners; in March 1501, four ships under da Nova; in 1502, two fleets under Vasco and Stephen da Gama with altogether twenty ships; in 1503, three fleets; 1504, 1505... and so on. Driven by a boundless lust for adventure, by greed and religious thirst for revenge, the sons of Lusitania roamed the seas between Africa and India, heroically fighting against overwhelmingly superior forces, pillaging and murdering with revolting cruelty, trading and negotiating with skill, building fortifications and churches, sinking ships, being sunk, and leaving a bloody trail of destruction in their wake.

The Mohammedan traders were forced into the defensive, the Sultans of Turkey and Egypt saw themselves robbed of their profits from the spice trade, and the Venetians of the main sources of their wealth. But Portugal paid no heed to their threats. Swashbuckling Francisco de Almeida was appointed the first Viceroy of India, with absolute power over all Portuguese east of the Cape of Good Hope. In all seriousness he undertook completely to drive out the Mohammedans and to divert the spice trade around the Cape. In March 1506 he won the sea battle of Cannanore against the fleet of the Prince of Calicut.

Venice's annual import of spices from the Levant sank from 3.5 million pounds, the amount it had reached during the last few years of the fifteenth century, to about 1 million pounds for the years 1502-1505, while during the same time 2.3 million pounds of spices reached Portugal every year via the newly discovered sea route. In 1504 Portuguese ships brought spices to England, and the trading station founded by King John II of Portugal in Antwerp began to develop into the leading spice market of the North. The time did not seem far off when the entire spice trade would go around Africa and through Lisbon instead of through the Levant and Venice.

Finally Mohammedan Egypt took a hand. Her strong fleet sailed to India, destroyed a few Portuguese ships, killing the son of the Viceroy, and, aided by more than a hundred Indian ships, prepared for the decisive blow. Almeida, enraged at the death of his son, threw himself at the enemy with his nineteen ships and, in one of the decisive battles of Asiatic history, inflicted a bloody defeat on him on February 3, 1509, off Diu.

In less than ten years after the return of Vasco da Gama from the first voyage to India, the centuries-old position of the Mohammedan trade world was smashed, as if it had been ripe for downfall, and the ocean between Africa and India had become a Portuguese pond. The title which Manuel the Lucky had assumed in 1499 no longer sounded so absurd: "By the Grace of God King of Portugal, on this side of the sea and beyond in Africa, ruler of Guinea and of the conquest, shipping, and trade of Ethiopia, Arabia, Persia, and India."