

WHO IN THE WORLD WAS THE FORGOTTEN EXPLORER?

THE STORY OF AMERIGO VESPUCCI

by Lorene Lambert
Illustrations by Jed Mickle



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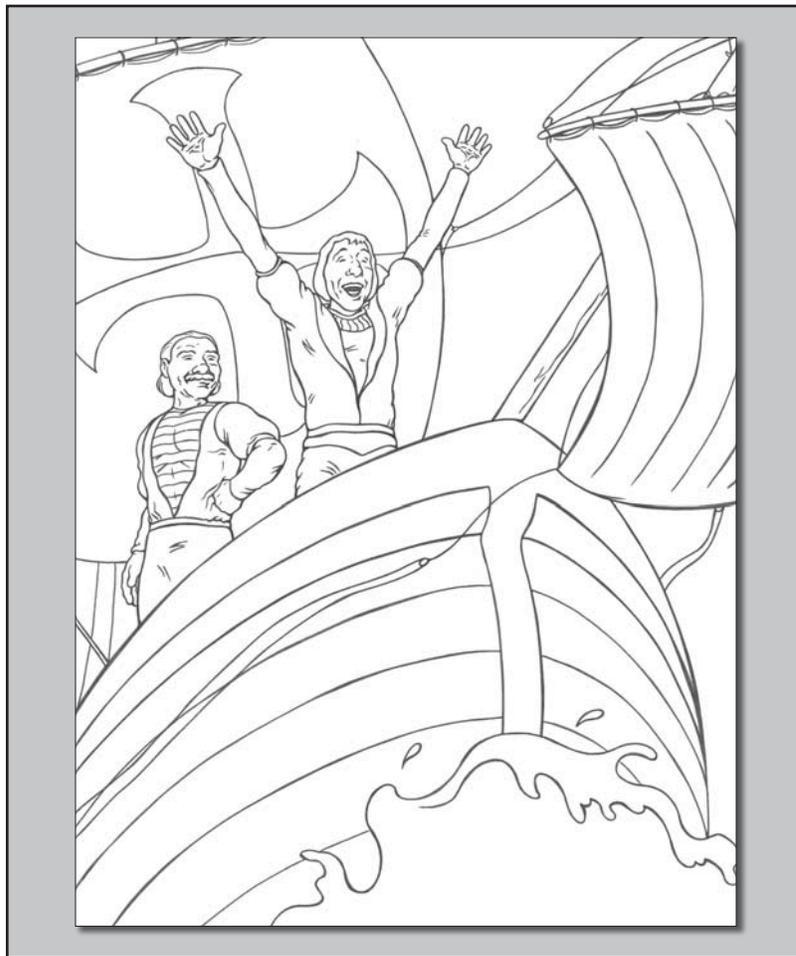
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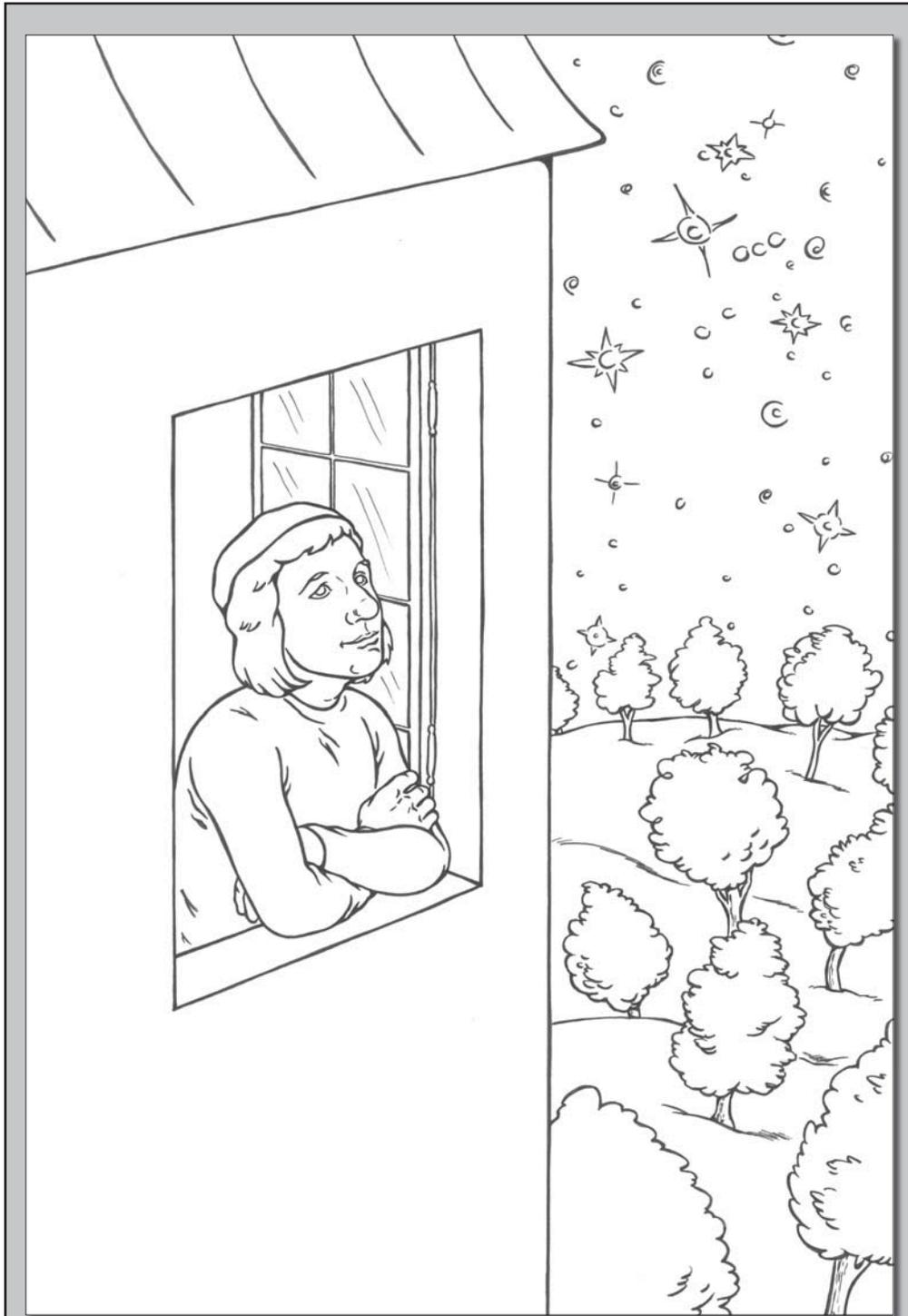
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*Amerigo leaned out from his window,
tipping his head back to look at the stars.*

CHAPTER 1



A NEW ROUTE TO THE INDIES

Hundreds of years ago, the great Italian city of Florence was very dark at night. No streetlamps or billboards cast up their glow. No floodlights shone down on baseball fields. When the sky grew dusky, the streets filled with shadows and the bustling city noises disappeared. The river Arno reflected the stars overhead as it flowed past the lamplit houses.

In a mansion close to the river, a boy named Amerigo leaned out from his window, tipping his head back to look at the stars. He loved the night sky. His uncle Giorgio had taught him to see the patterns that the stars made, the constellations. Uncle Giorgio showed Amerigo how they moved and wheeled through the sky as the seasons changed.

He told Amerigo how the sailors in their ships far out on the Ocean Sea could use the stars to steer toward land.

“Amerigo?” His uncle’s voice called.

He pulled his head back through the window, and looked across the room to the table where Uncle Giorgio sat. A large map was spread before him, in the pool of light made by a flickering candle. He beckoned Amerigo to his side.

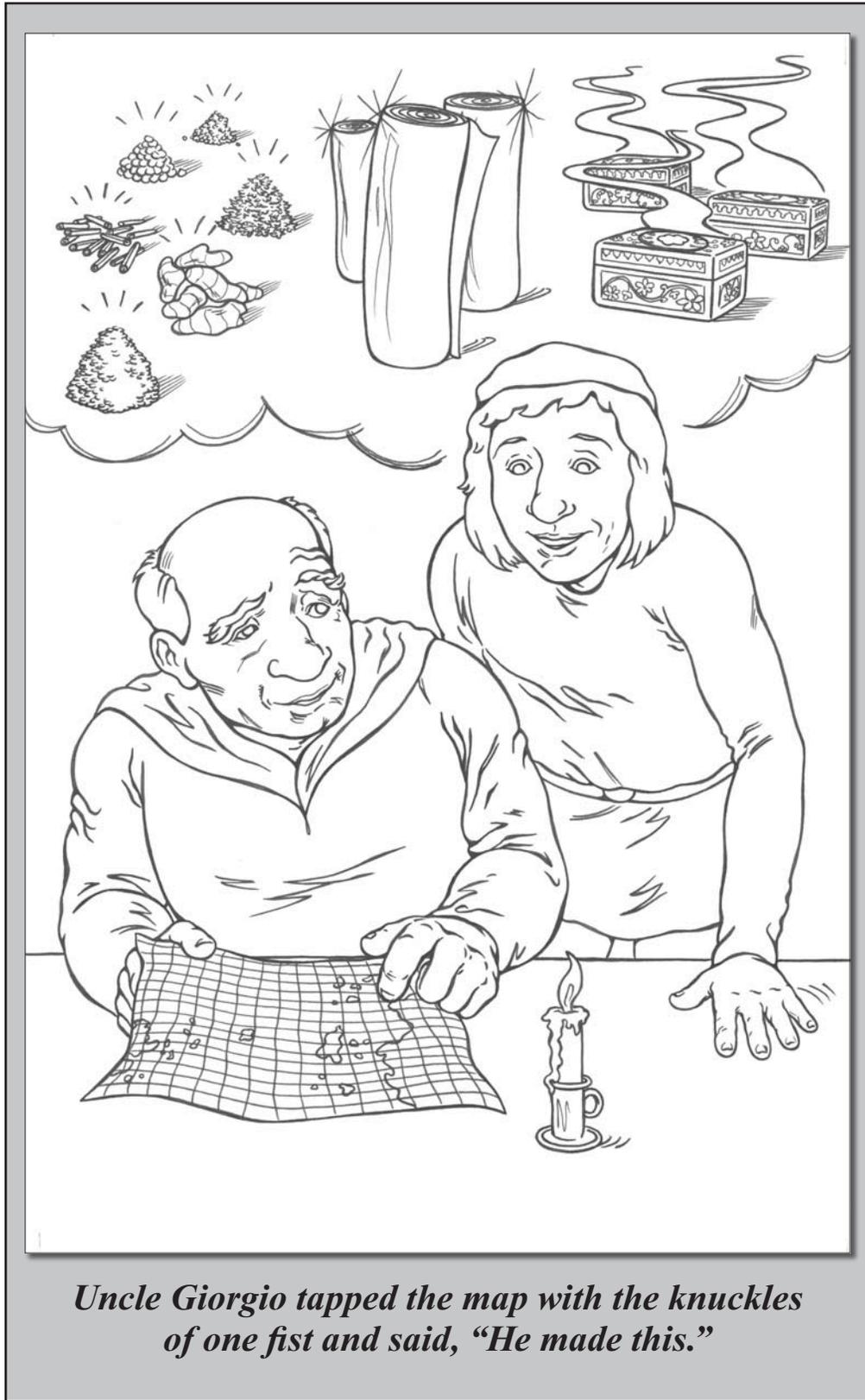
“Look at this,” he said. “What do you see?”

Amerigo walked over and leaned his elbows on the table, studying the map. It was like many others he had looked at. There were three large areas of land, which were the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa, with the Ocean Sea surrounding them like a large blue band. But in most maps, the Sea was filled with drawings of fantastic beasts, half man and half fish. This map had no drawings. There were only pictures of the land and the sea, with long straight lines going up, down and across. The lines divided the whole paper into little squares.

“Do you remember Paolo Toscanelli?” asked Uncle Giorgio.

Amerigo nodded. Signor Toscanelli was an old friend of the Vespucci family. He was a physician and a cosmographer, which means someone who studies the stars and planets. He explored far-away lands just by thinking about them. And he was famous for the beautiful maps that he drew.

Uncle Giorgio tapped the map with the knuckles of one fist and said, “He made this.”



Uncle Giorgio tapped the map with the knuckles of one fist and said, "He made this."

Amerigo peered down at it. “It looks different, from other maps,” he said. Slowly he traced his finger along one of the long lines from the right side of the paper to the left, east to west. His finger stopped on a picture of a group of islands, some large and some tiny. “What place is this, Uncle?”

Uncle Giorgio chuckled. “Ah, my boy, you’ve put your finger on the Indies. Dr. Toscanelli believes you may reach the Indies faster by sailing to the West.” He touched the left side of the map.

“But, how can that be?” Amerigo was puzzled. The Indies were those lands far, far to the east, in Asia, places called China and India and all the islands around them. Wonderful things came from the Indies. Amerigo had seen them in the market, piles of bright spices, rolls of shining silk cloth, and cunningly carved boxes made of sweet-smelling woods.

Amerigo knew that getting from Europe to the Indies was very difficult. Those lands could only be reached by a long journey over land to the east, on a pathway called the Silk Road. Much of that journey passed through countryside ruled by the fierce Turks, who hated Europeans. Some people thought that maybe you could get around the Turks by sailing up to the north or down to the south. But the way north was blocked with ice, and you could not sail south beyond Africa, either, because the Equator was there. Amerigo shivered. Everyone knew that the Equator was dangerous! He himself had heard Paolo Toscanelli say that the ancient Greeks and

Romans thought the Equator was a ring of fire! Anyone who sailed there would be blasted by flames shooting down from the sky!

But now Dr. Toscanelli had drawn a map showing the Indies on the far left side instead of on the right. Amerigo stared at the map, and then looked up at his uncle. “How can you go east by sailing west? I don’t understand.”

Uncle Giorgio reached over to a basket of fruit that sat in the middle of the table, and picked up an apple. “Well, you know that the world is round, like this apple.” Uncle Giorgio pulled a small knife from his pocket and carved a large X in its skin. “Let’s pretend that this is the Indies, right here.”



*“We could go the other way, to the left,
and still come to the Indies.”*

Then he made another, tiny X on the other side of the apple, and showed it to Amerigo. “And this is us, here in Florence. Do you understand so far?”

Amerigo nodded. Uncle Giorgio held up the apple, and put his finger on the little X that represented Florence.

“Now, we can get to the Indies by going east” he said, “like this.” And he moved his finger to the right along the apple’s skin until he came to the big X. “Or, we could go the other way, to the left, and still come to the Indies.” He moved his finger back to the tiny X and then went to the left, all the way around the apple to the large X that showed the Indies.

Amerigo was nodding vigorously. “I see it, Uncle! But, surely that’s a very long way to sail?”

“Toscanelli thinks not. He thinks it would be much shorter to sail west to the Indies than to travel over the Silk Road.”

His uncle carefully rolled up the map, and then sent Amerigo off to bed. As he lay in the darkness, watching the starlight make shadows on the wall, Amerigo thought about that map. And he remembered to say a prayer of gratitude that he was allowed to study such things.



*He remembered to say a prayer of gratitude
that he was allowed to study such things.*

CHAPTER 2

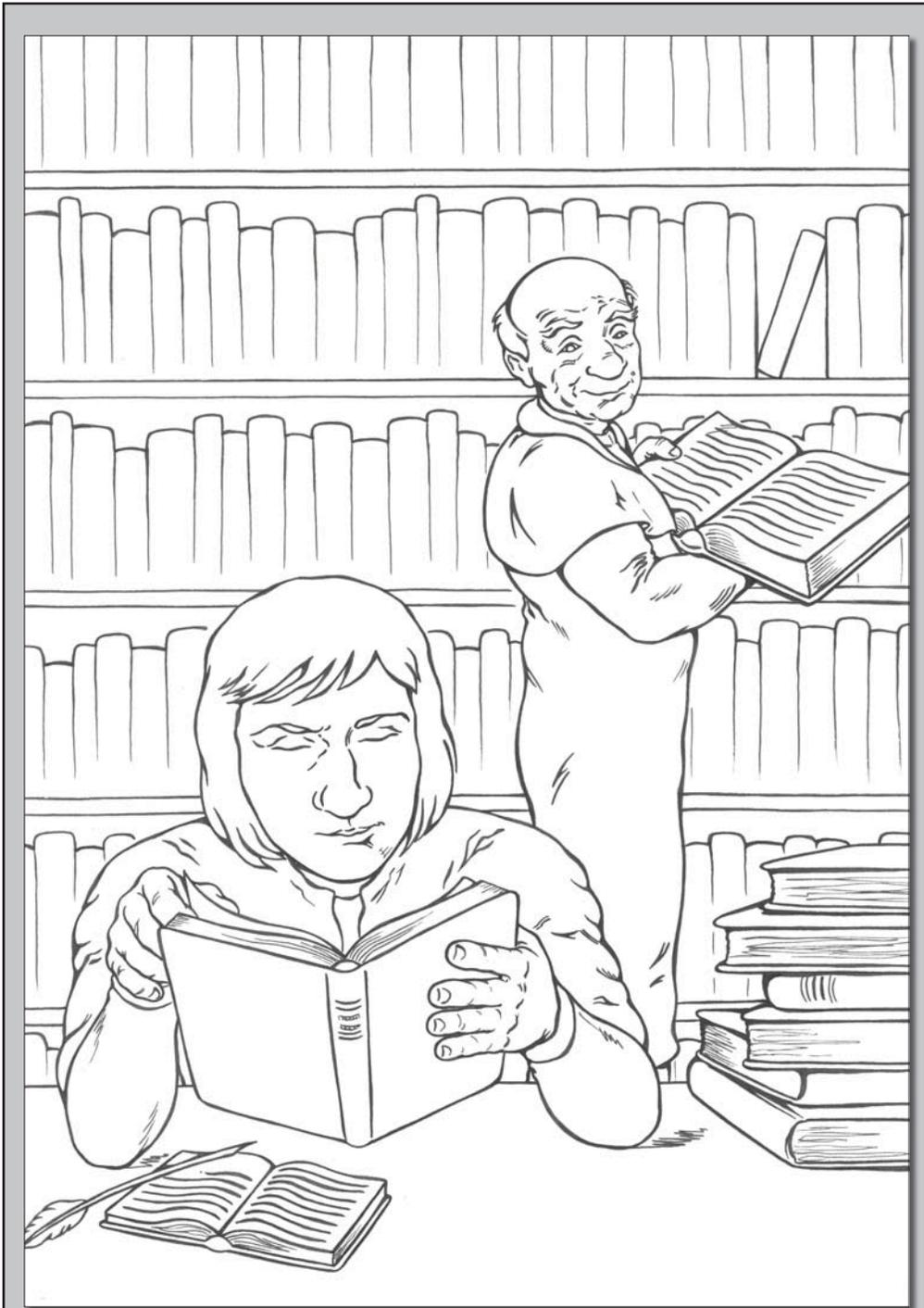


A THIRD SON

Amerigo knew he was a very lucky boy.

He was a third son. In our times, that would only mean that he had two brothers who were older than he, but in those days, a third son could usually expect a hard life. He would not be able to inherit any of his father's money, lands or power, because all of those things would be given to the first son. The second son might be given a little money to go to school and learn to be a lawyer or a philosopher. But the third son was almost always expected to begin working hard, as soon as he was old enough to read and write.

Amerigo, however, belonged to a powerful family. His father was Anastagio Vespucci, and the Vespucci family was



*He had a wonderful library, filled
to the topmost shelf with books about Latin,
mathematics, astronomy and literature.*

rich and well known in Florence. They were good friends with the Medici family, who ruled the entire city.

Because of his wealth and power, Anastagio Vespucci was able to give his third son Amerigo a special opportunity. Instead of having to go to work after he learned to read and write, Amerigo had been sent to live with his uncle. Uncle Giorgio was a famous teacher, with many students from all over Italy and Europe. He had a wonderful library, filled to the topmost shelf with books about Latin, mathematics, astronomy and literature. He collected maps of every sort, and he taught Amerigo all that he knew about these things. Amerigo wrote about what he was learning in a little notebook that he kept close by him. In it he wrote, "I want to do something to win fame and honor!"

Amerigo lived in his uncle's house and learned all that he could. He loved the maps, and even started his own collection. He did not forget about the Indies, and the problem of reaching them. He thought a lot about Dr. Toscanelli's map.

Then, when he was nineteen years old, he heard exciting news. Sailors from a country west of Italy called Portugal had crossed the Equator. And they were not burned up! No ring of fire stretched up in a solid wall to block their way. No greedy flames reached out to seize and devour their ships. Carefully following the sandy coastline, they could go all the way around the tip of Africa, and then, perhaps, on to the Indies. They would reach the east by sailing south!