

II

## Ferdinand Magellan



THE TROUBLE WITH BALBOA'S NEW SEA was that it was so hard to reach. And when you got there, what good was it? There were no ships waiting to take you on to Japan. It just didn't make sense: all this land and no opening to let anyone through! Columbus had tried to find a strait, and explorers continued to look and continued to fail. When Martin Waldseemüller drew his map of America, he put a strait through the isthmus that Balboa had crossed, but anyone could imagine a strait and draw it. To find one was harder. For four hundred years explorers had looked—to the north through the Arctic, to the south, up and down the eastern coasts of North and South America. Somewhere America must be connected to Asia. That's what most people thought through the sixteenth century and even into the seventeenth.

Giovanni da Verrazzano, a gentleman educated in Florence, sailing for the French king, was one of those looking for a strait. In 1524 after his latest trip, he wrote: "My intention on this voyage was to reach Cataia [China] and the extreme east coast of Asia, not expecting to find such a barrier of new land as I did find, and if I did find such a land, I estimated that it would not lack a strait to penetrate to the Eastern Ocean [Pacific]." He made a thorough search, from North Carolina down to Florida, then north all the way to Nova Scotia. And he found no strait. He did, however, think he had a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean. Sailing past the Outer Banks of North Carolina, he saw on the other side such a stretch of water, he decided it must be an ocean. (Actually, it was Pamlico Sound.) Unfortunately, he couldn't reach it. The Outer Banks was an unbroken barrier at that time with no passage through it. Besides, the water was so treacherous here, he couldn't attempt a landing. He must have hoped for an easier entry farther on.

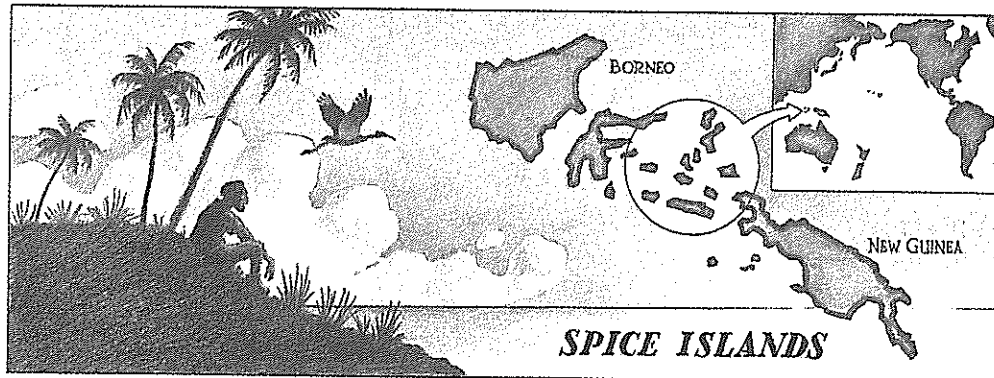
"We sailed along the isthmus," he wrote, "in continual hope of finding some strait . . . in order to penetrate to those happy shores of Cathay [another name for China]." Some mapmakers repeated Verrazzano's mistake for centuries, showing the Pacific Ocean off North Carolina. The imaginary picture of the world was so changeable, so unsettling, that mapmakers often ignored explorers even when what they reported was correct. Many, for instance, paid no attention to Verrazzano when he concluded that the entire east coast of North America was not joined to Asia but was part of a separate world.

Ferdinand Magellan, a friend of Verrazzano's, was also interested in that elusive strait. A Portuguese, Magellan was born about 1480 and at the age of twelve became a page in the queen's household, so of course he was at the right place at the right time to hear exploring news. He may even have been present when Columbus visited the Portuguese court on his return from his first voyage in 1493. Certainly,

Magellan was caught up in the excitement surrounding Columbus. Yet what did Columbus's Indies mean to Portugal? Since his islands were in Spanish territory, Portuguese explorers would have to stick to their African route. Later, when news came that Cabral, a Portuguese, had been blown accidentally onto South American shores that turned out to be on Portugal's side of the Line of Demarcation, Ferdinand Magellan began to dream.

When Magellan finally did go to sea in 1505, he went not as an explorer, but as a common soldier on military expeditions to India by way of Africa. Just as he suspected, he fell in love with the sea and for the first time knew where he'd like to go: the Spice Islands. Up to this time the Portuguese had done their spice trading in India, but far to the west of India, between present-day Indonesia and New Guinea, lay the Spice Islands (the Moluccas), where spices were actually grown. The Portuguese reached the islands in 1511, and Francisco Serrão, a new friend Magellan had met on his travels, wrote to Magellan in Portugal.

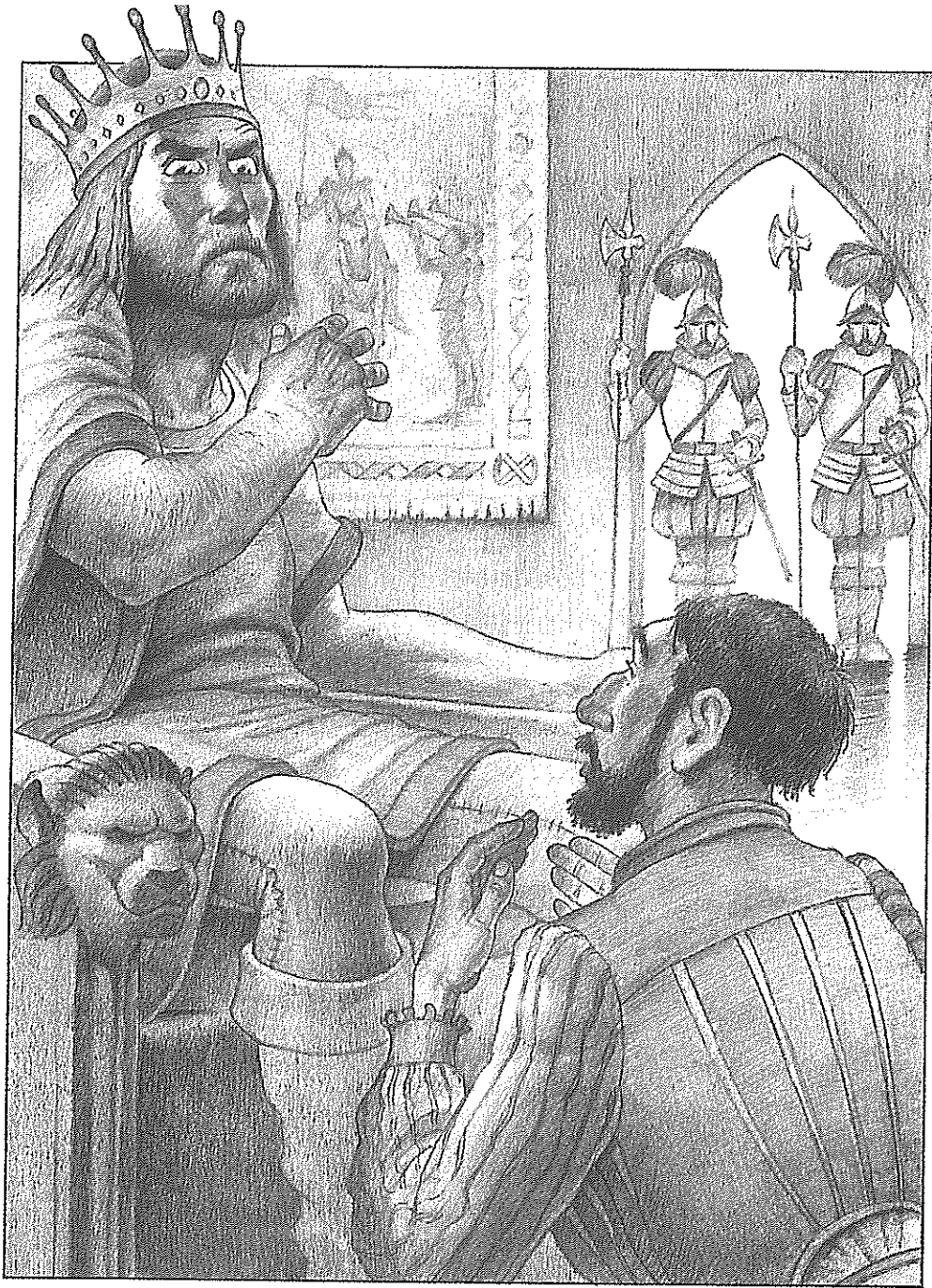
"I have found here a new world," he said, "richer and greater than that of Vasco da Gama." Indeed, Serrão liked the islands so much, he decided to stay. He saw how happy the people were, living a lazy life in the midst of lush, tropical surroundings, and he decided to live that way too. He tried to persuade Magellan to join him, and although Magellan did dream of those islands, he was far too ambitious to want to lie under palm trees the rest of his life. He wanted to get ahead in



the world, and when he went to the Spice Islands, he wanted to go as an explorer and make exploring history by being the first to sail west across the new sea. First he would need the backing of a king. The trouble was that King Manuel the Fortunate did not seem to be one bit impressed by Ferdinand Magellan, even though he'd been wounded twice fighting for Portugal and deserved some consideration. Instead, the king sent Magellan to fight the Moors in North Africa. Again he was wounded, this time in his knee, which left him with a limp for the rest of his life. And now he determined he had waited long enough. He was thirty-five years old, and he would *demand* that his position be improved.

King Manuel, however, liked his subjects to entreat, not demand. When Magellan said that his pension should be increased, the king said no. When Magellan said that the king should send him to the Spice Islands as captain of a caravel, the king said no. Magellan tried to observe court etiquette by kissing the king's hand, but the king (so it was said) withdrew his hand. Magellan had one more question. Would the king mind if Magellan left Portugal to serve another monarch? King Manuel made it clear: He couldn't care less what Ferdinand Magellan did.

Magellan didn't have many friends besides Enrique, his personal slave from Malacca, a city on the Malay Peninsula just north of modern Singapore. His home couldn't be too far from the Spice Islands, because he spoke the same language. Best of all, Magellan could depend on Enrique. Indeed, he was so loyal that in his will Magellan promised that at the moment he died, Enrique would be given his freedom. Right now, in spite of being rejected by King Manuel, Magellan's fortunes were improving. Working on his dream, he studied maps in the Portuguese naval archives, talked to pilots who had sailed to the



Indies, and finally confided his dream to a new friend, Ruy Faleiro, who happened to be a famous mapmaker and astronomer. Faleiro agreed that Magellan's dream was a good one. He agreed that yes, Magellan could get to the Spice Islands by sailing west. Ruy Faleiro, who had access to much secret geographic material, had heard of a strait in South America, so, of course, Magellan could sail right through to that other sea. What was more, the way Ruy figured it, the Spice Islands really fell not on the Portuguese side of the Line of Demarcation, but on the Spanish side.

Naturally, the thing to do was to go to Spain. In 1517 Magellan went to Seville to the home of Diego Barbosa, an old friend (perhaps a relative) who had long ago abandoned Portugal in favor of Spain. It was a good move for Magellan. Diego Barbosa had a daughter with whom Magellan fell in love. They were married, and all at once Magellan was a Spanish citizen with a prominent father-in-law who knew his way around court circles.

Eventually, Magellan was able to present his case to the Spanish king, Charles I. He didn't entreat and he didn't demand, but he was convincing. He persuaded the king that he had secret knowledge of a strait and he expected to sail through it and around the world, claiming the Spice Islands for Spain on the way. Magellan must have felt sure of that strait. In any case, no matter what happened, he stuck to that story. When the king asked him what he would do if he failed to find the strait, Magellan said he would just turn around and go to the Spice Islands around the Cape of Good Hope. It was such a reasonable reply, the king decided that he couldn't lose, so he promised Magellan five ships. And he agreed that once Magellan found the Spice Islands, he could keep two for himself.

On September 20, 1519, Ferdinand Magellan sailed with five ships,

265 men, the usual supply of bells and mirrors for barter, and enough food to last two years.

Magellan was naturally a secretive man who kept to himself, and he determined on his trip to communicate his plans to no one. And with good reason. The seamen were nervous enough about signing on for a two-year stint without being told that they would be sailing around the whole world. It would be like telling them that they were going to the moon. All anyone knew was that they were going through a strait to the Spice Islands. They would get rich, turn around, and go home. Not even the captains of the four other ships knew the whole story. They were Spanish noblemen who resented this ex-Portuguese newcomer, and Magellan knew that they would have to be watched. His father-in-law had warned him that there might be a mutiny. Beware of Juan de Cartagena, he said. Magellan would beware of them all. This was the first time he had been in command of men at sea, and he intended to stay in command.

Perhaps Magellan should have been more frank with his captains, for right from the first, the captains were suspicious. They had expected to sail from the Canary Islands due west on Columbus's old route, but Magellan heard that the Portuguese were waiting for him off the Canary Islands, so he ordered his ships down the coast of Africa. But of course his captains wondered why. Did he, a native of Portugal, intend to turn the ships over to the Portuguese? In the evening when the ships drew near Magellan's flagship, *Trinidad*, to receive their orders, Juan de Cartagena, the senior officer, asked about the course they were taking. Magellan snapped at Juan de Cartagena. A captain's business, he said, was to obey orders, not to ask questions.

So Juan de Cartagena didn't ask questions but he didn't forget. One evening when they were in the mid-Atlantic, clearly bound for Brazil,

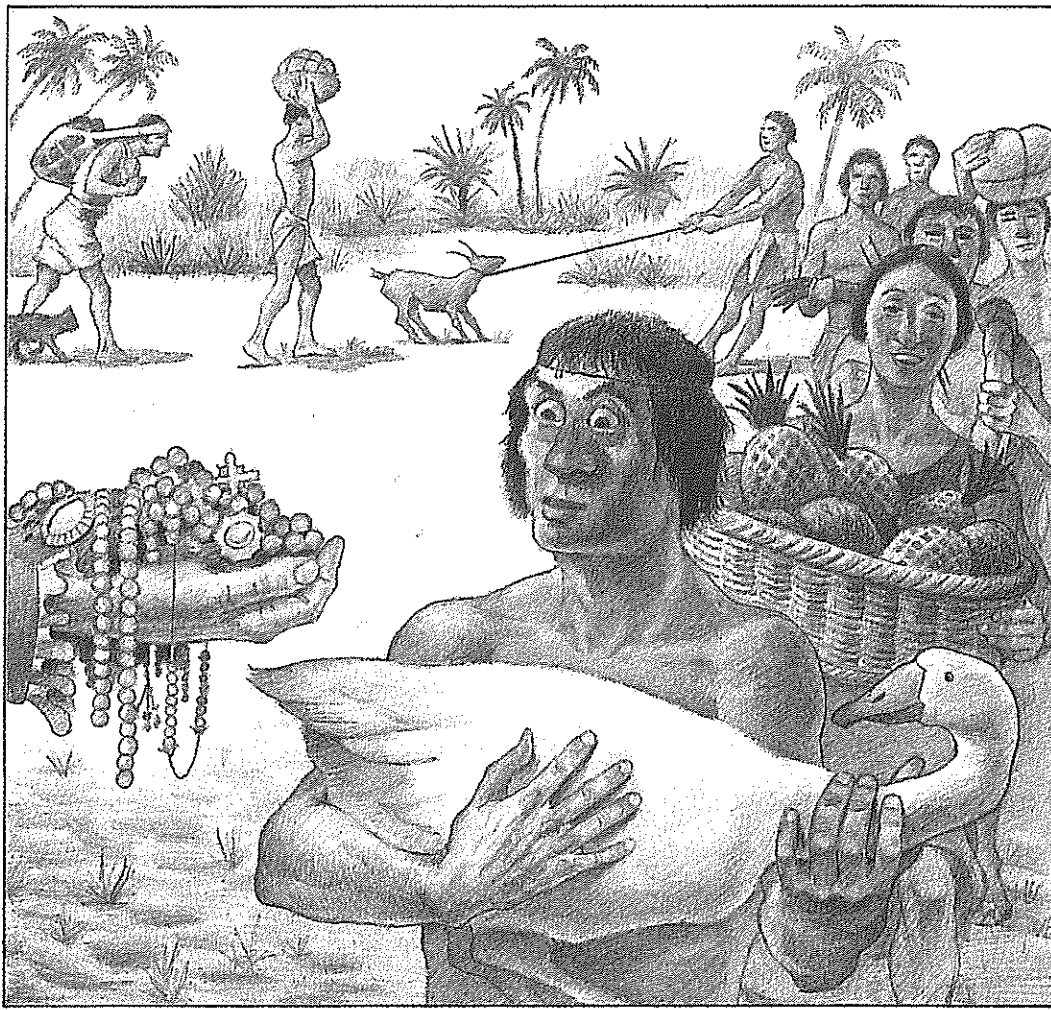
Juan de Cartagena did not personally report for instructions as his ship drew up to the flagship. Instead, he had his quartermaster speak to Magellan. Obviously under Juan de Cartagena's orders, he addressed Magellan as "Captain" instead of "Captain General," his official title. When Magellan demanded that he be addressed properly, Cartagena's ship simply sailed off, and though it stayed in sight, for three days Juan de Cartagena did not report for evening instructions.

Magellan pretended to ignore this insubordination, but a few days later he called his captains to a meeting on his flagship. Juan de Cartagena came and again asked Magellan about the course they had taken. Again Magellan refused to reply and Cartagena lost his temper. Perhaps this was the excuse that Magellan was waiting for. In any case, he grabbed Juan de Cartagena by the back of his collar. "Arrest this man," he ordered.

With Juan de Cartagena confined, the fleet sailed on, arriving on December 13 in Brazil at the port we now call Rio de Janeiro. Although Brazil was Portuguese, this area was not as yet settled, so Magellan felt free to land, but, as he warned his men, they must under no circumstances harm the native people. As it turned out, there was no incentive to harm them. They were friendly, trading great quantities of pineapple, sugarcane, geese, parrots, fish, and potatoes for the worthless geegaws that the Spaniards offered. Furthermore, when the Spaniards knelt to worship, the natives knelt too, so that when he left, Magellan congratulated himself that he had converted an entire heathen community.

Magellan loved the idea of converting natives, but after thirteen days he was impatient to move down the coast to his secret strait. He found it on January 10, 1520, just where he had expected it to be—a huge bay hiding behind Cape Santa María. Everyone agreed that this was their strait. A few days more and they would be in the Spice Islands. In order





to explore the strait before actually setting his course, Magellan divided his fleet, sending the smaller vessels west and the larger ones south. For two weeks Magellan waited at the mouth of the bay for the good news that his ships would bring back. But when they returned, they had no good news. There was no strait. There was only a wide river. After going upstream, they found that the water continued to be fresh.

However disappointed Magellan felt, he did not show it. He had insisted he knew of a secret strait; he continued to insist. They would look further. So off to the south they sailed, nosing into every cove, inspecting the mouth of every river. The trouble was that it was February now, and in South America this was the beginning of winter. The farther they went, the colder it became and the more desolate. Three more bays were examined. Nothing. Still, Magellan kept on. By the end of March the men were obviously upset. They were farther south than any ship had ever been. Where was this crazy Portuguese taking them? To the South Pole? And why wouldn't he talk to them?

Magellan had several options. He could turn around and go to the Spice Islands by the African route, as he had promised the Spanish king. He could go back to Brazil to spend the winter and resume his search in the spring. He could go home. But Magellan could not give up, postpone, or turn back. Nor would he discuss the options with the other captains, the normal procedure at sea. He made up his mind alone, and on March 31, when he came to a bay with a narrow opening (Port San Julián), he led his ships in. Although it was clear almost immediately that this was not a strait either, he did not return to the coast. Instead, he ordered all five ships to drop anchor. This was where they would spend the winter. He didn't say so but his intention was obvious when he ordered everyone to go on reduced rations.

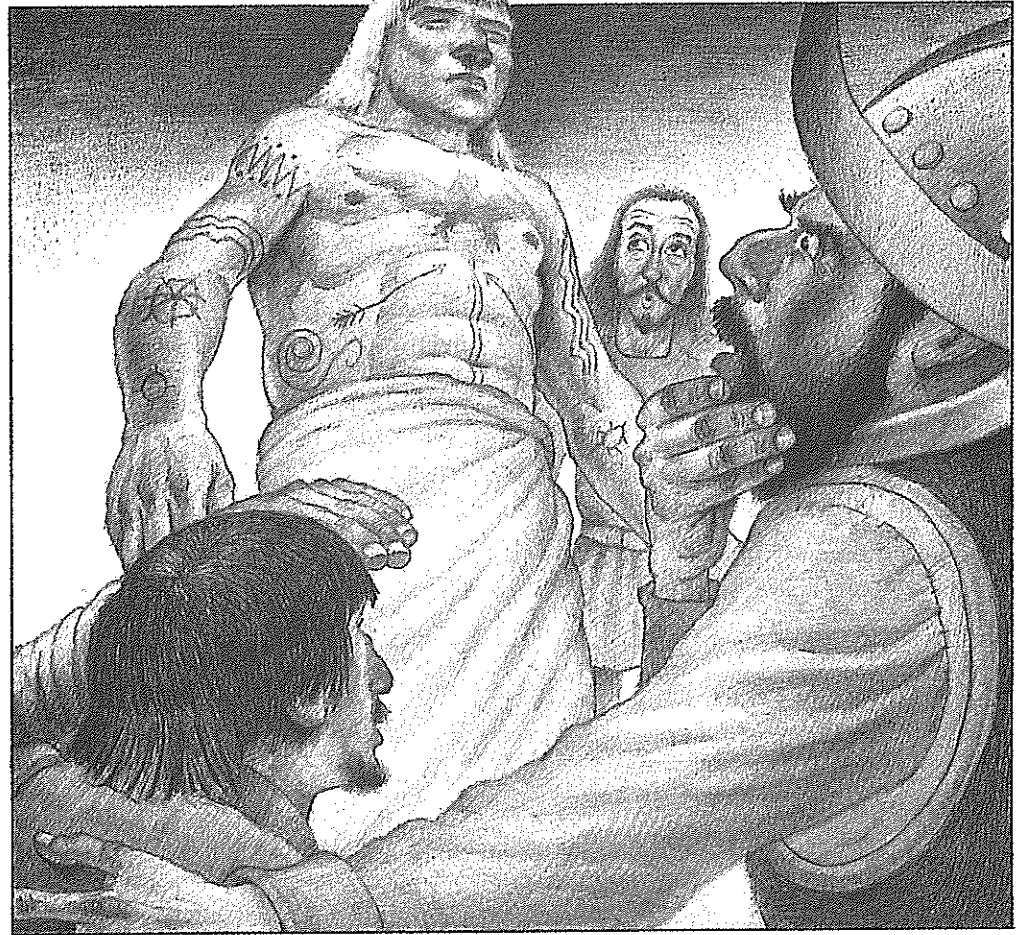
Of course Magellan knew that his decision would not be popular, and although he refused to discuss it, he thought he might smooth matters over by inviting the captains to attend Easter mass on April 1 and have breakfast with him afterward. He had the table set for five, but when the time came, the only one who showed up was his cousin, whom Magellan had made captain of the largest ship, the *San Antonio*. He must have suspected treachery, but he acted unconcerned. After all, he knew his cousin was loyal to him; and he was certain of the captain

of the smallest ship, the *Santiago*, even though he hadn't come for breakfast. That made it three ships for him and two ships against him.

The mutineers had already plotted how to put Magellan at a disadvantage. Quietly at midnight thirty armed men rowed to the *San Antonio*, overcame the captain (Magellan's cousin), and put him and the other Portuguese crew members in irons. Now the mutineers were in control of three ships and Magellan could count on only two. The leaders of the mutiny were Juan de Cartagena, who had been freed, Gaspar Quesada, and Antonio Coca. None of them wanted to get in trouble when they returned to Spain, so they sent Magellan a note, giving him a chance to make peace. They had no desire to threaten him, they said, or to challenge his authority. All they asked was that he stop treating the captains like children and tell them his plans.

Magellan was not a compromising man. He captured the small boat that had brought the mutineers' message, filled the boat with armed men, seized the *Victoria*, one of the three ships held by the rebels, and sent it to the mouth of the bay, where Magellan's own ship and the *Santiago* were already in position, blocking the entrance. No one could escape. The mutiny quickly collapsed, and in accordance with his duty as commander, Magellan ordered an official trial of the three leaders. Quesada, the ringleader, was beheaded, and the other two would be put ashore and left there when the fleet sailed in the spring.

Now the men settled down to the long, gloomy winter, making daily trips ashore for firewood, repairing the ships, and hunting seabirds, which were the only sign of life in the dead landscape. But the land was not quite as dead as they thought. One day a giant tattooed man suddenly appeared, dancing and throwing sand on his white hair. Magellan recognized this as a sign of friendship, so he ordered several of his crew to prance about and throw sand on their hair. This brought more giants and giantesses out, one of whom was so tall, the Spaniards



claimed they only came up to his waist. Since they also had enormous feet, Magellan called them the Patagonians, Spanish for “big-footed people.” Actually, their feet were not as big as they looked. They wore an oversized skin foot-covering stuffed with straw to keep them warm.

The days dragged on, cold and endless. Finally, on October 18, 1520, Magellan gave orders to continue the search. During the winter the *Santiago* had been wrecked in a storm, so there were only four ships in the fleet now, but except for the three mutineers and one slave, all

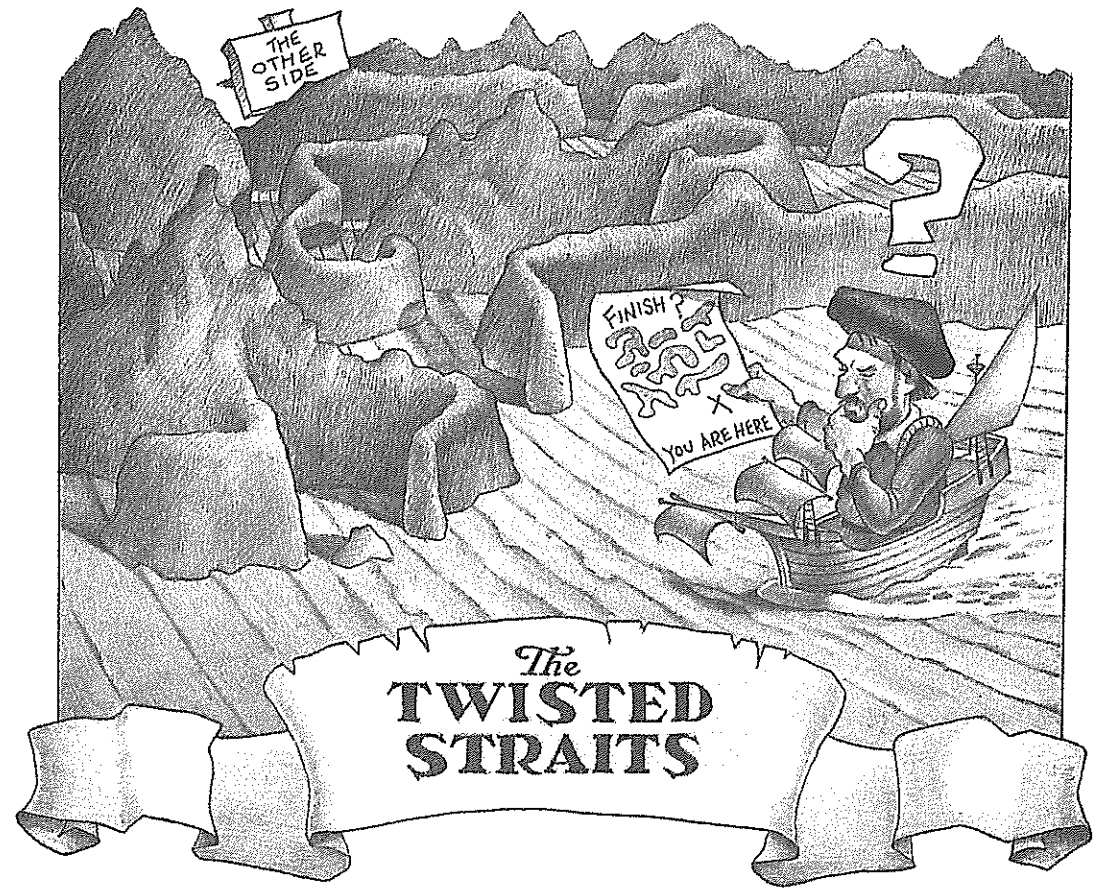
the men had survived. Moreover, they had Magellan's promise that if they did not find a strait at a certain point farther south, they would either return home or head for the Cape of Good Hope.

Two days later they came to another bay, apparently landlocked as all the rest had been except that this seemed wilder and more forbidding than the others. With its black waters and snowcapped peaks, it looked like a fiord in Norway and, as everyone knew, fiords led nowhere. There was no point in exploring it. "We all believed it was a blind alley," Antonio Pigafetta, the reporter of the expedition, wrote. But Ferdinand Magellan had not come this far to take anything for granted. He ordered two of his ships to proceed into the bay as far as they could but to return in not more than five days.

While the ships were gone a hurricane struck, so violent that those remaining with Magellan did not believe the exploring ships could have survived. When the fifth day came Magellan and the rest were ready to give up when suddenly in the distance a sail appeared. Two sails. Then a thundering bombardment. When the ships themselves hove into sight, they were flying all their flags. The men were crowded on the decks, waving, shouting.

They had found the strait! No, they had not sailed through it; they had not seen the other sea. But the water had been salty as far as they had gone; the tide rose and fell; the passage continued.

A cheer went up on all sides as the four ships proceeded through the bay. Of course no one could be sure that this was really their long-sought strait. Certainly, it was not the clear-cut, direct passage across the land that they had expected. They sailed through tortuous, twisted channels that seemed to be going nowhere. Then suddenly a bay would open up. Bay upon bay. Hidden outlets. Passageways leading to the right and left that had to be explored to determine which to follow. Still the waters remained salty; still the passage, however twisted, led west.



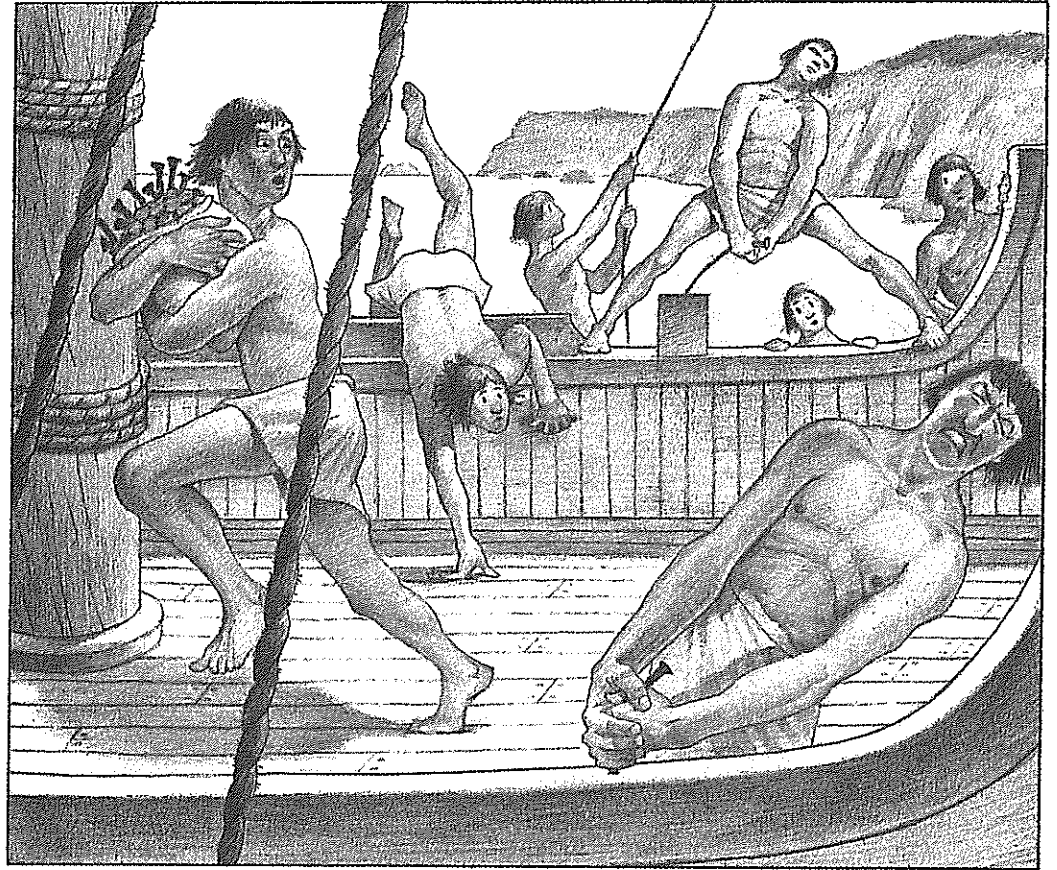
And at last one day two scout ships returned, firing their guns in celebration.

They had reached the other side! They had seen the other sea! Everyone must have looked at Magellan, the immovable man who never showed emotion. Ferdinand Magellan was crying. For once in his life he was overcome by his feelings. But when he pulled himself together and spoke, he showed no surprise. This was the hidden strait he'd told them about, he said. Even though the strait was 344 miles long and had taken thirty-eight days to cross, it was, Magellan said, just what he had expected.

This was the supreme moment of Magellan's life, but unfortunately bad luck was following on the heels of good luck. The *San Antonio*, the supply ship, was missing. Magellan waited and searched, thinking at first that the ship must be in trouble but eventually concluding that the *San Antonio* had secretly turned around and sailed back to Spain. The men on the remaining ships must have longed to do the same. And why not? They had found the strait. Wasn't that enough? And how could the three ships survive without their food supply? Magellan knew the risks. They would go on, he said. Even if they had to eat the leather on the ships' yards, they would go on.

So on November 28, 1520, one year and three months after leaving Spain, the three ships set sail into another unknown sea for the Spice Islands. But who could have guessed how wide this sea was? Day after day, week after week, the ships stayed in the middle of a huge blue circle that never changed and never ended. On the day they started out, Magellan had said, "May we always find [the waters] as peaceful as this morning. In this hope, I shall name this Sea of the Pacific." For this trip the sea did remain peaceful, but it was not peace that the men wanted now but land. And food. For three months and twenty days they had nothing fresh to eat and indeed little that could even be called food. Their fresh water had "gone sick," as the sailors said, and the only way they could bear the smell was to hold their noses as they drank. Their biscuits were so overrun with worms and maggots, they tried not to look as they ate. In the end they were down to sawdust and leather, and most of the men were sick. Nineteen had died.

If Magellan had only set his course ten degrees farther south, he would have found plenty of islands and would have wound up in the Spice Islands, where he wanted to be. As it was, he came to land only twice. One group of islands was so bare and lifeless, he called them the Unfortunate Islands. The other group was populated by natives who



swarmed over the ships, stealing everything in sight, even pulling nails out. Magellan named these the Thieves' Islands and sailed on as quickly as he could. On and on. Who would dream the world was so large? At last on March 16, 1521, Magellan came to what he supposed were the Spice Islands.

He was wrong. But at least the people were friendly. At least there was plenty of fresh food—bananas, coconuts, fish, oranges, vegetables, meat. He stayed nine days until his men had recovered, and then he sailed to a neighboring island, where Magellan's hopes rose. His loyal slave, Enrique, could speak to the natives! Since they had the same



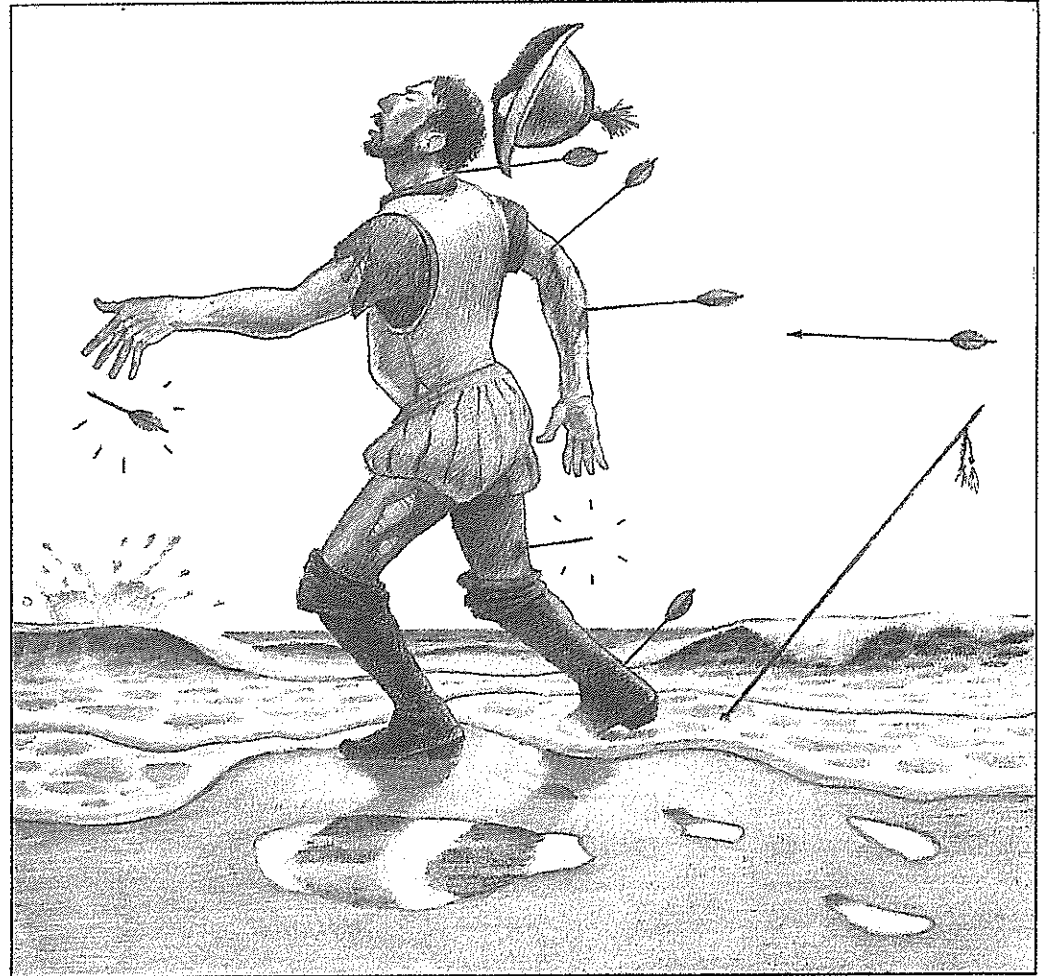
language, they must be close to the Spice Islands, Magellan figured. Actually, they were in what we now call the Philippine Islands, and Magellan decided that as long as he was here, he would make the people loyal to the Spanish king and turn them into Christians. He did so well on the small island of Mazzava, he thought he might as well go on to Cebu and do the same. Here he was so successful, he converted the whole island in a mass ceremony.

It was time to move on, but there was one more small island that Magellan wished to take care of before he left. The tiny island of Mactan had always been a troublemaker, feuding with Cebu, and already showing hostility to the Spaniards. Everyone warned him against it. Magellan didn't listen. This Christianizing business seemed to have gone to his head. He could not get enough of it. Besides, what was the danger? he asked. What could a group of primitive islanders do to experienced, well-armed Spaniards? Indeed, he was so sure of his strength that before he set out for Mactan on April 26, 1521, he didn't even bother to hear mass, as he always did before facing danger.

With sixty fully armed men, Magellan rowed to the shores of the island, prepared for battle but half expecting the natives to surrender peacefully. But they knew something that Magellan apparently did not know. Between Magellan's boats and the shore was a coral reef. This was low tide and the boats could not possibly cross it. From that distance even the arrows shot from their crossbows would patter harmlessly against the wooden shields the natives carried. The Spaniards would have to get out of their boats and wade ashore.

Magellan jumped into the waist-deep water and, followed by his men, went ashore, where fifteen hundred islanders were waiting with arrows, javelins, and lances. Although the rajah of Cebu had offered to provide men, Magellan had refused. They should stand on their shores and watch the Spanish victory, he said. So there they stood, waiting for

the Spaniards to perform their Christian magic, but obviously they didn't have any magic. Magellan seemed all but helpless with the natives closing in on him, aiming their arrows at every part of his body that was not covered with armor. Twice they knocked his helmet off. Then they lodged a poisoned arrow in his foot. Finally, when they managed to sink a spear in his face, they rushed him, threw him headlong into the water, and killed him.



There was nothing for the survivors to do but to retreat to their ships and sail on. First, however, they wanted to collect tribute from the rajah of Cebu to take to the king of Spain. When they told Enrique, who had been acting as their interpreter, to go ashore and make arrangements, Enrique reminded them that with Magellan's death, he was now a free man. Duarte Barbosa, brother-in-law of Magellan and one of the newly elected leaders, laughed at Enrique. Once a slave, he said, always a slave. So when Enrique went ashore, he stayed ashore, abandoning his false Spanish friends. The rajah, equally disillusioned, invited twenty-nine of the Spaniards to a farewell feast. As soon as they were inside his quarters, he had them all murdered.

Of the 265 men who had left Spain, 115 survived. They struggled on in two of the three remaining ships, taking six months to reach the relatively close Spice Islands. Here they stocked up on spices which in Spain would eventually sell for ten thousand times what they paid. On December 21, 1521, the *Victoria*, the only ship considered seaworthy, set out alone with fifty men, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in the middle of May. On September 6, 1522, the *Victoria* finally limped into a Spanish harbor with eighteen haggard survivors. Fortunately, Pigafetta, the reporter who had recorded the whole incredible trip, was one of the survivors and not only could attest to the fact that Magellan's dream had been realized but could give the world a vivid description of the most treacherous exploration of all. For the first time Europeans had a sense of the whole world. They had believed that the world consisted largely of land; now they had to get used to the idea that two thirds of the world was actually water. And it was possible to sail right around it.

Ironically, the Spice Islands, such an important part of Magellan's dream, must have seemed less important to King Charles, the ruler of Spain. He sold them to Portugal for 350,000 ducats.

