

The archaeology of tradition : an address to a meeting of the members of the Society held at Gloucester, 9th March, 1904 / y E. Sidney Hartland.

Contributors

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Royal College of Surgeons of England

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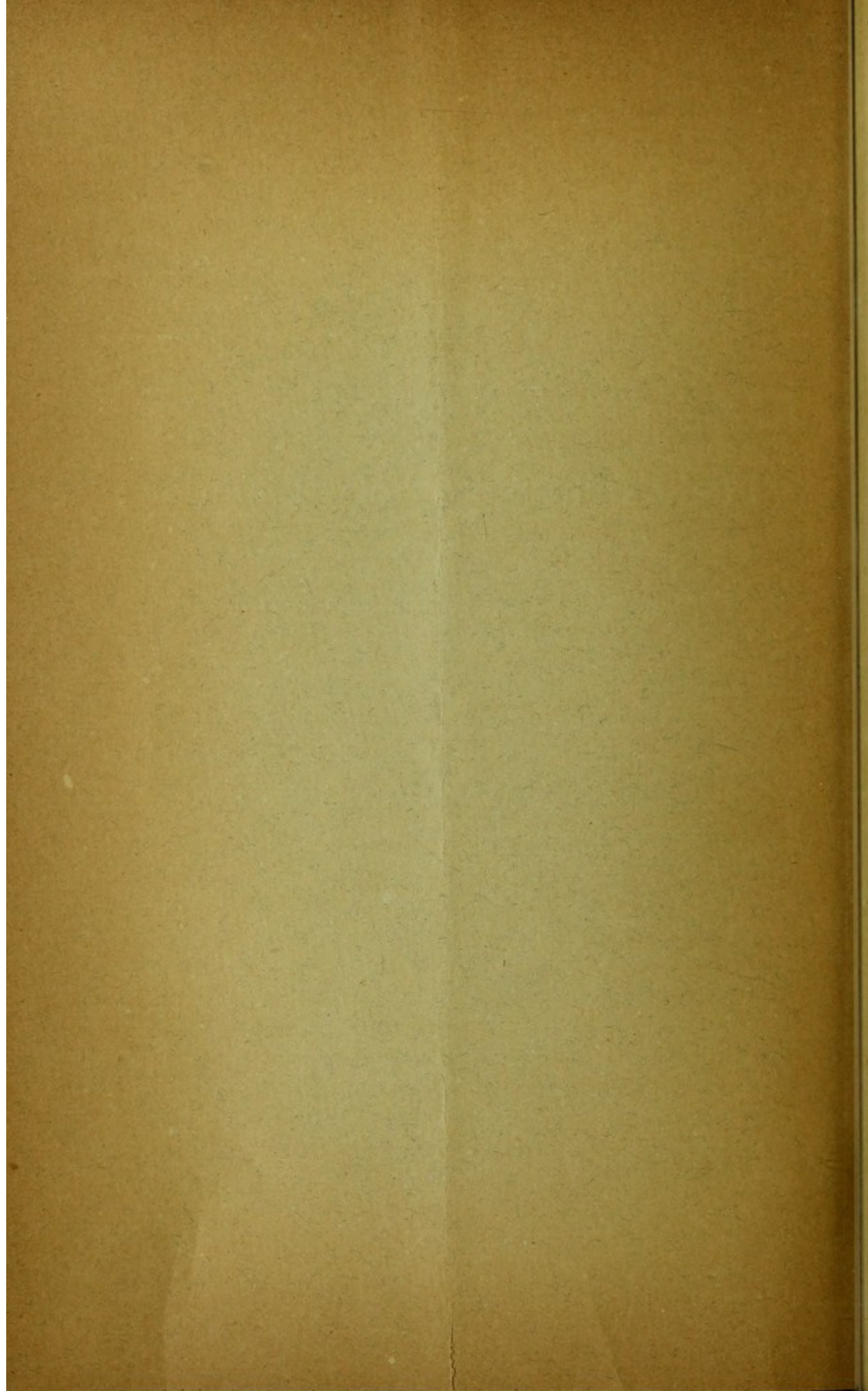
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The Archæology of Tradition:

AN ADDRESS TO A MEETING
OF THE MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY HELD AT GLOUCESTER,
9TH MARCH, 1904.

By E. SIDNEY HARTLAND.



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AN ADDRESS TO A MEETING OF THE MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY
HELD AT GLOUCESTER, 9TH MARCH, 1904.

By E. SIDNEY HARTLAND.

I FELT somewhat diffident when asked to preside this evening and to deliver an address, because the special direction of my own studies is not exactly what is usually known as archæology. That is to say, those studies are not chiefly concerned with the material fabrics which remain to us from the past. Incidentally, they often touch them; and I am by no means insensible to the fascination or the scientific importance of the arts and industries of our forefathers. But what interest me far more than these are the traditions which bear witness to a remoter past than is recorded in history—the beliefs, the customs, the institutions, the sayings and doings that spring from ideas of life and mental conditions proper rather to savagery than civilisation. The objects of this study are not as a rule to be found in the cathedrals or the churches, the castles, the palaces, or the Roman camps familiar to the archæologist. There are, it is true, other material relics of the past in which we are more likely to find hints, and something more than hints, of those earlier ideas of life and mental conditions, namely the prehistoric remains, the camps and barrows, numerous on the hill-tops around us, and the lake-villages and standing stones of the adjacent counties of Somerset, Wilts and Oxford. But the ideas of which we gather information from these remains are limited alike in number and range. We may learn something, for instance, of the burial customs of our barbarian predecessors, but we can discover nothing of other matters equally important to their rudimentary civilisation, such as their marriage customs and the details of their government and

organisation. And when we want to understand the meaning of their burial customs, so different from ours, we must interpret them by the customs and beliefs of the savage and barbarous peoples yet living in distant lands, which that other study—call it “folk-lore,” call it “ethnology,” call it what you will—takes into account.

Indeed, there are many of our own customs which we cannot explain save by those of savages. In a military funeral the deceased soldier's horse is led to the grave. This is meaningless until we learn that in a lower stage of civilisation horses and dogs and slaves, and even wives and other companions of the dead man are led to the grave and buried with him, to accompany him to the other world. That some such custom as this was once practised here there is reason to believe from the remains we find in the sepulchral barrows of this country. The only relic of it which is left in our ceremonies is that of leading the soldier's horse in the funeral.

The barrows also disclose other customs, some of which we have abandoned, and some that still linger among the peasantry. The study of the remains would often be puzzling if we did not know that a funeral feast, though no longer practised here at the grave and in the presence of the dead, is still part of the burial rites in other countries, and even within the limits of Europe. It is not very long since this was done, and for aught I know it may still be done, at Argentière, in the south of France. Immediately after the burial at Argentière the feast was spread, and the table of the *curé* and the family was placed upon the grave itself. The dinner ended, everyone, led by the nearest of kin, drank the health of the departed.¹ Such a feast is the solemn farewell, and the dead man is supposed to be a partaker.

There is a great barrow called Willy Howe, about three hundred feet in circumference and sixty feet in height, near Wold Newton, in Yorkshire. Though no remains have been

¹ Laisnel dela Salle, *Croyances et Légendes du Centre de la France*, ii. 81.

found within it, there is little doubt that it is a burial mound. In the belief of the rustics of the neighbourhood it is the abode of fairies. One night a man was riding home from the village of North Burton, when he heard, as he drew near, sounds of merriment issuing from the Howe. He saw a door open in the side of the mound, and riding close to it, he looked in, and beheld a great feast. One of the cupbearers approached and offered him drink. He took the cup, threw out the contents, and galloped off. The fairy banqueters gave chase, but he succeeded in distancing them and reaching home with his prize in safety. The king heard of the event, and the cup, which was equally strange in form, colour and material, was presented to him. Now this story, current to-day in the vicinity, is told by William of Newbridge in the thirteenth century. The chronicler identifies the king to whom the cup was given as Henry I., and adds that the king gave it to his brother-in-law, David, King of the Scots, one of whose successors, William the Lion, gave it to Henry II.

A contemporary of William of Newbridge, Gervase of Tilbury, Marshal of the Kingdom of Arles, wrote a curious book called *Otia Imperialia*, in which are many of the characteristic stories and speculations of that age of credulity. He tells us an interesting Gloucestershire tale parallel to this one of Willy Howe, and declares it to be well known (*satis divulgatum*). In a hunting forest of the county, full of boars, deer, and all sorts of game according to the circumstances of England, there was a glade, and in this glade a hillock rising to the height of a man. Knights and other hunters were wont, when fatigued with heat and thirst, to ascend the hillock and there seek relief. It had to be done singly, all companions being left at a distance. The adventurous man would then say: "I thirst!" Immediately a cupbearer would appear at his side in a distinguished dress and with jovial countenance, and offer him a large drinking-horn adorned with gold and gems, such as was used among the ancient English, and containing liquor of some unknown but most delicious flavour. When he had drunk this

all heat and weariness fled from his body. The cupbearer presented him with a napkin to wipe his mouth withal, and then, having performed his office, he disappeared, waiting neither for recompense nor inquiry. This had been a matter of frequent and even daily occurrence from time immemorial, when one day a knight of the city, having gotten the horn into his hands, contrary to custom and good manners kept it. But he soon had cause to regret his conduct, for his lord, the illustrious Earl of Gloucester, having ascertained the facts, condemned the robber to death, and gave the horn to King Henry I., lest he should be thought to be a promoter of such wickedness if he had added the rapine of another to the store of his own private property.

Several questions arise upon this remarkable tale. Who was the Earl of Gloucester referred to? There were two Earls of Gloucester in the reign of Henry I. The first of them was Robert FitzHamon, who fought at Hastings as one of the Conqueror's companions, who built Tewkesbury Abbey Church and Cardiff Castle, and died in 1107. The other was Robert, the natural son of Henry I. and Nest, the daughter of Rhys ap Tudor, Prince of South Wales. He was created Earl of Gloucester in 1109, and having outlived his father, became his sister Matilda's most devoted supporter in her wars against Stephen for the crown of England. Gervase's work was addressed to the Emperor Otho IV., Matilda's son. He speaks of King Henry as the Emperor's grandfather in this very passage. If the Earl of Gloucester mentioned in the story had been the Emperor's uncle, surely Gervase would have indicated the relationship. Since he does not, we must conclude that he means Robert FitzHamon, and that the event was alleged to have happened about a hundred years before the time of his writing, which was the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The next question relates to the horn, and here everybody would agree we get to archæology proper. It would be interesting to trace, if we could, the horn and the cup of Willy Howe, two vessels of supernatural origin, both of them reported to

have been in the possession of Henry I., and one of them at least in the possession of Henry II. Could we find them, they might throw unexpected light on the stories, by the style of their art, whether native or foreign, and its age. With this view, I got Mr. Hubert Hall, F.S.A., some years ago, very kindly to search the ancient inventories of the regalia and the wardrobe, and also the plate and jewel accounts of our Plantagenet kings. I am sorry to say he searched in vain. No trace of either vessel was to be found. If we could at least have known from these authentic records that there really were two remarkable vessels in the royal possession, upon whose strange form the popular imagination might have fastened, we should have had to that extent a corroboration of the writers to whom we are indebted for the stories. I think, however, there can be no doubt that Gervase, like William of Newbridge, is relating a local tradition. It was a variant of a very widespread tale, common to all Celtic and Teutonic lands, which had even found its way into the *Conte del Graal*, the great poem on the subject of the Holy Grail, by Chrestien de Troyes, written about the year 1170, thirty or forty years before Gervase of Tilbury wrote. If the story were a local tradition of Gloucester, no doubt the exact spot where the theft occurred was pointed out. Where this was we cannot now say. The mention of the hunting forest full of boars, deer, and all sorts of game, evidently in close proximity to the city, seems to indicate the Forest of Dean. Whether any glade containing a barrow or mound corresponding to the description given can now be discovered is a problem for those who are better acquainted than I am with the forest topography. The population of the forest has so changed, particularly during the last two hundred years, that it is hopeless to discover the story any longer, like that of Willy Howe, in local tradition.

How are we to interpret the tale? And what does it tell us of the beliefs of the ancient inhabitants of Gloucester and of the Forest? It is not enough to say vaguely and contemptuously: It tells us that they believed in fairies and suchlike

nonsense. Our forefather's beliefs are as much worthy of study as their art. Their art and their beliefs are inextricably interwoven, two strands in the web of their civilisation; and a knowledge of the one is incomplete without a knowledge of the other. Let us turn to the Yorkshire tale recorded by William of Newbridge. Its scene is laid at a mound which is a sepulchral barrow. It represents the dwellers in the mound as engaged in feasting. They are not called fairies by William of Newbridge, nor is there anything to show that they were so regarded when he wrote, whatever may be the case now after the lapse of seven hundred years and the further decay of primitive beliefs. The mound was the abode of the dead, and it must have been the dead who were found feasting by the belated horseman. This need not surprise us. The dead are often conceived by barbarous peoples as leading under the earth a kind of life similar to that which they led while upon it. As they loved the pleasures of feasting while upon the earth, so in their graves they continue to indulge the same taste. The indulgence is not confined to a single farewell feast with the living. In the east of Yorkshire there is much Norse blood. Many of the Vikings reaved and slew and ultimately settled there. An Icelandic saga relates how a shepherd belonging to one of the Norse settlers in Iceland fared after his sheep one evening of harvest to a hill called Holyfell. "There he saw how the hill was opened on the north side, and in the fell he saw mighty fires, and heard huge clamour therein, and the clank of drinking-horns; and when he hearkened, if perchance he might hear any words clear of others, he heard" his master's name. His master, Thorstein, and his crew were welcomed to the feast; and Thorstein "was bidden to sit in the high seat over against his father." That night Thorstein was drowned while out fishing.¹ Here it is quite clear that the assembly within the holy hill is that of the dead. True, the burial mounds of this country are rarely of Norse origin. But it is impossible to draw any hard and fast line of beliefs with

¹ W. Morris, *The Eye-dwellers' Saga*, p 19.

regard to the dead between the Norsemen and the Neolithic or the Bronze Age peoples who reared the barrows of South Britain. All alike believed in a life after death led within the barrow; all alike were worshippers of the dead; all alike buried with the corpse, or the ashes, arms and implements and utensils. The arms, implements and utensils thus buried were not buried there simply as a barren honour. They were buried there because they belonged to the dead, and were meant for their use. The pottery from the barrows with which we fill our museums was intended for their feasts. Sometimes we find it broken, and not by the careless pick of the workman who unearths it, but purposely broken when it was put in the grave. None the less is it believed to be useful to the dead in the other life. This belief still subsists among our peasantry. A clergyman wrote to me a little while ago about an incident that happened in a little town in Lincolnshire of which he was rector. "One day," he said, "my churchwardens called my attention to a newly-made grave, on which lay a mug and jug, evidently quite freshly broken, and said: 'The boys have been at it again [stone-throwing], and, what's more, have stolen the flowers that Widow D. had put upon her husband's grave.' I saw at once that no stone had caused the fractures, so putting off my officials with some excuse, I went to see the widow, and said to her: 'Well, Mrs. D., how came you to forget to give your old man his mug and his jug?' 'Ah, sir,' she replied, 'I knew you would understand all about it. I was that moidered with crying that I clean forgot to put 'em in the coffin. I puts the groat in his mouth to pay his footing, but blame me if I doesn't leave out t' owd mug and jug. So I goes and does t' next best. I deads 'em both over his grave, and says I to mysen: "My old man, he set a vast of store, he did, by yon mug and jug, and when their ghoastes gets over on yon side he'll holler out, 'Yon's nune; hand 'em over to me!'" and I'd like to see them as would stop him a-having of them an' all.'"¹

¹ *Folk-Lore*, ix. 187.

The old lady "deaded" her husband's mug and jug; that is, she broke them to set free their "ghoastes" and send them over to "yon side," as when "the golden bowl" of the human body is broken. This is a very common belief, but it is not universal. Apparently even she herself thought that it would have been enough to put the mug and jug whole into the coffin. In the same belief the Neolithic and the Bronze Age peoples of this country buried their pottery and arms very frequently unbroken. Both in practice and in story the tradition has lingered to the present day among the peasantry. The Lincolnshire woman is an example of the one; the legend of Willy Howe is an example of the other.

But if the dead were not too dead to feast, they were not too dead sometimes to share the feasts of mortals, or sometimes to invite mortals to share *their* feasts. In many parts of Europe it is to-day, and in our own country it was formerly, the custom to lay out a meal for the dead on All Hallows' Even, and it is believed that the dead of the family actually enter and partake of it. It is all very well, however, for the dead to partake of food provided for them by the living. It is quite a different thing for the living to partake of the food of the dead. That would unite them with the dead. It would be *death*. Hence, when drink is offered in the Willy Howe story to the belated peasant he dares not drink; he throws the drink away, and makes off with the cup. If now we may interpret our Gloucestershire story as given by Gervase of Tilbury in the same way, it would appear to be a tradition of a burial mound and of burial customs practised in times which were even then remote. It is true the story does speak of the predecessors of the felonious knight, who was of so little credit to the city of Gloucester, as having drunk. But in interpreting folk-tales, general statements of this kind are well known to be mere conjectural explanations offered for the main incident when its real meaning is no longer understood. The main incident here is essentially the same as that of Willy Howe. We are not told that the thief drank. We are only told that "having gotten

the horn into his hands, contrary to custom and good manners he kept it." In both cases the memory of an ancient burial custom is preserved in the imaginative form of a tradition of theft from the dead, or from supernatural beings confounded with the dead. What does puzzle us is the specific statements that both the cup of Willy Howe and the horn mentioned in Gervase of Tilbury's tale were given to King Henry I., and that one of them at least found its way into the hands of his grandson, King Henry II. within the lifetime of the writer who records the transaction.

There is a good deal more to say about burial mounds and the traditions attached to them; but I must leave the subject there, because I want to speak of another tale, not a local story, but yet interesting to Gloucester people because it concerns a famous Gloucestershire man, Sir Richard Whittington, thrice Lord Mayor of London. You all know how the foundation of his great fortune is said to have been laid. His master was sending out a ship to trade in foreign parts, and gave his dependents an opportunity of joining in the venture. Dick Whittington had nothing but his cat, and he sent that on board the vessel. In the course of her voyage the ship came to a country infested with rats, and there the captain sold the cat for a large sum, to the great profit of Master Dick. A few years ago a paper was read, which is printed in the *Transactions* (vol. xxi.), and in which the writer advocated the historical authenticity of the tale in question. I entirely disbelieve his conclusions.

Whittington died in 1423. No one doubts that the tale did become attached at an early date to his name. There is ample evidence to this effect from the sixteenth century, but none of it dates within a hundred years of his death. We may, therefore, safely pass it over as of no historical value. There is, however, one piece of evidence which at first sight seems of greater weight. The Whittington family, as befitted a county family in those days, had a town house opposite the Booth Hall in Westgate Street, Gloucester. They sold it in

1460, thirty-seven years after Sir Richard's death. It was pulled down in 1862, and in the course of demolition a carved stone figure of a boy holding a cat was found. The figure belongs to the fifteenth century, and is now in the Guildhall Museum, London. The suggestion is that it formed part of a chimneypiece in the house before the Whittingtons sold the property, and that it shows that the family and their contemporaries believed in the cat story. Upon this it has to be observed that either the house in question or some of the adjoining houses (for the *Rental* of 1455 is ambiguous) bore the name of Raton Row, or Rat Row. In a house with such a name, or even in an adjacent house, the symbolism of a boy holding a cat is not very difficult to interpret. And it may have been much more than symbolism. Rats doubtless were in plenty in that part of the town. Inasmuch as a cat is the deadly foe of rats and mice, even the carved figure of a cat would suffice, according to a widespread belief, to frighten them away. If, therefore, it were proved that the effigy is of an earlier date than 1460, and that it was set up in the house while the house belonged to the Whittington family, I should think it very slender evidence of the historical character of the cat story. But, so far as I am aware, there is no evidence that the effigy was set up in the house during the ownership of the Whittington family, or at all. It is merely said to have been "dug up" when the house was demolished; and it may have been brought thither long after the Whittingtons had parted with the property, and may have been simply lying forgotten in the cellar. There is not a tittle of evidence that the cat was ever adopted as a badge by Sir Richard Whittington, or that the story was told of him in his lifetime.

But we can go much further than this. It is easy to show that the cat story was well known long before Dick Whittington was born. The date usually assigned for his birth is about 1350; it is improbable that he was born earlier. A Persian poet and historian, Abdullah, the son of Fazlullah,

who was called Wasáf, or the Describer, wrote a history of Persia fifty years before that, in the year 1299. In this work he describes the island of Keis in the Persian Gulf, and says it derived its name from a pirate named Keis, who with his two brothers left his widowed mother and settled there. She dwelt in the city of Siráf, on the opposite shore of the Gulf, alone and helpless, for her son had dissipated the fortune left by her husband. The captain of a vessel bound from Siráf to India applied to her for a gift on setting out for his voyage; for it was then, the historian says, the custom of masters and captains of ships on such occasions to ask the poorest people for some gift, which they disposed of to the best advantage at the port whither they were bound. If the voyage proved prosperous, on their return "they repaid the amount of the gift or venture with the profit upon it, and a present besides, proportionate to the good luck with which in their opinion the prayers of the poor donor had blessed their concerns." Now the only property left to the widow was a cat—a Persian cat. The captain took it, and anchoring at an Indian port, he waited on the sovereign with costly presents as, says the historian, is usual. No doubt his object was to get permission to trade there, a proceeding still necessary when entering the dominions of a barbarous potentate. He was graciously received, and invited to dinner. At dinner he was surprised to find every dish guarded by a servant with a rod in his hand against a multitude of mice that swarmed on all sides, ready to devour the viands whenever they got the chance. The next day the captain brought the widow's cat, and we are told "the slaughter was immense." He presented the cat to the astonished and delighted monarch. He himself was rewarded with splendid presents; and the king, in addition, loaded his ship with precious merchandise, the produce of his kingdom, together with slaves, male and female, money and jewels, all to be given to the owner of the cat. The widow's sons, with this wealth, became traders and pirates, and finally founded on the little island a kingdom, which lasted for nearly

two hundred years, until in the year 1230 the descendants of Keis were reduced to vassalage to the Court of Persia.¹

But even earlier than the Persian historian, Albert, Abbot of Stade, a Benedictine monastery in Germany, had chronicled the tale. Albert became abbot in 1232; and the chronicle which goes under his name ends in 1256, nearly a hundred years before Whittington was born, and was in all probability written and completed at that time. The chronicler lays the scene of the story at Venice, where he tells us there were two fellow-citizens, one rich and the other poor. The rich one was going on a trading voyage, and asked his friend for merchandise. "I have nothing," said the poor man, "beside two cats." The rich man took the cats with him, and came by chance to a country almost entirely devastated by mice. He sold the cats there for a large sum of money, with which he traded and brought back to his friend much wealth.² The story is merely given in outline, and is attributed to the beginning of the city when it was founded by fugitives from Aquileia at the time of the siege of that city by Attila, king of the Huns. This points to the tradition as already very old.

Now it is a canon of criticism that the age of a story must not be reckoned from the date when it first appears in writing. It would not get into a chronicle unless it had been previously a long time current, and were then generally believed in the locality. We may be sure, therefore, that both in Persia and at Venice the cat story had been known for generations earlier than the thirteenth century; how many generations it is of course impossible to say. The domestic cat seems to have been familiar in India for many ages; but in Europe it is a comparatively new-comer, having probably been introduced

¹ Sir Gore Ouseley, *Biographical Notices of Persian Poets*, 232. Sir W. Ouseley, *Travels*, i. 170, gives an abstract of the story differing in some details.

² *Chronicon Alberti Abbatis Stadensis*. Ed. Boeclerus, Strassburg, 1685, p. 292, sub anno 1175.

from Egypt, where it was a sacred animal. It seems to have been well known to the Greeks when Herodotus wrote, in the fifth century before Christ,¹ though probably not to the Romans until much later. In any case, pussy had made herself at home in Europe long enough for the story to be a very old one in the thirteenth century. In the face of these facts, how can we be asked to believe that the cat story truly sets forth the foundation of the famous Dick Whittington's fortunes? The truth is that the story is told all over Europe; it was well known in the Middle Ages, and attached itself to more than one place and more than one noted name. Stories have a way of doing this in every part of the world.

Folk-tales, even the most wonderful, are never founded on nothing. There is always some grain of fact at the bottom of them, if we could penetrate to it. Here the grain of fact probably consists in a custom in early times of contributing to a trading venture very much in the manner described. There were no limited liability companies in those days. The Merchant Shipping Act, with its division of ships into sixty-four shares, had not been invented. A merchant who was going on a voyage, and had not enough of his own goods to fill his ship, would apply to his friends to join in the speculation by contributing such goods as they wanted to barter or sell abroad. Sometimes of course unlikely contributions turned out valuable. Out of such materials the story might easily grow.

Indeed, there is a curious parallel to it in a petition by one William Bragge to "the Company of the East India and Sommer Islands," in the year 1621, in which he claimed £6,875 for divers services rendered. Among these services we

¹ Whether the word used by Herodotus (*αἰέλουρος*) originally meant the animal we call a cat, or some animal of the weasel tribe, is immaterial. Herodotus (ii. 66) applies it to the sacred animal of Bubastis in Egypt, which we know was the cat. It is true that he does not expressly refer to cats as existing in Greece; but his use of the word without any qualification or explanation gives us the right to infer that the Greeks were then familiar with the cat, and called it *αἰέλουρος*.

read: "Item, more for 20 Dogges and a greate many Catts which, under God, as by your booke written of late, ridd away and devoured all the Ratts in that Iland [Bermuda], which formerly eate up all your corne, and many other blessed fruites which that land afforded. Well, for theis, I will demand of you but 5 lb a piece for the Doggs, and let the Catts goe—100 lb . 0 . od." In present value that would amount to a trifle of at least £1,000 for cats. How many cats the petitioner sayeth not, but doubtless it would be ample compensation even for "a greate many."¹

So again, a missionary to the Basuto of South Africa tells us that when he and his coadjutors procured cats the people considered them as a providential benefit. Their huts were infested with rats and mice, and they did not know how to get rid of them. Such was their gratitude to the little creature for ridding the country of the scourge that they would gladly have worshipped it.²

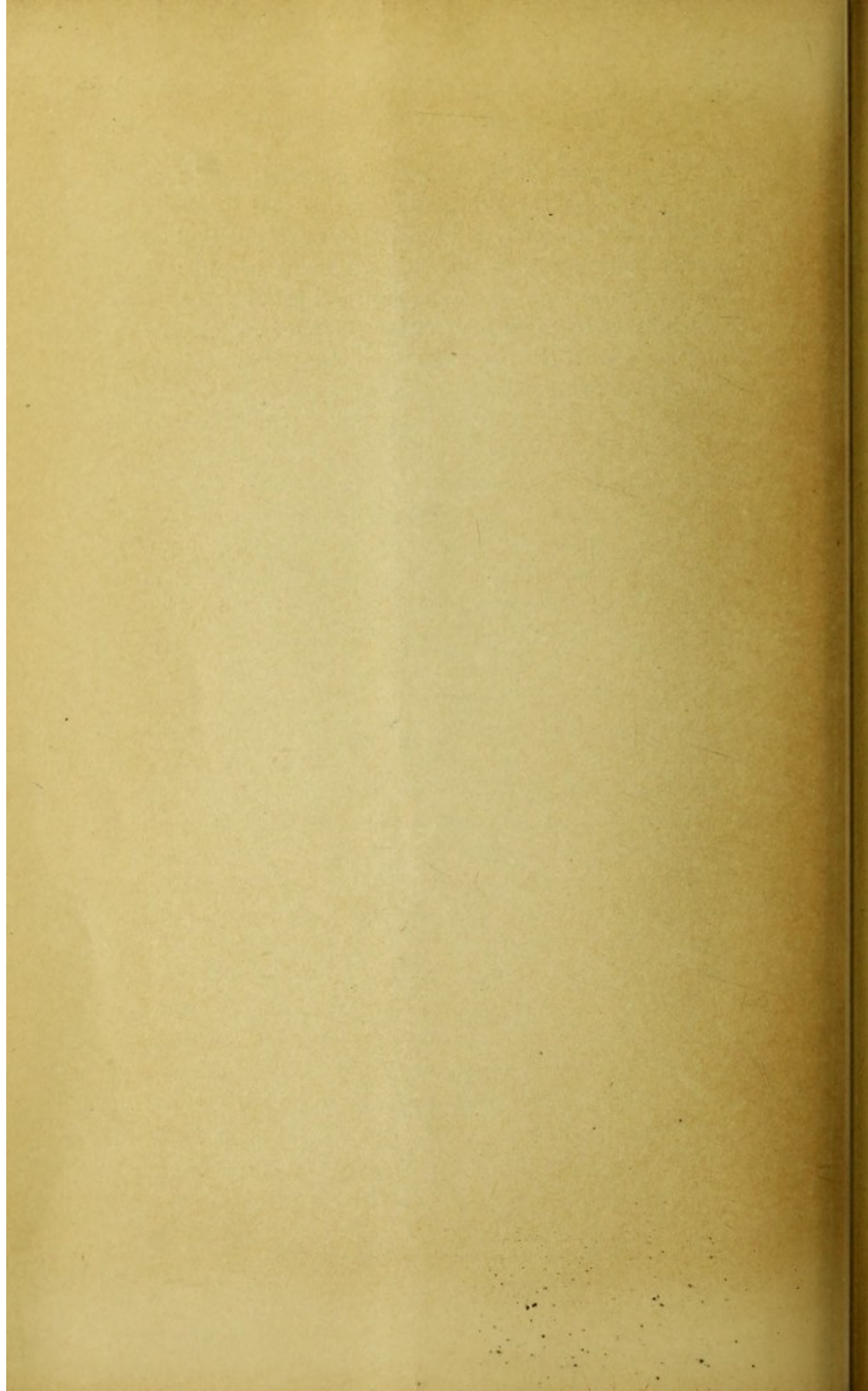
The cat story, therefore, is not an impossible tale. But to say this is not to admit that the adventure occurred in the experience of Dick Whittington, or indeed that it actually occurred as related at all. It would at any rate be a very rare occurrence; and seeing that the story was current both in Europe and the East for generations before Whittington was born, it must have happened (if it did happen) far in the immemorial past. Had it happened to him it would have been placed on record during his life, and the land where the cat performed her feats would have been definitely specified. The custom upon which it is founded does not indeed date from a condition of savagery, like the superstitions I have previously referred to; but it does date from a comparatively remote period in the development of trade.

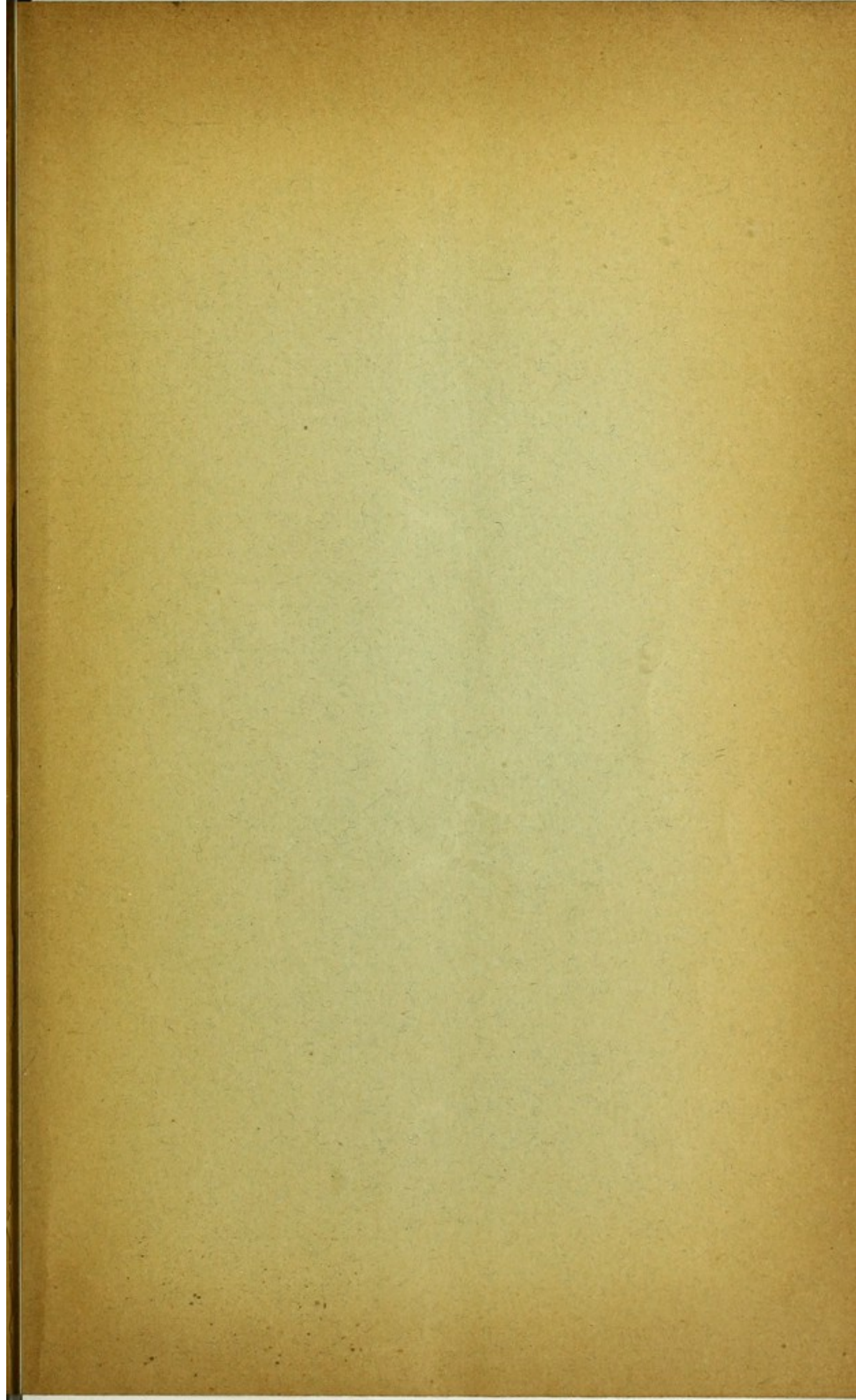
All this may seem very frivolous, and you may say it is

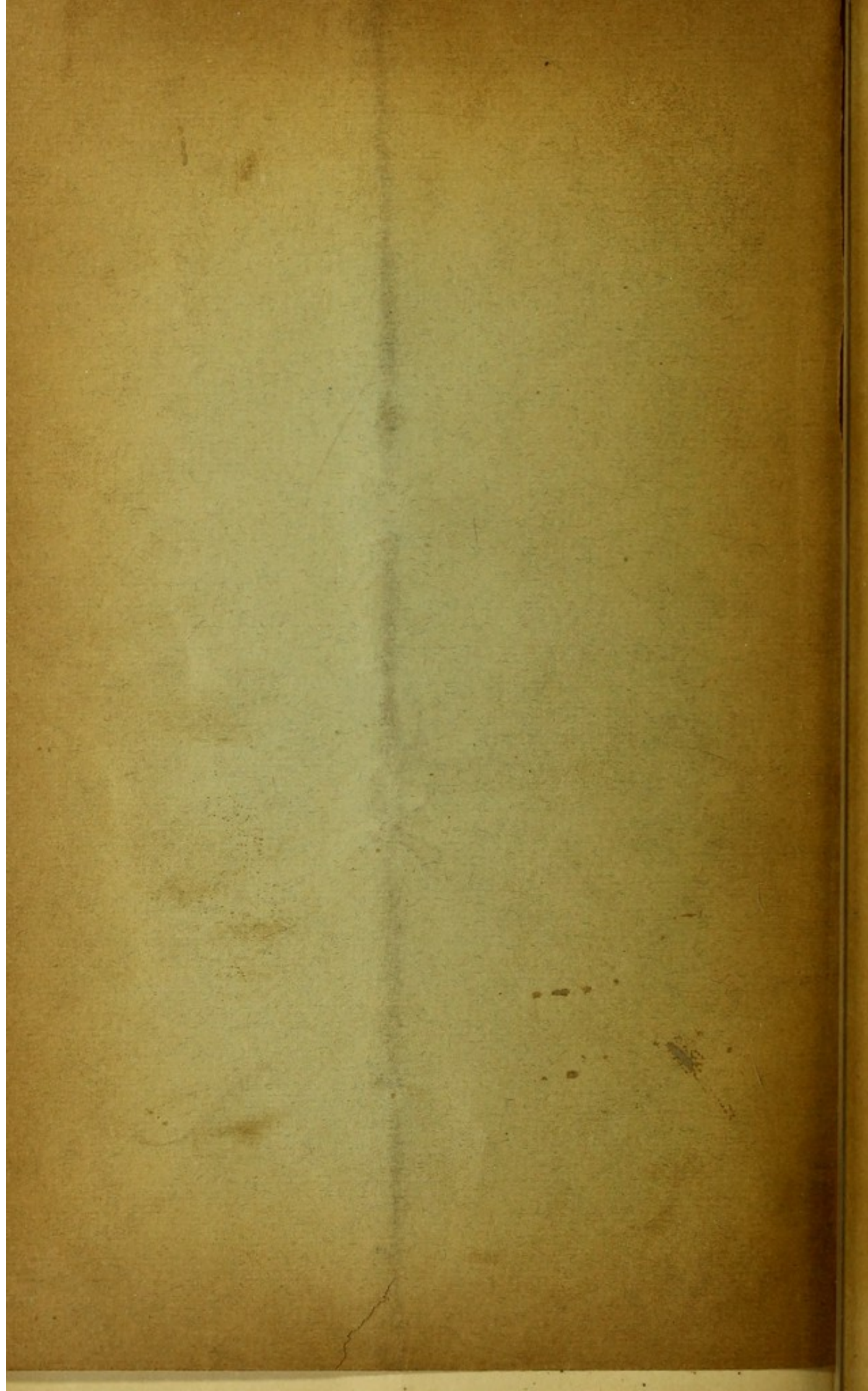
¹ Watkins, *Gleanings from the Natural History of the Ancients*, 64, citing *N. & Q.*, 3rd ser., ii. 345.

² Eugène Casalis, *Mes Souvenirs*, 271.

not archæology at all. Well, I will not quarrel over a word, if only you will agree with me in thinking that the study of old tales, old customs, old beliefs is replete with human interest, and, more than that, has a genuine scientific value in helping us to form a conception of the past history of the race, and thereby to understand the present, in a way and to an extent beyond the powers of archæology, if limited to the study of material remains.







Cornish seals. 262

