THE OXENHAM OMEN.

BY RICHARD W. COTTON.

(Read at Crediton, July, 1882.)

THE strange traditional belief associated with the Oxenham family of Devonshire had already attained considerable notoriety more than two centuries ago. A chance but striking allusion to it appeared in a book which was first published in the year 1645, and which became one of those favourites that were to be found in the proverbial hall-window of every country house. This has been the basis upon which most of the versions of the story now to be met with in historical descriptions of the county have been founded.

By far the best existing summary of the circumstances connected with the tradition was given in the Lysonses' *Magna Britannia*, vol. vi. (Devonshire: 1822) pp. 483–5. Since the publication of that work, however, the vitality of the tradition, which is one of its remarkable characteristics, has been exemplified, and some additional instances of the phenomena have been alleged. The time therefore seems a suitable one for bringing together, in a more complete form than has yet been attempted, the curious literature which has grown up in connection with the subject. This is mainly what I propose to do in the following pages. To trace, if it be possible, the history of such local traditions or—as many will, perhaps, prefer to call them—superstitions, and to preserve their remains, is one of the acknowledged functions of our Association. I shall necessarily go over the same ground as the Messrs. Lysons did, but it will be with more of detail; and some particulars will be added which were apparently unknown to them. From the point where the authors of the *Magna Britannia* left off I shall continue my review of the story.

The apparition of a white-breasted bird, as it is described in the earlier—or of a white bird, as it occurs in the later—

forms of the tradition, before the deaths of members of the Oxenham family, is one of those phenomena which seem perpetually destined to hover over the border-land between fact and fable. However that may be, it is unquestionable that the belief in the reality of the appearance, in its certain recurrence, and in its ominous import, has pervaded the minds of a family for many generations. It may be gathered from the original narrative, which will be given presently, that the mission of the mysterious, but to all appearance not intangible, visitor was regarded, at least in that instance, in a distinctly religious light, by those whose faith was more immediately appealed to. Its message was beneficent. And this is quite in accordance with a far-off, old, popular belief recorded by the Rev. Walter Gregor, in his *Notes on the Folk-lore of the North-east of Scotland*:* "A dove flying round and round a person was looked upon as an omen of death being not far distant, and at the same time a sure proof that the one so soon to die was going to everlasting happiness." (p. 142.) Nor, in its earlier and more legendary aspect, is the story without a certain poetical beauty. So Mrs. Bray seems to have felt; for these are the transcendent terms which she uses in referring to it, when treating of Dartmoor and its associations, in one of her letters to Robert Southey, in the *Traditions, &c., of Devonshire* (1838, vol. i. p. 60): "There also the 'white-breasted bird of Oxenham,' so fatal to that house, still appears, with her bosom pure and unsullied as the Druid's robes, and, like him, raises a cry of augury and evil. Her mission done, she is seen no more till she comes again as a virgin mourner complaining before death." But the localization of the apparition, which is implied in Mrs. Bray's poetical description, is not justified by the recognized tradition; the omen is more properly personal to the Oxenham family.

The Devonshire family of Oxenham is one of considerable antiquity, and appears to have been settled at South Tawton, where there is an estate of the name, from an early period. Of this family, there can be little doubt, was John Oxenham, the adventurous seaman and explorer of the Elizabethan days. He was one of those who accompanied Francis Drake in the expedition to Nombre de Dios, in 1572, and afterwards, in an adventure on his own account, was the first Englishman who launched a keel on the Pacific Ocean, or South Sea, as it was then called. He fell into the hands of the Spaniards, and was carried to Lima, and there put to death as a pirate. His

* Published for the Folk-lore Society, 1881.

romantic and melancholy story is well known to Devonshire readers.* The old home of this ancient and interesting family was alienated from the male line at the end of the last century, and passed by the marriage of a female to the Aclands, and thence to the Hoare family, whose heir now possesses it. The estate slopes into a wooded combe of much beauty, and is almost in the shadow of Cawsand, which rises, with its regularly rounded outline, and in height approaching to the dignity of a mountain, immediately beyond the ravine to the south. The present house has none but comparatively modern associations; it is of the last century, and was probably built about the year 1714, the date which is sculptured on one of the granite pillars of the entrance gates. On the other two pillars are the Oxenham arms—*ar. a fess embattled between 3 oxen sa.*—and the initials W. O., respectively. Some stately beech trees remain to mark the line of an avenue through which was the approach to the ancient house. Fragments of the family tradition linger about the place, and there survives a tragic legend, of decidedly mediæval tinge, which I cannot refrain from giving. Once upon a time, a certain Margaret Oxenham—"Lady" Margaret, as it was told to me, but it does not matter—was about to be married to the man of her choice. In the midst of the preparations on the wedding morn, when all was going as merrily as it ought to have done in such a case, the "white bird" appeared, and hovered over the bride-elect, to the consternation of all. The ceremony, however, proceeded, and at the altar of South Tawton church the hapless bride was stabbed to death by a rejected lover!

But with legend I have far less to do in this paper than with facts, or what I shall provisionally assume to be facts; and the earliest record of these is met with in connection with the branch of the Oxenham family which appears to have been settled early in the seventeenth century at Zeal Monachorum—formerly written Sale Monachorum—about seven miles west of Crediton, and at about the same distance from South Tawton. There is a remarkable circumstantial printed account of some appearances of the family omen in this parish, in the year 1635, which for its quaintness and the simplicity of its reasoning is eminently characteristic of the period in which it was written. It is contained in a tract of twenty pages, of extreme rarity, a copy of which, bound

* It was told by Kingsley, in *Westward Ho!* The family omen is effectively introduced, but there is a departure, in more than one particular, from the accepted form of the tradition.

up with others in a small quarto volume, is in the library of the British Museum. Another copy is in the Gough collection, in the Bodleian Library, and is the one which the Messrs. Lysons consulted. The tract is entitled:

A True Relation of an Apparition
in the likenesse of a Bird with a white brest,
that appeared hovering over the Death-Beds of some of the children of *Mr. James Oxenham*, of *Sale Monachorum*, *Devon*, *Gent.*
Confirmed by sundry witnesses as followeth in the ensuing Treatise.
London:
Printed by *I. O.* for *Richard Clutterbuck*,
And are to be sold at the signe of the Gun, in *Little Brittain*,
neere S. Botolph's Church. 1641.

Then follows the prologue:

A short Treatise of the godly lives, and deaths,
of some of the Children of *James Oxenham*,
of *Sale Monachorum* in *Devonshire*, Gent;
a true and zealous *Protestant.*

In the first three pages the subject is introduced by a short homily on the text that "the surest way to dye comfortably is to have liv'd virtuously," followed by a eulogy on the exemplary piety of the Oxenhams. The writer then proceeds:

. . . . "In this following discourse, what is, or shall bee spoken of the parties, shall not bee tainted with flatteries, but shall bee warrantably true, as by the testimonies of divers sufficient witnesses may appeare, who are yet alive, being good and religious people, and the Pastor of the place, a man of able parts, and of an holy conversation, who doe give in testimony for the confirmation of what is here recorded; the place where they dwelled, being not in any remote Region, but at home, the time when it fell out, being but (as I may say) as yesterday; some four or five yeares agoe, and the parties who dyed being of no obscure birth, but of good rank and repute in their native Countrie, they all being by the command of a reverend Father of our Church strictly examined concerning the premises; who finding all their sayings to bee true and just, hath given approbation for a Monument to bee erected in

the Church for the perpetuall memoriall of the fact, which was accordingly performed by the care and labour of *Edward Marshall* Tomb-maker under St. *Dunstans* Church in the west in Fleet-street; of whom if any that doubt, may receive ample satisfaction; all things considered, it will easily appeare, that it is no *Popish Relation*, or *lying Legend*, to gull and deceive people; but a true and reall thing lately done; the particulars whereof follow in order.

"In the parish called *Sale-monachorum*, in the County of *Devon*, there lives one *Iames Oxenham* a Gentleman of good worth and quality, who had many Children, one whereof was called *John Oxenham*, a young man in the vigour, beautie, and flower of his age, about 22, who was of stature comely, and tall, being in height of body six foote and an halfe, a very proper person; and for the endowments and gifts of his minde richly qualified; much addicted to pious and religious exercises; (a rare practice in these licentious times) for young men to imitate; thinking it best to grow in grace betimes, (as King *Solomon* adviseth) *to remember our Creator in the dayes of our youth:* none knowing how soone Deaths Harbinger and fore-runner may summon us all to all [*sic*] to appeare: This young Gentleman fell sicke, who being visited by many of the neighbours during the time of his sicknesse, departed this transitory life on the fifth day of *September*, 1635, to whom two dayes before hee yeelded up his soule to God, there appeared the likenesse of a bird with a white breast, hovering over him; and so he fitting himself for his happy departure, yeelded up his spirit to him that gave it, with manifest expressions of his faith in our Lord Jesus Christ; and for the confirmation of this appearance, there are two honest and substantial men, who were then present, to take away all sinister suspition and doubt, *Robert Woodley* and *Humphry King*, who were not by any rewards hired to speake so; but when they were examined, freely justified the same, both to the Minister of the parish, by the appoyntment of the reverend Father in God, *Ioseph* Lord Bishop of *Exeter*.

"He was no sooner dead in this pious manner; but the same apparition did againe showe it selfe to *Thomazine*, the wife of *Iames Oxenham*, the younger gentleman, about eleven of the Clocke at night, which *Thomazine* was a woman of a blamelesse and unspotted life, *Striving to keep a good Conscience towards God and man; keeping* (as St. *Iames* speakes) *her selfe unspotted of the World*, who also was diligent in the performance of Christian Duties, and was loving and amiable to her husband, and of carriage to her neighbours affable and courteous: moreover, which was the grace of all other her excellent parts, shee was wondrously charitable to the poore: Shee being desirous to be dissolved, and to be with the Lord, with heavenly expressions of her hope and faith, shee dyed to the comfort of all about her, the seventh of *September*, in the yeare 1635, and that the likenesse of such a Bird hovered over her, before her giving up her soule, as appeares by

the testimony of two women who were present, by name, *Elizabeth Frost*, and *Ioan Tooker*, who were likewise examined concerning the truth of this before the aforesaid Minister; and though there bee many, who perhaps may say, alas! these were but women, and so no heed to be taken to their words: It is answered; are not women of the same houshold of faith with men? and why then not to be credited? again, these were not such women, who were to [be] procur'd by hope of gaine to speake falsely, neither were there any of such corrupt mindes, who offered them any; and why should wee suppose, but that women have a care of their soules health as well as men? or to what purpose should they hazard their Faiths upon things that were not? and therefore their witnes in this kinde is to bee allowed as authenticall as mens, unlesse some just allegation can be produc'd, to make voyd their integrity.

"Not long after but *Rebeccah*, the sister of the aforesaid *Thomazine*, aged about eight yeares, to whom about eleven of Clocke of the night appeared the Bird in the same likenesse, and hovered over her: shee was a virgin of great hopes, and wondrous docible, of a gentle and courteous behaviour to all; shee dyed in a peacable manner the ninth of Septemb, 1635, prayer having been publikely by the Minister with the Congregation, made for her recovery, she departed: the witnesses of the aforesaid Apparition, by name *Elizabeth Avery*, and *Mary Stephens*.

"And she was no sooner dead, but *Thomazine* a little Child of the aforesaid *James Oxenham*, and *Thomazine* his wife, being in a Cradle, fell sicke, over whom did presently appeare the said Bird, in forme as aforesaid, and so she dyed the fifteenth of September, 1635, witnesses to this, the same two afore named, *Elizabeth Avery*, and *Mary Stephens;* and what is more, the said bird appeared to *Grace*, the Grandmother of the said *John*, over her death-bed, which said *Grace* was a vertuous woman, and full of good works, and yeelded her selfe into the hands of her Maker, with great cheerfulnesse and willingnesse, in the yeare of our Redemption, 1618. And to shut up all, there were foure more of the said family and kindred who were sicke, and yet did never see or perceive any such apparition, and recovered their former health speedily, to the glory of God, and comfort of their friends. Now briefly, if there were no such thing, how came some to see it, at severall times, upon the sicknes of severall parties, and all of them did perceive it in one and the same shape? if it were so, how come so many in these times to doubt, nay plainly and flatly to deny that there are any Apparitions now in these times as in former? but to condemne so many sufficient sober witnesses, lawfully summoned to the confirmation of this particular; what is it but to confine all things to their own base conceits, and mistrusting opinions: I hold it not therfore amisse, to give the Reader honest satisfaction concerning this one particular thing. I will therefore lay downe some conclusions, to prove the possibility and reallity of

such Apparitions even in these latter times; how ever I alwayes will doe it under the censure of better judgments . . ."

The remaining eight and a half pages of the tract are taken up by an argument from the Bible for the credibility of supernatural appearances, which it is unnecessary to reproduce here. There is a quaint engraved frontispiece prefixed to the tract. It is described in the *Bibliotheca Devoniensis*, p. 184; but I repeat the description here for the sake of completeness. It is in four compartments: in each of the first three is a representation of a person lying in a bed of the four-post type, with canopy and curtains; in the fourth is a child in a wicker cradle of a pattern still common. Over each individual is a bird on the wing, or hovering, resembling a pigeon. At the foot of these pictorial compartments are the following subscriptions in the order in which they occur:

Iohn Oxenham Gentleman Aged 21. Died with this Aparition above witnesse Robert Woodley and Humphrey King.

Rebecka Oxenham Aged 8. Died with the same Aparition witnesse. Eliz. Auerie widdow and Mary Stephens.

Tomasin the wife of Iames Oxenham the younger Gentleman Aged 22: Died w^th^ y^e^ like Aparition witnesse Elizabeth Frost & Ioane Tooker.

Tomasin a Child in a cradle Died with the like Aparition witnesse Eliz. Auerie & Mary Stephens.

It is worth while to note that as Rebeccah, the unmarried sister of James Oxenham's wife, was an Oxenham, it follows that they were all Oxenhams in blood.

The unknown author of this curious narrative carries the story back, it will be seen, to a previous appearance of the omen in the year 1618. If there had been any traditionally earlier, it is very likely that it would have been alluded to. Westcote, who was living within a few miles of the scene when writing his *View of Devonshire in 1630*, is silent on the subject of the omen; and it may be inferred that the tradition had not at that time acquired a settled form, or become a topic of common report, or it would scarcely have escaped so inveterate a gossip.

The assurance which the writer of the tract gives of the sanction accorded to the truth of the facts which he related, by the "pastor of the place" and the bishop, was probably well grounded, and he leaves us in no uncertainty as to the nature of his own faith. That the apparition was deemed to be a prognostic of approaching death seems to have been confirmed by the negative evidence that the apparition had not been seen when others of the family were sick but after-

wards recovered. The profound impression made on the minds of the survivors by these preternatural occurrences may be inferred from the desire to record them permanently in the somewhat unusual form of an inscription on a monument.

The allusion in the tract to this monument, which, with the approval of the bishop, was intended to be erected in the church—which thing, we are told, was accordingly performed by the care and labour of Edward Marshall, tomb maker, under St. Dunstan's Church in the West, in Fleet Street—leads us, in the progress of the story, to another publication of a few years later date, which it is indispensable to take in connection with the tract. This book, to which I alluded at the commencement of this paper, was the *Epistolæ Ho-Elianæ; or, Familiar Letters*, of James Howell.* The first edition of the first series of these letters was published in the year 1645, four years after the tract had appeared. In it is a letter, relating, it would seem, to the monument referred to in the tract, which has been made the basis of most of the ordinary notices of the story. Howell was no mere catch-penny writer, although Cibber somewhat maliciously says that he introduced the trade of writing for bread, which would be curious if it were true. He was a man of considerable literary attainments, and one of Ben Jonson's adopted sons. Granger says of him that he "was master of more modern languages, and author of more books, than any man of his time." About the year 1642, for political reasons, he was sent by a Committee of Parliament to the Fleet, and there confined for eight years. According to Anthony à Wood, many of the letters were not written until the author of them was in prison, and then were purposely published to relieve his necessities. These fascinating *Letters*, the best known of Howell's works, are written in a graceful, flowing style, unusual in the literature of the period. They lightly and graphically sketch the observations which the writer made in his journeys over the greater part of Europe; are full of anecdote and epigram; and give his passing views on the philosophy, the politics, and the events of the times in which he lived. This and *Montaigne* were the two "bed-side books" of Thackeray:—"If I wake at night I have one or other of them to prattle me to sleep again." For the purpose of this paper, it will be desirable to give the entire letter

* *Epistolæ Ho-Elianæ: Familiar Letters, Domestic and Forren, &c.* By J. H., Esq., one of the Clerks of His Majesties most Honourable Privy Councell. London: Printed for Humphrey Moseley; and are to be sold at his shop at the Prince's Arms in S. Paul's Church-yard. 1645.

which has been referred to, as it appears in the earliest edition of the work. It is numbered IX. in sect. 6, p. 18, of the volume described:

"To Mr. E. D.

"*Sir*,—I thank you a thousand times for the Noble entertainment you gave me at *Berry*, and the pains you took in shewing me the Antiquities of that place. In requitall, I can tell you of a strange thing I saw lately here, and I beleeve 'tis true: As I pass'd by Saint Dunstans in Fleet-street the last Saturday, I stepp'd into a Lapidary or Stone-cutters Shop, to treat with the Master for a Stone to be put upon my Fathers Tomb; And casting my eies up and down, I might spie a huge Marble with a large inscription upon't, which was thus, to my best remembrance:

"*Here lies* John Oxenham *a goodly young man, in whose Chamber, as he was strugling with the pangs of death, a Bird with a White-brest was seen fluttering about his Bed, and so vanish'd.*

"*Here lies also* Mary Oxenham *the sister of the said* John, *who died the next day, and the same Apparition was seen in the Room.*

"Then another sister is spoke of. Then, *Here lies hard by* James Oxenham, *the son of the said* John, *who died a child in his cradle a little after, and such a Bird was seen fluttering about his head, a little before he expir'd, which vanish'd afterwards.*

"At the bottom of the Stone ther is,

"*Here lies* Elizabeth Oxenham, *the Mother of the said* John, *who died 16 yeers since, when such a Bird with a White-Brest was seen about her Bed before her death.*

"To all these ther be divers Witnesses, both Squires and Ladies, whose names are engraven upon the Stone: This Stone is to be sent to a Town hard by *Excester*, wher this happen'd.

"Were you here, I could raise a choice discours with you hereupon. So hoping to see you the next Term, to requite som of your favours, I rest

"Your true Friend to serve you, J. H."

Howell, it will be observed, himself states that he wrote what is purported to be a copy of the inscription from his "best remembrance;" and, if so, there can be no doubt that his memory signally failed him; for, with the exception of the first paragraph, which naturally fixed itself more definitely on his mind, all the others differ, and differ considerably, from the statement in the tract, both in the Christian names and in the relationship to each other of the individuals mentioned. This was pointed out by the Messrs. Lysons, who also detected the anachronism in the date appended to the letter in most editions of the work, "July 3, 1632;" that is, three years (according to the tract) before the principal events occurred.

A critic less fair or less cautious than the Lysonses were would perhaps hastily assume that there was here sufficient reason for rejecting Howell's statement as altogether apocryphal. Dr. Birch, in fact, made this and other discrepancies the ground of a severe attack upon the genuineness of the letters; and Gough, in his additions to Camden's *Britannia* (ed. 1806, vol. i. p. 62), strangely enough, took it for granted that the monument and the tract related to two different sets of events, an assumption which is certainly not admissible. It may be easily conjectured that a careless or slovenly editor interpolated the dates at random, and not always with sufficient regard to the subject matter, in the later editions.* As a matter of fact there is *no date* to the letter now in question in the *first* edition of the work, from which I have quoted. It is believed that Howell's letters are of the class which is termed "imaginary;" that is to say, that they were not sent, nor intended to be sent, to the persons to whom they are addressed. That this is very probably the case, especially with the later letters, which were certainly written during Howell's incarceration in the Fleet, there is no reason to doubt. It will be apparent therefore that I attach no importance whatever to the anachronism. With regard to the presumed inaccuracies in Howell's description of the monument, they do not prove, or even suggest, that the incident itself of his visit to the stone-cutter's shop was fictitious; and, while the very discrepancies between that description and the narrative in the tract are evidence that Howell was not acquainted with the latter, and wrote independently, the evidently undesigned coincidences between them convince me that the monument which the author of the tract alluded to had a real existence, and that Howell saw it. It may be thought that I have devoted undue space to Howell; but it will be seen in the course of this paper that upon his evidence, whatever it may be worth, chiefly rests the confirmation of the statement in the tract.

And yet it appears almost fatal to belief in the veracity of both Howell and the author of the tract when we find the Lysonses stating that, not only was this monument not existing in their time at Zeal Monachorum, but that there was no trace of the Oxenham family in the register, church, or churchyard

* The following comparison will illustrate in an amusing way this inconsistency. In a letter of May 1, 1632, Howell is made to acknowledge the receipt of news of his father's death, and on the 5th of the same month to address a letter to him. But a cursory glance at the first half-dozen letters in the book is enough to satisfy one that no reliance is to be placed upon the dates appended to them.

of that parish. It is impossible not to be surprised at this singular absence of corroboration where one might have most expected to find it. The statement of the Messrs. Lysons seems conclusive; but it is really not so. I am not prepared to assert that I have verified the fact that the name of Oxenham nowhere occurs in the parish register of Zeal Monachorum; still it is remarkable that in the register of burials there are to be found only four entries in the year 1635—viz., of the dates May 26, September 18, and October 18; but between the two first of these there is a fatal hiatus, caused by a portion of the leaf—just so much as would have been occupied by the entries of the four deaths of the Oxenhams (all, it will be remembered, occurring between those two dates) —having been cut out. Whether this flagrant act was perpetrated before or subsequent to the time of the Lysonses it is now impossible even to conjecture. On the former supposition, if the statement of those authors was derived from personal inspection, the omission would doubtless have seemed suspicious, and would have led to further enquiry; but there is no reason to believe that they saw the register at all, and, if so, the information which they recorded, and which was doubtless communicated to them, although literally true, is nevertheless not the whole truth, and is eminently unsatisfactory. I have examined the register of South Tawton, on the supposition that the burials of the four persons who died, according to the narrative, in the month of September, 1635, may have taken place in that parish; but if so they were not recorded there. The entry of the burial of Grace Oxenham, to whom the omen is stated to have previously appeared, does, however, occur:

"1618. Gratia uxor Johañis Oxenham sepult. Secundo die Septem."

This, to some small extent, it will be seen, is confirmatory of the narrative.

Polwhele, whose enquiry, a generation earlier than that of the Lysonses, was perhaps instinctively directed rather to South Tawton, says, in the second volume (published in 1793) of his *History of Devonshire*, "The prodigy of the white bird, which I have noticed among the superstitions* of this county, seems to be little known at present to the common people at S. Tawton; nor can I find anywhere a trace of the marble stone which Mr. Howell saw in the lapidary's shop in London." (pp. 65, 66.)

* This part of the work does not, however, appear to have been printed.

In Sir William Pole's *Collections* (published in 1791) there occurs the following passage, relating to the Oxenham family: "Oxenham, the land of Will^m Oxenham, the father of John, the grandfather of Will. father of another John, grandfather of James, whose tombstone respects a strange wonder of this famyly, that at theire deaths were still seen a bird with a white brest, which fluttering for a while about theire beds suddenly vanisht away, which divers of y^e^ same place belive, being eye witnesses of." (p. 244.) With the exception of the first six words, the whole of this passage is printed in italics in the original, the signification of which is that this part of the paragraph was supplied by Sir John Pole, Baronet, Sir William Pole's eldest son and successor. Sir John Pole died in 1658; his father had died in 1635, the same year in which the alleged appearances took place; we have therefore an approximation to the date when this part, at least, of the paragraph was written. In the absence of any early pedigree of the Oxenham family (it does not appear in the Herald's Visitation either of 1564 or 1620) it is impossible to verify Sir John Pole's account of the successive generations. It would seem to point to another instance of the apparition, different from those elsewhere recorded; but from his mention of the monument, I shall probably be not far wrong in conjecturing that he was quoting from merely oral evidence, founded perhaps upon the account in the printed tract, but which (as he is not quite accurate) he had not seen, or at least had not got before him.

The episode of the monument has this curious sequel, that, notwithstanding repeated inquiries, no trace of the interesting memorial has ever been found in Devonshire. Although the passage in the tract is not quite clear, it certainly leads to the inference that the monument was actually erected, and, if anywhere in the county, it is reasonable to suppose that it would have been either at Zeal Monachorum or at South Tawton; but there is nothing, beyond that vague statement, to show that it was at any time seen in either of those parishes, or in fact anywhere in the county. It has been suggested that it may have been "improved away" in the process of church restoration. I am not concerned to defend church-restorers, who have doubtless many such sins to answer for; but the monument was missing long before the modern fashion of restoration set in. The church of Zeal Monachorum does not appear to have sustained any alterations in recent times that would lead one to suspect any such sweeping destruction of old memorials.

There are, as a matter of fact, none of these now to be found there. The church of South Tawton underwent the process last year. Incised floor-stones, bearing dates early in the seventeenth century, have been preserved, and are still there; but I am assured by the vicar, the Rev. F. J. Clarke, that no traces of the missing monument were discovered at the time when the alterations were in progress. I am not prepared to assert that the destruction of the monument may not have occurred during a former wave of improvement, or "beautifying," as it was then sometimes called, in the last century, when many of such records were undoubtedly swept away without compunction. Still it is inconceivable how a remarkable memorial, which, to say nothing of its unique local associations, must have been a prominent object in the place where it may have been erected—and Howell, it will be remembered, described it as "a huge marble"—could have been so easily disposed of. Nor is it likely that it would have been obnoxious to the iconoclastic zeal of the Puritans at a still earlier period, or that any other motive, that we can now see, could have arisen at any time for its deliberate removal. Gough, in his additions to Camden's *Britannia*, commenting on this question, fancied that the monument "never reached Devon." This is not at all improbable. The troubles of the Civil War, which supervened, may have been the cause of its remaining neglected, and perhaps forgotten, in Edward Marshall's shop, until (it may be) it was destroyed in the great fire of London. At all events the history of the monument, subsequently to the notice of it by Howell, is at this time as entirely unknown to the Oxenham family as it is to the rest of the world.

Howell's narrative seems to have gained much notice in philosophical circles. It had irresistible attractions for the learned antiquary Dr. Plot, who made the prodigy one of the chief objects of his intended investigation in connection with his project for journeying through England, after the example of Leland, for the discovery of "antiquities and other curiosities." Prince quoted it with commendable reservation in his *Worthies of Devon*, from which storehouse of historical materials connected with the county it has been passed on by numerous writers. The *Familiar Letters* went through many editions from 1645 to 1754; therefore, for a century the mysterious story which the book contained had been circulating, and, what is more, undoubtedly settling into a confirmed family belief. According to the view of the case

adopted by the Messrs. Lysons, the time was now ripe for another appearance of the phantom, and, as they remark, "this tradition of the bird had so worked upon the minds of some of the members of the family that it was supposed to have been seen by William Oxenham, who died in 1743." They then go on to relate this particular instance, which is given on the authority of a note in the MS. collections of William Chapple, the reviewer of Risdon. Mr. Chapple, it appears, "had the relation from Dr. Bent, who was brother-in-law to Mr. Oxenham, and had attended him as a physician. The story told is, that when the bird came into his chamber, he observed upon the tradition as connected with his family, but added, he was not sick enough to die, and that he should cheat the bird; and that this was a day or two before his death, which took place after a short illness." * There is a mural monument in the south aisle of South Tawton church to the memory of William Oxenham, Esq., who died, "much lamented by his friends," December 10, 1743, in the 65th year of his age. Presumably, therefore, the event, and the omen which presaged it, happened at Oxenham House.

In the *Gentleman's Magazine* of April, 1862, a *résumé* of some of the most familiar notices of the Oxenham tradition was given by a well-known antiquary, Mr. William Sidney Gibson, of Tynemouth. An abstract from a manuscript copy of a letter is the only absolutely new matter in Mr. Gibson's communication. The date of this letter is obviously incorrect (which Mr. Gibson also noticed), as it will be seen that it is two years antecedent to that of Mr. Oxenham's death, which has just been related; and there can be no doubt, from internal evidence, that the letter refers to the same event, of which it gives some further particulars, and from a different source. The abstract is as follows:

"I have received an answer from the country in relation to the strange bird which appeared to Mr. Oxenham just before his death, and the account which Dr. Bertie gave to Lord Abingdon of it is certainly true. It first was seen outside the window, and soon afterwards by Mrs. Oxenham in the room, which she mentioned to Mr. Oxenham, and asked him if he knew what bird it was. 'Yes,' says he, 'it has been upon my face and head, and is recorded in history as always appearing to our family before their deaths; but I shall cheat the Bird.' Nothing more was said about it, nor was the bird taken notice of from that time; but he died soon afterwards. However odd this affair may seem, it is certainly true; for the account was given of it by Mrs. Oxenham herself, but she

* *Magna Britannia*, vol. vi. p. 484.

never mentions it to anyone, unless particularly asked about it; and as it was seen by several persons at the same time, I can't attribute it to imagination, but must leave it as a phenomenon unaccounted for."

"The letter," according to Mr. Gibson, "appears to have been written not very long afterwards. It was taken, in 1823, from a blank leaf of a copy of Howell's *Familiar Letters*, which belonged to the then principal of Jesus College. It does not appear whence the letter is derived, but it is stated to be 'from J. Short, Middle Temple, to George Nares, jun., Albury,' and is dated December 24, 1741."

Mr. Gibson inferred that the Dr. Bertie mentioned in this letter was the same person as the Dr. Bent referred to in Chapple's MSS. But the informant, I believe, was the Hon. Charles Bertie, LL.D., Professor of Natural Philosophy at Oxford, and at that time Rector of Kenn, Devon. He was a son of James, first Earl of Abingdon, and a brother of Lady Anne Courtenay, wife of Sir William Courtenay, of Powderham Castle. How it happened that this was the channel through which the information originally came is sufficiently obvious. Mrs. Oxenham was the only child and heiress of William Longe, Esq., of Newhouse, in the parish of Mamhead.* In Dr. Bertie's time Mrs. Oxenham had erected a monument to her father and mother in Kenn church, where the ancestors of the Longes lay buried. The incident of the appearance of the omen before Mr. Oxenham's death no doubt had been talked of in private circles. Of Dr. Bent's individuality there can be no doubt. He was a physician, practising at Crediton, and afterwards at Exeter; his descendants are living, and still claim relationship to the Oxenham family. Now both Dr. Bertie and Dr. Bent were intelligent observers. We may go further, and assume, from what we know of them, that they were observers of more than average intelligence; and each in his own way appears to have had exceptionally favourable opportunities of knowing all the circumstances of this particular case. Their versions of the story, it is true, have reached us only at second-hand; but they have come through independent channels, and agree in every detail. The impression given us I think will be that the Oxford professor and the Exeter physician had convinced themselves of the reality of the

* Who that knows Newhouse will readily forget the grand old twisted and gnarled trunks of Spanish chestnuts—the relics of radiating avenues of those trees which must have been in existence before the place came into the possession of the Longe family?

appearance, strange as it must have seemed to them; and we cannot be surprised if they were unable to deduce anything from the facts by way of explanation. Remembering that this was in the year 1743, it is perhaps the nearest approach to a contemporary scientific account of the circumstances that we could reasonably expect to find.

In the *Gentleman's Magazine* of the year 1794, part i. p. 94, the following paragraph occurs in the Obituary: "13th [January], at Exeter, aged 80, Mrs. Elizabeth Weston, relict of Stephen W., esq., eldest son of Stephen, some time bishop of Exeter. Mrs. E. Weston was the youngest daughter of William Oxenham, esq., of Oxenham. The last appearance of the bird, mentioned by Howell and Prince, is said to have been to Mrs. E. Weston's eldest brother on his death-bed." This occurrence of the apparition must have been therefore a generation later than the previous instance quoted. No further particulars of this incident are now obtainable.

We are taken a further step in chronological order by the next case, which is said to have happened at Sidmouth. The evidence, it will be observed, is of rather shadowy character, and there are some variations from the previous order of the apparition. I extract the following from a now somewhat rare little book—*A Descriptive Sketch of Sidmouth, &c.*:*

"At the end of Mill lane, on the left, some years since, stood a large old-fashioned brick mansion, in which died one of the family of the Oxenhams, of which tradition records the strange and wonderful story, that at the death of any of them, a bird with a white breast is seen for a while fluttering about their beds, and then suddenly to vanish away. [He then goes on to quote Howell, &c.] In further reference to this tradition, I beg to insert an extract from a letter received from a highly-esteemed and valued friend on the subject:

"'My dear Sir,—I give you, as well as I can recollect, the anecdote related to me by a late respected baronet of this county. He told me that, having read in Howell's *Anecdotes* of the singular appearance of a white bird flying across, or hovering about the lifeless body of the different members of the Devonshire Oxenham family, immediately after dissolution, and also having heard the tradition in other quarters, wishing rather for an opportunity of refuting the superstitious assertion than from an idea of meeting with anything like a confirmation; having occasion to come to Sidmouth shortly after the death of his friend Mr. Oxenham, who resided in an old mansion, not now standing, and the place of which is now occupied by the houses called *Sidlands;* he questioned

* By Theodore H. Mogridge, Esq., Sidmouth [1836].

the old gardener, who had the care of the house, as to who attended his master when he died, as Mr. O. had gone there alone, meaning only to remain a day or two. "I and my wife, sir," was the reply. "Were you in the room when he expired?" "Yes, both of us." "Did anything in particular take place at that time?" "No, sir, nothing." (But then, after a moment's pause), "there was indeed something which I and my wife could almost swear we saw, which was a white bird fly in at the door, dart across the bed, and go into one of those drawers; and as it appeared in the same way to both of us, we opened all the drawers to find it, but where it went to we could never discover." If I recollect rightly, the man on being questioned had not heard of the tradition respecting such appearances, and that he was not prepared by previous instruction to confirm the story seems more than probable by his only mentioning it at second thought, as though he hardly supposed the baronet's inquiry had reference to anything supernatural, and by his not more positively making the assertion, which it seems probable he would have done had he any end to answer by making up the story.'

* * * * *

"This old mansion is no longer in existence, having been pulled down." (pp. 48–51.)

Mr. Mogridge, the author of the book, a medical man, in commenting upon the incident, did not seem to doubt that it was a special supernatural revelation.

This Mr. Oxenham, who, according to Butcher's *Beauties of Sidmouth*, third edition (1821?), had been for many years a resident at Sidmouth, appears to have died between the years 1810 and 1821. He was not buried there, and I have been unable to make out his identity.

If the series had ended here, these remarkable alleged manifestations of the omen might probably have been set down as some of the illusions of a pre-scientific age. The next case which I shall have to adduce is that of the last known appearance of the phenomenon, and is the more interesting and important because it is given on the authority of a member of the Oxenham family now living, confirmed by a lady (also a member of the family, and still living) who actually witnessed the occurrence. A short notice of the incident appeared in *Glimpses of the Supernatural*,* published in 1875, and was communicated by the Rev. Henry Nutcombe Oxenham, the present head of his family, who is favourably known as the author of some able theological works. Mr. Oxenham, whose courtesy I take the opportunity of acknow-

* By the Rev. FREDERICK GEORGE LEE, D.C.L.

ledging, and to whom I express my obligations, has kindly favoured me with a more detailed account of the incident, which I here give in his own words:

"Shortly before the death of my late uncle, G. N. Oxenham, Esq., of 17, Earl's Terrace, Kensington, who was then the head of the family, this occurred: His only surviving daughter, now Mrs. Thomas Peter, but then unmarried, and living at home, and a friend of my aunt's, Miss Roberts, who happened to be staying in the house, but was no relation, and had never heard of the family tradition, were sitting in the dining-room, immediately under his bedroom, about a week before his death, which took place on the 15th Dec., 1873, when their attention was roused by a shouting outside the window. On looking out they observed a white bird—which might have been a pigeon, but if so, was an unusually large one—perched on the thorn-tree outside the windows, and it remained there for several minutes, in spite of some workmen on the opposite side of the road throwing their hats at it, in the vain effort to drive it away. Miss Roberts mentioned this to my aunt at the time, though not of course attaching any special significance to it, and my aunt (since deceased) repeated it to me soon after my uncle's death. Neither did my cousin, though aware of the family tradition, think of it at the time. Miss Roberts we have lost sight of for some years, and do not even know if she is still living; but Mrs. Thomas Peter confirms in every particular the accuracy of this statement. Of the fact, therefore, there can be no reasonable doubt, whatever interpretation may be put upon it. My cousin also mentioned another circumstance, which either I did not hear of, or had forgotten; viz., that my late aunt spoke, at the time, of frequently hearing a sound like the fluttering of a bird's wings in my uncle's bedroom, and said that the nurse testified to hearing it also."

There would, of course, be nothing actually remarkable in the incident itself which is described in the earlier part of this account, if it were not taken in connection with the precedent tradition. If only a coincidence, it must be considered to be a very striking one. The departure from the accepted description of the ominous bird, which is certainly distinguished in the earlier stage of the story as only "white breasted," would perhaps be unimportant if it did not lead to an inference (physiologically interesting) that the semi-domesticated pigeon, of no particular colour, may have been the bird really connected, in every instance, with the phenomena. Mr. Oxenham states that the bird has always been

thought of and spoken of in his family simply as "the white bird."

On my pointing out to Mr. Oxenham that at least the earlier notices of his family tradition did not seem to warrant his supposition that the apparition was limited to the "head of the family," he informed me that, so far as he was aware, it had always been the oral tradition in the family that the bird was "bound" to appear before the death of the *head of the family*, and that it might or might not appear at other deaths, but certainly not that it always did so. Mr. Oxenham, who was himself a boy at the time, does not remember hearing of any appearance of the omen to his great-uncle, Richard Oxenham, the head of the family in the previous generation, who died August 23, 1844, at Penzance. He was a bachelor, and lived alone, and only his sister, Mrs. Oddy, who herself died in 1861, was with him at the time of his death. It certainly was not seen at the death of the Rev. William Oxenham, Vicar of Cornwood and Prebendary of Exeter, younger brother of the above, six months earlier, February 23, 1844, nor at the death of either of the younger brothers of the late head of the family, G. N. Oxenham, Esq., beforementioned. On the other hand, it is stated by a relative of the family, now living, that when Mrs. Oddy died, her daughter, now dead, spoke of birds flapping and hopping at the bedroom window the night before.

Our forefathers, notwithstanding the opposite sentiment which is embodied in the familiar ballad of the "Children in the Wood," which, however, does not seem to have been traced farther back than the beginning of the 17th century, preferred, on the whole, the contemplation of the darker side of the bird-world. Hence, the influence of birds was more often accounted decidedly malevolent. "A bird of ill omen," is a phrase which has come down to us with all the air of antiquity. Spenser gives an appalling list of disreputable birds. But, as I have already remarked, it does not appear that the Oxenhams regarded their particular bird-omen as otherwise than beneficent.

Mr. William Henderson, in his *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties*,* says that "the flying or hovering of birds around a house, and their resting on the window-sill or tapping against a pane, portends death," and that this belief is widely spread. The same belief is not uncommon I am told in Devonshire, although I have not found it

* Published for the Folk-Lore Society. Ed. 1879, p. 49.

recorded in the folk-lore collections of our Association. And it has an old place in our literature. It occurs in connection with a tragic incident in the story of *Thomas of Reading*, which was printed before the year 1600. "Said he, I am not sicke, but such an alteration I finde in my selfe as I never did before. With that the scritch-owle cried pitiously, and anon after the night-raven sate croaking hard by his window. Iesu have mercy upon me, quoth hee, what an ill-favoured cry doe yonder carrion birds make, and therewithall he laid him downe in his bed, from whence he never rose againe."* And Marston, who was a contemporary of Shakspeare, thus refers to it:

—— "and night-crowes screech aloud,
Fluttering 'bout casements of departing soules."†

Aubrey, as might be expected, has some instances in his *Miscellanies* of the preternatural appearances of birds. And one of the accounts of the Lyttelton ghost, which created a sensation a hundred years ago, describes the fluttering of something like a bird among the curtains of the bed. This led a facetious newspaper-writer of the year 1779—much in advance of his time—to think that future "linguists," as he calls them, would discover in this record the origin of the familiar phrase, "A little bird told me," which, however, is, I believe, as old as Solomon.‡ In the *Gentleman's Magazine* of November, 1786, there is an account of the strange appearance of a bird before death to two successive generations of the Pearce family, of Cranbrook, in Kent. But there are some better authenticated modern instances, which will bear repeating. The following is from *The Life, Times, and Correspondence of the Right Rev. Dr. Doyle, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin*, by W. J. FitzPatrick, LL.D., &c. (new edition, 1880.) Describing the Bishop's last illness, the author says: "Considering that the season was midsummer and not winter, the visit of two robin redbreasts to the sick-room may be noticed as interesting. They remained fluttering round, and sometimes perching on the uncurtained bed. The priests, struck by the novelty of the circumstance, made no effort to expel the little visitors, and the robins hung lovingly over the Bishop's head until death released him." (vol. ii. p. 505.) This was at Braganza, Carlow. Dr. Doyle died June 15, 1834. To the same

* THOMS's *Early English Prose Romances* (1858), vol. i. p. 151.

† *Tragedies and Comedies*, 1st ed., 1633. Antonio and Mellida, part ii. act iii. scene 3.

‡ "For a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter."—*Ecclesiastes* x. 20.

work I am indebted for the notice that a pigeon was frequently mentioned as having been the associate of Pope Pius IX. in his last illness, and was stated to have hovered over the catafalque which contained his remains. Mr. Henderson, from whose work I have already quoted, says: "I am permitted to mention that the recent death of a clergyman of some eminence in the town of Hull was preceded by the flight of a pure-white pigeon around the house, and its resting again and again on his window sill."*

Hereditary omens, peculiar to certain families, are another phase of popular belief which is equally apposite to the present review. The presence of a pair of owls on the battlements of Wardour Castle, the traditional death-warning of the Arundel family, is one of the best known of these. There is a copious list of such supposed phenomenal appearances, which are also remarkable for their varied and, sometimes, fantastic character.

As these stories, apart from their mythical accretions, have been in all probability only half told, they offer no clue to any psychological explanation of the strikingly similar appearances of the Oxenham tradition; but they may have some significance when we approach the physiological aspect of the phenomena.

The credibility of the occurrence of the four consecutive appearances of the Oxenham omen in the year 1635, rests upon the two pieces of documentary evidence which have been given at length. Setting aside a suspicion, suggested by the fact of two witnesses being brought forward for each instance, that the author of the narrative in the tract may have been a little too anxious for the statutory completeness of his case, there appears to be no reason to doubt that the six individuals who constituted the witnesses really believed that they saw what they asserted that they saw. I am disposed to go further, and to think that they were not mistaken in the fact; although it is to be assumed that they were illiterate, and that their impressions were strengthened, and the details of the incident exaggerated and coloured, by the traditional occurrence of the same kind in the family twenty years before; and there may have been a still earlier tradition deeply rooted in the minds of the elderly people. As for the rest, the remarkable array of corroborative testimony by which the facts were accredited—that of the clergyman, of the bishop, and of the squires and ladies whose names

* *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties*, p. 49.

were cut upon the monument (an emphatic and remarkable avowal of their belief)—can be seen to amount only to a general conviction of the honesty and veracity of those six witnesses. That the strange appearances at Zeal Monachorum were attributed, at the same time, to supernatural causes is not surprising; the period was one in which the popular belief in portents, apparitions, and such like prodigies, was very general, and by no means confined to the ignorant and illiterate. Shakespeare was probably only describing the popular misconceptions of his own time when he wrote—

> "No natural exhalation in the sky,
> No scape of nature, no distemper'd day,
> No common wind, no customèd event,
> But they will pluck away his natural cause,
> And call them meteors, prodigies, and signs,
> Abortives, présages, and tongues of heaven." *

When, as we know, witchcraft was accepted as a fact by some of the highest intellects of the time, nothing was wanting to justify to the popular imagination the reality of other phases of supposed extra-natural agency. I see no reason for supposing that this belief was more prevalent in Devonshire than elsewhere, whatever may be said of the persistency with which it has kept its ground in the West to the present day. That the bishop, whose *imprimatur* was set upon the remarkable record of the occurrences at Zeal Monachorum, was of the same way of thinking we are not left in any doubt. He was the able and eminent Joseph Hall, a poet and a satirist in early life, and in mature age a divine whose writings held a high place in the theological literature of the seventeenth century. I am not aware of any special reference, in his voluminous works, to these particular circumstances; but it is significant that in one of his books he vouched for the supernatural origin of the famous cure of a cripple at St. Maderne's well in Cornwall, of which he states that he made a "strict and personal examination;" and in his *Invisible World*, under the section of "The Employments and Operations of Angels," he deliberately pronounced his opinion that the effects of the memorable storm which caused the partial destruction of Widdecombe Church, three years after the events at Zeal Monachorum, were "plainly wrought by a stronger hand than Nature's."

There is, however, more incitement to our curiosity when we come to inquire into the historical (so to speak) and comparatively recent alleged appearances to the Oxenham

* *King John*, act iii. sc. 4.

family, which cannot off-hand be set down as fictitious or illusory. Most of these are now beyond the reach, if not of criticism, certainly of exact scientific investigation. The last instance, which has been described as having occurred at Kensington, stands upon somewhat different ground. It has been sifted as far as possible, and it has been seen with what result. It combines in itself two characteristic aspects of the phenomenon—firstly, the attempt of a bird to find an entrance to the house; and secondly, its quasi-mysterious presence in the sick-chamber. The general resemblance to the traditional circumstances of the apparition is sufficiently complete.

In the Oxenham family I have reason to believe that no decided conviction obtains as to the cause of the appearances, the reality of which is however not doubted. But it is no secret that a belief in the supernatural—in other words, miraculous—origin of the phenomena has been revived elsewhere. It is plainly implied by the context in *Glimpses of the Supernatural*, a work of great earnestness, however unscientific may be its tone, to which I have already referred. Upon this view of the case I shall not venture to make any comment. It may no doubt be fairly contended that the whole question of supernatural appearances is, and always must be, an open one.*

On the other hand, those of a diametrically opposite school of thought will probably be of opinion that the earliest notions about the Oxenham omen were merely imaginative, and had their origin in some half-forgotten folk-lore, and that all the subsequent supposed manifestations of it have been equally imaginary, and may be traced to the impression produced by Howell's familiar letter, on the well-known principle that prophecies often bring about their own fulfilment. This was, in effect, the explanation suggested by the Messrs. Lysons.

With regard to the purely psychological and more recondite methods of accounting for the hallucinations—if they be so—it may be remarked that it would seem obvious that the "subjective" theory, by which no doubt spectral illusions may be often explained, cannot be applied to the cases now before us. It will be noticed that there is no very clear intimation that the apparition, in the various instances recorded, was always

* No one who remembers the remarkable correspondence, extending to upwards of eighty letters, on the "Truth about Ghosts," which appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* of October, 1881, will doubt the perennial interest which this question has for minds of every degree of intelligence.

actually seen by the moribund member of the Oxenham family; in only one instance is it distinctly stated to have been so; and, if this is to be assumed, the apparition is stated to have been always equally or more conspicuous to others. Even this, it appears, is not an insurmountable difficulty; for we learn that as "the brain function has the power of projecting mental pictures on to the retina" (which is how ghosts are seen), so "if one person sees a vision, or spectre, anyone else who is in sympathetic or harmonious nerve-vibration with him may see it too."* But into this speculative region I do not care to follow the subject further.

Other attempts of course have been made to account for the appearances of the bird of the Oxenhams. One of these is to be found in the extremely interesting notes by Mr. W. Burt, appended to Carrington's *Dartmoor*, 1834. (Vol. i. p. 199.) This interpretation of the story is an eminently naturalistic one. Referring to the Ring Ouzel (*Turdus torquatus*, PENNANT)—

> "—— the solitary bird, that makes
> The rock his sole companion ——,"

a bird which Pennant had seen but three or four times, and always on Dartmoor, and which Morris figures with a half-moon shaped bar of white across its breast, Mr. Burt says that with it (but he does not state where the interesting fact is to be found) "has been connected the tradition respecting the appearance of a white bird before the death of anyone of the family of Oxenham of South Tawton. . . . The accidental appearance of this bird at Oxenham, attracted thither by the light in the sick-chamber, or by some other cause, may have given rise to the tradition, and the more particularly as the moor is close to South Tawton, and the Ring Ouzel frequents that part of it. There is no other rational mode of accounting for such a singular circumstance. This happening in one instance was extended, by superstition, to other cases of death in the same family."

Reverting to the narrative of the circumstances which occurred in 1635, as recorded in the tract, it is to be noticed that all the four members of the family died within a few days of each other, and, for anything that appears to the contrary, in the same house. It was an impressionable time, and the unwonted appearance of a bird flying within the house, and at night, may have been easily magnified by superstition into the phantom "in the likeness of a bird," for

* Dr. MORTIMER GRANVILLE in the *Daily Telegraph* of Oct. 7, 1881.

which it was taken. But that it was a real bird, and the same bird, in all the cases, it now requires no great stretch of imagination to believe. Opinions will inevitably differ as to the weight of the evidence for the reality of the subsequent alleged appearances of the same kind, which has been here adduced from various sources. An isolated case of this sort might or might not be easily disposed of by one of the recognized formulas. The persistency of the so-called omen of the Oxenhams, occurring at intervals throughout a period of two centuries and a half, all of which cases have strikingly similar details and characteristics, if there were no other concatenation than the mental impressions produced by the prevailing tradition, would alone be very remarkable. But there may appear to be in these occurrences a core of fact which it is scarcely possible to ignore. The like causes, or combination of causes, have produced the like effects. To assert that we must go outside Nature for an explanation of phenomena such as these, which transcend our ordinary experience, is equivalent to saying that all Nature's secrets are already known to us. It seems, therefore, reasonable to assume that either the circumstances have been imperfectly described, or that there is some natural explanation of them which it is at present impossible to recover. And we may be almost sure that if a satisfactory physiological cause for the phenomena is to be found, it will be discovered rather in collateral circumstances, which have *not* been noticed or described, than in those with which we are now acquainted. As an apt illustration of the possibilities of this method of interpretation, I am reminded of the famous St. Kilda story, which posed Dr. Johnson, and is mentioned by Boswell. It had been stated solemnly by McAulay, who wrote an account of St. Kilda, and the fact was well attested by others, that on the arrival of a stranger at the island all the inhabitants were "seized with a cold." The cause, as ultimately explained, was of course a natural one. The situation of St. Kilda rendered a north-east wind indispensably necessary, in those days, before a stranger could land. The wind, not the stranger, occasioned the epidemic. The principle is one of general application.

I commend the problem to physiologists. The supposed limitation of the appearances of the Oxenham omen to the heads of the family—the strongest support perhaps of the supernatural theory—is no doubt an accretion, the natural growth of the tradition, and certainly not warranted by the earliest part of the story itself. The apparition did not occur

to every member of the family, simply because some necessary condition was not always present. I believe that a physiological solution of the problem may be found, and that *heredity*, of the force and effect of which we have probably little conception, and the marvellous instinct of animals, of which we know as little, are the keys to it. The idea is crude, but not new. I have not professed, however, even to treat of this difficult part of the subject, much less to exhaust it, and I have no pretension to advance any formal theory of my own. As it is, it has been felt to be an ungracious task to strip a time-honoured tradition of any of its mythical surroundings; but there need be no fear that the tradition will not maintain its place for a long time to come among the established memorabilia of the county. The suggestions which I have ventured to make in aid of a natural explanation of the phenomena described have insensibly grown out of my review of the literature of this very curious Devonshire story.