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REAL DICK WHITTINGTON.

SUCCESS AND BENEVOLENCE.

NO RECORD OF THE CAT.

By N.L.

When a pantomime 'boy" prances on to the stage as Dick Whittington, few are aware that beyond all pantomimes and fairy tales there was a real Dick Whittington, a typical old-time municipal dignitary, and that he was Mayor of London not only three times, but four, or even five. But was the real Dick Whitington the owner of a real cat, which brought him a real fortune? That is where the historians disagree.

New interest has been given to Richard Whittington by the rather belated celebration in England this week of what is called his "five hundredth anniversary." He appears to have died in March, 1423, at the age of about 64 years. The nursery tales are right in describing him as becoming possessed of a great fortune, from which he gave largely for works of benevolence. It is true, also, that he married Alice Fitzwarren. But Dick did not enter the family as a scullion. To follow the most probable versions of his history, he was the son of Sir William Whittington, of Pauntley,in Gloucestershire. Dick bore the heraldic arms of the Pauntley family, with slight variation. For some time his father was outlawed, probably for having married without license the widow of a sheriff of Gloucestershire. By this marriage there were three sons. His eldest, William, left the estates to the second, Robert. And the third was Dick. Not many years have passed since it was claimed that landholders in Gloucestershire were the descendants of Dick Whittington's brother Bob.

Richard became a mercer in London, and in 1379 it was recorded that he had contributed five marks (of rather more value than the present German mark) to a city loan. There are records of his sales of velvets and damasks to the Earl of Derby, who became Henry IV. Whittington was successively councillor, alderman, and sheriff of London, and when a mayor died in 1397 he was appointed by King Richard II for the remainder of the term.

LENDING MONEY TO KINGS.

In 1389 Whittington had been surety for £10 towards the defence of the City of London. As acting mayor he had to accompany the King to Plesby (?) to arrest the Duke of Gloucester, but he was sufficiently open minded in regard to Royal quarrels to leave instructions in his will for prayers for both King Richard and the Duke, calling them his 'special lords and promoters." The highhandedness of King Richard caused the early terms of his namesake as mayor to pass in a time of public turmoil and danger. The King borrowed from Whittington a thousand marks. Though it must have seemed pos- sible that when Richard II was deposed the money had vanished, it was returned to Whittington. He was accumulating sufficient wealth to oblige Royalty with other loans, and Henry IV, the successor of Richard II, borrowed from him many large sums. One was £6,400, a considerable amount at the values of that time For the weddings of the daughters of the King. Whittington provided cloth of gold and other beautiful textures, as brilliant as those of the most gorgeous pantomime. He held high Government officers in London and Calais, and was collector of Customs and subsidy at both ports. This was considered to give him much more than sufficient security for his loans.

Whittington was trusted by Henry IV, in many ways. He and another were appointed to administer the funds for the restoration of the nave of Westminster Abbey, and a later mayor was told by the King that he must not order any buildings to be destroyed without consult nig Whittington. It is thought, but not proved, that Dick sat in Parliament at one time as representative of London. There is no certainty that he was ever Sir Richard.

Alice, our other pantomime friend, whom Dick married, was the daughter of Sir Ivo Fitzwaryn (as the name was then spelt). Sir Ivo was not the mercer of pantomime. He had a great deal of landed property in Dorsetshire and Devonshire, and was in Parliament for several terms. Left without children, Whittington, after the death of Alice, extended considerably the benevolence which he had already shown In parts of London he provided water supply, and he built or rebuilt religious, charitable, and educational institutions.

FACT MERGING INTO FANCY

The story which introduces the cat seems to have arisen through associating a real man with folk tales which were already current. Gradually, after his death, Whittington became a legendary figure. His name was remembered chiefly by the public buildings with which it was associated. Stories of cats and other animals which helped men or boys have been told for centuries in a number of European languages. "Puss in Boots" is one of the best known examples of an old group, though in its present form it is later than Whittington's time. When a tale was to be told of the poor boy Dick, who became a rich merchant with the aid of a cat, what would be easier than to bring into the story the famous and wealthy merchant Richard Whittington ? Legends soon rise, as we may see by the remarkable stories already told of Kitchener and of other famous men of recent years. Whatever the cause of the Whittington story, the real Richard seems to have owed nothing to a cat. No real authority takes seriously the view that the "cat" in the legend was derived from a word meaning a form of ship.

The true Whittington was opposed to what is now called profiteering. He prosecuted "forestallers" of meat and those who charged an excessive price for beer. It has been stated that he burnt bonds to a very large amount, representing money he had put into Government loans, but this is not well established. In the time of Edward VI. his tomb was rifled for treasure by a wicked clergyman, say some chroniclers. It was restored to its former state, but was burnt, with the church in which it was placed, in the Great Fire of London.

There have been sculptures and portraits of a supposed Whittington with a cat, but their period has been later than that of the nursery hero. Yet so well established was the legend that an engraver who depicted Whittington three centuries ago with his hand resting on a skull found it advisable to alter the skull to a cat. The public would not accept a catless Whittington.

And, with the cat, the nursery tale and the pantomime will remain; for it is a good tale, and usually it makes a good pantomime.

Article Transcribed by Don Cameron

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