

THE CABOT CONTROVERSIES.

WITH our present knowledge of the adventures by sea of the Normans and Bretons, or of the Biscayans and Basques, it cannot be proved that in the later years of the fifteenth century, any or all of them caught fish on the banks of Newfoundland, and so equalled on the American coast the hardihood of their known pursuit of whale, at that time, in the Icelandic seas. It needs only to be shown that these sea-going folks accomplished similar exploits in search of cod, to make it probable that before the days of John Cabot such people had become acquainted with the northeastern shores of America. We have no documentary evidence that the Bretons, for instance, were on the Newfoundland coast before 1504; but there is nothing improbable in the supposition that much earlier visits were made by courageous mariners. In those times as well as later, the Church enforced observance of a large number of days on which fish was the permitted food. On other days in winter a meat diet was little known among the common people. Seamen accordingly took great risks in distant seas to obtain fish for salting.

There is a chance that some dated manuscript or chart may yet be discovered which shall establish the certainty of such Biscayan, or perhaps Norman visits. In the seventeenth century Spain actually rested her right to fish on these shores in the frequenting of them by Basque fishermen before the Cabot discoveries, though it seems to have been near the middle of the sixteenth century before the Spaniards were again in any numbers in these waters.¹

¹ Prowse's Newfoundland, p. 42.