

**CHRISTMAS TALE, THE
ROSARY: A LEGEND
OF WILTON ABBEY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649494835

Christmas Tale, the Rosary: A Legend of Wilton Abbey by William Gilbert

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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WILLIAM GILBERT

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THE ROSARY:
A LEGEND OF WILTON ABBEY.

Christmas Tale.

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A LEGEND OF WILTON ABBEY.

BY

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LONDON:

WILLIAM FREEMAN, 102 FLEET STREET.

1863.

250. s. 158.

THE ROSARY.

INTRODUCTION.



AMONG the various mischiefs arising from the dissolution of religious houses in the reign of Henry the Eighth, one, and not the least, was the loss to literature, occasioned by the dispersion of the records belonging to many of the more important of these institutions. Of these, perhaps the Benedictine convent at Wilton might be named among the saddest examples. It is melancholy to note how small a portion of the voluminous documents that once belonged to that wealthy convent is now in existence—how few instances of the pious lives and labours of its inmates can be quoted; even that of the very list of its abbesses is most incomplete. But in this case, as in many other instances where the malice of man has been exerted to hide the works and efforts of the godly, tradition has stepped forward, and from her records, more durable than graven brass, has brought forth a singular episode in the life of one of the convent inmates which would otherwise have been lost to the world.

The heroine of the following pages is a singular specimen of this extraordinary power of tradition. Although for many years abbess of the convent, her name does not even appear

on any of the convent records or lists. Her very existence would have remained unknown had not chance revealed the fact of the present written confession in the library of a celebrated Wiltshire antiquarian ; and he, as jealous of his ancient manuscripts as a sultan of his harem, now sighs over the escape of the present recital, and its exposure to the rude eyes of the world.

That she existed and was in her day one of the wealthiest and best beloved superiors the convent ever had, is certain ; but from what family she originally sprang is exceedingly obscure. She appears to have succeeded Edith Barogh, of whom she was a distant relative ; but as nothing more is known of that abbess than her name, and that she began her rule A.D. 1464, little can be obtained from that source—even the date of her death is uncertain. The name of our heroine was Alicia Longspée, widow of Edwin Longspée, a descendant of William, first Earl of Salisbury. She had been a widow several months before she entered the convent as a novice. As she was then young, exceedingly beautiful, and very wealthy, her retirement from the world caused great wonder to most ; but to others who knew her during her married life, her quiet retiring disposition, intense love for her husband, as well as her great piety, the act was not so extraordinary. How many years she ruled over the convent is uncertain. Tradition reports her reign to have been strict yet gentle, and she was much loved, not only by those immediately under her control, but by both rich and poor for many miles round. She was succeeded by Alice Comalonde, of whose election there is also no date.

Alicia Longspée's death was occasioned by a disease of the lungs, arising from a severe cold. She had made a short pilgrimage to a shrine in Salisbury Cathedral, and on returning was caught in a violent storm, from which she was unable to obtain shelter. Finding her end approaching, and deter-

mining that her death should conduce to the cause of the holy Catholic Church, she requested permission of the Bishop of Salisbury to make a written confession, which might be kept sealed not only till after her death, but till the Christmas-eve following it, when it should be read to the nuns assembled in the refectory between vespers and the celebration of midnight mass. The bishop, after some demur, fearing scandal might possibly arise, at last gave his permission, and the confession was forthwith written out on parchment. Alicia shortly afterwards expired in the odour of sanctity, and was interred in the convent cemetery. A rosary she had always worn attached to her dress, was, at her request, buried with her. Her confession was kept sealed as she had desired, till the following Christmas-eve, when it was read to the assembled sisterhood.

CHAPTER I.

HAVING obtained permission from the Bishop of Salisbury to make a written confession of certain sins committed by me before I entered the holy house of which I have been ten years abbess, and considering that the open recital of my faults might be advantageous to our sisterhood, as proving the great power and goodness of God, and feeling that the strength of the mortal malady under which I am at present suffering will shortly relieve me from the cares and dangers of this life, I request that, on the evening preceding Christmas day, between vespers and the celebration of midnight mass, this confession may, for the following reasons, be read aloud to the sisterhood:—

1st. That the narration of the strong temptations to which I was exposed for two years prior to my seeking shelter within the convent walls, will, I believe, tend to the greater honour of God and our blessed Lady, who snatched me from the pit of perdition which yawned before me.

2d. It may shew how great is the mercy and power of God in assisting those in sore extremity who call upon Him for comfort and support.

And lastly, that by this candid avowal of my fault I may perform a work of humility acceptable to God, in shewing to those now dwelling in our house at present under my spiritual authority, and to others who have too often held me in higher estimation than was my due, that I have been a great and wicked sinner, and should have been totally unworthy

to hold communion hereafter with the Blessed, had it not been for the great mercy of Heaven vouchsafed to me in my need.

I will commence the thread of my confession three years after my marriage with my dear husband, and two years before I took the veil. I will describe him as he appeared to me the last time I saw him—to do so as he appeared to me when I married him would be impossible.

He was tall, handsome, powerful, and brave. A nobler looking knight was not at the court, nor one whose appearance better told his high qualities. He was generous but not extravagant, learned but not pedantic, resolute as a lion yet gentle as a lamb. He was beautiful in countenance; his eyes beamed with an expression of love and gentleness seldom met with in men, while the whole expression of his face told of his noble, loving nature. I will not dwell longer on his appearance, for I find I cannot do him justice. I would not have attempted it, but it is necessary to describe in some sort his noble qualities and beauty to make the enormity of my fault appear in its proper light, and the bounty of Heaven in saving me from the horrible sin I might otherwise have been guilty of, appear the greater.

After we had been married nearly three years, when we were residing in perfect happiness at the castle in Berkshire, my husband received an order from the king to attend the court. At that time his majesty was residing in Crosby Palace. To obey with the utmost alacrity every command of his king was a paramount duty with my husband; and in two days after he had received the summons, he left the castle for London.

We had never before been parted, and it would be difficult for me to explain to you the great grief his absence occasioned me. I wandered by myself in the park, and wept as if I fancied the intensity of my sorrow would