

A. D. CRAKE



***THE LAST ABBOT
OF GLASTONBURY: A TALE
OF THE DISSOLUTION
OF THE MONASTERIES***

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The Author humbly ventures to offer the ninth of his series of original tales, illustrating Church History, to the public; encouraged by the favourable reception the previous volumes have found.

In the tales, "Æmilius," "Evanus," and "The Camp on the Severn," he has endeavoured to describe the epoch of the Pagan persecutions, under the Roman Empire; in the "Three Chronicles of Æscendune," successive epochs of Early English history; in the "Andredsweald," the Norman Conquest; in "Fairleigh Hall," the Great Rebellion; and in the *present* volume, one of the earliest of the series of events ordinarily grouped under the general phrase "The Reformation," the destruction of the Monasteries.

It is many years since the writer was first attracted and yet saddened by the tragical story of the fate of the last Abbot of Glastonbury, and amongst the tales by which he was wont to enliven the Sunday evenings in a large School, this narrative found a foremost place, and excited very general interest.

A generation ago, few English Churchmen cared to say a good word for the unhappy monks, who suffered so cruel a persecution at the hands of Henry the Eighth and his vicar-general, Thomas Cromwell. Many, indeed, confessed a sentimental regret when they visited the ruins of such glorious fanes as Tintern, Reading, or Furness, and reflected that but for the vandalism of the period, such buildings might yet vie with the cathedrals, with which they were

coeval, and if not retained for their original uses, might yet be devoted to the service of religion and humanity, in various ways; but the fear of being supposed to betray a leaning to the doctrines once taught within these ruined walls, has prevented many a writer from doing justice to the sufferers under atrocious tyranny.

Yet did an act of parliament now pass the legislature giving the various episcopal palaces, deaneries, rectories, and vicarages in England, with all their furniture, to the Crown, and were the present occupants ruthlessly ejected, and hung, drawn, and quartered in case of resistance, active or passive, the injustice would not be greater, the outrage on the rights of property more flagrant, than in the case of the monasteries.

The late Rev. W. Gresley, in his tale, "The Forest of Arden," was (so far as the writer remembers) the first writer of historical fiction, amongst modern Churchmen, who attempted to render justice to our forefathers, who, born and bred under the papal supremacy, could not disguise their convictions, or transfer their allegiance to a lustful tyrant.

But even he spake with "bated breath" when compared with Dean Hook, who, later on, thus writes in his lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury:—

"To an Englishman, taught to regard his house as his castle, these acts of invasion on property appear to be monstrous; our blood boils within us when we learn that by blending the Acts of Supremacy with the Treason Acts the Protestant enthusiasts under Cromwell condemned to death not fewer than 59 persons, who, however mistaken they

were in their opinions, were as honest as Latimer, and more firm than Cranmer.

“Of the murders of Bishop Fisher and Sir Thomas Moore, the former the greatest patron of learning, the latter ranking with the most learned men the age produced, both of them men of undoubted piety, the reader must not expect in these pages a justification or even an attempt at palliation; we should be as ready to accord the crown of martyrdom to the Abbots of Reading and *Glastonbury* and to the Prior of S. John’s, Colchester, when rather than betray their trust they died, as we are to place it on the heads of Cranmer, Ridley, and Latimer. Although the latter had the better cause, yet we must all admit that atrocious as were the proceedings under Mary and Bonner, the persecutions under Henry and Cromwell fill the mind with greater horror.”

But it may be asked, were not the atrocious crimes laid to the charge of the monks in the celebrated “Black Book,” the “Compendium compertorum,” a sufficient justification? Did not the very parliament at the recital cry “Down with them.”

The opinion of such parliaments as those which passed the absurd and bloody treason acts dictated by Henry, or which condemned so many innocent victims by Acts of Attainder, or passed those most atrocious acts, “the Vagrant Acts,” by which a cruel form of slavery was established in England, only England would not put it in practice,—the professed opinion of such parliaments will weigh little with modern Englishmen.

But it appears that the very accusers themselves, or at least the Government who employed them, could not have believed in the accusations; for no less than eleven of the

Abbots were made Bishops to save the Government their pensions, and some of them men against whom the worst charges had been made; others became deans, and others were put into positions of trust, as parochial priests, under Cranmer himself.

And who were the witnesses? Their leader, Dr. London, was put to penance for the most grievous incontinency, and afterwards thrown into prison *for perjury*, where he died miserably. Another, Layton, who figures in the tale, becoming dean of York, pawned the cathedral plate. Upon the testimony of such witnesses one would not hang a dog.

But this is not the place for an investigation of the subject, nor is it one to be commended to the pure-minded reader, such garbage did these venal and foul-mouthed spies invent to justify the rapacity of their employers. Not that we would maintain the absolute purity of the monasteries, or that there was no foundation whatsoever upon which such a superstructure was reared: many of the brotherhoods had fallen far below the high ideal of their profession, or even the spiritual attainments of their brethren in earlier and better days; but there is absolute proof that in many instances the reports of the visitors were pure inventions. No just Lots were they, "vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked," but men of evil imaginations, who were paid to invent scandal if they could not find it.[\[1\]](#)

I have not, therefore, hesitated to make the sufferings of the last Abbot of Glastonbury the theme of a story, but while I have adhered to the main facts of the tragedy, I have availed myself somewhat of the usual license accorded to

all writers of historical fiction, justified by the example of the great and revered founder of the school, Sir Walter Scott.

In particular, the words put into the mouth of the Abbot, both in his last sermon at Glastonbury and in the trial at Wells, were actually used by his fellow-sufferer, the Prior of the Charterhouse, John Houghton, under precisely similar circumstances: the reader will find the whole of the touching story in the second volume of Froude's "History of England;" it is well worth perusal.

It may be objected that one so young as the hero of the latter portion of the story, "Cuthbert the foundling," could scarcely have been exposed to the operation of the Treason Acts, or required to take the oath of supremacy, in his twenty-first year; but there are examples of sufferers under this *régime* at a more tender age: a month or two, more or less, made small difference in the Tudor period, especially when the interests of the Crown were concerned, or the will of the despot expressed. The concealment of the Abbey treasure, and the sympathy of the Abbot with the Pilgrimage of Grace (how could he be otherwise disposed) are matters of history.

An attempt has been made, within our memory, by a modern historian, to whitewash the memory of the royal "Blue Beard," under whom such fearful atrocities were committed; we are asked to believe that the Carthusians, dying dismembered and mutilated in so horrible a manner, or in the filth of the fetid dungeons in which they were thrown, that the aged Countess of Salisbury flying about the scaffold with her gray hairs dabbled in blood, that the Protestants who were burnt, and Catholics who were drawn

and quartered, sometimes on the same day and at the same place, that such victims as Fisher, More, and Surrey, were all unwilling sacrifices to a high sense of duty on the part of the king who slew them, who also was a right honourable husband, plagued by unworthy wives, and hence deserving of the pity of married men.

But to the writer, the following paragraph from a deservedly popular history, appears more nearly to represent the truth:—

“The temper of such a legislator as Henry the Eighth, and the thorough subservience, the otherwise *incredible* cowardice and baseness of his parliaments, can only be fully exhibited by an enumeration of their penal laws, which for number, variety, severity, and inconsistency are perhaps unequalled in the annals of jurisprudence.

“Instead of the calmness, the foresight, and the wisdom which are looked for in a legislator, we find the wild fantasies and ever-changing, though ever selfish caprices of a spoiled child, joined to the blind fierce malignant passions of a brutal and cruel savage. It would seem as if the disembodied demon of a Caligula or a Nero, the evil spirit that once bore their human form, had again become incarnate upon earth, let loose for some wise (though to dull mortal eyes, dimly discerned) end, to repeat in a distant age, and another clime that same strange, wild, extravagant medley of buffoonery and horror, which is fitted to move at once the laughter and execration of mankind.” (*Knight's Pictorial History*).

This is strong language, but when one rises from a perusal of the deeds committed during this reign of terror, it

seems justified.

The destruction also of the monastic libraries, and the decay of solid learning (Latimer being witness), must ever be regretted by the scholar. Fuller tells us that “the English monks were bookish of themselves, and much inclined to hoard up monuments of learning.” But all these treasures were ruthlessly destroyed or scattered, including books and valuable MS., which would now be worth their weight in gold. John Ball, by no means a *laudator temporis acti*, wrote to Edward VI.:—

“A number of them which purchased these superstitious mansions (the monasteries) reserved of their library books, some to serve their jakes, some to scour their candlesticks, and some to rub their boots, some they sold to the grocers and soap sellers; and some they sent over sea to the bookbinders—not in small number, but at times whole ships full. ... I know a merchant man, which shall at this time be nameless, that bought the contents of two noble libraries for forty shillings a piece. A shame it is to be spoken. This stuff hath he occupied instead of grey paper by the space of more than these ten years, and yet he hath store enough for as many years to come.”

It is true the monks were accused of leading idle lives; but to the unlearned, especially those who get their bread by physical labour, the student poring over his books is always “a drone.”

It may be most true that the monastic system, so serviceable in the middle ages, the only shelter for peaceful men in the midst of bloodshed and strife, the only refuge for learning amongst the densely ignorant, had had its day;

that the hospitals, the almshouses, the workhouses, the schools and colleges, do all the work they once did, and do it better, that in the ages, then to come, they could have filled no useful purpose had they survived.

Well! supposing this granted, does it in any way justify the cruelty of the suppression? The judicious Hallam well observes, that "it is impossible to feel too much indignation at the spirit in which these proceedings were conducted." Had vested and life interests been respected, had the admission of further novices been prohibited, and the buildings themselves, when no longer needed, utilized as hospitals and colleges, and the like; whatever men might think of the change, they would at least admit the moderation of the government; but what consideration can justify the intolerable barbarity of the persecutions.

Two questions may be asked, first, what became of the monks, nearly a hundred thousand, in a population of some three millions, who were thus, with the most meagre of pensions, cruelly turned out of house and home.

It must be replied that a large number, in fact all who could by any contrivance be brought under the scope of either of the numerous laws involving capital punishment, perished by the hand of the executioner. For example, begging in the first instance was punished by whipping, in the second by mutilation, and in the third the beggar was doomed "to suffer pains and execution of death as a felon, and enemy of the commonwealth."^[2] This cruel law, which was probably drawn up by Henry himself, was doubtless aimed especially at the unfortunate monks, who unfitted for labour by their sedentary lives, and unable to obtain work,

would often be forced to the dreadful alternative of starvation or hanging. How many starving monks must have fallen into this dreadful trap, for their pensions even if regularly paid were miserably insufficient, and preferred to hang than to starve; doubtless they formed a large proportion of the eighty thousand criminals, who are said to have perished, by the hands of the executioner, in this dreadful reign.

Secondly: what became of the monastic property amounting, it has been said, to a sum equivalent to fifty millions sterling of our present money, which was to have almost superseded taxation, and accomplished other wonderful ends? It disappeared under Henry's incomprehensible extravagance, and at the hands of his greedy courtiers; and not only was he forced in his latter days to debase the currency, but moreover in the last November of his life, his venal parliament conferred upon him the absolute disposal of all colleges, charities, and hospitals in the kingdom, with all their manors, lands, and hereditaments, receiving only in return his gracious promise that they should all be applied for the public good. Had God not summoned the tyrant to give an account of his stewardship, within two months of the act, we might not have had a college, school, almshouse, or hospital left in England, any more than a monastery; "had he survived a little while longer," says the impartial writer I have before quoted, "he would not have left an hospital for the care of the sick, or a school for the instruction of youth."

But I have already taxed the patience of my readers; I have promised them a tale and instead I am writing an

essay.

A. D. C.

December, 1883.

Footnote

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[1] The reader will find this subject fully and fairly treated in the sixth chapter of the Rev. J. H. Blunt's "History of the Reformation" and the first introductory chapter of the first volume of the new series of Dean Hook's "Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury," from which I have already quoted.

[2] 22 Henry VIII. Cap. 12, and 27 Henry VIII. Cap. 25.

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ERRATUM.

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Page 169, line 5, Read appetens for appietens.



PART I.

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The Last Abbot.



They built in marble; built as they
Who hoped these stones should see the day
When Christ should come; and that these walls
Might stand o'er them till judgment calls.



THE LAST ABBOT OF GLASTONBURY, *A TALE OF THE DAYS OF HENRY VIII.*

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Prologue.

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It is a cold wintry night in the year 1524, the fifteenth of the high and mighty Lord, Henry, Eighth of that name, “by the grace of God King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland,” as the heralds vainly style him.

All day long the clouds have been hanging over the forest of Avalon, heavy and dull as lead, and now towards eventide they descend in snow, an east wind arises, which blows the flakes before it, with such frantic violence, that their direction seems almost parallel to the earth, penetrating every nook of the forest, filling each hollow.

Darkness descends upon the earth, as the storm increases; it is dark everywhere, but darkest in the depths of the sombre wood, amidst the tangled copse, beneath the bare branches of the huge oaks, which wave wildly as if in torture, and anon fall with a crash which startles the boldest beasts of the forest.

A road leads through the heart of this mighty wood, leads towards the famous Abbey-town of Glastonbury, where as folks say Joseph of Arimathæa arrived long ago, and planting his staff, which grew like Aaron’s rod, and put forth buds, determined the site of the future Benedictine Monastery. Do they not yet show the strange foreign thorn tree which grew from that holy staff?[3]

But we are in the wood, and happy were it for us, if we could but rest before the huge fire which imagination pictures in that far off great chamber of the Abbey.

Through the darkness comes a step softly falling on the snow; it draws nearer, and dim outlines become distinct. It is a woman and she carries an infant.

A woman and her child out to-night! the Saints preserve them, especially S. Joseph of Glastonbury; with what a timid glance too she looks behind her from time to time. Does she fear pursuit?

See how she clasps the child to her breast, how she wraps her robe around it, regardless of the exposure of her own person: poor mother, what has brought her out in this wild night? Alas, her strength seems failing: see she stumbles, almost falls, the wind blows so fiercely that she can hardly stand against it,—she stumbles again.

We, as invisible spectators, stand beneath the shade, or what would be in summer the shade of a spreading beech; around its base there is a mossy bank, gently rising, or rather *would* be were it not covered with snow.

She approaches the tree and falls on the slope as one who *can* do no more, who gives up the struggle.

Still she shelters the poor babe.

An hour passes away, she lies as if dead, only there is a ceaseless cry from the child, and from time to time a faint moan from the mother.

Look, there is a light in the wood; it is moving, and now a heavy step, crushing the frozen snow; it is a countryman, and he carries a horn lantern.

A dog, a shepherd's dog, runs by his side.

Will the man pass the tree?—yes *he* may but the dog will not; see he is "pointing," and now he runs to his master, and takes hold of the skirts of his smock.

"What have we here? S. Joseph help us! a woman! Why mistress what doest thou here? Get up, or thou wilt be frozen stiff and stark before morning."

Only a moan in answer: he stoops down and gently, for a rustic, looks at her face; he does not know her, but he sees by the dress and by something indescribable in the face, that she is one of "gentle blood."

"Canst thou not move?"

Another moan.

He strives to raise her, and the dog looks wistfully on, as if in full sympathy. Thy canine heart, poor Tray, is softer than that of the men who drove her forth to-night.

Ah, that is right; she takes courage, strives to rise,—no, she is down again.

"I cannot," she says, "my limbs are frozen; take the child, save my Cuthbert."

"I would fain save you both," says the man, but he strives in vain to do so, it is beyond his power to carry them, and *she* can move no further; she but rises to sink again on the bank, her limbs have lost their power.

"Take my child," she says once more, "and leave me to die; heaven is kinder than man, and the good angels are very near."

The yeoman, for such he is, hesitates, "No one shall say that Giles Hodge forsook thee in thy strait, yet, there is the keeper's cottage within a mile, if I run and take the babe, I may come back and save thee."

"Go, go, for heaven's sake, my boy *must* live, his precious life *must* be saved, then come back for me; he is the heir of"—

Here her voice failed her.

"She speaks the words of wisdom," says Giles, and he takes the babe, leaving the shawl wrapped round the

mother.

“Nay, the shawl, take the shawl for the babe.”

“I can carry it 'neath my smock, and 'twill come to no harm, thou wouldst die without it.”

She starts up, imprints one fervent kiss upon the babe ere it leaves her; alas, it is the last feeble outcome of strength.

Giles runs along the road, as fast as the ground, heavy with snow, and the wind, will permit him; he reaches the house of Stephen Ringwood, the deputy keeper; it is now Curfew time, and the honest woodman is just putting out his fire to go to bed.

“Stephen, Stephen,” shouts Giles, as he knocks at the door.

A loud and heavy barking from the throats of deep-chested dogs.

“Who is there?”

“Thy old crony, Giles Hodge; open to me at once.”

The door opens. “What Saint has sent thee here! and a babe too?”

“Oh, Stephen, come directly, and help me bring the *mother* in; she is out in the snow, spent with toil, and if we arrive not soon she will be *dead*.”

“I have some warm milk on the fire; here, Susan, give some to the babe and give me the rest,” and putting it into a horn, the two started back, leaving the infant with the keeper’s wife.

They reach the tree again.

How still she is.

Giles trembles, bless his tender heart. It is no discredit to thy manhood, Giles.

“Yes, she is dead, she has given her last kiss to the babe.”

They put together some short poles and cord they have brought, which make a sort of litter.

“Carry her gently, Stephen,” says Giles as he wipes his eyes with the sleeves of his smock, “carry her gently, she said the good angels were near her, and I believe they are watching us now, if they are not on the road to paradise with her soul.”



Footnote

[3] See [Note A.](#), Antiquities of Glastonbury.



CHAPTER I. ALL-HALLOW EVEN.

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It was the All-Hallow Even of the year 1538, and the first Evensong of the festival of All Saints had been sung, in the noble Abbey Church of Glastonbury, with all those solemn accessories, which gave such dignity, yet such mystery, to the services of the mediæval Church of England.

The air was yet redolent with the breath of incense, the solemn notes of the Gregorian psalmody yet seemed to echo through the lofty aisles, as the long procession of the Benedictine brethren left the choir, and passed in procession down the church, the Abbot in his gorgeous robes closing the procession.

A noble looking old man was he, that Richard Whiting,—last and not least of the hundred mitred Abbots who had filled that seat of honour and dignity since the first conversion of England. A face full of sweet benignity—one which inspired reverence while it commanded love. His life had been distinguished throughout by the virtues which had ever found congenial home at Glastonbury—piety towards God, and love towards man.

And now the lay congregation who filled the noble nave and aisles, beyond the transept, were leaving the church; the lights were slowly extinguished, and the gloom of the wintry evening was filling the church, save where the one solitary light burnt all night before the high altar.

In the porch, after the doors were closed, stood the sacristan and a young acolyte—one of the choristers, for since a large school was attached to the monastery, they had the assistance of a youthful choir. It was a bright happy face, that of the boy, upon which the moon shone brightly,