

A person in a long, light-colored robe is walking across a vast desert landscape of rolling sand dunes. The person is positioned in the middle ground, walking away from the viewer. The dunes are smooth and undulating, with a trail of footprints leading towards the person. The background shows a hazy horizon with distant mountains under a pale, overcast sky. The overall color palette is warm and monochromatic, dominated by shades of beige, tan, and light brown.

Followers of the Way

Stories of the Desert Fathers (Volume 1)

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Introduction

St. Ephrem had a vision in which he saw a large city with only one devil sitting on the wall half asleep guarding its inhabitants. The thousands of souls were all safely in his clutches either through bondage to sin or sufficiently distracted to ensure they never entered into the real purpose of their lives; to know, love and serve the Lord. He had them where he wanted them and expended little effort to keep them there. Then Ephrem's vision changed and he saw a hermit in his cell in the desert, hands, heart and mind lifted to God in prayer where a multitude of devils attacked him relentlessly as he interceded for the world.

Even though they were solitaries, the anchorites & hermits in the deserts of the Middle East and the communities of monks that came after them were part of a much bigger story. As they fought valiantly in their cells they were like shields locked together in an enormous phalanx that pushed against the forces of darkness, expanding the kingdom of God on earth and compressing the

enemy's territory into an ever decreasing space. *Eph. 6:12 for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.*

They left the world and all its enticements and distractions to pursue their one hearts' desire; unity with God. The ascetic life of prayer, fasting and sacrifice was the discipline and training that helped them subdue the flesh. The attacks of the demons only served to purify their hearts as they clung to the Lord all the more realising their weakness.

The lives of the desert fathers are unique not only because of the miracles that accompanied them (in our own day we often witness miracles wrought through faith), but they lived a truly supernatural life, not merely led by the Spirit but in the very flow of the Spirit where the supernatural life of God was as normal to them as it was to Him.

My reason for compiling this book of stories is to show what degree of communion with God is possible, what it costs, and what it produces in the

lives of those who embark on such a journey at the invitation of the one who said 'Follow me'.

My wife, having read some of the stories, concluded that it would be a good book for children. I think it's true; they are open and know the truth when they hear it.

Similarly it's a book for teenagers. This is not obvious at first as we tend to think of the desert fathers as crusty old men but when they left their possessions behind and began the long walk into the wilderness, having discovered something worth living and dying for, they were often teenagers. Paul of Thebes, the father of monasticism was 15, Anthony of Egypt barely 20 years old.

This is not too surprising though when you think about it. The young are idealistic; they have not drunk from the poisoned chalice of compromise and conformity but rather still seek to discover the true meaning and purpose of their lives.

They endured a brutal apprenticeship, in many ways mirroring those of warrior cultures through

the ages but no more than necessary, not more than the soul can bear. They were drawn and upheld by grace, there was no bravado in their warfare.

They were very much concerned about others. Sometimes this was manifested in hospitality or charity, sometimes quite heroic acts of service as in the case of St Serapion who sold himself as a slave to win the souls of his owners. Their practical wisdom was a guiding light for those who consulted them among their brethren and their humility truly astounding. They were what the Japanese would refer to as 'Bushi no nasake' or tender warriors, as their saviour had shown and trained them to be.

Our journey through life is all about growth and especially growth in the Spiritual life, the desert fathers can be our greatest teachers in a modern world where Christianity has become so domesticated and civilised that it is almost indistinguishable from the atheism that surrounds it.

Hopefully then, these ancient stories will remind us of what it is to be true followers of the way; asceticism to mysticism; discipline to freedom in Christ.

It is simple, but not easy as one of the desert mother's Amma Syncletica reminds us:- *"In the beginning there are a great many battles and a good deal of suffering for those who are advancing towards God and afterwards, ineffable joy. It is like those who wish to light a fire; at first they are choked by the smoke and cry, and by this means obtain what they seek ... so we must also kindle the divine fire in ourselves through tears and hard work."*

1

Paul of Thebes

Born in the province of Tiba (Luxor, Upper Egypt) in the year 229 A.D., Paul was the second son of a very rich man. When the father died, the two sons wanted to share the inheritance, so Peter, being the eldest, took the majority and gave what was left over to his brother Paul. This action caused great friction between the two brothers, and because they could not come to an agreement, they decided to settle the matter in court.

Along the way, they noticed a coffin being carried, and a great multitude mourning the loss. Paul approached one of the men to find out who had died, and the man responded, "Son, this man who died today, delighted in luxuries and lived the life of indulgence, possessed large amounts of gold and silver, and always dressed in expensive attire. Today he left the world and all his riches behind. Take heed my son that we not follow his example, but rather persist in enduring spiritual struggles,

for blessed is the man who lives in this world, but does not belong to this world, for the Lord will reward him richly in His Heavenly Kingdom."

Paul heard these words and felt as if he was spiritually awakened, and suddenly the world before him seemed as naught. He turned to his brother and said, "Brother, let us return." As they were returning home, Paul walked slowly behind his brother, then quickly escaped from his sight. Peter searched for days, and when he could not find his brother, he cried bitterly, "Why did I quarrel with my brother over worldly riches?!"

Having left the town, Paul found an empty tomb, and so he remained within it for three days and three nights, in continuous meditation and prayer. On the fourth day, an angel of the Lord appeared to him and led him into the inner Eastern Wilderness.

The angel directed him into a deserted cave, which was located near a spring of water and a fruitful palm tree. He dressed himself in a tunic he weaved from palms, and diligently prayed, "My Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, save me from the

traps of the enemy, be merciful to me so that I may accomplish Your will and rest safely between Your hands, for to You my King, is all glory and power forever, amen!"

He began his ascetic life in the Eastern Wilderness in the year 250 A.D., and remained there for 80 years.

One day, Abba Anthony thought to himself proudly, "I am the first person to ever venture into and live in the inner wilderness!" but the Lord revealed to him that, "within this wilderness lives a man whom the whole world is not worthy of his footstep." Immediately Abba Anthony took his rod and began searching for this saintly ascetic. He walked for an entire day, and then fell on his knees to pray. He remained praying throughout the night, and in the morning he got up and continued his journey.

As the sun was setting, he noticed a cave nearby. When he approached it, he found the door closed, so he knelt on the ground and said, "My saintly father, you know who I am and where I am from, and I will not leave this place before seeing you!

You who would not refuse the entry of an animal, I ask you, do not refuse me!" Abba Paul then replied from within the cave, "No one asks for charity by scolding, but rather by weeping."

Abba Anthony remained kneeling at the entrance of the cave for a long while, before finally Abba Paul opened the door for him. The two fathers embraced, then prayed together.

As they spoke about the many wonders of God, a raven flew passed and dropped a loaf of bread before them. Abba Paul held the loaf of bread reverently, and turned to Abba Anthony saying, "Blessed is the Lord my God; for eighty years He has provided for me half a loaf of bread daily, but today because of your presence, He has given us a full loaf! Blessed is the Lord, who satisfies the needs of my body!" Together they once again stood to pray before eating.

They spent the entire night praising God, until the morning sun dawned. Abba Anthony then said to Abba Paul, "Blessed is the hour in which God made me worthy of seeing you my father." Abba Paul replied, "Anthony, return now to your cave

and come back to me with the cloak Bishop Athanasius will give you, for with it you must wrap my body for burial; so go quickly, for the hour of my departure has come!" Abba Paul blessed and prayed for Abba Anthony, and then they embraced each other before departing.

Abba Anthony returned to his monastery after a two day journey through the wilderness. His disciples, who were very worried about him being gone so long, rejoiced when they saw him. They ran towards him asking, "Father, where were you?" to which he replied, "I am a sinner and unworthy, for indeed the Lord has revealed to me someone much greater than I." Taking the cloak given to him by Bishop Athanasius, Abba Anthony returned to the saintly father's cave. On arrival he saw a host of angels carrying the soul of the blessed saint Abba Paul. Abba Anthony entered his cave and found the saint lying on the ground with his hands outstretched like a cross. He wept bitterly. He then carefully wrapped the pure saint's body within the cloak, and prayed over him with heartfelt tears.

As he was wondering how he was going to dig a grave for the saint's blessed body, two lions entered the cave, knelt down beside Abba Paul's body and kissed him. They then turned and began licking the feet of Abba Anthony as if to say, 'where shall we dig?' Abba Anthony drew the sign of the cross on the ground inside the cave, and immediately the lions began digging. After Abba Anthony placed Abba Paul's body within the grave, he took his garment made from weaved palm, and went back to the Patriarch Abba Athanasius and told him all that he had seen and experienced of the life of the great Abba Paul. The Patriarch took Abba Paul's garment as a blessing and only wore it three times a year: on the feast of Epiphany, Easter and the Ascension of our gracious Saviour.

Bishop Athanasius had the thought of bringing back from the wilderness the body of Abba Paul, so Abba Anthony, together with some priests went in search for Abba Paul's cave. After two days of wandering through the wilderness, they became disoriented and were unable to find the saint's cave. Abba Paul then appeared to Abba Athanasius in a vision saying, "Send word for the

fathers to return from their search, because it is God's will that no one find my body." Immediately the Patriarch sent forth Abba Olgious that he might convey Abba Paul's message to the fathers, so that they may return from the wilderness.

2

Serapion the Sindonite

This wonderful anchorite had no other hermitage for many years but his love of God. His body was the cell in which his soul dwelt, and wherever the body went the soul remained undisturbed, and suffered nothing to interrupt its spiritual recollection and its union with God. Serapion was an Egyptian, and the ascetic tastes which early developed themselves in him led him to the great and holy men of the desert, with whom he underwent a severe probation. He brought his body and soul into subjection by austere mortification of the senses and the practice of obedience. He became thereby so docile to the inspirations of the Holy Ghost that he was moved by grace as easily and surely as a boat is guided by the rudder. His penances were so great that they appeared superhuman, and gained for him the name of 'the impassible' because no one could conceive that a man who was capable of suffering

could undergo so much. He was also called the Sindonite, from the piece of linen which formed his only garment.

Unbroken contemplation of the Holy Scriptures, together with his spiritual and bodily mortifications, grounded him securely in humility and in the spirit of penance. Therefore, the guides of his interior life made no opposition when he formed the resolution of exchanging his cell for the world, and of living the life of an anchorite in the midst of other men.

Serapion in his desire of attempting to save souls from the world's abyss came to the voluptuous city of Corinth, where the people were still frivolous, notwithstanding the Epistles of St Paul to them, and where there were singers and actors in abundance. A heathen juggler who with his whole family lived on the boards of the theatre filled Serapion's heart with the deepest compassion. He had no means of getting near these unhappy people but by selling himself to them as a slave, and so entering their service, and seeking by his life and his love to win them to the

Gospel. He sealed up and kept the twenty florins which he received as his price. He paid no attention to the dissolute, unbridled life, which was led in this house, and which would have been a mortal grief to one less perfect than he. A noble-hearted man who sees other men drowning in a muddy pond and longs to save them, does not consider the filthiness of the water, but precipitates himself into it; in like manner did Serapion act for the sake of these souls in danger.

He punctually fulfilled the lowest offices, carried water, washed his master's feet, and was never discontented nor weary of the most repulsive labour, but slept little and fasted much. Absorbed in the contemplation of heavenly things, he kept almost continual silence ; and when he did speak, there flowed from his lips celestial wisdom, which filled the poor juggler, first with amazement, then with admiration, and finally with love. He treated his wonderful servant with respect, listened more and more to his admonitions, asked his advice, and at length renounced his miserable profession, and was converted to Christianity. His family followed his example.

Then they all looked upon their slave with very different eyes, and the more pious they became the more highly they prized him. After some time Serapion's master said to him, "My brother, because you have delivered us from the disgraceful slavery of heathenism, and have redeemed us from the world and from sin, I will free you from my service, and let you live where and how you wish" Serapion answered, "Now that God has given you the grace to recognise the truth and to enter upon the right road to salvation, I can leave you with comfort, and go in search of other souls to save." And he related to them how he was an Egyptian monk, and a free man ; and how, after the example of the Son of God, who took upon Himself the form of a servant to free the world from the bondage of sin, he had of his own will become their slave out of love for their souls. Then they burst into tears, and implored him to remain with them as their lord and father. But Serapion could be detained no longer, and gave them back the price they had paid for him.

"Oh! Keep this money which has helped to save us" they exclaimed, weeping, "or distribute it

amongst the poor” “It belongs to you and not to me” said Serapion “for I am a poor monk, who can neither possess nor give away anything.” And he took an affectionate leave of them.

Divine Providence guided him to Lacedasmon to a childless widow, who was ill, and in extreme want. He knew not how to help her, yet he could not leave her in such misery. He heard that a distinguished man of that town, who was infected by the Manichean heresy, but otherwise upright, was in want of an active servant. He went immediately to him, sold himself to him, gave the proceeds to the poor widow, and managed so that within the course of two years, his master’s family and whole household returned to the Catholic faith. This master also gave his holy slave his liberty out of gratitude, clothed him in a good coat and cloak, and gave him a book of the Gospels as well. Serapion joyfully departed; he had never before been so well provided for. He had indeed never been in such want of it before, for the winter was cold in the mountains of Lacedaemon. As he was wandering on, peacefully awaiting God’s guidance, he met a poor half-naked man.

Quickly Serapion pulled off his cloak and gave it to the beggar, who wrapped himself comfortably in it. He went a little farther, and found an old man lying in the road nearly frozen with cold. He did not hesitate to take off his coat and cover him with it, and went his way in his linen garment only. In the evening he met some compassionate people who gave him shelter; and when they asked him, who could have so robbed him, Serapion pointed to the book of the Gospels, and said, "It was this book that did it." But even that book did not long remain in his possession. In the neighbouring town he sold it for the benefit of a family who had fallen into great distress. It was bought by an ecclesiastic, who gently rebuked Serapion for parting with such a treasure. He answered humbly, "You will hardly believe it, my father, but it seemed to me as if the Gospel was constantly crying out to me, Go, sell all that thou hast and give to the poor. Now, this very book was all that I had, and therefore I sold it"

In Athens there were many philosophers, but very few charitable people. Serapion was there three days without receiving a mouthful of bread. Then

he joined some people who were assembled in a public place, and told them that since he had left his native country of Egypt, he had fallen into the hands of a hard usurer, who tormented him without ceasing. Everyone was willing to help him if he would only name the usurer. "It is hunger," said Serapion. A philosopher who was passing by contemptuously threw him a piece of silver. Serapion humbly picked up the money and took it to the nearest baker's shop, where he received a single loaf, and then contentedly left the city. The money was brought back to the philosopher, with the exception of the halfpenny the loaf had cost and he then confessed that the poor stranger was further advanced in contempt of the world than he.

From Greece Serapion sailed to Rome. As he ate nothing whatever in the first days of the voyage, the other passengers thought he suffered from sea sickness, and did not trouble themselves at all about him. At last on the fifth day, someone said to him, "Why don't you eat?" Serapion answered "Because I have nothing, nor have I any money to buy even a bit of bread" The people were all

amazed at such mortification. One of the sailors alone exclaimed “You rogue! If you have no money, how can you pay for your passage?” “I cannot pay for it, it is true,” replied Serapion, gently, “but if you positively will not give me a free passage, make for the nearest coast and set me ashore there” “No “said the captain, “I will not do that, for it would delay us, and wind and weather have never before been so favourable to us as they are this voyage.”

The passengers then vied with each other in supplying Serapion with food and drink, which he received with the greatest gratitude, and thus arrived safely at Rome.

His first care was to visit with great devotion the tombs of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and those of the holy martyrs. His second was to serve his neighbour and that in his own peculiar manner, which he had learnt from his Divine Redeemer Himself he made himself a servant in order to save souls. Twice more he practiced this heroic deed of love, twice more he became the slave of men, who by their conduct would have been

repulsive to his natural feelings, but whom he loved because he looked upon them with the eye of faith, and saw a trace of the divine image still remaining in them. And God, who made Himself the slave of sinful men for their redemption, assisted Serapion by His grace, so that twice men were converted and saved who seemed ready to fall into everlasting perdition, they could not withstand such self-sacrifice and humility, such obedience, and such love. For thirty years Serapion fulfilled his task, which was to imitate this feature in the life of the Incarnate God.

Then he returned to the desert, his home, where he soon found death, and through death eternal and blessed liberty in return for a short slavery. When the Patriarch of Alexandria, St John the Almoner, read the history of Serapion's life, he called his steward, and said, with many tears, "How miserable it would be in us to pride ourselves on giving our goods to the poor. This holy Serapion found means to give himself to them, and that not once but many times."

3

St Mary the hermit

In the 4th century lived an ascetic monk priest by the name of Father Zocima who was from a monastery in Palestine. The monastery's location was not far from the wilderness where our Lord Jesus Christ fasted for forty days and nights. It is a monastic custom that each year the monks would spend the spiritual days of Lent in solitude outside of the monastery.

It was the first Sunday of the Great Lent, when Abba Zocima ventured into the wilderness to spend the forty days in spiritual retreat. After these holy days were over, Abba Zocima was walking back to the monastery when he noticed a human form quickly pass him by. He made the sign of the cross and carefully approached the figure. He then heard a voice saying, "Give me your cape so that I may cover my nakedness, for I am a woman." She knelt before Abba Zocima and said, "Bless me Abba Zocima, for you are a priest of God." After

he prayed for her, he asked that she reveal her story.

"I was born in Egypt in the year 344. When I was twelve years old, I disobeyed my father's wish and travelled to Alexandria; I am ashamed to think how I first lost my virginity there, and how I was set on fire with the endless desire for pleasure. I was exposed to many harmful things, which at such an early age destroyed the purity of my mind. I then became curious to experience many things, and so I willingly surrendered myself to lusts and bodily desires. As a result, I lost my virginity at the age of seventeen.

While I was living in this way, one summer I saw a great crowd of men going down toward the sea. I stopped one of them and asked him where they were going, and he said, "We are all going to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Holy Cross. "Drawn by curiosity, I joined the pilgrims going by ship to Jerusalem. On the way I seduced many of my companions, and I continued to live in this way in Jerusalem.

As the feast day of the Holy Cross approached, I wanted to enter the church like everyone else, but this mysterious force prevented me. The more I persisted in trying to enter, the more it would throw me back. Giving up, I sat in a lonely place not far from the church and wondered about this strange experience. I then thought to myself, 'it must be because I am a sinner and unworthy of entering such a place, for what relation is there between an evil one such as myself, and the cross of the Lord Jesus?' Suddenly guilt filled my heart and I began to cry bitterly while beating on my chest. I then carefully approached the icon of St. Mary and said, "Was not your Son incarnated for the salvation of sinners? If this is so, please help me! O faithful pleader, ask your Son to make me worthy of entering His church so that I may throw myself before His Holy Cross.

Save me from this power that resists my entry, and I promise never to return to my worldly and sinful life, with all its desires and pleasures, and I shall go wherever the Lord leads me!"

After finishing my prayers of repentance, the Lord permitted that I enter into His holy church. I felt so shameful and unworthy before His greatness and majesty, that slowly I approached His Holy Cross and fell to the ground before it weeping bitterly.

I lost track of time during my prayers, and when I lifted my head, I found it was midday. I left the church glorifying the Lord saying, "Glory be to you my Lord, God and Saviour, who accepted the pleadings of Your mother on my behalf, for You have accepted me, just as You accept all sinners who return to You. I cannot comprehend the compassion and unlimited love and the new life you grant to those who repent! And as for you blessed Virgin Mother, pray to your Son for me, that He may lead me along the paths of righteousness, and now my Master and Lord, into your hands do I surrender my life." I then heard a voice saying, "Cross the River Jordan and there you will find the place of your salvation." On the way a man gave me three pieces of silver with which to buy bread. I bought three loaves and took them with me on my journey. I was then

twenty nine years old, and now it has been forty five years since I left the holy city Jerusalem.

I reached the church of St. John the Baptist which is located near the Jordan. The memory of my many sins still haunted me, so I washed my face in the river before entering the holy place and confessing my sins to the priest. When the father absolved me, I felt an incredible relief; it was as though a burden had been lifted! I then completed my joy by receiving the Holy Sacraments.

I left the church and fed on a little of the bread I had with me. I continued walking for two days without eating. I then stopped a while to rest before sailing by boat to the other side of the Jordan River.

The trials and satanic wars I faced were severe, and to this day I remember them and tremble. For seventeen years the devil stirred within me disturbing and lustful desires. Many times I hungered and thirsted, which brought about memories of my past, and I craved to taste the sweet liquors I was once so accustomed to drinking...Many secular songs filled my mind, and

then I would beat on my chest remembering the day of my repentance, and once again surrender myself with tears of repentance before the Lord, asking for the pleadings of His Virgin Mother St. Mary.

After relentless spiritual struggles and many tears, a bright light would surround me and immediately the devil would flee. I would then live in the comfort and security of God's glory...

When I had eaten the three loaves of bread I had with me, I began eating from the grass of the wilderness...my clothes wore out and my body was burnt many times from the extreme heat of the sun, and trembled greatly from the cold desert nights, but God in His infinite love preserved me so that my heart rejoiced exceedingly. Father, you are the first person I have seen since crossing the Jordan River many years ago, so I ask you to pray for me." She knelt before Abba Zocima to take his blessings, and he lifted up his hands towards heaven saying, "Blessed are You O God in the highest, who is the performer of great miracles.

Blessed is your holy name, for you have revealed to me the many treasures of your grace."

St. Mary said to him, "Father, please do not tell anyone about me before my death. Now, you must return to your monastery in peace. The following year you will not be able to come to me during the days of Lent, for this is God's will, but come and meet me on the shores of the Jordan on Holy Thursday, and bring for me the Holy Body and Blood of my Lord Jesus Christ.

Abba Zocima, I ask you to tell Abba John the abbot of your monastery to keep close watch over his flock, for they are in need of care and discipline. And finally, do not forget to pray for me."

Abba Zocima returned to his monastery on Palm Sunday, and kept in his heart all that he had seen and heard, just as St. Mary requested of him. The following year, he was unable to leave the monastery during Lent because he was struck by a severe fever. He then remembered St. Mary's words, and realised that his illness was the will of God.

After the Holy Mass on Holy Thursday, Abba Zocima carefully carried the Holy Sacraments, and took with him some vegetables and went out seeking the blessed saint Mary.

When he reached the shores of the Jordan River, he saw the saint in the distance making the sign of the cross on the water, then walked upon it until she stood before him. She knelt before the Holy Body and Blood of Christ in complete reverence and prayed the Orthodox Creed and the Lord's Prayer before receiving the Holy Sacraments.

She then said to Abba Zocima, "By the will of God, come to me next year, and meet me at the cave where you first saw me." He prayed for her before she once again made the sign of the cross on the water and crossed over, returning to her cave.

The following year, the saintly father Zocima went to the cave of St. Mary and found her kneeling towards the east; she had already passed away. Abba Zocima fell to the ground crying, then, as he got up to pray, he noticed a message engraved beside her: "Abba Zocima, bury the body of Mary

the Repentant in this place and leave this body of sin for the dust." Abba Zocima was comforted by this message and marvelled when he saw a lion sitting by guarding her body. When he became worried as to how to dig a grave for her, the lion which sat guarding the body began digging. Abba Zocima then prayed over the body of St. Mary the hermit, before burying her and placing the sign of the cross on her cave.

Abba Zocima returned to his monastery praising and glorifying God's holy name. He gathered together all the monks of the monastery and told them the beautiful story of the repentance of the pure saint Mary the hermit. Her aromatic story is a comforting and encouraging meditation on God's mercies for all those who struggle in the life of purity and virtues.

Abba Zocima kept returning to her cave each year during the days of Holy Lent, until he rested in peace at the age of one hundred.

4

Paul the simple

In the desert inhabited by St. Antony, a peasant, sixty years of age, was wandering restlessly to and fro in great distress. His wife, who was young and beautiful, but very wicked, had deceived him and grievously offended God. He had surrendered to her his little house and all that he possessed, and hastened away without knowing what was to become of him. He was a simple, guileless man, who would not for the world have told a lie, or done his neighbour any harm. He was called Paul. For eight days he strayed about, helpless and full of anxiety. Then God suggested to him to forget all things else, and to think only of the salvation of his soul; and he arose and went straightway to Antony, and said to him that he wished to learn to be an anchorite. Antony replied that it was not possible at his age; he must serve God very piously some other way, for he could never bear the austerity of the ascetic life. Only teach me

what I have to do answered Paul quietly, “and I will certainly accomplish it” “It is impossible” replied Antony; “you cannot become an anchorite. But if you are resolved to leave the world, go into a cloister where monks live together, that you may, in case of need, find the care and support which your age requires. Here you will find nothing, for I live entirely alone and only eat a little every third or fourth day” Then Antony went back into his cell, and shut himself up in it for three days, and applied himself to his prayers and contemplations, leaving to Paul the choice whether he would take his advice or not. On the fourth day Antony emerged from his cavern and Paul was still there.

“My dear old man” he said kindly, “this is no place for you” “My father, “replied Paul resolutely, “I will die nowhere but on this very spot.” Antony perceived that he had no victuals whatever with him, and as he did not yet know what spirit inspired the old man, he took him into his cell, gave him some bread and water, and said “ Paul, you may become perfect and blessed, if you will observe obedience.” “I will observe it, only command” said Paul, simply. This childlike

readiness to obey, at such an advanced age, much rejoiced Antony, and he immediately began to treat Paul as a soul endowed with great grace. He said to him “Now go out, place yourself before the cavern, and pray until I bring you some work. Paul went out, and betook himself to prayer. Antony left him standing the whole day and the whole night; and whenever he looked at him through a little crevice in his cell, he saw him standing immersed in prayer, so immovably on the same spot, that during the twenty-four hours he did not stir a hairs-breadth, careless alike of the scorching heat of the sun and of the nightly dews. Then Antony brought him some palm leaves steeped in water, and said “ Plait a rope out of these as you see me do” It was troublesome and laborious work, but Paul did it with great diligence, and made a piece fifteen ells long. But when Antony saw the rope, he was not pleased with it, and said “You have twisted it too tightly; undo it, and plait it again more loosely” Paul unplaited all the fifteen ells, and then plaited them together again, which was extremely difficult, because the damp and moistened palm-leaves had got bent and crooked with the first plaiting. He had to

practice this for seven whole days, without receiving food or drink, because Antony wished to try whether he would be patient under neglect, or was to be deterred by difficulties. Paul's courage did not fail him; he never complained by word or look, and cheerfully remained at his work.

Antony rejoiced more and more; and, going to him after sunset, asked him "Will you now eat a little bread with me, my dear Paul?" "As you will, my father!" was the answer. They went into the cavern, and Antony brought out four little loaves, of six ounces each, one for himself, and three for Paul. They were so hard and dry that they required to be soaked in water. In the meantime Antony recited a psalm, and repeated it twelve times, Paul joyfully reciting it with him. Then the holy master said to his holy disciple "We will sit down, we will not eat yet, but ponder on the benefits of God." And as night had come on, he added "The meal-time is past, let us make our thanksgiving, and retire to rest." Paul obeyed without hesitation. At midnight Antony aroused him for prayer, and on the evening of that day they first tasted bread. When they had each eaten a loaf, Antony, who

never took more, said “Take another little loaf, and eat it.” “If you will eat another, I will, but not otherwise,” answered Paul. “I cannot, because I am a poor anchorite, and as such must live poorly” replied Antony. “Then I cannot either, because I want to become an anchorite” said Paul, quietly.

St. Antony taught as follows about obedience: “Our Lord has said, I am come, not to do my will but the will of Him who sent me” “This must be our guide. If any one wishes to become perfect in a short time, let him not be his own teacher and master, and let him not follow his own will, even when his will is not evil. For Christ’s will was certainly not opposed to the will of His heavenly Father, but the reverse; and yet He would not do His own will, in order to teach us obedience, which consists, above all, in the complete renunciation of our own will. The Son of God could not have erred, if He had followed His own will, and yet He followed it not. How much less ought we, who with the best intentions often go so far astray, to act from our own impulses, if we wish to reach the highest perfection” Antony exercised his disciples according to this doctrine,

and Paul submitted himself with incredible humility and simplicity to such discipline. First, he had for a whole day to draw water out of the well, and pour it out again directly, then to tear his habit, to mend it, and to tear it again ; and many times to pull baskets to pieces, and to plait them together again. Once Antony received a present of a vase of honey. He said to Paul “ Break the vessel, and let the honey fall upon the sand” And directly after, when his command had been fulfilled, he added “Now gather up the honey, and put it into another bowl quite clean, and without any admixture of sand” If we consider how man is visited by God with innumerable providences and judgments, the reason of which he cannot fathom, and which frequently run counter to human prudence and sagacity, we shall deem that school wise and loving in which Paul was exercised to so great a degree in equanimity and resignation. And if we consider the proneness of every man to prefer his own will to all else, we shall praise God, whose grace renders possible such abnegation of our strongest inclinations, and love that man who received grace in such unspeakable purity of soul, and corresponded to it so faithfully.

After Antony had convinced himself that Paul was obedient to him in all the strictness of the spiritual life, he said : “See now, my brother, if you can trust yourself to live on, day after day, in this manner, I will keep you with me” With exceeding cheerfulness Paul answered “I do not know, my father, what difficulties are yet to come, and whether you will teach and order me to do hard things ; for all that I have done or observed in you I can accomplish by God’s help, and without very great exertion” After a few months Antony conducted this soul, so perfect in its simplicity, into a cell which was about a thousand paces distant from his own, and said “ Paul, in the name of Jesus, and by His grace you are now an anchorite ; live in solitude, labour diligently, raise up your thoughts, your heart, and your mind to Almighty God whilst your hands are busy; do not eat nor drink before sunset, and never enough to satisfy yourself; learn to struggle and combat with our ancient adversary the devil, and practice punctually all that I have told or shown to you” Paul received this exhortation with the greatest attention, and followed it with equal exactness, for he looked upon it as given to him by God Himself.

Antony visited him sometimes, and rejoiced over this simple piety, which had no suspicion of the height of its own virtue; and when strange brethren were with him, he often called Paul, that he might edify them, and serve them for a model. Once some very holy and enlightened brethren came to visit Antony, and Paul was sent for to serve them, which he most willingly did with humble joy. These saintly men conversed together upon divine things, and once happened to be speaking of the prophets. As Paul had never heard of them, he asked ingenuously “Were the prophets before Christ, or was Christ before the prophets?” Antony almost blushed at this question, and said to Paul kindly “Be silent, my brother” and Paul held his peace. The brethren remained three weeks with Antony, and Paul served them with the greatest care, but in such unbroken silence, that at last they said, “Why do you not speak to us?” Paul smiled sweetly, but did not answer. When, therefore, the brethren asked Antony the cause, and he could not at all recollect having ordered anything of the kind, he said to Paul “Speak then to the brethren ; why are you silent ?” Because you commanded me, my father” answered Paul quietly.

Then Antony exclaimed “my brethren! Paul condemns us all, for none of us observe and follow the inspirations of the Holy Ghost as carefully as he takes heed of each word that I speak to him” Paul was precisely one of those ‘little ones’ to whom God reveals His eternal mysteries. The sublime and sanctifying mystery of the obedience of the Eternal Son in the Incarnation was clear to him; not to his intellect, but to his heart. He obeyed because his God was obedient “That is the highest degree of obedience” says St. Bonaventure in his ‘Golden Ladder of the Virtues’

According to the teaching of St. Antony, certain evil spirits ruled men through certain vices. If anyone had fully subdued in himself and entirely rooted out any vice, such as pride, covetousness, sloth, or envy, Almighty God would sometimes reward his valiant struggle by deputing to him power over the demon of this vice in others. By humility and obedience, Paul so thoroughly conquered the old man in himself, that he quickly raised himself to the highest perfection. The power of God found no purer instrument than

this simple old man, and therefore his prayers became nearly all- powerful over the devils and those possessed by them. Antony caused the most melancholy cases of this kind to be delivered by his beloved Paul, perhaps out of humility, for saints always vie with each other in this virtue. Once a youth was brought to him who was tormented almost to madness by the demon of blasphemy. He took him to Paul, and said “Drive the evil spirit out of this soul, that it may be able to love and praise God” “Why don’t you do it yourself, my father?” asked Paul. “Because I have not time” answered Antony, and then went away. Paul made a most fervent prayer, and then said “Have you heard, you bad demon, Antony commands you to leave this soul?” But the youth only raved more wickedly and wildly against God, and against all that was holy. “Leave this soul, or I will complain of you to Christ” repeated Paul. Still there were no results. He then went out into the burning noonday sun of Egypt, which is not unlike the Babylonian furnace, and, climbing a rock, he said “Beloved redeemer, You see that I stand here; now I will not go away, neither will I sleep, eat, or drink, till You have delivered this

poor youth from the evil spirit; for Antony has ordered me to ask You” And by this dove-like simplicity he accomplished the work.

5

Ammon, Abbot of Nitria

In a country house near Alexandria a young man sat opposite a maiden, and he explained to her the seventh chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians, which talks about the pre-eminence of the life of virginity over the state of matrimony, a superiority which the holy Apostle points out when he says : “The virgin thinks on the things of the Lord : that she may be holy both in body and in spirit” And “More blessed shall she be if she remain a virgin” These two young people were in festal garments, and wore wreaths of flowers on their heads; this was their bridal dress, for they had just been married. The young man was called Ammon.

He was of a rich and noble family, had lost his parents when a child, and had received an excellent education from his uncle, so as to be able

to shine in the world. But grace took possession of his soul so early and so completely, that the happiness and splendour of the world never had the smallest attraction for him. Riches, honours, enjoyments, and pleasures, repelled instead of alluring him. His uncle, who was otherwise an upright man, saw this with great grief, and imagined that marriage would be the best means of suggesting other thoughts to Ammon. Without asking him, he concluded an alliance for him with the daughter of a distinguished man, and after all was settled, Ammon heard, for the first time, of the arrangement. Pure souls are safe in God's hands. Ammon submitted himself outwardly to his uncle, whom he tenderly loved and honoured. But grace was so strong within him that it overflowed upon his bride; and the elevation of his soul was so great, that it raised her also above earthly things. After Ammon had imparted to her what the Apostle Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, says about virginity, and what our Divine Saviour says of heaven in the nineteenth chapter of the Evangelist St. Matthew, there sprang up in the heart of the young maiden the flame of heavenly love, and they both agreed to

remain in a state of virginity. Ammon would have wished to be able at once to follow the life of an anchorite, but he would not take this step without the consent of his bride; and as she did not know what would become of her if he left her, she begged him not to separate from her for the present. Ammon was content, and they then began a peaceful angelic life, which they led together for eighteen years.

They inhabited a pleasant country house, surrounded by a large garden, and Ammon occupied himself diligently with its cultivation. He gave his especial care to a garden of balsam-trees, because those trees, like vines, require to be cultivated with great trouble, in order that they may exude their precious odoriferous gum, which is used for incense and for medicinal purposes. His wife superintended the household, worked diligently in order to clothe the aged and poor, visited and tended the sick, and sanctified these simple occupations, as Ammon did his, by a continual elevation of the heart to God. Twice a day they recited psalms together, and towards evening they united again in taking a simple meal.

Their days thus passed in a peace which the world knows not and gives not, and their prayers were so efficacious that grace descended upon them more and more abundantly. The whole neighbourhood was edified by the conduct of these two earthly angels. Virgins who thirsted after the heights of perfection requested the counsel and prayers of this holy woman ; men and youths who wished to secure their salvation turned to Ammon for instruction ; and every soul that approached them in any kind of trouble left them consoled and strengthened. Although it is not named amongst His seven gifts, the gift of consolation is the work of the Holy Ghost, Whom our Blessed Lord calls “the Comforter”

One day Ammon’s pious wife said to him, “My dear lord, it is now eighteen years since, by God’s grace, I have followed your salutary advice; if now you will take mine, I shall be assured that you love me heartily in God” Ammon replied that she might always be assured of that, whether he took her advice or not; and asked what it was. “I think” said she “that you and perhaps I also, could do more for the salvation of the souls of others, if we

lived separated from one another. Formerly you had compassion on my youth and inexperience, and remained with me ; but now that I have become your disciple in the spiritual life, I think it only right that I should give you your full liberty, in order that thy great wisdom and virtue may be no longer hidden” With heartfelt joy Ammon blessed the goodness of God, and thanked his wife, saying, “That thought came from above, my dear sister, and since you are willing, I will build a hut for myself in solitude. But you remain in this house, under the protection of Almighty God” He gave her all his property, that she might be unfettered in practicing works of mercy; and before long, some pious virgins joined her, with whom she led an ascetic life, and they composed in reality, if not in form, a monastic community.

After taking leave of his wife, and promising to visit her once or twice a year, Ammon departed into the desert, where he remained twenty-two years. He was one of those rare men who possess such independent strength of mind, that whatever direction they take, they receive little from other men, but give them very much, and can arouse

them to great things. Therefore his spirit did not urge him towards the universal pilgrimage of the day to Antony, but like Antony he sought first perfect solitude with God; and it was not till later that he visited the great patriarch, and formed an intimate friendship with him, as was to be expected from two holy souls united together in God. Ammon established himself in Lower Egypt, his native country. There, west of Alexandria, lay the great Lake Mareotis, half marsh, half water, such as are often found on the coasts of the Mediterranean, where they are not rocky. On the southern shore of this lake, which Palladius only reached after a journey of a day and a half, a great deal of saltpetre or nitre was dug up, and therefore that part of the country was called Nitria. It reached as far as a vast desert, which stretched out to Mauritania, in Northern Africa, but to the south may have extended even into the impenetrable centre of Africa. Limestone rocks, offshoots of the Lybian mountains, rose up in this desert, and formed the mountain of Nitria, which Ammon, in the first half of the fourth century, chose for his hermitage, and upon which Palladius, towards the

end of the same century, found five thousand monks.

In this desert Ammon fitted up for himself a cavern for a cell, and raised himself to the highest contemplation and knowledge of the truth. The powers which he imbibed from the fullness of divine light and divine love overflowed out of his soul upon the souls of others, vivifying, refreshing, and purifying them like the streams of water that descend from a high mountain into a valley. He had reached this intimate union with God by a different road from Paul of Thebes, from Antony, or Hilarion.

He had not been able to withdraw himself from the world, and to fly into the unfrequented desert in his tender youth. His circumstances were such that everything was at his command which generally brings earthly happiness to men. But men who love God look at all things which they find around them only in the light in which they are seen by the eye of faith, and by keeping this view consistently and thoroughly before them,

they make for themselves a new and rightful happiness.

Whilst the faint-hearted call them indiscreet and eccentric, they alone are really of sound mind; and whilst men of the world pity them, they advance to the conquest of true felicity. And to that end they have a sure guide, the same that Ammon had, the unadulterated inspired Writings “You shall buy as though you possessed not” is said in that wonderful Epistle to the Corinthians, which puts before us the ideal of perfection, and shows it to be attainable, yet without discouraging the great majority who do not wish to put it in practice. Ammon strove after it with all his might, and he was so filled with the prospect and hope of heavenly goods and eternal joys, that earthly and temporal goods were as little considered by him as if he had not possessed them. He saw them with his eyes, and handled them with his hands, and was surrounded by them, and yet he had detached himself so completely from them, that now in the solitude of the desert he was no poorer than in his rich house.

Before long he became in Lower Egypt what Antony was in Thebais and Hilarion in Palestine, the teacher and the centre of the spiritual life. Those who sought salvation came in troops to the mountain of Nitria, and many remained with Ammon, and became anchorites. The mountain resembled a beehive, so perforated was it with cells, whose inhabitants nourished themselves with the sweet honey of holy contemplations. Their occupation was weaving linen, the produce of which Ammon employed partly for the support of the brotherhood, partly for the poor far and near, and partly for the entertainment of their numerous guests. Hospitality was practiced to the utmost.

When strangers came, the monks hastened to meet them, and singing psalms, conducted them first to the church, and then to the spacious hospice, where they washed their feet, brought them food and drink, and waited on them. A large house which was on the mountain, near to the church, was devoted entirely to guests. There they might live for years, if they so wished, and during the first eight days no work was required from them. But if they stayed longer, they had to work

in the kitchen garden, or the kitchen, or the bakery, or in some other household labour, and also to observe the universal silence which was established at certain hours. If learned or scientific men came, they were provided with books and writings, in order to maintain themselves by their own kind of work, and they also had to accommodate themselves to the general way of life, so as to make no disturbance in the monastic rule. At regular hours, many times each day, the monks said certain psalms, and sang hymns and canticles, so that the whole mountain resounded with heavenly choirs. Every day also Ammon instructed them in the duties of the ascetic life, and explained to them the Holy Scriptures. On Saturday and Sunday they assembled in the great church, halfway up the mountain. By degrees, as many as eight priests were required for this numerous congregation and its spiritual necessities; but the senior one always offered the holy sacrifice of the Mass, and preached. If any of Ammon's spiritual sons felt himself called to a life of unusually severe penance, and had first given proofs of his humility and constancy, he received permission to retire from the community life at

Nitria to a greater solitude. Such anchorites pitched their tents ten miles further into the desert; and at the time that there were five thousand brethren living in community at Nitria, six hundred had retired into that part of the desert, which, from the number of their cells and huts, received the name of Cellia. These cells were so wide apart, that no anchorite could be either seen or heard by his next neighbour. Each one remained alone with his own work, which he took to Nitria once or twice a year, and received in exchange his necessary provisions. No one ever visited another to converse with him. No one spoke to another for recreation; but if any one of them was far advanced in the spiritual life, and knew that another was waging a terrible combat, he went to him to give him advice or consolation. The hermits of Cellia had a church of their own, which was situated in the centre of their desert, wherein they likewise assembled on Saturdays and Sundays. Some of them lived at a distance of three or four miles from it. There they met, but only as strangers come down from heaven, to carry on upon earth the occupation of the blessed, namely, to worship God. When the service was over, each

returned home in silence. If anyone did not appear, the others then knew that he must be sick and they visited him, but cautiously, and not all at the same time. Suffice it to say, that if they lived outwardly apart, and without a single temporal consolation, they were inwardly united in the holy love of God and their neighbour, and in this union they were living members of the body of Christ, through Whom again they were united to their heavenly Father, and could say, with greater perfection than the Apostle Philip, whose supernatural eye had not then been enlightened by the Holy Ghost “It is enough for us”

The holy founder of this pious community was endowed with unusual gifts and graces, and could read the secrets of souls and of times as if from an open book. Some afflicted parents once brought their only son to Nitria in bonds and chains. He had been bitten by a mad dog, and now in his madness he sought to attack others. The parents told Ammon their trouble, and besought his intercession. “My dear children” he replied “my poor prayers can do very little in this affair, but you yourselves can do a great deal” They asked

how that could be; and he said “You have robbed a poor widow of her cow; give it back to her, and our good God will take such pleasure in that act, that He will restore your son to health” Ashamed and penitent, but full of hope, they returned home, repaired their misdeed, and their son recovered. Another time two men assured him that they wished to do him a service out of love for God. “I am glad of that” said Ammon, on purpose to try them; “I will give you an opportunity at once. Someone in your village has given us a large new cask, which we are in great want of, to keep water in for our guests to drink. I beg of you to send it up here” They promised to do so, and left him. But one of them repented of his promise, and said to the other, “I shall certainly not send the cask up to the mountain; it would destroy my camel” But the other kept his word, although he had only a little ass, not without great trouble and labour to himself and his beast. When Ammon saw him coming, he went kindly to meet him, thanked him, and said “See, it has done thy companion no good to take such excessive care of his camel, for in the meantime the hyenas have torn it to pieces” And when the man returned the next day to his village,

he found his companion tearing his hair, because the wild beasts had devoured his camel during the night.

Once St. Antony sent a friendly greeting to the holy Ammon, with an invitation to visit him once more. Thirteen days journey divided them, but Ammon arose without hesitation, and, accompanied by the messenger and his favourite disciple, Theodore, made the pilgrimage from the mountain of Nitria to the mountain of Colzim. They journeyed safely as far as the arm of the Nile called the Lycus, and there they sought for a boat in which to cross it. But it was an unpeopled country, traversed by no traders, and therefore no boat was to be found, and nothing was left for them but to swim across the river.

The brethren prepared for this, but Ammon was unwilling to take off his clothes. He was softly lifted up by a supernatural force, and transported to the other side of the stream, being borne upon the water, as his Lord and Master had been. Antony received him with heartfelt joy, and said "Your tarrying will not be much longer amongst

us, my brother, therefore I had a great desire to speak of eternal things with You once more” They remained some time together, and refreshed their souls in each other’s light. Then they parted; and when Ammon died soon after upon the mountain of Nitria, Antony saw his glorified soul ascend to the heavenly country like the rising morning.

6

Hilarion of Palestine

As there were children amongst the martyrs, so there were also found children who embraced the martyrdom of the soul with supernatural love, and like thousands of others renounced the world for Christ's sake. Amongst those who, thirsting for salvation, sought Antony in the desert, there once appeared a remarkably delicate and beautiful boy of fourteen called Hilarion. His home was in Palestine where it borders on the Lesser Arabian desert and the Isthmus of Suez. He was born in a place called Thabatha, near Gaza, the ancient city of the Philistines, and he was like a rose amongst thorns, for his parents were pagans. They were rich, and wished to do all in their power to give their son a good education, and develop his brilliant talents. The schools of Alexandria had a wide reputation; there they sent Hilarion when he was very young to the house of a tutor, and he learned with zeal under his superintendence. But

the spirit of heathenism, both in religion and in the world, was so repulsive to him that he never indulged childish curiosity by going to see the games in the amphitheatre. When and how grace led him to the Christian faith is known to God alone. The fruit of this grace was that he abandoned grammar and rhetoric, Plato and Aristotle, as soon as he heard of Antony, whose name at that time was renowned throughout Egypt.

Hilarion penetrated through the desert to Antony, and immediately became his disciple and scholar. He laid aside worldly clothing, assumed the rough sack-like tunic and the scapular of sheepskin, and lived like the other anchorites. He also kept his eyes fixed on Antony, and observed how humbly he received every one, how lovingly he instructed the brethren, how austere a life he led, without ever deviating from his fasts, his vigils, and his prayers. These things pleased the holy youth extremely; but he disliked the constant influx of people who came to Antony with their many cares and necessities. He said to himself "I did not leave the town to find again all this crowd in the desert.

It may be very well for our Father Antony, for he has fought his fight, and receives in reward the grace to help others in fighting theirs. But I have to begin, and I must begin in the same way that he did”

With this determination he left the desert, after two months, beloved by Antony, and admired by all the anchorites, and returned to his own country. His parents had died. He divided the inheritance they had left him between his brothers and sisters, and the poor; and completely denuded of every earthly possession, he sought out such a place of abode for himself as should become one who had renounced all, to be the disciple of Christ. This extreme poverty was his joy. The seaport and commercial town of Majuma lay a few miles from Gaza, and from thence a long marshy district of the coast reached as far as Egypt, and the mouth of the arm of the Nile forming the delta, beyond Pelusium. This is a swampy desert where there is no living thing save flies and gnats, and nothing thrives but reeds and rushes; and which is, if possible, still more desolate and dreary than the sandy desert which bounds it on the south. This

was the place of Hilarion's choice. His relations and friends in Thabatha and Gaza warned him that this wilderness was at times very unsafe, on account of sundry robbers and murderers who roved about in the neighbourhood of Majuma in search of booty, and who plundered merchants and travellers, and then escaped into the desert, where no one dared to follow them. Hilarion's answer was, that he feared not murderers, but only everlasting death.

Every one shuddered at this project, in one so young and so delicate in frame, and wondered at his fervour of heart, which, arising from his ardent faith, shone forth from his eyes, and cast a marvellous splendour over his countenance. But he put on a rough cloak, such as the peasants of that country wore, over his hair-shirt and scapular, took with him a slender provision of dried figs, and proceeded into the depths of the inhospitable desert, where he had the sea in front of him, and behind him an interminable morass. For protection against the storms from the sea, which were sometimes accompanied by torrents of rain, he built a kind of hut out of the clods of earth of

the swamp, which he roofed with reeds, and plaiting a mat of rushes to cover the damp ground, he took possession of this hovel as though it were the antechamber of heaven. He was then fifteen years old.

He began his warfare against the natural man with incredible valour. Fifteen dried figs daily, which he never ate till after sunset, were his only food, and as he was mindful of the apostolic saying, “ If any man will not work, neither let him eat” he endeavoured to make a portion of the swampy land productive, that he might grow a few vegetables. Besides which, like the Egyptian anchorites, he plaited baskets, not out of palm leaves, which were not to be had, but out of rushes, whose brittleness made it an exceedingly troublesome work. He sought to keep his soul constantly united to God by prayer and contemplation of divine mysteries and heavenly things, and thereby to sanctify all his actions. The natural man is so inclined towards earthly things by reason of the fall, that it seeks everywhere to assert its claim to them. Hilarion experienced this also. Thoughts entered into his soul, and images

appeared before his eyes, in which although he knew nothing of the world and its pleasures, he recognised temptations to evil, because they sought to disturb his joy in God, by promising him false joys. Then the holy youth was angry with himself, and smote his breast contemptuously, because it contained a heart of flesh and blood which dared to stir in opposition to the heavenly desires of his soul. In order to strengthen the energy of his soul, and to crush his inferior nature, he commenced a terrific fast. He ate a few figs, and drank a bitter juice which he pressed out of the grass of the marsh, only every third day, or even every fourth. Yet he never intermitted any of his laborious work, and he redoubled his vigils and prayers. His delicate body was wasted to a mere skeleton, but his spirit grew strong and overcame every infernal deceit. As soon as he had so accustomed himself to any bodily mortification, that through the pliability of human nature it had become a habit to him, he immediately invented some new torture.

He lived in the way described above till his twentieth year; he then left his damp hut, collected

stones with great exertions, and built a sort of cell or cavern, It was indeed long enough for him to lie down at full length in it, but only four feet wide, and five feet high. It was impossible to stand upright in it, and it resembled a grave more than a cell. His nourishment consisted at this time of a few lentils, which he soaked in cold water. Afterwards he took bread with salt and water, then he lived for three years on raw roots and wild herbs, after which he returned to six ounces of barley-bread daily.

At the age of sixty-four, he made a fresh beginning with incredible zeal in the service of God and in austerity towards himself; and abstained from bread to eat only cabbage mixed with some meal. Of this he never ate more than five ounces a day and upon that he attained his eightieth year.

Hilarion's solitude was once invaded by robbers. These wicked men well knew that nothing was to be found there, but they came for the pleasure of frightening this poor hermit. But they wandered about in his neighbourhood the whole night, although they were very familiar with it, and did

not find him till broad daylight, when he was quietly sitting in his poor cell, plaiting baskets and praying. “What would you do if murderers surprised you?” they asked him. “So poor a man as I am fears them not” replied Hilarion. “But they might kill you out of vexation at finding nothing” “They certainly might, but still I should not fear them, for I am quite ready to die” Such holy peace in this complete poverty and abandonment made so deep an impression upon these quarrelsome, bad men, that they felt remorse, and promised him to amend their lives.

Otherwise Hilarion was little disturbed in his solitude, although it was known in the whole of Palestine what an unearthly life he was leading, and how completely he was immersed in prayer. He knew the whole of the sacred Scriptures by heart; and when he had finished his daily psalms and hymns, he was accustomed to recite them slowly and devoutly as in the presence of God. Thus twenty-two years passed away, which were occupied in nothing but the longing for God. Single solitaries, or those who wished to become such, sought him out now and then, brought him

his scanty necessaries of life, and received in return the baskets which he wove with such great trouble ; but it pleased God to keep him during this length of time completely hidden.

After this he received one day an unexpected visit. A woman of Eleutheropolis, in Palestine, came to him with the firm confidence that such a mortified soul must be more intimately united to God than other men, and could therefore pray more efficiently. Hilarion was not in the habit of receiving such visits in his desert, and was also determined not to have any concern with them; but the woman fell upon her knees, and cried out with a mournful voice, “Fly not, father, and forgive my temerity! Regard only my necessity, and not my sex, although this sex brought forth the Saviour. I am in need of thy intercession” Then Hilarion kindly asked what her desire was, and she told him that her husband’s heart was turned away from her, because their marriage of fifteen years standing had not been blessed by children, so that she had a double grief; and she entreated Hilarion to assist her, and bestow upon her a spiritual alms. He comforted her, and

encouraged her to trust rather to God, who has ordained the time and the hour for all things, than to the prayers of a poor solitary.

The gift of consolation is a grace of holy souls; the woman returned, strengthened and rejoicing, to her native city, and gratefully praised Hilarion's intercession when her wish was afterwards fulfilled, and God gave her a son. At the same time, a still more afflicted woman had recourse in the deepest grief to Hilarion. This was Aristeneta, the wife of Elipius, the governor of Palestine, who had made a journey to Egypt with him and with her three sons solely to visit St. Antony. On their journey home, the three boys sickened at Gaza of such a dangerous fever that their recovery was hopeless, notwithstanding the exertions of the physicians and the most careful nursing of their parents. Aristeneta herself went about like a dying person between the deathbeds of her children. Then her maid-servants told her of the holy anchorite who led such a saintly life in the desert by the sea, that God took great delight in his prayers. Aristeneta arose and with the permission of her husband, went to Hilarion, accompanied by a few retainers.

She cried to him, even from afar off, “I beg of you, for the love of Jesus Christ, to come to Gaza and restore my sons to life” Hilarion excused himself, and said that he went very seldom, and only from the greatest necessity, even into a quiet village; and that he never would enter a town, still less a large heathen city like that, full of idols and idolatrous temples. Aristeneta threw herself at his feet, and implored him, saying, “You should come all the more, and glorify the name of Jesus, and put the idols to shame by saving my children” Hilarion still continually refused, because his humility shunned all ostentation; but Aristeneta remained on her knees, repeating only these words, “By the Holy Blood of Jesus, save my children!” And she wept so bitterly that her followers burst into tears.

Hilarion, overcome by compassion, promised her at length to be in Gaza at sunset. He kept his word, and came, and prayed by the dying boys, who were immediately cured. They recognised their delighted parents, praised God, kissed Hilarion’s hands with gratitude, and asked, in childish fashion, for something to eat. This sign that the power of God abode in his prayers spread

Hilarion's name abroad in the world, and his hermitage became a place of pilgrimage. Heathens came, and returned believing; believers came, and returned no more to the world. Up to that time there had been neither monasteries nor monks in Syria and Palestine. Hilarion became their founder, and, at the same time, a master of the spiritual life for all those, rich and poor, men and women, who thronged to him in crowds. The disposition in which he received them is beautifully described in a few words by St. Jerome, who wrote his life "Our Lord Jesus had the aged Antony in Egypt, and in Palestine Hilarion" When the sick and suffering came to Antony, he was accustomed to say, "Why do you not go to my son Hilarion? He knows better how to help you than I do" The deserts and mountains of the Holy Land, of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, Mesopotamia, and Persia, became peopled by degrees with lovers of the ascetic life, with fervent penitents, with anchorites, some of whom lived in complete retirement, others in lauras in community, and who also afterwards were united together in enclosed dwellings called cloisters. Hilarion was their spiritual father. He travelled at times to all

these brethren, and visited them in their cells and lauras, to keep watch over them, and to encourage them to make progress and persevere. He used to say to them, “The fashion of this world is passing away, and that alone remains and gives everlasting life which is purchased by the tribulations of this present life”

These journeys resembled little migrations of nations, for nearly all the anchorites whom he visited accompanied him a part of his way, so that there were often about a thousand, or even two thousand of them together. Each one had to take a small provision of food with him, so as not to be burdensome to anyone else. Yet this great crowd of men was at times a burden to those monasteries or lauras in which Hilarion took shelter. But the joy the brethren felt in receiving him by far outweighed the little discomforts they underwent. Hilarion was in the habit of writing down on paper the places where he would pass the night, and those which he should only visit by the way. There was one brother who, although he may have possessed many good qualities, had not made much progress in the virtue of holy poverty. He

lived in his vineyard, and looked upon it as entirely his own property. The brethren asked Hilarion to designate this vineyard as one of his resting-places, in order to cure the brother of his avarice. “No” said Hilarion, “why should we be a burden to the brother, and an annoyance to ourselves?” When the penurious man heard this saying, he was ashamed of himself, and invited Hilarion and his followers to pass the night with him. Hilarion accepted the invitation. But before he had set out, the miser repented over and over again of having given this invitation; and he placed watchers all around his vineyard, with instructions to drive away the pious company with blows and stones, as soon as ever they approached the vineyard; which was accordingly done. The brethren were angry with the miser; but Hilarion laughed and passed by, remarking to some of his companions, that it is not avarice, but the blessing of God, which fills the barns and casks. Then Brother Sabas lovingly received the little army of three thousand men.

He also had built his cell in his vineyard, and laboured diligently and carefully in it, but solely that he might give all the produce to the poor,

living himself like a true ascetic on a little barley bread and vegetables. Although it was the greatest pleasure of this man, who was voluntarily poor in Christ, to give a rich harvest to the needy, yet he hesitated not for a single instant to exercise hospitality, and to invite the brethren to enter, and to refresh themselves with his grapes. Hilarion offered up a prayer with them, and then arose, blessed the vineyard, and let his flock feed therein, saying, "Do as you are permitted" They then continued their pilgrimage. At the vintage, the produce of this vineyard was much greater than usual, whilst that of the miser was much scantier.

Hilarion had a great dislike to all those ascetics who did not trust themselves with perfect confidence to the providence of God, but took too much thought for their nourishment, shelter, or garments. His opinion was, that in order to undertake the conquest of the kingdom of heaven, the soldier of Christ should be little encumbered with baggage. He expelled a brother who spent the proceeds of his garden sparingly in order to make a little store for himself, and who even possessed some ready money. This brother wished to be

reconciled with Hilarion, and therefore addressed himself to his favourite disciple Hesichius, and brought, as a proof of his better disposition, the first crop from his garden, a basket of green peas. Hesichius showed them to Hilarion in the evening, but he pushed them away, and said that their smell was repugnant to him, for he detected covetousness therein. Then he asked who had brought the peas; and after Hesichius had named the brother, he said: "Put them in the manger before the oxen, and you will see that even beasts will reject them. The hand which gave them is not free from cupidity." Hesichius obeyed, and the peas remained untouched.

Hilarion had received from God great power over all that was evil, wherefore persons possessed came to him from far and near, and he freed them by his prayers, from the spirits that tormented them. The promise of our Blessed Lord was fulfilled in this man of faith "As you have believed, so be it done to you" Even the emperor Constantius sent a young Franconian, one of his attendants, with a numerous guard of honour from Byzantium to Gaza, that he might receive

assistance from Hilarion. As it sometimes happens, by the special permission of God, that those nearest to the saints honour them the least, so was it in this case. The inhabitants of Gaza were mostly Pagans, worshipping their idol Marnas, and hating Hilarion on account of his miracles, as an enemy of this Marnas ; but the imperial embassy frightened them, and to make amends for their former insults, many of them joined themselves to the guard of honour. Hilarion was walking in the open air, and reciting the psalms in a low voice, when this concourse of people came to meet him. He appeared so holy and attractive that they all fell upon their knees, and he gave them his blessing, and bid them return to their homes, keeping only the one possessed with him.

The young man was in a terrible state, and was so drawn up that his feet hardly touched the ground, and all his limbs were dislocated. Moreover, he spoke in Greek and Syriac, just as he was addressed, although, when he was well, he only knew Latin and Franconian. Many times the indescribable fury of the paroxysms made him more like a wild beast than a man. Hilarion

commanded the devil, in the name of the Lord Jesus, to depart from the young man, and he departed. The young man then insisted upon giving his benefactor ten talents of gold. But Hilarion showed him a piece of barley-bread, and said "To him who lives upon this, gold and dust are alike"

He possessed also great power over wild animals. An unwieldy Bactrian camel had gone mad, and had trampled some men to death under its feet. Then thirty men led it, bound with strong ropes, to Hilarion, and ran away with the greatest possible speed, when the holy man ordered them to set the beast free. With outstretched hands he approached the camel, which was going to attack him fiercely, when it suddenly fell to the ground quite tamed.

Thus, as we have seen, Hilarion had passed his youth in the deepest solitude, and served God alone in peace. But afterwards he had been obliged to spend the whole of his mature manhood in constant intercourse with every kind of people, amidst their cares and necessities, their wants and

infirmities, leading countless souls to the way of truth, and thousands to the paths of the highest perfection. He had become the founder of the monastic life in the East, had called into existence innumerable cloisters, lauras, and cells, and in the midst of all these dissipating and dangerous works, in the midst of the praise and admiration of the best and noblest of his contemporaries, he had always in the depths of his soul glorified God alone, and not himself, never having had the slightest feeling of pride or of self-complacency.

He was now an old man of sixty-three and according to the ordinary opinion of mankind, he might have been at ease about his salvation. But he was not. He daily wept and longed with unspeakable desires for the peaceful life of his youth. As the brethren saw him in such grief, they pressed around him, and he mournfully said, “my children, I have become quite worldly again, and I receive my reward already in this life. Where is the obscurity of my early years? Do you not see how all Palestine and the neighbouring lands honour me, how noble and wise men, pious priests, and holy bishops visit me, a miserable man? Where is

my solitude? Do you not see how the desert has been changed into the world, and is filled with people who come to me with a thousand wants, as if I could help them, and as if anyone were not a better instrument of God than I? Where is my poverty? Alas! under the name of monasteries and the care of the brethren, I have property and temporal possessions. Do you see, therefore, what danger my soul is in of becoming worldly, and of losing in eternity that reward of abnegation which the Lord has promised to us “a hundredfold?”

Thus he lamented, and would not be comforted. But his disciples, and, above all Hesichius, affectionately watched his every step, lest he should secretly fly from them into some impenetrable desert. That he might at least do what he could, Hilarion began to proceed against himself with renewed severity, and to deprive his feeble and wasted body of the use of bread ; and, at the same time, to expound still more fervently and profoundly to the brethren the Holy Scriptures, which were the sweet food of his soul. But anxiety about his eternal salvation never left his mind.

At that time he was visited one day by Aristeneta, whose children he had restored to life by his prayers many years before. These children were now men, and Aristeneta was living like many highborn ladies of that time, in complete retirement from the world, entirely devoted to arranging the affairs of her soul before she should have to render her account to the Eternal Judge.

She wished to make a pilgrimage to St. Antony, and her first station was with St. Hilarion. She no longer brought with her the retinue and the luxuries of her former life; poor and simple, and with few companions, she begged for Hilarion's blessing on her journey. But he said, with tears in his eyes "If I were not immured in the monastery as though it were a prison, I should long ago have taken flight to our father Antony in the desert. It is too late now; we lost him yesterday. Delay thy journey, for the news will soon arrive"

Such was actually the case. Antony had departed, but he still lived in those who, like Hilarion, had found realised in him the ideal of their own aspirations, and who had formed themselves after

his pattern not outwardly alone, but even in their most inward being. Hilarion now felt a still more pressing need of withdrawing himself from the great tumult of men. He was so weakened by fasting that he could no longer undertake a journey on foot; he therefore one day asked for an ass. He wished to go away. Quick as lightning the news spread abroad; and as if Palestine had been threatened with ruin, the people flocked to his cloister to detain him. "Let me go" he said imploringly "God does not lie. He shows me the desolation of the Church, the desecration of altars, the shedding of my children's blood. I could not bear to see such terrible things! Let me depart" They understood that God was manifesting future things to him, but nevertheless they watched him night and day. Then Hilarion declared that he would touch no food till he was allowed to depart; and as he kept his word, and neither ate nor drank for six days, they resolved, sorrowfully and mournfully, to let him go. Then he blessed the people, chose out forty monks who were active in mind and body, made them take a few provisions with them, and started with them on a pilgrimage to the mountain of Colzim. On his road he visited

the monasteries of monks and the anchorites, and also two holy confessors, the Bishops Dracontius and Philo, whom the Arian Emperor Constantius had deposed and banished to Babylon in Egypt, the present Cairo. The entrance into the desert, which stretches as far as the Red Sea, began at the city of Aphroditon. There the deacon Baison had made the arrangement of having foreign travellers carried through the pathless and waterless desert upon swift dromedaries, which, accustomed to a quick trot, traversed the sands rapidly.

Yet it was three days journey to Colzim. But Hilarion shrunk from no exertion in order to see the place which Antony had sanctified, and to pray on the spot where the teacher of his youth, who had exercised such powerful influence over his whole life, and had drawn him to follow his example, had lived in the most intimate union with God, and where he had died. Hilarion arrived there on the anniversary of his death, and was joyfully greeted by Antony's two faithful disciples, Isaac and Pelusian. They had been eye-witnesses and companions of the last years and death of the holy patriarch, and could give Hilarion all the

accurate details about him which he desired. They went with him over the little oasis, Antony's own creation, and related how the arid and savage nature of the place had been changed and softened under his blessed hand. Hilarion knelt down near the ledge of rock which had been the couch and deathbed of the holy old man, and paid respect to it by a devout kiss. The saints know best what is due to holiness, and what it is to be holy.

Hilarion returned to Aphroditon, dismissed his travelling companions, and left them in their monastery in Palestine, keeping only two disciples, with whom he went to a neighbouring desert where he lived in such strict fasting and silence that he said he had only now begun to serve God. There had been no rain in this country for three years, so that the inhabitants could not irrigate the parched soil sufficiently for cultivation, and men and beasts were starving. It was generally remarked that all the elements were mourning the death of Antony. But when it was known that Hilarion was in those parts, the people, convinced that he was a friend of God, who could alleviate every want and trouble, thronged to him in masses;

enfeebled men, wasted women, and dying children, pale with hunger and the pangs of death, cried aloud to Hilarion, as a follower of Antony, to ask God for rain. He did so, and was heard. But the grateful reverence of the people drove him once more from his cell, because he no longer found there the retirement and solitude which was his soul's most urgent need ; and he proceeded to Alexandria, there to bury himself in the desert of Lower Egypt.

During a visit which he made to a monastery in Bruchium, the port of Alexandria, he learnt that Julian the apostate, who had become emperor in the meantime, was very furious against him, and was causing search to be made for him in Gaza. He immediately saddled his little ass, and prepared himself for a journey. The monks implored him to remain, as no one would seek him there, and even if he should be found, they would all suffer and die with him. "Let me go, my children" he said "you know not what God destines for us" He was hardly gone before the soldiers of the governor of Palestine arrived in search of him, and of Hesichius, with orders from the emperor to put

them to death. So great was the antipathy of the powerful emperor to the poor hermit, of the apostate to the saint. The renegade emperor of the world acknowledged such power in this aged ascetic that he could not suffer him to live on the earth with him. And such has ever since been invariably the case ; the imitation of Jesus in its greatest perfection, as ascetic souls in the Church have striven to practice it, is an object of hatred and of persecution to the apostates of all ages. This is a proof of its immense power, for what is powerless is always allowed to pass unmolested.

Whilst Hilarion concealed himself in the desert, the Arians and the heathens of Gaza, who had a natural sympathy with each other, making common cause, burnt down his cloister, laid it waste, and ill-treated and chased away the brethren. Amongst these there was a Judas of the name of Hadrian. He went to Hilarion, and sought to induce him to return to Palestine, under the pretext that he would greatly console the afflicted brethren there, while, in truth, all the faithful brethren rejoiced to know that the holy old man was in safety from his enemies. Hilarion was not

deceived by Hadrian, but dismissed him, and continued his wanderings farther, even beyond the sea to Sicily. On landing, he offered the captain of the ship, as payment for himself and his companion Zananus, the book of the holy Gospels, which he had written out in his earliest youth, and which he always carried about with him. But the captain having pity on these two beggars, would not take it, and let them go their way.

Hilarion, rejoicing to be thought a beggar, left the densely populated coast and penetrated into the interior of the country, where he erected a cell of branches on the borders of a wood. Every day he collected a bundle of dry twigs, which Zananus carried to a neighbouring village, and exchanged for a piece of bread. Upon this they both lived very contentedly, entirely given to prayer. But Hilarion's light had been already put upon a candlestick, notwithstanding the pains he took to hide it under a bushel. Here, as well as in Palestine and Egypt, the suffering had recourse to this man of prayer. God accepted the intercession, which Hilarion could not refuse to those who asked it; the sick were healed, and reverence following

upon gratitude, he was once more surrounded by a throng of men. In the meantime Hesichius, who had been separated from his beloved master, had sought him in all the deserts, monasteries, and ports of the East in vain. After three years he embarked for the Peloponnesus, and there he heard a Jew relate many things about a Christian prophet in Sicily who worked miracles and wonders, like a second Elias. He inquired his name and age, but the Jew had only heard of him, and never seen him. Hesichius immediately took ship for Sicily, and his first question there was about the worker of miracles, whom everyone knew. When he learnt that this servant of God never accepted even so much as a bit of bread from those who wished to testify their gratitude to him by rich presents, but always answered with our Blessed Lord, "Freely have you received, freely give"

Hesichius rejoiced, for thereby he recognized Hilarion, and he immediately rejoined him. Then they travelled together through a strange country, whose language and people were completely unknown to them, to Dalmatia, on the eastern

shore of the Adriatic Sea ; a beautiful land, but often severely visited by earthquakes. One was then desolating the seaport town of Epidaurus. Whilst the earth yawned to swallow it up, and the tails crushed it in their fall, the sea rose with exceeding violence to such a height that the ships were dashed upon the rocks of the coast. The afflicted inhabitants fled, as if by inspiration, to Hilarion, who lived in a cavern amongst the mountains, implored him to save them, and led him to the sea beach. Hilarion possessed the faith which removes mountains. He traced three crosses on the sand of the shore, and lifted up his hand against the waves, which raised themselves on high, stood still, fell backwards, and retreated slowly from the shore. St. Jerome, who wrote his life, and who was himself a Dalmatian, says, “The town of Epidaurus and the whole of Dalmatia speak of this miracle to this day, for mothers relate it to their children, that it may be perpetuated in the remembrance of the generations to come” Why is it so difficult for us to look upon miracles with the eye of faith? Do we, perchance, belong to those whom our Blessed Lord called “ye of little faith” when He made a great calm upon the sea?

A country which Hilarion entered under such circumstances could never be the place of his abode. He went to the island of Cyprus, whose primate was St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, his countryman, and formerly his disciple. At his table a fowl was once set before him. Hilarion declined to partake of it, because, since he had borne the habit of an anchorite, he had never tasted anything that had had life. "And I" answered Epiphanius "since I have worn this habit, have never suffered any one to retire to rest with anything against me in his heart, and I myself have never laid me down to sleep in discord with anyone" "Forgive me, my father" replied Hilarion meekly, "you have followed a better rule of life than I" He settled a few miles from Paphos, amongst the ruins of an abandoned idolatrous temple, and lived there two years, always praying, always working miracles, always seeking to escape from the renown of his own sanctity. Five years before his death he sent Hesichius away with the commission to greet the brethren in Palestine, and to discover a place in Egypt or Lybia, where he could await his last hour undisturbed. Hesichius returned, and advised the old man to remain in Cyprus, where he had found

out a wild and solitary valley in the interior of the island. It was situated amongst the mountains, and was almost inaccessible, being enclosed all round by high and rugged rocks; but it had a clear stream, a verdant meadow, and many beautiful apple-trees. The whole place was also said to be inhabited by evil spirits. The old man was pleased at the thoughts of living and dying in such a wild solitude, surrounded by his ancient foes. Climbing and scrambling with difficulty, at times even creeping on their hands and knees, they reached the valley which Hilarion recognised as the place of his repose. He would have no earthly consolation, and sent back his beloved disciple to Palestine, with the permission to come to visit him twice a year, which he did. Hilarion laid out a little garden by the stream, and lived upon vegetables and water, as he had done in his youth. He never tasted the apples, but they rejoiced his eyes. No one dared approach him. Thus he gained once more his long-sought beloved solitude, and saw nothing but heavenly images, which the earthly eye cannot perceive. Shortly before his death, a paralytic person, the owner of this rocky wilderness, contrived to reach him, and begged so

earnestly for his prayers, that Hilarion wept and implored God's mercy for him, and dismissed him cured. This had the usual consequences, but they no longer affected him. He became sick, and wrote his will, leaving to Hesichius his book of the Gospels, his hair shirt, and his poor mantle. Many pious people of Paphos visited him with great devotion.

Nothing in him lived save his eyes and his voice, his whole body was already, as it were, dead. Once more the holy fear of God's judgment fell upon him, and he spoke to himself encouragingly "Fear not, my soul! depart, depart. Seventy years you have served Christ, and do you fear death?" Then a deep rest settled upon his brow, and he slept in the Lord, in the God who had called him so early, and had said, "You are mine".

7

Valens, Ero and Ptolemy

Palladius said, “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil stood in paradise in the midst of fair and pleasant trees and plants. It will not, therefore, be useless to give an account of some of those who fell because they prided themselves upon their own excellence. If virtue is not practised for the pure intention of pleasing God, it easily becomes the source of falls, because man trusts to his own strength and makes shipwreck from his feebleness. For it is written: I have seen the just man perish in his justice”

Valens was born in Palestine, and went to the desert of Scete, where he lived for many years an extremely rigorous and austere life. But unfortunately, he pursued it without humility, and

more with the object of seeking his own glory than that of God. Holy souls, in measure as they advance in perfection, ascribe their virtue to the grace of God, and keep their faults in mind that they may despise themselves for their sinfulness.

Valens, on the contrary, overestimated himself so much that he imagined he had become a friend of God by his own exertions, and was therefore entitled to special privileges. He entirely forgot the teaching which was handed down by all the ascetics from the mouth of St. Antony. That patriarch of the spiritual life saw in a vision the whole earth overspread with a thick net, and he understood that this signified the snares the devil lays for all men. "Alas!" said he, "will no one then escape from them?" A voice answered, "Yes, he that is humble." For the humble man is prudent, knowing the frailty of the soul and the deceitfulness of human nature. Brother Valens was far indeed from such humility and circumspection. He thought he had risen so high that the angels were ready to serve him. The anchorites related to Palladius that Brother Valens was once sitting at his work by night, and dropped

the needle that he used for fastening his baskets together; then a strange light illuminated his cell, and he found his needle by it. From that hour he became so inflated with pride that he despised all the other anchorites.

Macarius the Great, the priest of Scete, received a cake as a present from some guests. He blessed it and sent a share of it to every brother in the whole desert, a loving custom of those times, typifying the community of faith and grace which proceeds from the Holy Eucharist. But Valens received in a very unfriendly manner the messenger from Macarius who brought him the Eulogia, as the blessed bread was called. "Away with you!" he called out "and say to Macarius that I am every bit as good as he, and have no need to receive his blessing" When Macarius received this answer he saw how badly it must be faring with the soul of Brother Valens, and he set out at once to go to him, and lovingly showed him the danger in which he stood. "Turn to God, my brother" implored the aged priest, "call upon His mercy! You have forsaken Him because you are deceived" But the deluded monk would not listen to him, and sad at

heart, Macarius was constrained to leave him to himself.

Soon after Valens had thought it beneath his dignity to accept the token of fellowship with his brethren, he went a step further, and despised even that fellowship with our loving Saviour which He Himself deigns to enter into with men in holy communion. When the brethren perceived that Valens kept away from the holy sacraments they were inexpressibly troubled, for they knew that he could never overcome pride if he scorned to receive within himself its true Conqueror. But the wicked enemy triumphed; he well knew that he had Valens in his power. He showed the foolish man a deceitful illusion which, in the extreme heedlessness of his pride, he accepted without proof as a veritable heavenly vision. A bright angel appeared before him, and said, "Christ loves your works, your firm confidence, your liberty of spirit. He is coming to you, go forth and meet Him, and fall upon your face to worship Him" Valens hastened out of his cell. The dark night was as bright as day with innumerable torches and lamps, and in the midst of all these lights, he saw a

shining form. He prostrated himself on the ground and adored the spirit of falsehood. The following Sunday, after the Office, he spoke thus to the assembled brethren: "Communion is henceforward useless to me, for Christ the Lord visits me in my cell" He had hardly uttered these words before he became insane. The brethren were obliged to put him in bonds, and he remained out of his mind for a whole year.

When the saints had heavenly visions, they always mistrusted them, and considered them self deceptions or temptations of the evil one endeavouring to flatter their pride. But if the vision truly came from God, the Eternal Truth and Wisdom, and brought them supernatural light about divine mysteries, this light so brightly illuminated their souls that they not only perceived every spot upon them, even in their most hidden depths, but also every spot, however small, appeared so hateful in comparison to that unspeakable beauty, that they were inspired with a profound contempt of themselves. They always walked in fear along the dangerous and narrow path of supernatural light and revelations. They

ever bore in mind that the enemies of salvation were only watching for a weak moment of self complacency in which to lay snares for them. They kept constantly before their eyes the inscrutable decree of God by which it pleased Him to choose them, in this way, for the instruments of His designs. And therefore, the unusual gifts of grace which fell to their share, produced the still more unusual one of humility, and where that is, neither God's glory nor the salvation of souls can suffer loss.

The prayers of the brethren, and a severe spiritual discipline, gradually restored Valens to his senses, and finally to the perception of his fault. After having wished to pass for a companion of the blessed spirits, and having instead of that lost even his reason, he saw the misery of all human excellence which is not grounded in God, and led ever after a simple penitential life, blessing God who puts down the mighty from their seat, and exalts the humble.

Brother Ero came from Alexandria, a noble and beautiful youth of clear understanding and pure

morals. The ascetic life singularly attracted him, and he dedicated himself to it in Scete with a vigour and perseverance which excited the admiration of the most experienced fathers. He studied the Holy Scriptures day and night. He so accustomed his body to fasting, that his chief nourishment in the course of three months often consisted of holy communion, with only a few wild herbs now and then. When Palladius wished to journey from Alexandria to the desert of Scete, the patriarch directed him for that purpose to the two hermits Albin and Ero, who had just then brought the work done by the anchorites to Isidore, the master of the hospital at Alexandria, that he might sell it for the benefit of his pilgrims and sick poor. Palladius, accordingly, set out with them. He says: "We had forty leagues to go. Brother Albin and I took food twice on this journey, and a draught of water three times. But Brother Ero took nothing the whole way, and went, nevertheless, so fast that he seemed to fly over the sand, and we could not keep up with him. At the same time he recited from memory, to our great edification, the Prophet Isaias, and a portion of Jeremias, the Gospel of St. Luke, the Epistle to

the Hebrews, the Proverbs of Solomon, and a number of psalms.” Ero lived thus for many years in peace, until the tempter suggested the thought to him that he was living an angelic rather than a human life. Instead of thanking God for the assistance of His grace, Brother Ero indulged in self-complacent reflections. It soon came to pass that he despised the other solitaries and the admonitions of the fathers, nourishing, on the other hand, a great desire to be admired by the world for his angelic demeanour. As he despised the warnings of the ancient fathers, and the holy sacrament of penance, his soul lost at length the power of struggling against these violent temptations to vanity, and even the will to struggle. He fell into spiritual idleness, lukewarmness, and weariness, and at last into disgust with the ascetic life. His cell becoming unbearable to him, he cast off his anchorite’s habit, and hastened to Alexandria. But there were none there to admire him, or even to look at him. He roamed idly about, with a desolate heart and an unbridled mind, sought distraction in wine, and sank deeper and deeper, so that he who had lived upon the Bread of angels as long as he was in union with God,

now in his separation from God, sought to satisfy himself as though with the husks of the unclean beasts.

Nevertheless God was merciful to him, and sent him a severe illness, which afflicted him with indescribable pains, and entirely destroyed his health. Then he thought with regret of his lost peace, and hurried back into the desert. The good fathers received their prodigal son with kindness, and nursed him tenderly. But he had only time enough to confess his guilt, with innumerable tears, before God called him into eternity to give an account of the talent entrusted to him.

Pride and vanity are powerful antagonists to perfection; but its mortal enemy is self-will. When a young man of the name of Ptolemy began the ascetic life, the holy anchorites of Scete were anxious and concerned about him, for he did not follow the way which was good for beginners.

Our Blessed Lord says that those who wish to win heaven must become like little children. The chief virtue of a child consists in obedience. By obedience it is led and practised in all good;

without obedience it may have good inclinations and impulses, but the lasting foundation of virtue is wanting. Those who left the world for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, and who renounced all joys and pleasures the more surely to enjoy the delights of eternity, had also to make themselves like little children and to enter the school of obedience, as Paul the Simple had done under St. Antony.

This was the first rule both for monks and solitaries. Furthermore, it was not exactly a precept, but a wholesome custom, that beginners should ask for counsel and consolation from the experienced. Hence the many beautiful teachings and maxims which the ancient fathers gave to the younger brethren when they disclosed to them their temptations. Thus a young hermit said once in distress to a father “What am I to do to keep myself from despair? This thought is constantly in my head, that I have left the world in vain, and that I shall never be saved” “My brother” answered the old man, “even if we are not worthy to enter the Promised Land, still it is better for us to die in the desert than to turn back to the

fleshpots of Egypt. Lay that to heart” Another brother said to his spiritual father “Why is it, my father, that I am overcome by idleness and disgust?” “It is a sign that you do not duly set before your eyes either the glory of heaven or the pains of hell” was the answer “for if you did, the desire of eternal bliss and the fear of everlasting punishment would be sufficient motives to excite zeal and contrition, with which we may bravely combat laxity and luke warmness” And even if all the young anchorites did not hear such words of encouragement in their struggles, yet experience taught them that it was always very useful to speak freely about the state of their souls ; because childlike openness is often sufficient to drive away the strongest temptations.

But Ptolemy disdained all advice. He asserted that he need learn the spiritual life from none save the Holy Ghost, of whose inspirations any man of good will could be certain. He was told, on the contrary, that an inspiration of the Holy Ghost and the understanding of the same are two distinct things, and that this understanding is disclosed only to him whose will has been purified by the

long practice of obedience and humility. Thereupon Ptolemy alleged the example of Paul of Thebes, the patriarch of all the anchorites, without considering that this holy man had not by any means separated himself from others out of obstinacy, but had rather been obliged by the pressure of circumstances to fly into the desert, and had there, by the extraordinary purity of his heart, attained to that union with God which became to him a heavenly bond. Neither Paul nor any of the ancient fathers ever laid claim to a special inspiration or guidance of the Holy Ghost, it was only granted to them as a favour. But these representations did not produce any effect upon Ptolemy. He separated himself entirely from the brethren, and made his dwelling in a cave on the other side of the desert of Scete, in a completely uninhabited spot, from whence the only drinkable water was eighteen leagues distant. However, in the winter months the nightly dew was tolerably heavy, and Ptolemy collected it in sponges, which he squeezed into earthen vessels for his use. He lived there for fifteen years.

But what did he gain by his bodily mortification, when he was thereby nourishing and pampering his self-will? Alas, nothing whatever. Absent by his own fault from the holy sacraments of penance and of the altar, from the hearing and the exposition of the Gospel, from the converse and teaching of the ancient fathers, wilfully confined to his own thoughts, he soon followed as wrong a path inwardly as outwardly. Error took more and more possession of him, he strayed further and further from the truth, the doctrine of salvation was veiled before him, and he fell into misbelief and infidelity. He imagined that the world was governed by chance, and not by Divine Providence, and therefore that there were no eternal rewards or punishments; that man had no judgement of God to fear after death, and that the menaces of Holy Writ were vain fables. In spite of all his fasting, Ptolemy was powerless to make a stand alone against this storm of wild thoughts.

Even yet he could have saved his soul, if he had fled to the fathers and placed himself under their guidance, but his stubbornness would not suffer it. He preferred going to Alexandria. His long habit

of an austere and mortified life had inspired him with a great dislike to every sort of immorality, and he proposed to himself to lead a most virtuous life, partly because he considered it more becoming, and partly because he wished to show the anchorites to what heights of virtue he had attained in his solitude, and how far he had surpassed them. Idle and aimless, he wandered about the voluptuous Alexandria, visited the theatres and the public baths, mixed everywhere with the crowd, and saw and heard a thousand things of which he had never dreamt in the desert, and which were very dangerous for him. Then it happened that a very holy and aged solitary of Scete came to Alexandria to sell the handiwork of the brethren, and to buy materials for their clothing. He saw Brother Ptolemy going into a wine-shop. This grieved the holy old man beyond measure. He waited outside the door of the house till Ptolemy came out again, took him affectionately by the hand, and led him away with him, saying mournfully “My lord and brother, you wear an ecclesiastical, yea, an angelic habit; you are still very young, do you never think then of the manifold snares of Satan? Do you not know that

the wicked enemy enters into the heart through the eyes and ears, and that nothing is more prejudicial to the hermit than the motley and infatuating throng of men in a great city? How, therefore, can you dare to enter a wine-shop, where so much that is unholy must be seen and heard? Oh, I beg you, do so no more! Fly rather once more to Scete, where, with the help of God, thou may save your soul! I am going back there this very day; my brother, come with me” Here again was a moment in which Divine grace was seeking admission into Ptolemy’s heart, but he would not suffer it to enter. On the contrary, he said very contemptuously to the holy man, “Go back alone, old man, and do not chatter so much. You know well that God regards nothing but a pure heart” Then the old man lifted up his eyes and hands to heaven, and humbly said, “Praise and glory be to you, my God! Behold, I have lived now for five and fifty years in the desert of Scete, and I have not yet a pure heart. But this young brother, who frequents the wine shops of Alexandria, says that he already possesses a pure heart” Thereupon he turned to Ptolemy, and lovingly said to him, “May God keep you, my

brother, but may He also not suffer me or my hope to be confounded” They parted thus, each to follow the way he had freely chosen, the one the way of salvation, the other that of perdition.

Ptolemy could not maintain himself upon his imaginary heights. Darkness and unbelief, which are ever in league with all bad passions, were no protection to him when these latter were powerfully excited by bad example and evil company. It is enough to say that he sank down into a wretched and despicable way of life, associated with the lowest of the rabble, and wandered forlorn over the whole of Egypt, a sorrow and a shame to Christian hearts, and a mockery to the heathen. How and where he perished is not known; one thing only is certain, that the desert saw him no more, for contact with the world had been his ruin. Recollection of spirit, a recollection which gives strength to aim at holiness by the mortification of sinful nature and discipline of the passions, by meditation and prayer finds its safest home in the ascetic cell. If his vocation calls the ascetic forth, if the priest, the missionary, the teacher of the faith, must have

intercourse with the world, then the grace of his state is the shield which preserves him from distraction and pollution, and in his heart he always remains, by longing desire, an inhabitant of his cell. But voluntarily to choose dissipation out of levity or from weariness of the ascetic life, is to cast a poisonous blight upon those graces and gifts which only come to perfection in recollection and elevation of mind.

8

Moses of Abyssinia

“The sins of my youth do not remember, Lord”

The wild and depraved life which Moses led until his fortieth year made his conversion a miracle of grace. The history of it was related to Palladius by all the anchorites of Scete. His native country was Abyssinia, or, as it was then called, Ethiopia. His skin was black, and his passions burnt as hotly as the sun of those lands. In condition he was a slave, and he belonged to a master who filled some public office. He was guilty of so many thefts and infidelities, that he often brought severe punishments upon himself. But instead of improving, his wickedness and insubordination increased. He killed another slave in a quarrel, and partly because he feared for his life, partly because slavery was wearisome to him, he fled from his home, collected other bad characters about him, and with their aid lived by highway robbery for fifteen years.

His immense bodily strength and his boldness gained for him the distinction of becoming captain of this band. They roved about in all directions, robbing and plundering, carrying terror everywhere, and were yet so ingenious in concealing themselves in various and scattered lurking-places that they escaped every search that was made for them. Moses was once deterred from committing a robbery by the barking of a shepherd's dog. He determined to revenge himself for this upon the dog's master, and learned that he was a shepherd who watched his flocks on the opposite bank of the Nile. He therefore stripped off his clothes, wrapped them round his head like a turban, stuck his spear through them and swam across the Nile, as the Nubians do to the present day. But the poor shepherd having had timely warning of the threatened vengeance, had hidden himself, and in lieu of the shepherd, Moses revenged himself upon the flock, by killing all the sheep except four of the strongest rams, which he bound together, and swimming back with them, sold them in the nearest village.

No one dared to lay hands upon him, and he escaped safely to his companions. We know not how it happened that a ray of grace penetrated into this nature, darkened as it was by the fiercest passions, or how a soul so remote from God's kingdom determined upon winning it. God, who wills not the death of a sinner but his conversion, did not permit Moses to perish in his. He suddenly glanced over his profligate life, shuddered at himself, and began upon the spot the arduous task of converting himself to God. It was inexpressibly difficult to him, for his untamed passions and his long habits of sin kept him, as it seemed to him, insuperably chained to evil. In order to avoid, at least, all dangerous occasions of sin, Moses fled to a mountain on the Lybian boundary of the desert of Scete, begged the ancient father Isidore, who was the priest of those anchorites, to have pity upon his soul, and then began his combat, which was difficult beyond all belief. How long had an Antony, a Pachomius, a Hilarion, had to struggle, who from their childhood upwards had aimed at higher things, and had never known the desire to sin ! But Moses had been young and grown old in sin, and had been wholly given up to it. But he

was not to be deterred, for he had now learned to know God, in Whom the Apostle St. Paul trusted, when he said, "I can do all things in Him who strengthened me" A hundred times Moses was strongly tempted to abandon the penitential life of the desert and return to the world, and each time he overcame the temptation. But he hastened to the abbot Isidore, and complained to him of his trial. The old man comforted him thus: "Fear not, my brother, these attacks of the enemy; he knows that you are a beginner, and he therefore seeks to inspire you with disgust towards the desert. Do not listen to him, stay peacefully in your cell, and the enemy will depart" Working, fasting, and praying he remained in the narrow cavern which served him for a cell. He divided his day into fifty parts, and at the close of each part he recited a certain number of psalms, while he also wove mats and twisted ropes. His daily nourishment consisted of twelve ounces of dry bread and one draught of water. He hoped in this way to subdue his fondness for eating and drinking, and his roving disposition, and, by reciting psalms, to occupy his memory and curb his imagination. But the wicked one would not surrender his prey so

easily. He attacked the penitent with alluring images and deceptive representations, and plunged him into fearful anguish, for it was only with his higher will that he could close his mind against these seductive delusions. The earthly man was in compact with them against his better will, and in spite of prayer, labour, and fasting he could not entirely overcome them. His restlessness drove him once more to Isidore, and the holy old man gave this answer to his complaints, “You have not defended your mind with all your strength against these visions of your sinful past, my brother. From long habit you have allowed them to enter, and therefore they have mastered your thoughts. Combat them more vigorously than before. They give you no rest; very well: pay like with like, never give them rest enough to find footing in you. Watch and pray night and day” Moses followed literally the advice of the experienced and holy man. For six years he was never content with devoting the whole day to uninterrupted prayer, but when night set in, he placed himself in the middle of his cell, and with uplifted hands he continued to call on God and to praise Him. For fear of falling asleep from fatigue, he never once

ventured to kneel down at his prayers. Sometimes he slept a little towards morning, leaning against the wall. Many nights he never closed his eyes. He was determined to overcome his earthly nature, which sought to enslave him and separate him from God. But he did not as yet always succeed. He made known all his struggles and sufferings to St. Isidore, who felt great pity and sympathy for him, and who once said to him, "You fight your wicked enemy too violently; that enrages him. Observe moderation, my brother. The spiritual combat must not be carried on too eagerly" Moses replied, "My father, let me fight as best I may ; for I shall never find any rest till I have conquered all that keeps me back from union with God" Instead, therefore, of abating his austerities, he invented new ones. In the night time he went to the cells of the sick and aged anchorites, and, secretly taking their empty water jars, drew water to fill them, and brought them back again. This was an immense exertion for a man nearly worn out with fasting, watching, labour, and mental torture, for the only drinkable water was 5000 paces distant from many of the cells. But Moses rigorously pursued his end, for he was not afraid of succumbing to bodily, but

to spiritual weakness. When he was one evening carrying a jar full of water to the cell of an aged solitary, he felt himself suddenly thrown to the ground, and a violent pain deprived him of consciousness. A brother found him thus, called others to help him, and they bore him, still insensible, to Isidore, who lived near the church.

Moses lay there for a whole year extremely ill. When he had recovered, and Isidore called upon him to return to Petra, the rock in which his cave was, he objected, for he feared to find again in solitude his former foes “You are not alone in your struggles, my brother, although your cell seems to you so solitary, look up” He pointed towards the east, and Moses saw legions of angels, who shone so brightly with supernatural light that the sun seemed dark in comparison with them. Then he looked towards the west, and perceived a swarm of hideous forms, who, gloomy and sad, seemed to be retreating in confusion. See, my brother” said Isidore, “ this dark array fights indeed against us, but Almighty God sends to our aid that bright host which is much more numerous, and is always with you in your solitary cell.

Greatly consoled, Moses received Holy Communion, and returned to his cell. Three months later, Isidore visited his beloved disciple, and asked him if the ancient enemy had tormented him as before. "Oh no, my father" replied Moses, humbly; "all the temptations have ceased since you, a friend of God, did open my eyes to the help of His grace" "God has so ordained it that you might not glorify yourself for having overcome Satan and his temptations by the austerities of your life. Be comforted now in the Name of Jesus Christ, the assaults are over." These combats had brought forth in Moses the saving fruits of courage and humility. He was then for the first time called to the assembly of the fathers of the desert of Scete, who were holding council over some important matter. When Moses appeared, some of them exclaimed aloud, on purpose to try him, "What business has a negro here?" But he kept silence, with a serene countenance. They who had treated him so contemptuously asked him afterwards what he had thought about it. Moses made answer, "I thought of this, But Jesus held his peace" He was sent for at another time to an assembly which was to judge a guilty brother. But

Moses came not. Then Isidore sent to tell him that all the fathers were waiting for him, and to ask wherefore he did not come. Moses filled a basket with sand, took it upon his back, and thus entered the assembly. Being asked the meaning of this, he answered, "I have to bear the heavy burden of my own sins, and shall I make bold to judge the sins of others?" Then no one spoke a word against the guilty brother.

The evil spirits who for so many years had tormented the valiant Moses, now acknowledged themselves to be overcome. A holy hermit heard them say to Moses, "We can do you no harm, for when we try to cast you into despair by setting before your eyes the sins of your past life, you raise yourself full of confidence to the mercy of God; and whenever we seek to make you proud, you humble yourself before the justice of God. We have nothing to do with such men."

The anchorites were always wishing to hear his good advice and instructions, and he likewise desired theirs. Thus all were satisfied, each one learnt and taught with humility. "There are four

things which are before all else necessary to a monk “said Moses, drawing from the store of his experience, “keeping the commandments, humility, poverty, and silence. And there are three things which he must especially lay to heart, because they are very difficult to him as well as to all men, he must always carry his cross cheerfully, he must always remember his sins, and always have the hour of his death before his eyes” He often repeated to the brethren, “If a man does not truly in his heart look upon himself as a sinner, the Lord God will not hear his prayer” “ And who is there who really in his heart considers himself a sinner? “asked a young solitary. “He who always looks at his own sins and never at those of his neighbour” replied Moses. He then proceeded to say “If a man’s works are not in conformity with his prayers, all his trouble and labour is in vain” “In what does this conformity consist?” said the young solitary. “In not committing any more the sins for which we ask God’s forgiveness. If a man has renounced with his will in the inmost depths of his heart each and every sin, then he is reconciled to God, and his prayers maybe heard” “But how can we bear so much labour and

trouble?” asked the curious youth. “By the help of God” said Moses. The young solitary found the spiritual combat very hard, and mortification very burdensome; so he exclaimed with some impatience “Oh, my father ! what is the use of all this fasting and watching ? the evil inclinations and temptations always wake up again” “But mortifications send them to sleep again “said Moses “How can a man best die to himself” asked another brother “My son” said Moses, “unless a man imagines to himself that he has been lying for three years in the grave and under the earth, he will never die to himself”

An anchorite of the name of Zacharias was then living in the desert of Scete, of whom the holy abbot Serapion used to say “Although I surpass him in bodily mortification, he is far beyond me in humility and silence” This Zacharias was with Moses when some of the brethren visited the latter, and begged him to give them some salutary instructions “I beg of you, my brother, to tell me what I am to do, and what to say to our brethren” said Moses to Zacharias. The latter fell at his feet, and said, with tears “Why do you put me to shame

by such a question?” “I saw the Holy Ghost descend upon you” answered Moses, “and that impelled me to ask you” Then Brother Zacharias took off his mantle, threw it on the ground, and trampled it under foot. All looked at him in silence and amazement. Then he said, “A man who does not let himself be trampled underfoot in this way will never be a true monk” This has been the teaching of the ascetics through all ages. A thousand years later the sweet and thoughtful ascetic of the fourteenth century, Henry Suso the holy Dominican monk, saw a little dog playing with a cloth, and understood thereby that he was to let himself be dragged about in the dirt, no matter by whom. Humility is love of God carried to the most complete contempt of self. The last hour of Brother Zacharias was nigh. As he lay between life and death, Moses said to him, “Can you see heavenly things, my brother ?” “I see that nothing is better than silence” answered Zacharias humbly. “Keep silence then to the end, my brother” said Moses.

And silently, in perfect peace, Zacharias gave up his soul to God. Abbot Isidore looked up joyfully

at the same hour, and said, “ blissful Zacharias, the gates of heaven open to you, for humility is the road to God” The contrast between what Moses had been and what he had now become gave him in the eyes of the world a celebrity which deeply pained him. He feared that the glory of his conversion would not be given to God alone, but that he himself might be admired and praised ; and he said with St. Ignatius of Antioch, and with all the saints, “He who praises me scourges me” Whenever he was able to do so, he fled from his admirers, and no one could render him a greater service than that of warning him of these visits ; then he hurried away, and only his empty cell was found. Once a great dignitary set out to go to Scete to make the acquaintance of this Moses, who had begun as a highway robber and ended as a saint.

Moses was informed of his coming, and hid himself in a swamp, where he was safe. But the stranger, with all his followers, lost their way amidst the sand hills and rocks of the desert, and Moses came unexpectedly upon those from whom he was flying. The stranger was thankful to see a

guide, and said to Moses, “My father, I beg of you to tell me where lies the cell of the renowned Moses the holy solitary ?” He peacefully answered, “ What do you want of that man ? and why do you call him holy ? We know him better here. He is a fool and a heretic. If you wish for edification, go and visit the other brethren, but not him” Then he went away and left the visitor greatly amazed that Moses should be so much thought of at a distance, and so little esteemed in the desert. In the meantime he followed the advice given him, and visited some of the fathers, who received him with distinction, and by whom he was greatly edified. He told them afterwards how he had originally intended to visit Moses, and how he had been dissuaded therefrom. The pious fathers were exceedingly troubled to hear of such a calumny, and asked him to describe the monk who had uttered it. The stranger answered, “He was old, tall, and thin, clothed in a worn-out monk’s habit, and his skin was quite black” “That was Moses himself!” exclaimed the fathers joyfully ; and the stranger left the desert more edified by this behaviour of Moses than he could have been by the most holy discourse from his lips.

When Moses had not to do with admirers and flatterers, he was extremely affable and accessible. A youth who wished to devote himself to the ascetic life, begged an anchorite of the desert of Scete to conduct him to one of the most holy fathers that he might receive advice and instruction from him. The anchorite took him to Arsenius. He was sitting in his cell weaving a mat, and was so immersed in contemplation that he did not observe their entrance, and did not greet them or say a single syllable to them. After some time they went away as silently as they had sat there, and the anchorite took the youth to Moses. He received them so lovingly, spoke of the youth's intention with such fatherly benevolence, and showed him such hearty sympathy, that he said to his companion after they had taken leave, "Oh, how much holier and better the former robber is than the former courtier" This saying reached the ancient fathers, and one of them, who was extremely holy, and who had a high opinion of Arsenius, begged God to enlighten him upon the interior state of these two men. "The one, Lord, avoids for Your Name's sake all intercourse with men, whilst the other, for the same reason, is kind

to them. Which of the two is in the right ?” And he fell into ecstasy, and saw two boats floating on one stream. Arsenius sat in one, peaceful and still, and the Holy Ghost hovered above his head. Moses was in the other, and angels travelled with him and were dropping honey upon his lips. Then the father understood that both these holy men, although outwardly different, lived in perfect love, which guided all their actions and made them pleasing to God.

Another time Moses had visitors of a very different kind. Four bad men, who lived by robbery and plunder, were vexed with him for having left the ways of sin, and adopted a penitential life. Their evil conscience saw in his repentance a secret reproach. They wished to revenge themselves on him, to ill-treat him, and perhaps to kill him. They fell upon him in the night. But the old giant within him was dead only to sin. He overpowered his four adversaries, bound them, and dragged them to the church. He said to the priest, “I am not allowed to punish these men who have fallen upon me in my cell with violence. Tell me what I am to do with them”

This childlike simplicity made so much impression upon the robbers that they humbly craved forgiveness and were converted to God. “For” said they, “if this strong man has found One stronger than he, why should we strive any longer against Him.”

The holy anchorites were most anxious to avoid every honour, and above all that of the priesthood. They were kept back from it not by cowardice or earthly-mindedness but by humility, and the high sanctity of the priestly office. They very seldom received holy orders without the express command of the bishops. Moses had to submit in his old age to this loving constraint, for the patriarch of Alexandria bestowed holy orders upon him. “Now you have become white, Moses” said the patriarch playfully to him, after he had made him a deacon, and laid the white stole upon his shoulder. “Have I become white inwardly or outwardly?” asked Moses. Then the patriarch secretly told the sacristans not to suffer Moses to approach the altar on the following day to fulfill his office as deacon, and to observe his conduct closely. The sacristans accordingly drove away the

old man as if he had been an impudent intruder, and called after him, "A negro has no business at the altar" He withdrew gently and patiently, and said, "The negro is rightly served. He is hardly a man, and he wishes to serve at the altar amongst the angels !"

Moses was sixty-five years old when the desert of Scete was overrun by the barbarian race of the Mazices. Shortly before this, seven hermits came to him to be edified by his heavenly wisdom, and to cleanse their souls in the holy sacrament of penance. After he had performed this office as the representative of God, he said to them in the spirit of prophecy "Today, my brethren, I have served souls for the last time. Fly now in haste, for the barbarians are already near" "Will you not take flight also?" they asked. "No" said Moses; "in looking back upon my early life I have long expected this day, that the words of my Saviour might be fulfilled in me, All that take the sword shall perish with the sword" Then the anchorites said with one voice, "If you will not flee we will remain too, and die with you" Moses said "There is no reason why I should fly. But do you consider

well what you should do. You can still escape, but it will soon be too late”

They were, however, determined to stay with him, and he did not forbid it. The night passed in holy prayer and pious discourse. When morning dawned, Moses said, “the hour is come”

9

Arsenius

It created no surprise in those days, although it now appears strange to us, to see men follow the frequent injunction of the Apostle St. Paul, and break all worldly ties in order to be more perfectly united to Christ. The great and important business of sanctification was not then one among a thousand affairs, but it was the chief occupation of the Christian's life. Christians in name and appearance only, Arians and other heretics whose false doctrine of the Incarnation of God swept away the whole of Christianity; and heathens whose philosophy knew nothing of the fall, of redemption, or of the sanctification of man born again in Christ ; these indeed were all inclined to gainsay a life of Christian asceticism, because in the former the spirit of Christianity was too feeble, and in the latter materialism was too strong for them to accept in the light of faith the doctrine of renunciation.

But the genuine Christians were then in the fervour of their first love; and as love exacts a complete renouncement, they kept before their eyes the example of this renouncement and of the holiness inseparably bound up with it ; namely, the Saviour dying on the Cross for the love of sinners, between Mary and John on Calvary. This was done by men of the most opposite characters, by great and small, learned and simple, sinners and saints, old men, and tender youths alike. Whomsoever Christ called, the same followed Him, no matter where; in the bloody circus, in the peaceful cloister, on the top of pillars, in the palace of the emperors, in the barren desert, they broke all ties which were inconsistent with the call of Christ.

The Emperor Theodosius the Great sought a tutor for his sons Arcadius and Honorius, and begged the Emperor Gratian in Rome to send to Constantinople a person to whom he could entrust the youths. At that time Arsenius was deacon of the Roman Church, a man of prayer, of profound study, and of holy works. Although he was related to the most noble families of Rome,

he and his pious sister lived in the greatest retirement. Pope Damasus, to whom the Emperor Gratian had referred the weighty matter, cast his eyes upon Arsenius, for in him was found faith and learning, wisdom and prudence, all that could qualify him to be the tutor of the youthful Caesars.

Arsenius obeyed the successor of the Prince of the Apostles, and leaving his solitude; he renounced his desire of total separation from the world and its dangers, and went to Constantinople. Theodosius knew his worth; he gave him the rank of senator, with a magnificent residence, and a numerous retinue, and made him not only the teacher of his sons, but also their godfather, desiring that they should honour him as their second father. Arsenius remained always humble, even outwardly.

When he gave instructions to the young emperors, he stood while they sat down. Theodosius once visited them during their lesson hours, and blamed his sons for this as being extremely disrespectful, and pressed Arsenius to take a seat also. Arsenius was supremely indifferent to all these honours, for

his mind was too securely fixed on heaven to be drawn aside by gold or purple. He performed his laborious and unthankful task with the greatest zeal and love. Whilst he was using all his endeavours to train his pupils to be worthy to wear a crown, he could not but see how they listened to the courtly flatterers that surrounded them, and how they gave themselves up to that indolence and effeminacy which made them so unlike their noble father, and which afterwards rendered their reign so pernicious. Nevertheless, Arsenius did not lose courage, but spared neither instructions nor warnings, neither the gentleness nor the severity of love. Arcadius once committed such a great fault that Arsenius judged a severe chastisement necessary. Instead of entering into himself, the young prince was furious with anger, and began to hate and persecute his tutor, being spurred on and encouraged by those who were envious of Arsenius; and, finally, he charged an officer of his body-guard to deliver him, at all costs, from this rigid supervision. Fortunately the officer did not consider in Arcadius, as so many others did, the future emperor, into whose favour he might have wished to ingratiate himself, but he

feared Theodosius, and respected Arsenius. Therefore he disclosed the affair to the latter, and advised him to withdraw secretly from Constantinople, as his life was in danger, and all hope of his influencing Arcadius for good was at an end on account of the hatred which he bore him.

Arsenius betook himself to prayer to obtain light to discern the will of God, and he heard a voice which said to him “Fly from all men, Arsenius, be silent, and at peace, and you shall save your soul” These words were in such perfect accordance with the longing for complete solitude which he had long perceived and struggled with in his soul, that he believed the time had come which God in His mercy had appointed for him to dedicate himself henceforward to a severe and ascetic life. He left the imperial palace, went on board a ship bound for Alexandria, which lay in the harbour, and sailed from thence, not so much to save his life as to sacrifice it. All the grandeur of the luxurious and populous city of Alexandria was to him as nothing. He passed on to the desert of Scete. There, in a cavern, he once more prayed with great

fervour to know the will of God ; and again he heard a voice in prayer which said “Arsenius, fly from men, keep silence, be at peace, and you shall save your soul” Whoever wished to join a community of anchorites or monks had first to present himself to the superior, and beg for his permission to be allowed to serve God under the direction of the experienced and aged, who were called out of respect the fathers, or the ancient fathers. This act of submission was particularly necessary amongst the anchorites. If each one had settled in the desert at his own pleasure, without spiritual direction and supervision, it would soon have been peopled by savage and independent hordes. But humility and obedience united the individuals into one holy family of brethren. In compliance with this rule, Arsenius also presented himself at once before the abbot Pastor who had, at that time, the spiritual direction of those who dwelt in the desert of Scete. Arsenius was already forty years old, and he came from a most brilliant position in the world; from the imperial court of Byzantium.

The abbot Pastor entrusted him to the care of a brother called John the Dwarf, who was remarkably pious and spiritual, although he was still very young. His office was to put the novices to the proof by various mortifications, and to discover how much they were inclined to penance; and above all, whether they were capable of the ascetic life. John therefore added Arsenius to the number of his disciples. In the evening, when they assembled to take their scanty meal, and the brethren all took their assigned places, John did not show Arsenius to any place at all, but left him standing in their midst without noticing his presence. This slight was followed by another. John contemptuously took up a piece of bread, threw it at the feet of Arsenius, and sharply said, "Eat if you wish" Arsenius knelt down and ate the bread upon his knees. The brethren gazed upon him with admiration, and John, transported with joy, exclaimed "This man is fit for the hermit's life. Oh, my brethren, pray that the blessing of God may be upon him and upon us!"

From that moment, till his last hour, Arsenius buried himself in solitude with God. He often

asked himself these questions “Arsenius, why have you left the world? why have you come here?” A great ascetic of later times, St. Bernard, put before himself over and over again the same question, in order, like Arsenius, to excite himself to perseverance. He asserted that the chief duty of a monk consists in detaching himself from the earth and from all temporal concerns without exception; in weeping in the spirit of contrition over all his faults and infirmities, and in waiting with desire for a glorious eternity. Therefore Arsenius sought to bury himself with all his talents and learning in his mountain cell, striving to put to death the earthly man, and thereby to attain to union with God. The Emperor Theodosius was sorely grieved at the disappearance of Arsenius. He caused him to be sought for everywhere, in the cloisters and deserts. But the great emperor died in the year 395, and his sons divided the crown, which he had worn, but which was, nevertheless, too heavy for them both.

The search for Arsenius was not, however, fruitless. Arcadius, who now sat on the throne of Constantinople, learnt the abode of his holy tutor,

and wrote to him by a special messenger to beg pardon for his former offences, and to recommend himself to his prayers, and offered to make over to him all the revenue of the Egyptian taxes, that he might spend them as he thought fit, in favour of the poor, the hermits, the churches, and the monasteries, because the care of the poor would be safest in his hands. Arsenius did not accept this magnificent alms, but only wrote in answer “May God forgive us all our sins! I cannot have anything to do with the distribution of the money, because I look upon myself as one already dead” He remembered the warning of that heavenly voice which had so clearly pointed out his path to him. He was firmly resolved to follow it, and to remove all occasions of distraction however good they might seem. In his eyes no worldly affair was worth a single thought He occupied himself solely with death, and in preparing his soul for the judgment of God.

At first he retained unwittingly many little habits he had brought with him out of the world; for example, he crossed his legs one over another when he sat down, or he placed one foot on his

knee. But in the assemblies of the monks, position, movements, and demeanour were all regulated in order to accustom them, even exteriorly, to a certain discipline. Yet all were unwilling to draw his attention to this little fault, because they were filled with the greatest respect for his sublime penance. The wise abbot Pastor adopted the expedient of once sitting himself in an assembly with his foot upon his knee, and thereby drawing upon himself a rebuke from an aged solitary. Arsenius understood the admonition, and took pains thenceforward to combat little worldly habits no less than greater ones. In the world he had been splendidly clothed, now he wore the coarsest and most inconvenient habit.

In the world he had taken great pleasure in intellectual conversation; here he observed silence more rigidly than any, and for that reason he chose a cell which was an hour's journey more distant than any of the others. In the world his keen and penetrating intellect found joy in all sciences, and he studied even the profane ones with deep interest; now he denied his mind all recreation, and studied nothing but the knowledge,

alas! too sadly neglected, of the Four Last Things. In the world he was very fond of perfumes, which it was then the custom to burn in rooms, and to place among garments; but now he kept the water in which he soaked palm leaves for a whole year without changing it, only adding a little fresh water to it when required. When some of the fathers asked him why he did not throw away such offensive water, he replied "To mortify my sense of smell, which was formerly so much indulged" He accustomed himself with difficulty to the universal occupation of the Egyptian hermits, that of weaving mats. The more laborious he found this work the more earnestly did he devote himself to it, but not so much as to let it disturb his heavenly contemplation. Through this latter the merciful love of God, and the sinful ingratitude of men, were so deeply impressed upon his soul that his eyes were always bathed in tears of love and sorrow, and this holy contrition lasted to the end of his long life, and established him securely in humility, the foundation of perfection.

The hermits of Scete once received a small present of figs, but they were so few that the abbot did

not like to send so contemptible a gift to Arsenius. He learnt this from some of the solitaries, who supplied him with his scanty necessaries because of his extreme unwillingness to leave his cell for the sake of earthly things- But after that he left off attending the Offices of the church, and when the brethren came to visit him supposing him to be ill, he said to them “You have expelled me from your community by considering me unworthy to share in the blessing which the good God sent to you” Extremely edified by the humility which esteemed the gifts of God so highly, and himself so lightly, the priest of the community hurried to him, brought him a few figs, and conducted him to the church. In church he always sought a place behind a column, where he could see no one, and be out of sight of all, so greatly did he fear every occasion of distraction. The abbot Marcus once asked him “Why do you avoid thy brethren?” “God knows how I love them” answered Arsenius, “but I cannot be with God and men at the same time, and it is not lawful for me to leave Him in order to join myself to them. I must endeavour to keep myself in company with the heavenly hosts, in constant and unremitting application of my will to

God, and amongst men it is always divided” Intercourse with mankind always filled him with fear, and he was in the habit of saying “Silence has never given me any regret ; conversation always a little” Hence he could never be persuaded to answer letters in writing, nor even to explain the Holy Scriptures, for which he was so admirably fitted by talent, prayer, and enlightenment, for he feared not only distractions, but also vanity and self-complacency. He often repeated “All our mental culture does not help us Romans in the progress of virtue, for the glory of knowledge easily fills the heart with pride. On the other hand, these unlearned Egyptians have advanced along the road to perfection by labour and simplicity” Once he asked advice from a very simple and aged Egyptian solitary, and another who was listening said, in amazement “Father Arsenius, you are versed in all the knowledge of the Greeks and Romans, then why do you ask counsel from this uneducated old man?” “Yes” answered the holy man “it is true that I know the sciences of the Greeks and Romans, but, unfortunately, I have not yet learnt this old man’s alphabet”

Theophilus, archbishop of Alexandria, once visited him with an eminent magistrate, and begged him to say something edifying to them. Arsenius replied that he was much too sinful. After a short silence, he added “However, if you will promise to take my advice, I will willingly say a few words” The two visitors joyfully consented, and he said “If you hear that the poor sinner Arsenius is here or is there, do not go to see him” The same archbishop wished on another occasion to speak with him, but knowing already by experience his exceeding love for solitude, he sent first to ask him if entrance into his cell was permitted. Arsenius gave this answer to the messenger : “If the archbishop comes I will certainly open my cell to him ; and not only to him, but to all the world ; and then I will depart from it myself” When this declaration was reported to the archbishop, he said “It is better not to go than to drive him away” The younger solitaries, Daniel, Zoylas, and Alexander, who rendered him their services, were thus brought into intimate connection with him, and they rejoiced in observing his holy demeanour, and in the teachings which he gave them at times. One of the

youths complained that although he knew the Holy Scriptures by heart, and would like to contemplate them, he did not properly understand their deep meaning, and therefore remained lukewarm. “Continue, nevertheless, your holy contemplation, my son” said Arsenius. The holy abbot Pastor used to say “The snake-charmers understand not the force of the words with which they capture the snakes; but the snakes understand and obey them. Even if we ourselves do not understand the full meaning of the holy writings, the ancient serpent acknowledges their power when we occupy ourselves with them, and the divine words which the Holy Ghost has spoken to us through the prophets and apostles drive him far from us” He said once to Daniel “ An ancient father gave me this piece of good advice: Be diligent in directing your interior works by the will of God, and they will help you to conquer the evil desires of the exterior man” Another time he said “If we seek the Lord God we shall find Him, and if we keep Him He will remain with us” Arsenius attained to this union with God by the direction of all his powers to this sublime end, and he found strength for his fifty years of struggle in fervent,

constant, and humble prayer, joined with mortification of the senses. His disciples often heard him in his cell weeping and exclaiming, “O Lord, forsake me not, although I have so far been so faithless. Give me the grace at length to begin to serve thee” He said that one hours sleep should suffice for a monk, and he allowed himself still less. When he had spent the night in prayer, and was overpowered by fatigue towards morning, he said to sleep “Come here, thou bad fellow” and after sleeping a little while went quickly back to his work. Every Saturday evening, as the sun sank behind him, he began to pray with his hands lifted up towards heaven, and he never arose from his prayer till the rising sun shone upon his face early on Sunday morning.

The example he set of sanctity and humility gained him unlimited obedience on the part of his disciples. Arsenius said one day to Alexander “As soon as you have finished your palm-weaving tomorrow, come to me, and we will take our meal together. But if strangers visit you, eat with them, and do not come at all to me” At that time Alexander was quite unpractised in weaving palms,

though he tried to do his work as well as he could. He was not nearly ready, therefore, at the time for eating, and Arsenius ate alone, in the supposition that some strangers had required Alexander's hospitality. When the latter came to him late in the evening, he immediately asked if such had not been the case. Alexander said no "Why, then, did you not come sooner?" said Arsenius "My father" replied Alexander, "you told me to come when I had finished my palms. My store was large. I have only just now finished it, therefore I did not dare to come sooner" Arsenius was delighted with such perfect obedience, but instead of expressing his joy, he said "Learn to work quicker, and then you will have time to recite psalms, to worship God in other ways, and to eat, otherwise you will be starved in body and soul" But reproofs and severity only bound the pious youth more firmly to Arsenius, for by them he measured the holy love of his teacher and his own imperfection.

Arsenius also practiced perfect obedience in a way that was most painful to him. He once became so seriously ill that the priest who had charge of the spiritual necessities of the hermits of Scete

thought good to cause him to be brought into the vicinity of the church, and into a dwelling which could afford a few comforts. The sufferer was laid upon some skins of wild beasts, with a small pillow, and these little indulgences were to him more unbearable than his dreadful pains, but he submitted himself with resignation to the arrangement. An aged solitary visited him, and angrily exclaimed, "Is it really Father Arsenius that I see in this comfortable bed?" The sick man was silent, but the priest took up the discourse, and said "What was your rank in the world?" "I was a shepherd" answered the solitary. "And how did you gain your livelihood?" "With the greatest difficulty" "And how do you live now?" "Much better and more easily" "See, then" said the priest, "it is exactly the reverse with Arsenius. In the world he was, as it were, the father of the Caesars. He had a hundred servants, clad in silk, and magnificent apartments with carpets and sofas. Here he renounces all that luxury to be poor and suffering, while you are now better off than you were in the world. And yet you take scandal at his couch" The aged anchorite threw himself on his knees, and exclaimed "Forgive me, my father ; for

I have sinned. Arsenius is on the right road to humility” He who was formerly so richly clothed, was now so poor that his only possession was his monastic habit. During his illness he had to wear a linen shirt. He did not possess one, and having money given him to buy one, he said, “My God, I thank You for the grace of being permitted to receive alms in Your Name “At that time a messenger was sent to him from Rome, to bring him the will of one of his relations, a rich senator, who had made him heir to all his property. He asked when his cousin had died, and the messenger said it was three months ago. “Then I cannot inherit anything from him” said Arsenius, “because I died long before him” and nothing could induce him to accept the inheritance. After his recovery he returned with joy to his poor cell, which was dearer to him than a paradise, and he left it still more seldom than before. He also advised all the other anchorites to keep as much as possible at a distance from him, and he repeated to them the words he had once heard in prayer, which were so deeply impressed upon his heart, “Fly, remain silent and in peace, and you shall save your soul”

“But, my father,” said a young monk “why do you avoid the conversation of the brethren ? It would all be of God” “I had rather listen to what God says in the interior of my heart than to what others say of Him” was the answer of Arsenius.

When he was advanced in age, God sent him a trial which was the hardest to him of all. The torrent of the migration of nations continued to spread ever wider desolation over the ancient Roman empire. The northern barbarians poured irresistibly across the frontiers, first into the provinces, then to Rome, and beyond Rome to the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Their devastating scourge fell also upon the Roman provinces of Africa. Genseric, king of the Vandals, conquered Carthage, and founded a kingdom there. During these tribulations St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo, departed from the earth. The African deserts no longer offered a safe refuge from the hardy barbarian tribes of the north, who everywhere drove away the inhabitants. They fled into the deserts, and the savage Mazices followed them, carrying fire and sword even into the solitude of Scete, and scared away the peaceful anchorites.

Arsenius departed weeping, and exclaimed “Woe unto us ! the world has lost the city of Rome, and we monks the desert of Scete” He directed his steps to a distant region between the Egyptian Babylon (now Cairo) and the ancient royal city of Memphis, and lived there for ten years. But the neighbourhood of the great cities brought disturbance and molestation, and he therefore fled into Lower Egypt to a marshy wilderness, where he increased still more all the austerities he had practiced for fifty years; and, as if he were a young beginner in asceticism, he daily asked himself the same question, “Arsenius, why did you come here ?” About this time a noble Roman lady left her home, and travelled to Egypt to refresh and strengthen her soul in the spirit of Christianity, which there brought forth such glorious blossoms of perfection that their perfume filled all the lands of the East and the West. The sublime holiness of her countryman, Arsenius, attracted the noble Roman lady above all others. She rejoiced to learn from the patriarch of Alexandria that he was living in the neighbourhood, and she begged the archbishop to obtain her an interview. But Arsenius, who had been unwilling formerly to

receive the patriarch himself, flatly refused this request, and the astonished lady thought it advisable to visit him without any more ceremony. She went into the desert, and waited there a long time, till he returned from a visit to a sick brother. He came at last, a thin, tall man, somewhat bent with the weight of his ninety-two years, but majestic in his walk and carriage, with a long snow-white beard, with beautiful and attractive eyes bathed in tears, and with that sweetness of countenance which betokens victory over the earthly man. She thought she beheld an angel, or one of the prophets of olden times. The celestial beauty of his exterior sprang from the peace of his soul, which reposed in unbroken union with God by means of prayer; and this beauty can never be shared by the sensual man. She hurried to meet him; and, falling at his feet, sought to express her veneration for him. Arsenius raised her up immediately, and said, with great gravity, "If you insist on seeing me, look at me as much as you like, only send no more Roman ladies across the sea to look upon the aged Arsenius. I wonder, moreover, very much at your leaving your home and your family to come to Egypt to annoy the solitaries"

The lady, in the greatest confusion, said that she would certainly dissuade all Roman ladies from undertaking this journey, but she entreated Arsenius to remember her in prayer before God. “I will, indeed, pray God to blot out the recollection of you from my memory” Arsenius answered, and retreated to his cell. The lady returned in haste to Alexandria. Consternation, fear, and sorrow threw her into a violent fever, and the patriarch had the greatest difficulty in consoling her, and making her perceive that Arsenius had shown in his answer greater severity to himself than to her. Arsenius, on his part, was full of fear because Lower Egypt was directly in the line of the pilgrimage from Rome to the Oriental ascetics. These journeys were becoming more and more common amongst devout people, and Arsenius fled once more to his cell at Memphis. On the road he met a Moorish maiden, who out of curiosity seized hold of his coarse habit. He refused to allow it, and said that it was not proper to touch the garment of a monk, whereupon the Moorish girl, undaunted, said to him, “Why do you not remain in the cloister, as you are a monk ?” These words went to his heart.

He made still more haste to reach his solitude, and said to his disciples “The dove found no branch whereon to rest, and returned to Noah’s ark” At length, at the age of ninety-five, the strength of this giant in spirit was exhausted, and he felt his last hour approach. He made only one request to his disciples, that they would pay him no honour after his death ; but on the contrary, that they would remember him in their prayers as the greatest of poor sinners. Then exceeding fear fell upon him. “Is it possible, my father, that you fear death ?” asked his sorrowful disciples. “Certainly, I fear death” said the holy old man “and I can truly say that this fear has not left me for a single instant as long as I have been a monk” But this fear diminished as his end drew near. At last it gave place to a deep and holy calm, and he fell asleep in the peace of the Lord When the patriarch Theophilus was informed of his decease, he exclaimed, “happy Arsenius, who has always had his last end before his eyes !” And the ancient father, Poemen, said with tears, “blessed Arsenius, who wept over yourself as long as you were upon earth! Whoever does not weep here, will weep for ever in the next life”

10

Ephrem

Egypt, the Babylon of polytheism, the land of dark problems before which the sphinx keeps guard, had thus become a clear and bright fountain from which flowed forth in plenitude the 'waters of everlasting life' The enigma of the world, unread by the polytheistic ages which bowed before the dumb sphinx of stone, was solved by the sons of Egypt at the foot of the Cross, when by asceticism and mysticism they restored man to his state in paradise, and turned caverns and cloisters into nurseries of the highest Christian virtue. From thence this new life poured forth over the world in two vast streams full of rich germs of untold fertility. The one flowed towards the east, the other towards the west and north. The channel for this latter stream was prepared by Athanasius, the great and saintly Patriarch of Alexandria, the spiritual hero of the century, the champion and representative of the Church in the battle of faith

for the Divinity of Christ against Arianism. During his banishments to Treves and Rome, at once a disciple and a master in asceticism, he became a leader in this holy and mysterious realm by his example, his exhortations, and his writings. We have no certain account of how the ascetic life, under its two forms, made its way into the east. St. Basil the Great found flourishing and well-regulated monasteries in Coele-Syria and Mesopotamia as early as the year 357, and a very perfect form of monastic life flourished also in Palestine and Persia at that time. Therefore we may infer that the spirit and life of the cloister developed themselves as naturally from a lively Christian faith, as a flower unfolds from the bud.

Man learnt by faith to know the God of infinite love, and as the simple consequence received Him into his heart with a corresponding love, and dedicated himself entirely to His service. The greatest and most distinguished men in the Church were disciples of the ascetics, and spread and encouraged this disposition in their own disciples. Near Nisibis, the ancient capital of Mesopotamia, there dwelt a married couple of

worthy peasants, who brought up their son in the fear of the Lord. This boy was Ephrem. His gentle and thoughtful disposition was developed by continual contemplation of Holy Writ, with whose treasures his parents had early made him acquainted. It shed such light upon his soul that a high degree of virtue was ever before him as his only aim. Little bursts of anger, and passing doubts of the Providence of God seemed to him afterwards grave sins, and he deplored some boyish tricks as bitterly as though they had been serious crimes; so pure did his heart remain from youth up to extreme old age. An indescribable peacefulness and invincible meekness, together with perfect firmness of faith, rendered his virtue unusually attractive. Some visions in sleep, and an unjust imprisonment which endangered his life, but was followed by his release, inspired him with the liveliest gratitude for the dispositions of God's mercy ; and about the age of eighteen he received holy baptism, and formed the resolution of dedicating himself in peaceful contemplation to the service of God. There were then in Syria and Mesopotamia, as in Egypt and Palestine, very many who devoted themselves to the ascetic life,

and who practised spiritual exercises with great mortification of the senses, and were at the same time diligent in manual labour.

There were three forms of this life. Some were solitaries in the strictest sense of the word, and each of these lived in complete solitude in his cell, hut, or cavern; others lived so far in community that they united together daily in prayer and praise, dwelling without shelter upon the mountains of the great Syrian desert, chiefly upon Mount Sigoron, between Nisibis and Edessa. They slept in fissures in the rocks, and ate no bread; each one had a small sickle with which he gathered at meal time some wild herbs for his nourishment. This appalling austerity of life was practised only by a few; most of them joined some community where they had their dwelling, their meals and prayer in common. Here also severe mortification prevailed, and the body was allowed the least possible quantity of sleep and food. Labour was one of the chief conditions of the ascetic life, under every form.

The anchorites in their cells, or on the mountains, the monks in their cloisters, all worked that they might supply their own wants and give alms. This last duty was considered so holy that the most extreme poverty gave no exemption from it, and hence their great zeal in labour. They plaited baskets, mats, and ropes, prepared paper, wove sails and cloths, ground corn, worked in the fields and gardens, and copied books; some, like Ephrem, wrote books themselves, but he also wove sails. Their labours, except that of writing, did not hinder either prayer, or the singing of psalms, or reading the Holy Scriptures, or contemplation.

Ephrem went to the holy hermit James, who afterwards became Bishop of Nisibis, but who was then leading the life of an anchorite in his cell at the foot of a mountain, and made the confession to him of all the wicked and evil deeds of his life, for such did his little faults appear to him when weighed by heavenly measures and compared to the infinite perfection of God. He received permission from James to dedicate himself thenceforward under his guidance to penance and

mortification. Here Ephrem went through the purifying discipline of obedience, and laid the foundation of his holiness and of his spiritual enlightenment. He is said to have been ignorant of the Greek language and of worldly science, and to have received only an ordinary school education, but to have acquired by incessant study of the Holy Scriptures the supernatural wisdom which he expressed in his writings.

The most learned fathers of the Church honoured Ephrem as an enlightened teacher. The clear vision of his soul being devoted to heavenly things alone, he contemplated untroubled and undazzled that light which had illumined first the Prophets and then the Apostles. And in prayer Ephrem spoke so uninterruptedly, so simply, so lovingly, and so humbly to the Eternal Word, that at length the Word spoke to him in return, and bestowed knowledge upon him which he could never have learnt from books or from the lips of men. He was violent and passionate by nature and prone to anger; but he so completely subdued this passion that he was never known to dispute or to be angry with any one, and he gained for himself the

surname of ‘the peaceable man of God’ In his later intercourse with hardened sinners and evildoers, with heretics and heathen, prayers and tears were his sole weapons. He despised himself beyond measure, and his greatest desire was that others should hold him in equal contempt.

With indescribable humility he wept and mourned over his spiritual misery. “I should fear to be like those” he writes in his Confessions, “who were consumed by flames from heaven, because they presumed to offer an unholy fire upon the altar, if I were to appear before God without the consecrated fire of love in my heart, and so to deserve that punishment” He declared that he could never shed tears enough to wash away all the stains upon his soul, which he alone perceived; and to this contrition was joined an earnest desire to establish the kingdom of God perfectly in his heart. Because pride is the declared enemy of this kingdom, he feared nothing so much as its snares. “There is no more dangerous sin” he writes “it destroys even the gifts of God, makes virtues sources of pride, and changes them into abominations. Oh! if we would only constantly

remember that in the day of judgment all our virtues will be tried by fire and that none can bear the trial save that of humility” Praises terrified him. Whilst he was being praised he stood in spirit before the judgment-seat of God, trembling lest by his hypocritical simulation of holiness he had deceived those who praised him. He insisted strongly and earnestly on the necessity of this penitential and humble contrition in presence of the infinite love of God, and the awful strictness of His judgments, for himself first, but also for others. He writes, “Contrition is the daily bread of all spiritual men. By it they obtain mercy, and acquire for themselves everlasting graces which are more precious than all treasures.” St. Gregory of Nyssa says of Ephrem, “Weeping was as natural to him as breathing is to other men. By day and by night his eyes shed floods of tears” From his hermitage Ephrem went to live for some time in a religious order, to exercise himself in the various mortifications which a community life imposes. There he joined himself to a holy monk of the name of Julian, who had been driven out of the West by severe misfortunes, and had taken shelter in that haven of repose. Julian was by birth

a Visigoth, and had fallen into slavery through the fortune of war, and suffered incredible hardships at the hand of his heathen master on account of his faith. For the Christian faith with its purity and holiness was no welcome guest at Heliopolis in Coele-Syria. Heliopolis, (the city of the sun,) is the Greek name for Baalbec. Baal, the god of the sun, and his sister Astarte, goddess of the moon, were the principal and favourite deities of Syria, and no idolatry was more strikingly opposed to Christianity than the worship which was paid to these idols.

Coele-Syria is the strip of land lying between the two mountain ranges of Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon, a wide, level, and fruitful valley. There was situated the voluptuous Baalbec, the headquarters of the worship of Baal, rich, effeminate, and adorned with temples ; there even now lie its gigantic and beautiful ruins, in whose vast extent the amazed and admiring traveller may easily lose himself. The contiguous quarries of Anti-Lebanon readily supplied the splendid materials for these colossal structures. Enormous blocks still lie there, from twenty to thirty feet long, such as were used

for the foundations and the surrounding walls. They are left half finished; before the workmen could complete them Baal was no more. The bare and wild peaks of Anti-Lebanon look frowningly down upon its devastated loveliness, and near it we now find only a little Maronite village, and a couple of walnut-trees by a small stream.

Here Julian had to bear much cruelty and disgrace before he obtained his freedom, of which his first use was to take upon himself the sweet yoke of the Saviour by practical imitation of Him. His spirit had been purified by his severe trials and inflamed with a burning love of God. He could not hear or read the Name of God without bursting into tears and imploring pardon of his sins. Julian and Ephrem were alike in this, and strengthened each other in the holy love which is inseparable from holy sorrow for offences against God by sin. The two friends were parted by the holy death of Julian, and Ephrem went to Nisibis, where the Episcopal throne was then occupied by the saintly anchorite James. It was in the year 350, and Sapor, king of Persia, was besieging the city with innumerable forces, for it was the bulwark of

the Koman empire against the East, and against the kings and nations of the rest of Asia. For this reason it was as strenuously and indefatigably defended as it was attacked. But after the fearful exertions of a seventy days siege Nisibis was exhausted, while Sapor, on the contrary, received assistance and fresh troops from the kings of India.

The fall of Nisibis seemed inevitable; the men of action gave it up for lost. Then the men of prayer, James and Ephrem, arose at the request of the people to beseech God to deliver the city. They mounted the walls of the town, and James looked over the camp, the army and the warlike array, and King Sapor's ramparts, trenches, and redoubts; he then knelt down and begged Almighty God to show forth His omnipotence. Then cloud after cloud rose up from the horizon, and spread over the earth, darkening the light of day, for they were formed of myriads of flies which entered the trunks of the elephants, and the nostrils, eyes, and ears of the horses, camels, and other beasts of burden. This so maddened them that they broke their harness, tore away from the ranks, trampled the men under foot, and fled in every direction,

spreading destruction in the camp. The soldiers were utterly powerless to prevent it, because they were themselves blinded by the innumerable flies. The disorder of the camp was so great and so complete that King Sapor in his rage shot an arrow towards heaven and raised the siege.

The holy Bishop James was soon after called out of this life, and Ephrem went to the province of Osroene, where, in peaceful solitude, he led an extremely austere life in the neighbourhood of Edessa, the capital. Here he began to compose his writings. An aged anchorite who visited him now and then to gladden himself with the sight of his growth in holiness, once found him having just finished his commentary on the First Book of Moses, the history of the creation. The old man read the writing, kept it, and taking it to Edessa showed it to the ecclesiastics and most learned men of the city. They admired the book, and congratulated the old man on having written so excellent a treatise. He then said that he was not the author of it, but that it was the work of a stranger hermit who lived very piously in a miserable cavern. From that time Ephrem's

hidden life ceased. He was frequently visited, some requiring his advice, others his teaching, all, his prayers. The Bishop of Edessa heard of the great influence which Ephrem's words exercised upon the people, and of the great love they felt for him on account of his meekness and piety. Therefore he resolved to put this bright light upon a candle stick in the church, and ordained Ephrem deacon. Ephrem submitted with fear and trembling to this command; but even the bishop could not induce him to receive priest's orders. He remained all his life a humble deacon of the church of Edessa, fulfilling the duties of that office to their utmost extent, preaching the Gospel and tending the poor.

The more deeply penetrated he felt by his unworthiness and sinfulness the more did his humility affect all with whom he came in contact. When he preached and censured the sins of others he was always careful to condemn himself, placing himself on the same footing as his hearers, or indeed beneath them. At the end of a sermon which he preached to enkindle a desire for martyrdom when there were fears of a persecution of the Christians by the Emperor Julian, he

exclaimed, "I desire to die for this faith! Assemble, ye Jews and heretics, unite with the pagans and barbarians! Let me die for Jesus Christ! Your cruelty will, indeed, grieve me for your own sakes, but I should esteem myself most fortunate to be allowed to die for my faith. It is true that I fear death if I consider myself alone, but Jesus Christ is my hope and my trust. In my own weakness I fly; in His strength I persevere. If I look at myself I tremble, if I cast my eyes upon Him I am full of courage. My God! I tremble because You hate sin, but nevertheless I am filled with joy, for You died for sinners" The spirit of penance which animated Ephrem made him an irresistible preacher of penance. His appearance was also very striking; he was tall and thin, his bright eyes were always overflowing with tears, and his face had a serene and wonderful expression, which betokened the highest sanctity. He was so overcome by the saving truths which he announced, that he was continually obliged to pause to recover himself. If he then gave free course to his tears, his hearers wept and sobbed with him. St. Gregory of Nyssa asserts that it was impossible to read his sermon

on the Last Judgment, and still more so to hear it, without tears.

“My dear brethren” he said, “you are listening to the words which I am going to speak concerning the fearful coming of the Lord. But who can relate such terrible things? If I think of that dreadful moment I am entranced with fear. The King of kings will descend from heaven, from the throne of glory, to take His seat as Judge, and will call all the inhabitants of earth before His judgment-seat. Alas! a clap of thunder makes us tremble now; how then shall we bear the clang of those trumpets which shall wake the dead?”

As soon as the sleeping bodies in the bosom of the grave shall hear this sound, life will animate them once more. All will rise again in one and the same moment, without a single hair being wanting to them ; they will collect together and stream towards the place of judgment ; for the heavenly King issues His commands, and the stricken earth and the agitated depths of ocean give back their dead” Then he described the fire which enkindles the whole world ; the angels who separate the

sheep from the goats ; the sign of the Cross shining with light, which is carried before the King ; mankind in fear and confusion ; the just overflowing with joy, and the wicked a prey to despair ; the heavenly hosts glorifying the thrice holy God with their songs of praise ; heaven opened, and the Lord surrounded by such glory that neither heaven nor earth can support it. Ephrem was so affected that his voice melted into tears, and he was unable to proceed. But the congregation cried aloud to him, “Continue to instruct us in these fearful things, say further, servant of God, what will happen after that” Ephrem then unfolded before their eyes the Book of Life in which all our thoughts, words, and works are written. “Then each man will be called up to undergo a severe examination, and will not dare to lift up his eyes to the Eternal Judge, whose divinely just decree awards to each one life or death, heaven or hell.

“My dearest brethren! how many tears ought we shed day and night in expectation of this fearful judgment? At the mere thought of such things my limbs stiffen” “We conjure you” exclaimed his

hearers, “continue to speak to us for our welfare and the salvation of our souls” “my dearest brethren !” continued Ephrem, “ then will each Christian be examined whether he has the seal of holy baptism and the treasure of the faith ; each Christian will be asked whether he has lived according to his renunciation of Satan and his works, not only one or two of his works, but all in general. Oh, blessed is he who has faithfully kept his promise! Then is announced that woeful sentence which parts men for ever from one another: bishops from bishops, priests from priests, deacons and lectors from their companions in orders; children from their parents, brothers from their sisters, friends from their friends. After the separation has taken place, the reprobate will call upon the elect with unspeakable lamentation, and will say: “Farewell you saints and servants of God! farewell you prophets, apostles, and martyrs! farewell you parents, children, and friends! farewell forever most Blessed Virgin, Mother of God!

All of you have prayed for the salvation of our souls but we would not be saved. Farewell saving

Cross! farewell Paradise, field of delights, everlasting kingdom, heavenly Jerusalem! Farewell ye blessed! Farewell to bliss! We shall see you no more! We are sinking into an abyss of pain and torments, we have no more hope of salvation forever” Ephrem continued to speak in this way for a long time to the breathlessly attentive congregation, and wept and sobbed, and struck his breast in penitence. He did not do this with the motive of affecting his hearers, but the sinfulness of men, and the justice of God, represented themselves so forcibly to his mind, that his interior agitation made him lose his self-command.

He once, with two companions, left Edessa before sunrise, when the whole sky was sprinkled with thousands of sparkling stars. His pure heart was flooded with joy, and he exclaimed, “Oh, if the beauty of these created things is so inexpressibly lovely, how great must be that glory which will proceed from the Uncreated Light at the coming of the Saviour of the world, and which will shine around the blessed” Then he directly turned his thoughts humbly towards himself and added, “Alas! what a direful day! Oh, woe is me!” And he

fell down fainting. When he recovered his consciousness his companions asked him what had befallen him. “my brethren” Ephrem answered, “I thought of the state in which I should appear before my Judge, I so miserable amongst so many perfections, I a withered tree without fruit. The martyrs will show their wounds, the religious their virtues, but I, alas! I shall have nothing to show in my vain and proud soul but idleness and Luke warmness”

At night when he was going to allow himself a little rest he was hindered by the recollection of his sins. He found it impossible to sleep, and like King David, he watered his couch with his tears. Or he thought of the infinite love of God for men, and throwing himself upon his knees, he sought, in the fervour of his love, to pour forth his gratitude. “But” he said “the remembrance of my sins deters me, and I can do nothing but dissolve in tears. I feel clearly that the anguish the day of judgment causes in me would be insupportable if I were not sustained and encouraged by examples of the mercy of God, such as those of the publican, the Good Shepherd, the Canaanite woman, the

Magdalen, and the Samaritan” Ephrem advised his disciples, above all things, to banish tepidity from their souls, and he said “What a man builds up today with one hand by mortification, he pulls down tomorrow with the other by Luke warmness. And when Satan is overcome by fervent souls, he says, “I will go to the lukewarm, they are my friends I hold them fast without any difficulty by the bonds which they love. “He taught his disciples to encourage themselves with the thought that this earthly life is a time of usury, and a very short time in which to acquire everlasting profits. He said, “Repeat often to yourselves ; I have only a very little more of the way left, and I am near to the haven of repose, therefore I will not delay upon the road” Although Ephrem was very gentle, yet he thought that obedience promoted virtue only when it commanded difficult, or even harsh things. “For “said he “wild beasts are never tamed by gentleness”

Ephrem was accustomed to call Edessa the “city of benediction” It had very early received the teaching of the Gospel, and kept it pure. When Arianism overspread those parts Edessa remained

unstained by it, and eighty priests with their holy Bishop Barse were banished for their fidelity to the Catholic faith. The Emperor Julian avoided it in his Persian campaign, because of the piety of its inhabitants. Nevertheless, the heretical teaching of a certain Bardesanus, denying, amongst other things, the resurrection of the body, was propagated from mouth to mouth in this pious city of Edessa. In order to gain admittance for these doctrines where their falsehood would otherwise have caused them to be rejected, and to secure their greatest possible diffusion, Harmonius, the son of Bardesanus, clothed them in verse and set them to music, and by means of the attractive melodies, the heretical poison entered the ears, and flowed from the lips of the unwitting people. What a grief for Ephrem! But this holy sorrow made him a poet, like many earlier divinely inspired minstrels. He wrote Catholic songs, partly in the same metre, to be sung to the well-known tunes, and partly in new and still pleasanter rhymes. To make them known, he assembled the consecrated virgins, the “daughters of the covenant” as they were called in the Syrian language, and instructed them to sing these hymns

at the gatherings of the faithful and in pious family circles. Ephrem's praises of the most Holy Virgin Mary are inexhaustible. Perhaps no other poet has honoured her with such fervent and glowing devotion. He opens the whole treasury of Oriental fancy, and calls upon heaven and earth to bring their best and sweetest to form an adornment that shall be worthy of its object.

These songs, hymns, and prayers in honour of Mary have come down to us from the most ancient times of the Church, from the fourth century, and the universal consent which they express gives them their childlike and confident tone. They issue forth from Ephrem's fervent devotion like a silver stream; he can set no bounds to their flowing. As the waves of the sea rise and fall, and ever rise again, so does the fulness of his love ever break forth anew in praise and admiration. One of the prayers is as follows: "Most Holy Mother of God, all unspotted, perfectly inviolate! Throne of the heavenly King, Gate of Heaven, incomprehensible Miracle. Revelation of the hidden Mystery of God, life-giving Fountain, unfathomable Sea of unspeakable

divine grace ; after the Most Holy Trinity, Queen of all things ; after the Mediator, Mediatrix of the whole world ; spotless Robe of Him who is clothed with light as with a garment ; Bridge of the entire world, which leads us to heaven. Mother and Servant of the never-setting Star ; True Vine, bearing the fruit of life ; Safety of those who stand, Resurrection of those who fall, Arouser of the slothful, Dispenser of all good, Haven of the tempest-tossed, Staff of the blind, Guide of the wandering, Deliverer of the imprisoned, incorruptible Flower dispersing sweet odour throughout all the world, most glorious Lily, Rose full of the most fragrant perfume ; my salvation, my consolation, my light, my life, my joy, my glory, bright lamp of my darkened soul, oh look down upon my faith and my desire ! Receive my soul, and make me, by thy help and intercession, worthy to stand one day at the Right Hand of thy Son, and to enter into the rest of the saints and the elect. Neither the will nor the power are wanting to thee. Thy Son honours you as His Mother, and willingly grants your prayers. Therefore I trust in you, true Mother of God, to whom honour and

glory are due, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, now and always and forever. Amen”

In a penitential prayer, he thus addresses Mary “O Virginal Mother, arouse my soul to penance and guide me to the way of salvation. When I shall have found it, be still my leader, that under your guidance I may attain to eternal bliss. Mother of the God who loves men, melt and humble my heart, fill mine eyes with tears of repentance, and enlighten them by the light of your intercession, that I may not die the death of the soul. Sprinkle me with the hyssop of your pity, that I may become clean and whiter than snow. Mother of my Lord Jesus Christ, accept my humble confession and prayer, and during the life that yet remains to me, keep me without stumbling on the path of penance! But when my poor soul must leave this body, then, my Lady, appear to me with your merciful eyes, and deliver me from the terrible accusations of my enemies and of the prince of this world. Be thou my defender, cancel my debt of sin, and lead me saved and fearless before the judgment-seat of thy Son”

Ephrem made another prayer a veritable garland of loving and honourable appellations, “all pure, all inviolate, all spotless, all stainless, all blameless, all praiseworthy, all untouched, all undefiled, most holy, most venerable, most estimable, most commendable, most desirable, holy Ark, in which we are saved from the deluge of sin ; unconsumed Bush, seen by Moses the prophet of God ; golden Censer, in which the Word, by putting on flesh, filled the world with sweet savour ; seven-branched Candlestick, whose light exceeded that of the sun ; holy Tabernacle, built by the spiritual Beseleel ; Vessel that preservest the manna ; holy blossoming Staff of Aaron, dew-bearing Fleece of Gideon, Book written by God, by which the penalty of Adam’s sin is blotted out ; Mountain of God, holy Mountain in which the Lord was well pleased to dwell ; holy Root of Jesse, City of God, of which David speaks, Glorious things are said of thee. Most beautiful by your very nature and incapable of receiving any stain. Paradise, holier than that of Eden, life-giving Tree, bearing sweetest and most lovely fruit ; beautiful Apple, fragrant Rose, whitest Lily, Sealed Book which none can read, inviolate Pattern of virginity,

highly-treasured Vision of the Prophets ; Purple woven by God, eloquent Mouth of the Apostles, unconquerable Trust of the combatants, Support of kings, Glory of the priesthood, Appeaser of the just Judge, my Hope, my Refreshment, my heart's Joy, my Delight, my Glory, my never-sleeping Helper with God ! inexhaustible Sea of divine and unspeakable graces and gifts; Height exalted above the heavenly powers; unfathomable Depth of sublime thoughts, Pride of all Nature, Ornament of the Angels, incomparably more glorious and sublime than the Cherubim and Seraphim, Key that admits us into heaven; Glory of the true and mystical day, illuminating Light of believing souls, Morning cloud that bringest heavenly dew to the inhabitants of earth. ..” And so on for pages and pages.

How cold, how short, how poor, are our songs in honour of the most Blessed Virgin Mary, in contrast with those of Ephrem. And how simply and completely he expresses the ground of his love and his trust; “You, who art above all praise, and can gain what you wish from God whom you have borne.” “Mighty Mother of the mighty and

living God, you can and will, because you have brought forth in an unspeakable manner One of the Trinity in Unity” “Bride of God! great confidence you have in Him who is born of you! As Mother of God you can do all things; as exalted above all creatures, you are all powerful. Nothing is impossible to you that you will, good Mother of Christ our God”

Ephrem wrote hymns upon the whole life of Christ, His birth, His baptism, His fasting, His passion, His resurrection and ascension, upon the martyrs, the dead, and the cleansing of the soul in the sacrament of penance; and the aged but loving anchorite stood in the midst of the sweet choirs of the daughters of the covenant like a teacher of the melodies of a supernatural world. But since he could not always win heretics and heathen by hymns and songs, he went forth to do them battle as an ardent missionary, and brought faith and conviction to their hearts. He won over numbers to the fold of Christ, Manichees, who denied the Divinity of the Holy Ghost; Arians, who disbelieved the Godhead of the Only-begotten Son; Novatians who rejected the power of

penance and condemned second marriages ; Ophites, who worshipped Jesus under the form of a serpent ; and Bardesanes, who would not credit the resurrection of the body. The East was full of these and other heresies, each of which had more or less numerous followers, to the deep sorrow of the Catholic Church, whose doctrine and teaching were never in the smallest degree influenced or modified by them.

With regard to the future life, Ephrem taught that souls immediately after their separation from the body undergo a particular judgment, and that the just who die in venial sin, or who have not sufficiently expiated their former sins by works of satisfaction, must still suffer in the flames of purgatory before they attain to the vision of God ; but that the faithful who are still upon this earth can mitigate and shorten these pains of the holy suffering souls, by sacrifices, prayers, and other good works. The doctrine of the Catholic Church was then exactly what it is now, and this testimony of the Syrian father of the Church in the fourth century proves that neither the reverence for Mary nor the doctrine of purgatory were the invention

of the Middle Ages. Ephrem nourished also an especial veneration for the symbol of our redemption, and said “All nations honour the saving emblem of the Cross, and we sign therewith our doors, our foreheads, our eyes, our mouths, our breasts, our whole selves” Notwithstanding the fervour of his faith, which impelled him to use the greatest severity towards himself, he was very gentle and considerate to others. He never allowed recent converts to follow the impulses of their first fervours indiscreetly, and to begin severe mortifications; he advised them rather to adopt such practices as they could persevere in, and could gradually increase, according to the advice of experienced spiritual persons.

Ephrem lived for some time with St. Basil, in Cesarea, to rejoice and to bask in the rays of this spiritual sun, and the great archbishop esteemed no less the humble deacon. Once when Basil was preaching, Ephrem saw a dove hovering over his head, a beautiful emblem of the Holy Ghost, Who spoke by the mouth of the archbishop, and revealed Himself to the deacon. In one of

Ephrem's discourses about Basil, the accents of admiring friendship flowed from his lips in figurative eloquence, and he could not find words enough to express his veneration. He says, "Basil is in truth, the life of miracles, the path of virtue, the book of praise. He walks in the flesh, but lives in the spirit. He lives upon the earth like other men, but is immersed in the contemplation of heaven. He is the magic wand that strikes mysterious chords whose melody ravishes the angels. He is the protecting wall encircling the doctrine of the faith and the goodly grapes of the Divine vineyard. He is the rich harvest-field of the kingdom of heaven, that brings forth precious fruits of justice; the valley adorned with a thousand blossoms of spiritual roses, that send up a grateful odour to heaven. As the holy writings are his constant study, and the apostolic precepts his rule, and as he lives amid them as if amongst imperishable flowers, his speech flows forth like a stream, and his justice like the waves of the sea"

But we must return to Ephrem himself. In the midst of all his labours as preacher, missionary, poet, teacher, and father of the poor, he still

retained in his soul the attraction to solitude which he shared with all the saints ; for the Holy Ghost, speaking to the soul by the mouth of the prophet, says, “I will lead you into the wilderness; and there I will plead with you face to face” In the times of solitude, which he devoted to penance and heavenly contemplation, he made still greater progress in purity of heart by his indefatigable watchfulness over all his inclinations. As often as was possible, without offence against charity, Ephrem withdrew from Edessa into the cavern not far distant, which he had formerly inhabited as a hermit, and there he plunged into the joys of intercourse with God and the depths of holy contemplations. Shortly before his death, Edessa was visited by a terrific famine, and its usual consequences, poverty and disease. Then he joyfully left his beloved cell, and entered the excited and terror-stricken city. He addressed himself to the rich and the opulent, by turns begging and threatening, praying and reproving, to prevail upon them to relieve the necessities of their poorer fellow-citizens. In such public calamities as these, self-love always reigns supreme; each one thinking only of himself and of his own

in the most restricted sense, and thus it was at Edessa. But in Ephrem's eyes all were his who suffered, and he never ceased appealing to the consciences of the rich, until they announced that they were willing to give alms if they only knew who would distribute them properly. For the holy Bishop Barses and eighty Catholic priests had just been sent into exile for the faith by the Arian Emperor Valens, and people had grown so accustomed to entrust the distribution of alms to the Bishop, that in his absence some were truly at a loss, whilst others found therein a welcome excuse for their parsimony. But Ephrem had been consecrated deacon in order to impart sacramental grace to the care of the poor, according to the apostolic custom, and to combine with it the dispensing of higher graces. The Church so highly prized her poor and needy, that she bestowed an especial blessing on their care, and made the future priest, who was destined to the holiest intercourse with God in the sacrifice of the Mass, undergo a sanctifying preparation of intercourse with God in the person of the poor.

Therefore Ephrem said “What think you of me?” and immediately alms and gifts flowed in plentifully upon him, and he displayed an activity equally circumspect and universal. He provided for all the wants of the poor of the town and the neighbourhood, and converted public buildings into hospitals, for such of the sick as had no other shelter. He spent a whole year in feeding the hungry, nursing the sick, burying the dead, converting and consoling the dying, moving the rich to love their neighbour; edifying the whole population of Edessa- and inviting them to imitate his example. When the pestilence had passed away he returned to his cell, where he soon fell sick.

Nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, he then wrote his exhortations to penance. Till his very last breath he continued to remind himself and others of the one thing necessary, a penitential conversion to God. He also made his will, that is to say, he wrote down his profession of faith for his disciples, testifying that he had ever remained without wavering in the pure faith and communion of the Church, abhorred heresy and avoided all intercourse with its sectaries, and

exhorting his followers to do the same. He forbade that anyone should praise him after his death, or give him stately burial, and still more stringently that anyone should ask his intercession, “as we do that of the saints who have died in the Lord”

He urgently implored them, on the contrary, to pray much for his soul, and to have the Holy Sacrifice often offered up for it. At the end, he gave his blessing to his disciples, with the exception of Paulonas and Aranad, although they seemed very fervent and gifted, because he foresaw, in the spirit of prophecy, that they would fall away from the true faith. He entered into the peace of the Lord in the year 378. He was mourned by the whole of Edessa. The Church, however, does not fulfil his wish, but keeps his memory holy; and St. Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote his life, thus addresses him “O you, who standest now on the steps of the Divine Altar, before the King of life, where with the angels you worship the Most Holy Trinity, be mindful of us all, and obtain for us the remission of our sins”

11

Pachomius Abbot of Tabenna

Lord, what will You have me do?

As Antony may be called the creator of the monastic life, so was his younger contemporary Pachomius its lawgiver. The companies of anchorites had until then lived partly as hermits, and partly in community in lauras, without form or rules, and held together only by the powerful minds of their teachers, Antony, Hilarion, and Ammon. They now received from Pachomius laws and regulations by which they were joined together in a firm and lasting union. Pachomius was, properly speaking, the founder of the religious orders, of which the other three communities were the forerunners and models.

Pachomius was descended from a heathen family in the Thebaid, and was carefully instructed in the

sciences of his country and his time. From his earliest childhood he was distinguished amongst his heathen companions by his innocent disposition and his pure morals. It was related of him that, when a young child, he accompanied his parents to an idol which spoke oracles ; but it was dumb in the presence of this child, and the idolatrous priests declared to his amazed parents that no one was in fault but the little enemy of the gods, their son.

At the time that Constantine was carrying on the war against his colleague Maxentius, he caused all the strongest youths in that part of the Roman empire which was subject to him to be levied as recruits, and to enter the army. This was the fate of Pachomius, who was then barely twenty years old. A whole troop of young people were torn from their families in Thebais, and shipped on the Nile, to be sent first to Alexandria, and then to their further destination. They were all very much cast down at leaving their homes against their will; they were also roughly treated by the soldiers who guarded them. When the ship touched one day at a large town on the shore, many of the inhabitants

came down to the bank of the Nile, bringing the young recruits food and drink, and every kind of refreshment, consoling them and encouraging them to be hopeful and courageous, and showing so much kindness to these unknown and forsaken youths, that all were touched by it, and Pachomius especially. He inquired who these charitable and benevolent people were, and learned that they were Christians, people who believed in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, and who endeavoured to do good to all men, and particularly to the sorrowful, the helpless, and the forsaken, and that they hoped to receive their reward in heaven, and not upon earth. Pachomius was deeply moved by this faith of the Christians; and, inflamed with divine love, he drew aside, and lifting up his eyes and hands to heaven, he prayed, saying, “Almighty God, who has created the heavens and the earth, if you will deliver me from my present affliction, and will send me the true knowledge of how to serve you most perfectly, I will dedicate all the days of my life to Your service. Hear my prayer, and show me what I must do” The ship continued her voyage, and carried the young soldiers to their destination. Although many

seductions awaited him, Pachomius never forgot that he had promised himself to the service of God, and always avoided the worldly pleasures in which his heathen companions indulged. Constantine's campaign against Maxentius was soon brought to a victorious conclusion, and the soldiers being dismissed in the year 313, Pachomius joyfully returned to his home, to place himself in another company, namely, that of the catechumens, who received instruction in the doctrines of the Christian faith. His ardent heart made him so zealous a disciple of this holy faith that he soon after received the sacrament of Baptism. The following night he dreamt that dew fell from heaven into his right hand, and was changed into honey, and that a voice said: "Pachomius! Christ the Lord gives you great grace" His loving heart could not be satisfied save by sacrificing himself entirely to this gracious and loving Lord.

Whilst he was considering how best to effect this he heard of the aged anchorite Palemon, who, quite dead to the world, led a heavenly life in a desert of the Thebaid. All then became as clear to

Pachomius as if the sun had risen inwardly upon him. He said to himself: "It is there that God will have you" and he immediately set out on the road to Palemon's desert. He knocked humbly at the door of the poor hut, and begged for admittance. The aged anchorite only half opened the door, looked sadly and sternly at the youth, and asked him, "What do you want? Who are you looking for?" Pachomius, undiscouraged, answered: "The Lord God has sent me here. I seek you, for I wish to learn from you how to be an anchorite" But with no less severity Palemon answered "Many have said the same to me, but they all soon grew tired of their purpose. For the life of an anchorite is indeed pleasing to God, but it is a hard and a difficult undertaking, of which it is easy to become weary." "All men are not alike" said Pachomius modestly "only try me, and by degrees you will acknowledge my resolve" "First go through the primary exercises of the spiritual life in a lura" said Palemon, still refusing "there the company of others will afford you more help, and their example will give you encouragement, and you can more easily find solace when a penitential life seems hard to you. Here, in this place, it is

impossible to lead other than an extremely austere life, for all human help and support are absent. For my nourishment I only use bread or wild herbs with salt, and I watch during half the night and often the whole night long, in prayer and contemplation of the Holy Scriptures. In the daytime I am never idle for a single moment, and even when I sing psalms or pray, I am making hair-shirts, in order to be able to give their price to the poor and to strangers”

The youth trembled at the thoughts of sacrificing a long life in this way ; but grace overcame the resistance of nature, and he said resolutely “I believe and trust in Christ the Lord, that He will give me strength and patience to persevere for His love in this course of life as long as I live, and I hope that you will pray for me, my father” This faith in God’s assistance, and this willingness to make sacrifices, was a sign to the aged Palemon that it was a supernatural vocation, and not pride or curiosity, which urged the youth to embrace the ascetic life. He bade him welcome, took him to live with him, and gave him the habit which all anchorites wore, so as outwardly to show the state

of life to which they were dedicated namely, the scapular of goat or sheepskin.

About this time Eusebius wrote in his “Proofs of the Gospel” “In the Church of Christ there are two kinds of life which are both in conformity with grace, and one of them is supernatural, and excels the usual human way. For it allows neither marriage nor the begetting of children, neither possessions nor gains, and, entirely separated from the ordinary concerns of men, it dedicates itself, out of exceeding love, to the service of God alone. Those who lead this life are, as it were, already dead to this temporal life, and live only in the body upon this earth; their souls have by vehement desire already ascended to heaven. Like immortals, they look down upon the traffic of the inhabitants of earth, and sanctify themselves to the everlasting God for the whole human race, not by strangled bullocks, not by drink or smoke offerings, but by the simple precepts of true religion, by the dispositions of a pure soul, by the practice of virtue and good works, whereby they appease God, and offer Him a holy service for themselves and their brethren”

In such esteem did the ancient Church hold her ascetics; for they corresponded to her love for her Lord by their loving union with His propitiatory sacrifice, which won for them supernatural grace and strength to do penance for those who do none, and thus to acquire power of atonement for their brethren. Renunciation, out of immense unspeakable love, was the invention of the Incarnate God. He became Man in order to practise it in its highest perfection, and it has remained ever since the property of heavenly-minded men: for He not only showed to men the virtues pleasing to God, but at the same time gave them grace to practise them. Eusebius was by no means one of those enthusiastic souls, like Antony, Athanasius, or Augustine, who, inebriated as it were with divine love, made every breath they drew a hymn, and every pulsation of their hearts a sigh of love. He was in the Church of God devoted to learning rather than to love; but even his dry intellect acknowledged the supernatural depth and glowing love of asceticism, and basked in the holy flame of love of suffering which Christ enkindled upon earth.

Pachomius now lived with Palemon, practicing the same spiritual exercises and labours as the old man himself. The nightly prayer was very trying to him, as he was not accustomed to night vigils, and was very often overcome by sleep. Then Palemon went outside the hut with him, and told him to fill a sack with sand, and to carry the heavy burden to and fro till he had become wakeful again. Palemon also admonished him to be always very attentive to prayer, and not to allow himself to be distracted by his work or by any other thought. He used to say “Be watchful and fervent, my Pachomius! If thou art drowsy and lukewarm, the evil one will take advantage of it to inspire you with disgust for your holy purpose, and then all our labour and trouble will have been in vain” The pious youth received all the exhortations and teaching of the old man with perfect obedience, and thereby advanced from day to day in conduct pleasing to God, so that the aged Palemon rejoiced, and never ceased from praising Christ the Lord for such a disciple, whilst Pachomius, on his part, blessed God for giving him so holy a spiritual father.

On the holy festival of Easter, Palemon said “Today is a feast in the whole of Christendom; go out therefore, my Pachomius, and prepare a banquet for us for this glorious festival” The youth accomplished the order, and the feast which he prepared consisted in pouring a little oil upon the wild herbs which they usually seasoned only with salt. Then he came to Palemon, and said, “My father, I have done what you told me” But when, after offering up a prayer, Palemon’s eyes fell upon the food, and he perceived that oil had been mixed with the pounded salt, he began to weep bitterly, and exclaimed, with tears “My Lord and Saviour was given vinegar and gall, and shall I eat dainty food? No, I cannot indeed” Pachomius earnestly begged him to take a little of it, because it was the great day of joy, but in vain. The old man continued his lamentations. So Pachomius brought bread and salt as usual, and then Palemon was happy, and ate joyfully with his beloved disciple.

Once an anchorite came to them, and begged for shelter, which was willingly granted him. Pachomius had lighted a fire to bake some bread,

and they all three sat near it in conversation. The stranger began to speak of faith, and suddenly said, "If either of you has real faith, let him place himself upon those glowing coals, and recite the Our Father slowly" Palemon saw from this impertinent challenge that the good brother must be tormented with pride, and answered, "Do not let such words pass your lips again, my brother. An evil spirit has suggested them to you. It is the same spirit which summoned our Lord to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. If God commands you to tread on burning coals, do so, but under obedience, and not out of the presumption of self-will" Instead of gratefully taking Palemon's advice, the anchorite stood up, and actually placed himself upon the coals.

Either by the special permission of God, or by an illusion of the wicked one, he remained uninjured, and he then became so proud of his fancied holiness that he looked down upon Palemon and Pachomius with great contempt, and soon after left them. But he came to a sad end. Pride deprived him of true confidence in God, and of watchfulness against temptation, and he fell lower

and lower, the blindness of his heart becoming so great that it gradually darkened his intellect, and, losing his mind, he died miserably. This occurrence was a salutary admonition to Pachomius to watch carefully over himself, that he might not only outwardly fulfill the precepts of God, but also that he might engrave them in his heart, and practice them with his whole soul. Day and night he read the Holy Scriptures, and, learning them by heart, and contemplating them, he endeavoured both to fix in his memory and to carry out in his actions their lessons of patience, humility, and love of God, and of our neighbour. Palemon secretly admired him, because he practised self-denial and mortification in so holy a manner that his soul became more and more cleansed and purified. Pachomius heartily loved his hard and difficult anchorite life, in which nothing was to be found save what was most repelling to sensual nature, because he thus lived over again a part of the Holy Passion of our Lord.

In some spots the desert produced stunted thorn bushes, the thorns of which are as long and as sharp as large pins, and which are, besides, so hard

that they pierce each other like lances. At Jerusalem they are called the “Spina Sancta” because the holy Crown of thorns was made of them. One of these thickets of thorns was in the vicinity of Palemon’s hut, and Pachomius collected there the twigs which he used for firing. When his hands and feet were painfully torn by the fearful thorns, he thought of the nails which pierced the tender Hands and Feet of our loving Saviour on the Cross, and no longer felt his own pain. Thus Pachomius went through a time of trial of many years duration under Palemon.

One day’s journey down the Nile from Thebes, on the left bank of the river, the beautiful temple of Aphrodite built by Queen Cleopatra, lies in the desert behind the village of Denderah, (the ancient Tentyris.) It was four hundred years old when Pachomius came into these parts, and as he then beheld it, it remains at the present time, even after the lapse of fifteen hundred years, except that its destination is altered, for it has now become a shelter for travellers in that country. This kind of building is called in the East a khan. It offers the

traveller shelter for himself his asses, horses, or camels, and nothing more.

Under the twenty-four majestic and colossal columns, which, six in each row, form a magnificent hall, there is a layer of chaff a foot deep on the floor, as a sleeping-place for man and beast, and stones and black ashes lie about, the remnants of little fires, and lengthy water-troughs, kneaded out of clay, for the cattle to drink from, reach from the interior to the entrance door. This employment for ordinary purposes forms a striking contrast to the severe and sublime architectural lines of the ancient Egyptian building, but not so striking as that between the deep seriousness of this very architecture and its childish and distorted decoration with chisel and brush. The purest creation of the spirit of the ancient Egyptians, and perchance of most other nations, was their architecture, probably because sensuality can be less impressed on that science than on any other. The village of Denderah lies under the palm groves, and in the midst of fields. But the cultivation soon changes into pasture land for sheep and goats, and gradually dies away into

the yellow waves of sand out of which the temple of Hathor (the Venus of the Egyptian mythology) rises like a block of black stone. Beyond it the boundless Lybian desert spreads its undulations into the very heart of Africa. In this region there was situated a ruined and abandoned village called Tabenna. It is not known whether Christians had been expelled from it, or whether it had been earlier destroyed and laid desolate by the wars of the Romans, or even of still more ancient nations. Hither Pachomius once came when searching for a complete solitude. A voice from above said to him interiorly in prayer, "Pachomius, this is the place where you shall serve me, you and many others. Behold" And an angel showed him a tablet, upon which were written the precepts which he afterwards gave to his monks as the rules of their order. Pachomius immediately hastened back to Palemon, and submitted all to his judgment. The old man gladly believed that a high destiny awaited Pachomius, and went with him to Tabenna, where he helped him to erect a cell, and then returned to his own little hut. There he was attacked by a long and painful illness, brought on by his severe fasts. Some of the brethren went to him, with the

intention of nursing him carefully, and gave him better and more plentiful victuals. But his sufferings grew more violent, and he begged the brethren to leave him to his old ways. “Rest and joy are to be found only in God and in mortification” he said, “and therefore I will use even to the end the spiritual weapons which I took up for the love of Jesus” So he let himself be consumed by the disease, and died happily in the arms of his beloved Pachomius, who buried the venerable old man, reciting psalms.

Since Pachomius had become a Christian and an anchorite, he had never seen one of his relations. Great, therefore, was his joy, when his elder brother John came to him in the desert of Tabenna, with a view of sharing his hermit life. In those happy early times of the Gospel, the Christians distinguished themselves so much by their virtues, that the life they led after their conversion made a deep impression on such of the heathen as had preserved any virtuous dispositions. Pachomius had been greatly struck by the neighbourly love of the Christians, and his brother John was similarly impressed when he

heard of the ascetic life which his brother led in the desert for the love of God, seeing that it must be a divine faith which could inspire such a sacrifice. John learnt to know this faith, and, having been baptized, became an anchorite. Both brothers then advanced together to take the kingdom of heaven by storm, and each strove to excel the other in humility, patience, and self-denial. Pachomius mortified equally his body and his soul. For fifteen years, notwithstanding his strict fasts, vigils, and manual labour, he never lay down, but slept sitting in the middle of his cell, without leaning against the wall. At first he suffered exceedingly from this want of sleep, till nature was sufficiently overcome no longer to disturb the repose of his soul in God. He prayed for hours together with outstretched arms, as immovably as if his body had been fastened to the cross; and by constant elevation to God, and contemplation of the Eternal Beauty, he purified his soul to such a degree that it could not bear the smallest atom of imperfection on its spotless mirror without bitter repentance. What temptations the ancient enemy of human perfection prepared for him, and what snares he

laid for him, may easily be inferred from these terrific austerities. Inspirations from above informed him that the time was near in which he should collect around him many anchorites, and give them a rule of conduct for a community life. He and John were still entirely alone in Tabenna, but, like the boy Samuel in the temple, he was attentive to the voice of God, and therefore began by degrees to build cells.

John, who was a great lover of poverty, blamed this supposed fault with some severity, and his reproaches deeply pained Pachomius; but he repressed all answer, and, behaving with the greatest gentleness, kept silence. In the night there came over him great remorse for this involuntary movement of sensitiveness. An ordinary man would have called being silent in such a case a virtue; but this holy man considered his interior emotion a sin. He went out and threw himself on the ground, weeping bitterly, and saying, "Woe is me! I still act always according to the flesh, and not according to the spirit! I burn with impatience because I fancy myself in the right. You did not, meek and humble Lord Jesus, and if you do not

find any of Your grace in me, I am not Your true servant. If, on the contrary, the wicked enemy finds any of his works in me, I am in his servitude; for it is written, by whom a man is overcome, of the same also he is the slave. How shall I dare to guide others in the spiritual life, if I cannot observe Your holy law with an unspotted mind. Lord! Lord I cleanse my heart with the rays of Your grace” So tender a conscience could hardly be found where the natural man had not first been mortified and destroyed by holy asceticism.

John died soon after, and Pachomius was consoled by God with the frequent visits of an aged anchorite called Apollo, who strengthened him in his combats with the seductions of the devil. Once Pachomius complained to him of the sufferings of this combat daily renewed, and always under a fresh form. Apollo answered, smiling, “The wicked enemy has two reasons for fighting against you with all his power first, because he has never yet overcome thee; and secondly, because he hopes to have an easy victory over us, if you were first conquered. Therefore resist bravely, Pachomius you outshine us all in

divine grace; therefore your fall would be an occasion of falling to many” In that holy simplicity which looks only to God, Pachomius continued his severe mortifications of body and mind, considering them as a means of facilitating his battle with sensuality and pride. When he for the third time felt the inspiration to found a community of anchorites, and to unite them in a common life by a fixed rule, he delayed no longer, but kept those with him who wished to learn from him the way of salvation, and to submit themselves to his rule.

About the year 325, when Pachomius was nearly thirty-three years old, the monastery of Tabenna was founded, and he was its first Father, (in the Greek language Abbas, from which the English word Abbot is derived.) Pachomius founded afterwards eight other monasteries of Tabennaiots, as men belonging to this order were called; and also, by means of his sister, one of Tabennasiotines.

She had also been converted to the faith, and soon after the foundation of the first monastery, she

came to Tabenna to visit her brother. But Pachomius had made it a rule never to speak to a woman, and he would not make any exception even for his sister, denying himself this consolation. He caused her to be told through the brother porter, who received all the guests, that she had better dedicate herself entirely to the service of God, and assemble widows and virgins for the same end. If she was willing to do so, he would have a monastery built for her on the other side of the Nile from that on which the brethren lived, and he would draw up a rule of life for her community. The heart of the maiden became enkindled and inflamed with the fire of the Holy Ghost, and she betrothed herself to the Divine Lover of souls; and in the year 328 she was living in the monastery with some spiritual sisters, to whom she showed by precept and example the path of salvation. The venerable and aged monk, Peter of Tabenna, was commissioned by Pachomius to visit the nuns on certain days, in order to instruct them in the Holy Scriptures, and stimulate them to a life pleasing to God, according to the rule of their order, in poverty, chastity, obedience, and punctuality. The nuns could not

see the male members of their families but with the permission of the superiors, and in the presence of other aged nuns, and could never receive the most trifling present from them. If buildings had to be looked after in the monastery, or other things done which women could not do, the most venerable, most silent, and industrious of the brethren were sent there from Tabenna, who executed the work, always returning at meal times to Tabenna, without accepting even a draught of water from the nuns. Except the priest, who with his deacon offered up the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass every Sunday, no man crossed the threshold of the monastery. The nuns had the same occupations as the monks. They prayed in community at fixed times during the day and night, reciting a certain number of psalms and hymns; and they each prayed alone and contemplated the mysteries of the faith, or the sentences and teachings of Holy Writ, during their work, whether it consisted of the household duties, cooking, baking, washing, and working in the garden, or of separate manual labours. They span the yarn out of which they wove their garments, and if they had more than was required for their

community, they made clothes for the poor, and gave them away. When a nun died, the sisters laid the corpse in the coffin, in the habit of their order, and bore it to the bank of the Nile, solemnly reciting psalms, and holding palm -branches in their hands. Then monks came from Tabenna, across the Nile, also singing psalms, but with olive-branches in their hands, and, carrying away the body, buried it in their burial-ground with great rejoicing; for the battle of this life, so poor, and yet so rich in sacrifice, was won, and it rested from all earthly tribulation under the palms of victory and the olive branches of peace.

Pachomius received with humble and holy love all who desired to offer themselves up in sacrifice to God by a life of penance and abnegation. He strengthened this purpose in them in every possible way, and constantly repeated this warning, “A monk must first renounce the world, then his relations and friends, and lastly himself, in order that, delivered from unnecessary burdens, he may be free to carry the cross of the imitation of Christ”

At the commencement of the monastery, he was the sole servant of all the monks, prepared the tables for dinner, brought in the dishes, planted and watered the vegetables, filled the burdensome and laborious offices of porter and infirmarian, and yet persevered in all his fastings and watchings, and moreover gave all the spiritual instruction to the brethren, and set them the example of a fervent prayer inflamed with holy love. Before long the monks of Tabenna were reckoned by hundreds. Whosoever resolved to remain in the monastery, was kept for three whole years employed in manual labour, and in the minor household works, and then for the first time admitted to the spiritual exercises, and to his own place of combat. No one was received who was not free, who was under age, or who had contracted any indissoluble engagements in the world. No money or presents were taken from those who entered, as it might have been a source of vanity to the richer brethren, or of false shame to the poorer ones. Serving the strangers was the first humble occupation of the newcomer. If he could not read, he had to learn to do so, and whilst he was a novice, to learn by heart the whole

of the New Testament and the Psalms. This was a good practice for impressing holy doctrines upon the memory, and for leading the mind to supernatural things. Besides, owing to the value of books at that time, and the great number of the brethren, it was impossible to provide each one with a copy of the Holy Scriptures, although some of the monks were always occupied in copying. A trumpet summoned them to the community prayers. At its sound the monks had immediately to leave their cells ; and this they did with such punctuality that they never even finished the letter they had begun ; this punctuality is, in reality, only conscientious obedience, without which no house or community can be kept in order. Every Saturday and Sunday the monks received the most Holy Sacrament. A priest from the nearest church offered the Holy Sacrifice, for there were no priests amongst Pachomius's first disciples, and he himself, like Antony, Hilarion, and Ammon, was a layman. No brother was permitted to receive holy orders, and if an ecclesiastic joined the community he had to submit himself to the same rule of life as all the others, because Pachomius wished to remove every occasion of dissimilarity or ambition.

Prescribed prayers were offered up in community, at stated hours, and were each time commenced with singing psalms. If a brother was on a journey, or detained by business imposed upon him by obedience, he was bound to unite himself in spirit to the prayer of the brethren. The prayers were not very many, so that those fervent in devotion could add to them; whilst those less advanced in spirituality were not overladen. To practise obedience was the chief duty of a novice, and therefore he sometimes received commands whose object he could not discover, and which, indeed, had no other but that of subduing his will. This appearance of servitude was to give him true freedom, by delivering him from the yoke of his self-love. Whoever wishes to conform himself to the will of God must renounce his own will, and he cannot learn to do so otherwise than by obedience. A novice asked Pachomius for work. He stuck his staff into the ground, and said, "Water this stick." The youth obeyed that day and the next, for three hundred and sixty-five days. When one year was past, he did the same all through the second. And in the third year the staff began to put forth leaves and blossoms.

Amongst the numbers of men and youths who, eager for salvation, went to live with Pachomius, there was naturally a very great variety of capacities, of gifts, and of powers, both of body and soul. Some came to him who were already mortified, and soon reached the highest degrees of perfection, others progressed more slowly, and some not at all. But these last were always the exception. In order that all might be properly watched over and guided, they were divided into orders and choirs, and each order placed under the inspection of a superintendent, and these again were under the abbot of Tabenna. The remaining monasteries of the order had each a prior, who was subject to the abbot of Tabenna, although the monastery of Pabau was larger and more considerable than that of Tabenna. The hierarchical form was observed from the first beginning of the monastic life. In the various orders of monks all were distributed according to their various talents and capabilities, the weak in the easy occupations, and the strong in the difficult ones; but all, without exception, had to work. There was an order for each work that was required in the monastery an order of cooks, of

gardeners, of bakers, &c. The sick formed one order, and the porters another, the latter consisted of very circumspect and discreet men, because they had charge of the intercourse with the external world, and the preparatory instruction of those who wished to be received.

Each order inhabited their own house, which was divided into cells, and three brethren dwelt together in each cell. But there was only one kitchen for all, and they ate in community, but in the deepest silence, and with their hoods drawn down so low over their heads, that no one could see whether his neighbour ate much or little. The holy abbot practised the same rule about food as about prayer ; he was not too severe upon some, whilst he gave free scope to the zeal of others. Their usual meals consisted of bread and cheese, salt fish, olives, figs, and other fruits. Boiled vegetables were also served daily, but none ate of them save old men and children, or the infirm, and these also generally availed themselves of the permission of eating some supper, which was always brought to table, to give the brethren an occasion of self-denial. Pachomius and a few

companions once visited a monastery where supper was laid before them. He remarked that the monks partook of everything. It was not against the rule, but this want of abstemiousness pained him so much, that quiet tears rolled down his cheeks. The monks were painfully surprised to see him so troubled, and still more so when, at their earnest request, he told them the cause. How much more must he have been pained when he saw the rules broken! At one time he had not visited the monastery of Pabau for two months. When he went there, many of the brethren came to meet him, and also some children, who had been sent by their parents to the monastery to be piously brought up. We see by this that even in their first beginning the monasteries were employed in this work, which became in later times so important and so noble.

One of the boys said to him, “my father, whilst you have been away, we have not had either soup or vegetables to eat” The holy abbot kindly replied, “I will take care, my dear child, that it never happens again” He went into the monastery, and visited and examined all the classes, and then went

into the kitchen. He found the superintendent of this class very busily occupied in plaiting reed-mats. "How long is it, my brother, since you boiled any vegetables?" The brother immediately confessed that it must be a full two months, but added "As hardly any of the monks tasted them, I thought I might save the time and expense, and plait mats for the profit of the monastery" Pachomius asked "How many mats hast thou plaited then?" "Five hundred" he answered. Pachomius said "Bring them all here" And when they were all piled in a heap, Pachomius caused them to be burnt, and in the presence of the whole order reproved the twofold fault of the brother, saying, "You have sinned against obedience, because the rule prescribes certain kinds of food, and also against charity, because the children and the aged have missed their necessary nourishment, and you hast deprived the other brethren of the holy exercise of mortification" No economy, industry, or increase of gain, to the profit of the poor, excused in the eyes of the holy abbot the want of obedience and love. A chief steward superintended the domestic government of the monastery, and under him a procurator,

whose care it was to supply the wants of the brethren out of the proceeds of their work, and to buy new materials, for example flax and cotton for weaving, parchment for the copyists.

What remained was sold for the benefit of the poor, and this amounted to so large a sum, that none of the poor, in that whole country, suffered from the famines which often visited Egypt. So great was the industry of the brethren, that two boats were constantly employed in these various affairs, going up and down the Nile, between Tabenna and Alexandria. They sanctified labour, which is also praiseworthy in itself, by contemplation of divine things; and by interior prayer, which is the breath of life to the holy, because it breathes out love, and draws in grace.

Brother Zaccheus was a very holy man, who had spent many years in extreme humility and mortification, and suffered very severe pains in his old age in consequence of his penances. He was given a separate cell, and obliged by obedience to occupy it; but he continued his austerities, and lived on bread and salt, slept little, rose at

midnight, was unailing at the community hours of prayer, and never complained, showing by his whole behavior what consolation the love of God procures, and how light are temporal sufferings to those whose souls already inhabit eternity. As a matter of course, Brother Zaccheus worked with the greatest industry, although he could hardly hold himself upright from weakness and pain. He plaited mats of reeds, and this is work which, being very rough, hurt his hands very much, and often wounded them severely. They represented to him that such work was too hard for one who was already martyred by sickness and suffering. Zaccheus answered that he knew no other work, and that he knew still less how to be idle.

They called his attention to the fearful wounds of his hands. Zaccheus answered, that the wounds in the Hands of the crucified Saviour were much deeper. At last a brother persuaded him to rub his hands with salve, so as to be better able to work. Zaccheus followed his advice; but instead of finding relief, the wounds and pain increased to such an extent that he could hardly move his hands. Pachomius visited the sick brother

Zaccheus, and treated him as only one perfect man can treat another, he reproved him because, from want of confidence in God, he had had recourse to human assistance. Zaccheus immediately accused himself of this failing, begging his holy abbot to implore God's mercy upon him, and wept for his fault to the end of his life.

On Wednesdays and Fridays each superintendent assembled his order, and gave them an instructive or an admonitory exhortation. On Saturdays the superior of each monastery preached once, on Sundays twice. Each order had also its little library, out of which the brethren were provided with books. Silence was faithfully observed, and speaking was only allowed at certain hours. Hospitality was nobly practised towards all comers. They were lodged and fed in apartments near the gate. They might share at will in the church services of the monks, but could not eat with them or dwell amongst them, not even if they were priests or anchorites. There was a separate building for female guests, in which they were hospitably lodged. And this beautiful virtue of

hospitality is an inheritance which the monasteries of the East have faithfully preserved to this day, and which they exercise in an admirable manner towards all travellers. No monastery is without its adjoining building for pilgrims, and it is opened to all who knock, without distinction. In the Island of Cyprus, at Damascus, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Rama, everywhere the good Franciscan Fathers receive with cheerful self-denial travellers of all nations, creeds, and conditions; and in the beautiful monastery on Mount Carmel, the most sublime and fascinating hermitage upon earth, the holy Carmelite Fathers make themselves poor to enrich their guests. Even the Greek monastery of Mar Saba, in the wild rocky desert of the Dead Sea, grants hospitable shelter. All who have ever travelled in the East know how to prize the hospitality of the monasteries at its just value.

The first monastic order which sprung from Christianity was so filled with the Holy Ghost that later centuries kept, unaltered in essentials, the rule which the great abbot Pachomius gave to his Tabennasiots, for it contained the incitement to every virtue, and gave scope for the attainment of

the highest perfection. But it sometimes happened that men entered the order who were deficient either in good will or in perseverance. They forgot the warning of our Blessed Lord, that he who has put his hand to the plough may not look back. They wished to be thought spiritual men, but to live as sensual ones. It was not yet the custom to take the three vows of the evangelical counsels on entering the order, after having finished the novitiate. In general, the faith was too ardent, and souls were too fervent to be wanting in zeal to persevere in the ascetic life. Besides, a recreant was as it were branded, because his return to the world was looked upon as evidence, to say the least, of extraordinary weakness.

Pachomius felt great grief at one time on account of some monks who would not carry on to the end the interior combat. He spared himself no trouble in instructing them how to behave in prayer, in temptation, and in all kinds of delusions; he prayed for them with all the fervour of a tender father and a good shepherd, but in vain. His faithful vigilance over their behaviour became so hateful to them, and the evil desires of their

passions grew so strong, that they persisted in returning to the world. But Tabenna, like a garden cleared of its weeds, only flourished and blossomed more brightly and more beautifully. Pachomius had such a gift, of wisdom in the guidance of souls that the priors often brought him rebellious monks that he might pacify them. The prior of Pabau came once to Tabenna and brought bitter complaints of a young monk who would insist on becoming a priest, and whom he did not consider worthy to receive priest's orders. To his great surprise Pachomius said, "My advice is that you should comply with the brother's wishes. The desire to become a priest is good in itself, and may stimulate a slothful soul to greater perfection. Perhaps holy orders will sanctify him" The prior followed the advice of his holy abbot, and soon after the young monk came to Tabenna, threw himself at the feet of Pachomius and said, with flowing tears "Thank you, blessed of the Lord, that you were so gentle and compliant with me. The denial of my wish only caused it to grow stronger and stronger. But when it was going to be fulfilled, I cast a glance into myself and shuddered before my imperfection, clearly recognising a

satanic temptation to pride. I will remain what I am, a simple monk. But if you had not treated me so wisely, I should have fallen away from the order and consequently from God Himself, who called me to it”

Pachomius was so extremely humble that although he worked miracles and signs, cast out evil spirits, and trod unharmed upon serpents and scorpions, he yet obeyed a child. He was visiting one of his monasteries, and after he had made an inspection of all the classes, and had offered up the community prayers, he sat down by the brethren who were making reed coverings, and began likewise to plait rushes. Then a little boy passed by, and, stopping near Pachomius, said, with the forwardness of his age “My father, you are not doing it correctly, our prior does it differently” Then Pachomius stood up as if one in authority were speaking to him, and said lovingly, “Then, my child, show me how the prior does it” The boy showed him, and Pachomius quietly continued his work in the way which he had just learnt. If he had acted according to earthly wisdom he would have given the child a reproof for his forwardness, but

he acted according to heavenly wisdom, and gave the brethren an example of incomparable humility.

Also when Athanasius the Great, the patriarch of Alexandria, visited the monastery of Tabenna, Pachomius hid himself amongst the monks and strictly forbade any of them to name him. But this was of no avail, for the saint recognised the saint. Pachomius feared that the great bishop would perhaps wish to ordain him priest, which he strove against with all his might, feeling himself unworthy in the sight of God. The saints became holy because they measured their virtue by what was above them, by the example of Jesus, and never by what was below them, the infirmity of their neighbour.

Pachomius had frequent ecstasies in which he clearly beheld future things and heavenly mysteries. Once, after long and fervent prayer, he was as it were raised above the earth, and saw in a vision the future of the monastic life, that much luke warmness, worldliness, contention, and envy would creep in, especially because the superiors would not conscientiously maintain the rules, but

would seek power and consideration in the world. Seeing this, he sighed and said “Lord! if such things are to come, why have You caused me to begin the laborious under taking in which I have served You night and day without giving myself any rest, and without ever satisfying myself even with dry bread ?” Then a voice said, “Pachomius, do not glorify yourself, for what you hast done for Me I have done in you” Pachomius fell on his face and wept, and implored the pardon of God for his proud speech. And lo! a great light descended upon him, and angels surrounded him, saying “Because you hast implored the mercy of God to assist you in your struggle against sadness and pride, the King of Glory, who is Mercy itself, approaches you, He who out of compassion has willed to become Man and to be crucified” And when the angels had raised him up Pachomius saw, standing before him in unspeakable beauty and glory, our Divine Saviour giving out rays of splendour as the sun, but with the marks of the Wounds and the Crown of thorns. “Lord, have I thus crucified You ?” asked Pachomius sorrowfully. “Not you, but your parents” answered the loving Lord. “Therefore be

comforted and have courage and confidence. The work which I have begun by you shall not be abandoned by my grace, but will subsist to the end of days. He who loves and seeks eternal life with his whole heart, and does not shun the battle, will find in this way the salvation of his soul, and hereafter eternal glory. But he who loves the death of the soul will remain in everlasting darkness” Pachomius heard these words with ineffable consolation, and when the heavenly vision disappeared he sought the brethren, offered up with them the evening sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and spoke to them so attractively of the joy of the glories to come, that they readily perceived the abundance of sweetness with which he was inundated. At the conclusion, he said, “Have, therefore, the hour of your death ever before your eyes, and think of the eternal punishments. Then every earthly pain and every sacrifice will seem light to you. If you exercise yourselves in mortification in this way, you make room in yourselves for the operation of the Holy Ghost. He will enkindle fire and light in your purified hearts, which will make them capable of heavenly contemplation. And this continual

contemplation will cleanse you more and more from earthly desires, and give you purity of mind and humility of heart. Then you will become truly temples of the Holy Ghost, and tabernacles of God as He Himself has promised : “If any one loves me, my Father will love him, and we will come to him and will make our abode with him” Then the holy fear of God will instruct you in the progress of the spirit better than the wisest teacher, making you clear sighted, and giving you knowledge above the conception of human understanding. Then you will know for what you are to pray to God, because “the Spirit himself asks for us with unspeakable groanings. He asks for the saints according to God”

With this heavenly doctrine Pachomius enkindled holy love in the hearts of the brethren, and of a young monk in particular, called Sylvanus, who had hitherto given much scandal. He had been an actor, and feeling for a time disgusted with his mode of life, he had been led by grace to Tabenna, where Pachomius had admitted him in imitation of his Divine Master, Who did not break the bruised reed. But although Sylvanus never looked

back wistfully to the follies of the world, his thoughts were still filled with their images, and he so often infringed the rule and discipline, out of levity and absence of mind, that he gave a very bad example to the younger novices, and scandal to the elder monks. Pachomius alone had patience with him. At last it came to this, that some of the most experienced brethren represented to their holy abbot that Sylvanus caused too much harm by his light behaviour to be tolerated any longer in the monastery, to the prejudice of the weak. Pachomius, who was never tired of urging him with great sweetness to turn from the way of perdition, once more interceded for the frivolous and perverse youth, and he wept so long before God for the salvation of this soul that the spark of grace which slumbered within it increased till at length it became a bright flame. Sylvanus grew as penitent as he had formerly been frivolous, and he who had hither to unceasingly talked and laughed now kept silence and wept constantly. He now again disturbed the brethren, but this time by his tears.

Whether he walked or stood, at prayer, at work, at meals, he shed floods of tears. They begged him not to weep so bitterly, at least at table, as compassion prevented some of the brethren from eating anything. Sylvanus took very great pains to repress his tears; and as he did not succeed, he accepted with joyous humility all reproofs and punishments; but his sins were so continually before him that his whole soul was, as it were, dissolved in sorrow, and poured itself out in tears. He reached at last an unusual degree of holy compunction and hatred of self, and Pachomius said one day to the assembled monks “My dear children, since this monastery was built I have only had one single brother who was perfect in humility. I protest this before God and His angels” The brethren tried to guess who this perfect monk was, and at length earnestly begged their abbot to tell them his name, for the edification of all. Pachomius answered “My sons, if I did not know that he whom I shall name would humble himself all the more, I could not accede to your request. But he follows the grace of God so faithfully that the sting of earthly honour can no longer reach and wound him. He is no other than the youth

whom you lately wished to expel from the monastery, Brother Sylvanus”

Once, during the fast of Lent, the monks of Tabenna had a wonderful example of mortification before their eyes. An aged workman asked Pachomius to receive him. The holy abbot was certainly endowed with the gifts of prophecy and of discernment of spirits; but nevertheless it pleased God at times to veil his supernatural sight, or to leave his prayers unheard. This, however, did not in the least disturb his holy indifference, for, in their fulfilment, as well as in their rejection, he loved the will of God alone. Pachomius told the aged labourer that he was much too old to begin a monastic life, for people began very early there to accustom themselves to the religious rule, and to submit themselves to discipline and obedience. His wish, therefore, could not be granted. But the old man prayed all one day, and the next, and for seven whole days, observing a continual fast all the time. On the eighth day he said to Pachomius, “I beg of you to receive me. Whenever you shall see that I do not fulfil all the duties of a monk, in prayer and work, in fasting, watching, and silence,

then, my father, I pray drive me away” Pachomius agreed to these conditions and the old man was received just as the forty days fast began. During that time the monks practiced various mortifications; some ate a little towards evening, others only every second, third, or fifth day. Many watched the whole night through standing, and only resting a little in the daytime ; many did all their work kneeling; in short, there was not one who did not take pains to retire with our Blessed Lord into the desert But what did the old man do ? He placed himself in a corner, and wove baskets out of palm leaves steeped in water. And there he always stood, without lying down, sitting, or kneeling, without leaning against anything, or speaking, without tasting a bit of bread or a drop of water. On Sundays only he ate a few leaves of salad, and he never left his place except at the community hours of prayer. He was ever diligently employed in his work, and was almost uninterruptedly in an ecstasy of holy contemplation and union with God. The whole class of basket makers rose in insurrection, and said to their superior “Where have you found this man, who has no longer anything human about

him ? Take him away. We can bear the sight no more, for it is impossible for us to keep pace with him. When we look at him we all fear to be lost” The superior of the class laid these complaints before Pachomius, who then himself carefully observed the doings of the old man. He was thereby filled with holy reverence for such a victory of the spirit over the flesh, and he betook himself to prayer to beg for light to see what he should do in this affair, in order that the brethren might be edified instead of discouraged by such extraordinary virtue. Then God opened the eyes of his soul. Pachomius went to the old man, led him by the hand before the altar, and said “I greet you, worthy friend of God, you blessed one! You are the great Macarius of whom I have heard for many years, and whom I have so ardently longed to see. I thank you that you have humbled my spiritual children, and shown them that they have no cause to glory in their life. But I beg of you now to leave us; you are too far above us” Thus spoke the great St. Pachomius, classing himself in the same rank as the most pusillanimous of the brethren, so that none should despond, and

humbling himself for them all, although he was in reality equal to Macarius.

That great man was born in Alexandria in a humble condition. At the age of thirty he suddenly abandoned his little trade of selling sugar in the streets, after the fashion of Orientals, and joined the anchorites whom Ammon had assembled in the country of Nitria. There he learned the practice of obedience, and then he followed the strong attraction that led him into solitude. He came into the desert of Scete, between Egypt and Lybia, which was so fearfully arid, that in its whole length and breadth there was no drinkable water. He who entered this dreadful desert was fain to be contented with the water of the marshy lakes, which was of a repulsive odour and bitter taste. And yet the anchorites were willing to spend their lives in it. As the desire of earthly goods stimulates worldly men to the conquest of blooming lands and the discovery of gold and silver mines, so the desire of heavenly treasures, of the bright gold of love, impelled ascetic men to search out places where seekers of pleasure would shudder, and where evil passions can find no food.

Macarius of Alexandria found a namesake and spiritual brother in the desert of Scete, the Egyptian Macarius, by birth a shepherd, but so early in life distinguished for his asceticism that the other anchorites called him “the young old man” His heart was overwhelmed with contrition for having stolen some figs as a child, and to confirm him more and more in humility God permitted some atrocious calumnies of him to be spread abroad and believed, whilst he was leading a hidden and penitential life in a small dark cavern in the hills. This trial passed over as all trials do, and when the time of honour began for him, when his miracles, the answers to his prayers, and the grace of God which worked in him, became known, he fled from the admiring crowds into the desert of Scete, where no one could follow him, unless it were a few disciples desirous of salvation. These were not wanting, although he exercised them severely in all the virtues of their state. But he did it with such gentle charity that his disciples clearly perceived his severity to be caused, not by harshness, but by the love he bore them. His favourite prayer was, “Lord, have pity on me, as You know best and will” He once sent a youth

who wished to become an anchorite to the burial-ground of the brethren, and ordered him to praise the dead. When he returned, he said to him "Go there once more and revile the dead" After the youth had obeyed, Macarius asked "What did the dead answer you, my son?" "Nothing, my father" answered the astonished youth. "Imitate, then, my son, their insensibility to the praise or the contempt of men ; for eternal life depends not upon the judgments of the world, but upon the sentence of God" To another youth he said "Receive poverty, want, sickness, and all miseries joyfully from the Hand of God, and with equal joy, consolation, refreshment, and all superabundance. By this uniform joy in the will of God you will deaden the stimulus of your passions" Some more aged anchorites accused him of too great condescension and too loving a demeanour towards his disciples, but he replied, "Oh, my brethren, I had to beg this grace from God for the space of twelve years before it was given to me. What does it profit us if we irritate or embitter those whom we have to correct? Punishment should be so constituted as to win the soul to virtue"

When the sanctity of the Egyptian Macarius had gathered together many anchorites in the desert of Scete, who, like those in Cellia in Lower Egypt, lived in solitary huts, scattered over a distance of many miles, a church had to be built for them, in which they assembled according to the custom of those times, on Saturdays and Sundays for the celebration of the sacred mysteries, and the reception of the holy sacraments; and Macarius, by command of the bishop, was constrained to receive priest's orders, in order to supply the spiritual necessities of these children of the desert. By degrees three churches were built in the desert of Scete, and each was governed by a priest.

But Macarius had a most terrible temptation to pride, and therefore besought God, day and night, to send him some wholesome humiliation. His prayer was heard. He received the command from heaven to visit two women living in a distant city, and to learn from them a degree of perfection to which he had not yet attained. They lived in the same house, and there was nothing extraordinary to be remarked in them, or in their circumstances. Macarius begged them to disclose to him their way

of life. “Oh, that is not worth the trouble, my father. For fifteen years we have lived quietly and peaceably together; we have never exchanged an evil word, have been obedient to our husbands, have loved silence, and have kept ourselves in the presence of God in all our household affairs. That is all that we can do for love of Him, and it is, alas very little” But Macarius returned to his desert edified and ashamed.

To him, the elder, came Macarius the younger of Alexandria, who was then beginning to lead an ascetic life. For seven years he lived upon raw vegetables; for three years upon from four to five ounces of bread daily. And at last he did in this way: he crumbled some bread into a jar of water with a narrow mouth, to soak it, and once each day he ate as many crumbs as he could take out in one handful. But that was very little, because if his hand was very full he could not withdraw it through the narrow mouth of the jar. In order completely to overcome every motion of sensual pleasure, he placed his dwelling for some months in a swamp over which swarms of flies hung like thick clouds. These bloodthirsty insects fell upon

him, and tortured him to such a degree that he came back to the brethren, after six months, as wounded and disfigured as a leper. With immense labour he excavated an underground passage, which led to a distant and entirely unvisited cavern; then if strangers came and wished to speak to him about their affairs, he fled through humility into his place of concealment, and left the elder Macarius, or other pious solitaries, to dispatch the business. The example of these two “blessed ones” excited all the brethren to emulation; and every one would have been ashamed of the sin of allowing himself any sensual enjoyment. A bunch of grapes was once given to the younger Macarius. He never even thought of eating it, but he took it to the anchorite who lived next to him. This one did just as Macarius had done, and the bunch of grapes travelled in this way over the whole desert of Scete, and after a long time returned to Macarius. When a disciple complained much of distractions in prayer, and was inclined to abandon it out of spiritual idleness, Macarius said “no, rather lengthen thy prayer and say, Even if I cannot pray in peace, I will stay quietly in this spot for Christ’s sake” The disciple followed his advice,

and gradually overcame his distractions. The Patriarch of Alexandria hearing of the favourable influence which he exercised over souls, sent for him, and bestowed holy orders upon him. Macarius the elder accompanied him for a part of his journey. They travelled by the Nile, and had placed themselves humbly in a corner of the ship, and betaken themselves to contemplation. There were also on the ship two men of high rank, who were travelling with a large retinue. Their servants, horses, and litters, shone with gold and purple, and filled all the space. When they perceived the two poor monks in their mean garments, they deemed them happy in their plain arid simple manner of life, and exclaimed "Oh, how blessed are you, who despise the world!" "We do indeed by God's grace despise the world" answered Macarius of Alexandria "but how is it with you? Do you not also despise the world?" "This speech made so obvious to one of the noblemen the emptiness and delusion of his state of life, that when he returned home he renounced all his vain grandeur and began an ascetic life.

Both the saints named Macarius, by their faith and holiness, their teaching and example, were true apostles and pillars of the Catholic Church, and were therefore bitterly hated by the Arians, and in particular by the Arian patriarch, Lucius, who gave no rest to the Emperor Valens, also an Arian, until he had driven both these holy men out of Egypt, and banished them to an island in the Grecian Archipelago, where idolatry was still in vogue. This took place in the year 373. But in banishment as in their home they won souls to the true faith, and it seemed as if God had wished to add to their other virtues that of the apostolate. This nowise coincided with the views of the Arians, so they were sent back to their own country. The elder Macarius sought once more his desert of Scete, and the younger went to Cellia, where he had the spiritual charge of the anchorites. Although he most conscientiously fulfilled this holy duty, and was indefatigable in all the offices of love which make the care of souls so arduous, he was nevertheless afflicted by the temptation of thinking that he ought to work still more for the honour of God, which he could only do in Rome. This thought followed him day and night. Neither

work, nor prayer, nor occupation with the brethren, could drive away the torturing temptation. Then he filled a large basket with sand, took it upon his shoulders, and with this burden wandered all about the desert, in order to overcome his spiritual restlessness by bodily fatigue. In continual combats and labours, such as never lying down for the last sixty years of his life, he lived to nearly a hundred years of age, and died about the year 395. Palladius says of him that he was small and delicate in form, and that he worked so many miracles, that with him they were ordinary daily events.

In the meantime the holy Abbot of Tabenna was leading his monks further and further into the regions of the spiritual life. Their mortification reached a very high degree even for that fervent ascetic age. It was the rule at the community prayers to keep as still as possible, never to cough or to clear the throat, or to move from one place. It happened once that Brother Titheus was violently stung in the foot by a scorpion during this time. The poison immediately caused the injured foot to swell, and Titheus felt it taking

more hold upon him every moment. But in spite of the danger and the pain he stayed quietly in his place, and this heroic obedience moved Pachomius to beg of God his recovery and his life. He very rarely did so, for he generally said to the brethren who complained of their illnesses or pains “Oh, my children, how can you wish to be freed from your sufferings? Do you not yet know that no mortification is so pleasing to God as the joyful, or at least patient, acceptance of the crosses He imposes? Fasting, watching and mortifying the flesh are good kinds of penance, but suffering in union with our suffering Lord and Saviour is incomparably better”

The salvation of all men lay very near to the heart of Pachomius. In the great deserts there are here and there fruitful spots around the water springs, oases, which lie like green islands in the middle of the sea of sand. That which is called “the Great Oasis” in the Lybian Desert was also called by the Greeks “the Island of the Happy” because it was so beautiful. The Egyptian oases afforded pasture for herds of cattle, and were therefore inhabited by numerous shepherds, who became almost

savages, and lost their faith from want of instruction. Pachomius went to the Bishop of Tentyris, and begged him to take pity on these poor forsaken Christians, and to send them a priest, and build a little chapel for them. Till that could be done, he and some of the brethren divided the pasture lands amongst themselves, and visited and instructed the shepherds in the faith. We seem to see a St. Alphonsus Liguori, who in our own days, sought out the goat herds in the mountain valleys of Amalfi and Sorrento for the same end.

He who is completely reconciled to God has no longer a single enemy in the whole world. St. Jerome, who wrote the life of the great Abbot of Tabenna, relates that Pachomius could walk uninjured upon poisonous reptiles, and that crocodiles had offered themselves to him, and carried him over the Nile on their backs. Evil spirits came to attack him, but his heel crushed their head, and he obliged them to speak to him, and tell him by whose power they had been so fettered “By the wonderful Incarnation of Jesus Christ” they said. Yea, truly the Incarnation is the

key-note of redemption; and the grandeur of the strong faith of Christian antiquity consisted in embracing this belief in its fullest meaning, and accepting all its consequences. But the tongue of the slanderer is harder to subdue than crocodiles or devils. Neither virtue nor solitude, neither sanctity nor miracles, protected Pachomius from calumny. Hatred and envy were busy in decrying him as a heretical visionary who, through ambition, sought to deceive his monks and all the world. The Egyptian bishops commanded him to appear before their assembly at Latopolis, (the present Essne.) He justified himself after the fashion of the saints; that is to say, with such humility and simplicity, that he gained for himself the love and confidence of his superiors.

At length this glorious star of the early Christian spiritual life was to set. The plague, that scourge of the East, visited Tabenna. More than a hundred monks died, and amongst them three of the favourite disciples of Pachomius, pillars and ornaments of the Order. His own turn followed. With a weak and worn-out body, but with a countenance beaming with holy joy, he addressed

the brethren once more, and peacefully breathed his last.

12

The Net

There was a monk who lived in a cell, far away in the desert, and this monk had a brother who lived in the world, and whose end was nigh, for he had to die; and he sent a message to the monk, saying, "For God's sake do an act of grace, and come that I may see you before I die." And when the monk heard [this], he shut the door of his cell, and set out to go to him, and as he was travelling through the desert, he saw an old man sitting on the wayside mending nets; now this old man was the Calumniator, who was making ready his snares to catch in them those who were journeying on the road of spiritual excellence. And he was exceedingly anxious to overthrow that brother, and to trip him up by his snares, for he had not only never allowed his foot to become entangled in the meshes of his nets, but he had also slit in pieces and destroyed his pit-falls through the remembrance of God.

Now the monk did not know that the man who was sitting by the road-side mending his nets was Satan, and he said unto him, "Why are you sitting here in this parched desert? And what are you doing here?" The Calumniator said to him, "I am mending my nets wherewith I wish to catch the gazelle which are in the desert." And the monk said unto him, "Make me a net also, for I want to catch with it the gazelle which go into my garden and lay it waste." Then that devil said to him, "Continue on your journey, and I will make a net for you which shall be better than the one you now see me working on."

And when the monk had gone to his brother, he saw him, and remained with him for two days, and on the third day his brother died; and he wrapped him in his grave-clothes, and buried him with the honour which is due to believing men. And as he was lying there in his brother's house, his brother's wife rose up by night, and came and lay down by his side through the agency of the Calumniator, and she began to say to him "God has sent you here to provide for your brother's children, and to bring them up; take me, then, as your wife and

take care of your brother's house and of his children, and stay here in peace in your own house."

And when the monk had heard what she said to him, he was moved to wrath against her, and he said to her, "Fire upon you, O woman! Get behind me Satan!" And he rose up straightway, and took his staff, and set out to go through the desert to his cell, and as he was journeying along the way, he saw that old man sitting in his place and mending his nets; and the monk said to him, "Are you still sitting here, old man? Have you prepared for me that net I asked you for?"

Then Satan became furious, and he looked at him in fierce anger and said, "Get out of my sight. Yes, you have indeed broken the net which I made for you. Did you not know that you were breaking and slitting in pieces during the past night that other net which was better than the first one? I am not able to make a net which will catch you"

And as he was speaking he changed himself into a great serpent. Now when the monk saw this he understood that it was Satan who had appeared to

him; and he fled from the place in fear, and went to his cell, and he gave thanks unto God Who had delivered him from the snare of Satan, who had wished to snare him and to drag him down into his net through his brother's wife.