

# The Wisdom of the Desert: Part 1

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## Preface

THIS little booklet is neither a critical examination of the earlier Egyptian monastic literature nor an historical account of the movement. It is nothing more than an attempt to appreciate the religious spirit of the first Christian monks. I do not know of any other similar attempt, though an exceedingly interesting study of the hermit life will be found in E. Lucius' *Das Mönchische Leben des vierten und fünften Jahrhunderts in der Beleuchtung seiner Vertreter und Gönner*.

The collection of stories and sayings which I have translated, sometimes very freely, must be regarded merely as an anthology culled from the "meadows" of the literature of the desert life. There is much more which is worthy of a place in our devotional literature, and which, I hope, may, in the future be arranged and translated by men more fitted for the task than I am. I acknowledge gratefully the assistance I have received from two friends—Miss Bloxham and the Rev. C. S. Collins—whose sympathy with things that are high and holy has been a constant help to me in my work.

I have further to acknowledge the very great kindness of Father Andrew, S.D.C., who designed the drawings which both adorn this volume and interpret the spirit of the hermits' teaching.

After the MS. of this book was in the publishers' hands I received, through the kindness of Professor Zöckler, of Greifswald, a copy of his recently published *Die Tugendlehre des Christentums*. The work is of great importance for anyone engaged in the study of the ethics of monasticism, but I have not felt myself obliged to modify anything I have written. Professor Zöckler's point of view and his object are entirely different from mine. He is scientific; I hope only to suggest devotional thought.

In the course of my Introduction I allude to the want of a critical study of the Apophthegmata. I am now informed by Dom E. C. Butler, O.S.B., that such a work is being prepared by Abbé Nau, and will soon be published in the *Patrologia Orientalis* by Firmin-Didot (Paris).

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## Chapter 1

### The Hidden Treasure

The Kingdom of Heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

-- St. Matt., xiii. 44.

He that findeth Jesus findeth a good treasure,  
yea, a Good above all good.

-- The Imitation of Christ, ii. 8.

### I

How the hermit Macedonius witnessed that it is not strange to do for the sake of possessing the Lord what men do willingly for smaller gains.

A certain captain of soldiers, who took a great delight in hunting, once came in search of wild animals to the desolate mountain where Macedonius dwelt. He was prepared for hunting, having brought with him men and dogs. As he went over the mountain he saw, far off a man. Being surprised that anyone should be in a place so desolate, he asked who it might be. One told him that it was the hermit Macedonius. The captain, who was a pious man, leaped from his horse and ran to meet the hermit. When he came to him he asked, "What are you doing in such a barren place as this is?" The hermit in his turn asked, "And you? What have you come here to do?" The captain answered him, "I have come to hunt." Then said Macedonius, "I also am a huntsman. I am hunting for my God. I yearn to capture Him. My desire is to enjoy Him. I shall not cease from this my hunting."

### II

A word of St. Basil to one who was unwilling to sell all that he had in order to buy the field wherein the treasure is.

A certain Syncretus, a senator, renounced the world. He divided his property among the poor, but kept back some of it for his own use. To him St. Basil said, "Truly you have spoiled a senator, but you have not made a monk."

### III

A word of the abbot Arsenius, him who left the emperor's court for the desert, seeking God; and resigned his wealth that he might take the hidden treasure.

"If we seek God, He will appear to us. If we hold Him fast, He will remain with us."

#### IV

The word of one who knew how good a thing it is to know of nothing in the world, but to know of Jesus.

The abbot Allois said "Except a man say in his heart, 'I and God are alone in the world,' he will not find peace."

#### V

How the enticements of the world have no power to lure back again the soul that has once possessed Jesus.

The abbot John said: "There was an exceedingly beautiful woman who dwelt in a certain city, and she had a multitude of lovers. A great man, one of the nobles of the city, came to her and said, 'Promise that you will be mine and I will wed you.' She gladly promised, and being his wife went to dwell with him in his palace. Afterwards her other lovers came seeking her and found her not. When they heard that she had become the nobleman's wife, they said one to another, 'If we go up to the door of the palace, it will be plain that we are seeking her, then, without doubt, we shall be punished. Let us go to the back of the house and whistle to her, as we used to do when she was free. When she hears our whistling she will certainly come down to us.' They did as they had planned, and the woman heard their whistling. Hating greatly even to hear them, she went into the inner parts of the house and shut the door upon herself. Now this woman is the soul of a man. Her husband, the nobleman, is Christ. The palace is the eternal mansion of the heavens. They who whistle for her are the demons."

#### VI

A comparison of one who desires to attain the eternal treasure to an archer who turns his eyes away from everything except his mark.

A man will despise all things present as being transitory when he has securely fixed the gaze of his mind on those things which are immovable and eternal. Already he enjoys, in contemplation, the blessedness of his future life. It is as when one desires to strike some mighty prize—the prize is virtue—which is far off on high, and seems but a small mark to shoot at. The archer strains his eyesight while he aims at it, for he knows how great are the glory and rewards which await his hitting it. He turns his eyes away from everything, and will not look save thither where the reward is placed. He knows that he would surely lose the prize if his strained sight were turned away from the mark even a very little.

#### VII

How a man cannot possess the heavenly treasure and at the same time cling to the pleasures of earth.

The abbot Arsenius was once asked by the abbot Mark why he fled from the society of men. He replied, "God knows it is not that I hate men. I love them well. But I cannot dwell both with God and with men. There are multitudes of heavenly beings and many virtues, but all their wills are one, and they come of one will. Among men it is otherwise. Their wills are many, and they pull us different ways. I am in this strait. I cannot leave God, for that is how I think of it, to dwell with men."

### Chapter II: On Being Crucified with Christ

If any man will come after Me,  
let him take up his cross, and follow Me.  
-- St. Matt., xvi 24.

He who enters upon the way of life in fear bears the cross patiently.  
He who advances in hope bears the cross readily.  
He who is perfected in charity embraces the cross ardently.  
-- St. Bernard, Sermon I. on St. Andrew's Day.

I have received the cross. I have received it from Thy hand.  
I will bear it, and bear it even unto death, as Thou hast laid it upon me. --- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 36.

The agony of Christ will last till the end of the world;  
we must not slumber during this agony. -- Pascal.

#### I

Of what it means to take up the cross with Christ.

Perhaps some man will say, "how can a man carry his cross? How can a man who is alive be crucified? Hear, briefly, how this thing may be. The fear of the Lord is our cross. As, then, one who is crucified no longer has the

power of moving or turning his limbs in any direction as he pleases, so we ought to fix our wishes and desires, not in accordance with what is pleasant and delightful to us now, but in accordance with the law of the Lord in whatsoever direction it constrain us. Also, he who is fastened to a cross no longer considers things present, nor thinks about his likings, nor is perplexed with anxiety or care for the morrow, minor is inflamed by any pride, or strife, or rivalry, grieves not at present insults, nor remembers past ones. While he is still breathing in the body, he is dead to all earthly things, and sends his heart on to that place to which he doubts not he shall shortly come. So we, when we are crucified by the fear of the Lord, ought to be dead to all these things. We die not only to carnal vices, but to all earthly things, even to those indifferent. We fix our minds there whither we hope at every moment we are to go.

## II

Of one who feared because God took the cross he bore from him.

There was a certain old man who was frequently sick and feeble. One whole year it happened that no sickness of any kind troubled him. He wept on that account, and was sorely afflicted, saying, "Thou hast left me, O Lord, and art unwilling to come to me this year."

## III

Of the hermit Palaemon, how he desired to crucify his body because the Lord was crucified.

When the holy time of Easter came Palaemon said to his disciple St. Pachomius, "Prepare some special food for us today, since this is a feast day for all Christians throughout the whole world." Then St. Pachomius, prompt ever in obedience, did as the old man bade him. After their prayers were finished Palaemon went to the table to eat. When he saw there oil added to the usual food he burst into tears and smote his hands against his forehead, saying, "My Lord has been crucified, and I—shall I eat oil?"

## IV

How the desire of being crucified with Christ will keep a man in the narrow way though he see others departing from it.

A certain elder was once asked, how a monk can avoid being offended and disheartened, when he sees others giving up the hermit life and returning to the world. He replied—"Watch the dogs which hunt hares. One of them only, perhaps, sees the hare and chases it. The others see nothing but the dog in full chase, so they run with him for a while and then grow weary and give up. The one that sees the hare goes on chasing it until he catches it. He takes no heed of the steep hills, nor of the thickets, nor of the brambles in his way. Sometimes his feet are flayed and pricked with thorns, yet he does not rest until he catches it. So it is with the monk who seeks Christ and gazes steadfastly on the cross. He takes no notice of the things which vex and offend him. He cares for nothing but attaining the goal of being crucified with Christ."

## V

Of the narrow way which leadeth unto life.

A certain elder was once asked, "What is this which we read—'Strait and narrow is the way?'" The old man replied, "The narrow way is that on which a man does violence to his own imaginations, and cuts himself off from the fulfilment of his own will. This is the meaning of that which was written of the apostles, 'Behold we have left all, and followed Thee.'"

### Chapter III: Being Dead to the World

The Lord—  
when the Jews spit on Him and buffeted Him  
and smote Him with their hands,  
when Peter denied Him thrice,  
when the priests and elders accused Him,  
when the soldiers mocked Him and scourged Him—  
answered not. He neither rebuked them, nor  
defended Himself, nor reviled again, nor cursed  
those that persecuted Him.

My son, in many things it is thy duty to be  
ignorant and to esteem thyself as one dead upon  
the earth, and to whom the whole world is crucified  
-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 44.

Thou oughtest to be so dead to such affections of beloved friends,

that (so far as thou art concerned) thou wouldst choose  
to be without all human sympathy.

-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 42.

## I

How Zacharias, the disciple of the abbot Moses, showed that the followers of the Lord must accept such treatment as the Master received.

Certain brethren once came to the abbot Moses, and asked him to speak to them some word of exhortation. He turned to his disciple Zacharias and urged him, saying, "Do you speak somewhat to these brethren." Then Zacharias took off his cloak, and, laying it on the ground, trampled on it. "Behold" he said, "unless a man is thus trampled on he cannot be a monk."

## II

The Abbot Sisois finds the secret of peace in the imitation of the sufferings of Christ.

The abbot Sisois said, "Suffer yourself to be despised. Cast your own will behind your back. Stand free from the cares of the world. Then you will have peace."

## III

The parable which the abbot Anub acted, meaning to teach thereby that the disciple of Jesus must be dead alike to insult and to praise.

Once a tribe of Mazici burst into the Scetic desert, and killed many of the fathers who dwelt there. Seven of the fathers found safety in flight, among whom were the abbot Pimenius, and another older abbot called Anub. These seven came in their flight to Terenuthi. There they found an ancient temple of some heathen god, now deserted by the worshippers. Into it they entered, meaning to dwell together for a week without speaking to each other, while each sought a place where to build his solitary cell, for in the Scetic desert these seven had lived as hermits.

Now, there was in the temple an image of the ancient idol. The, abbot Anub guessed the thought of dwelling together which had entered the minds of the brethren. He therefore, when he rose in the morning, used to cast a stone at the face of the idol. In the evening he used to speak to it, and say, "I have done wrong. Pardon me." On the Sabbath day, when the brethren met together, the abbot Pimenius said to him, "How is it that you, a Christian man, have for a whole week been saying to an idol, 'Pardon me?'" The abbot Anub replied to him, "I did this for your sakes. When I cast stones at the idol, was it angry? Did it speak to rebuke me? When I asked pardon of it, was it pleased? Did it boast?" The abbot Pimenius answered, "Surely no, my brother." Then said the abbot Anub, "We seven are here together. If we wish to remain thus and yet find profit for our souls, this idol must be our example. When one of us is insulted or vexed by another, he must not get angry. When one of us is asked for pardon by his brother, he must not be puffed up. If we are not willing thus to live together it is better for each of us to depart to whatever place he wishes." Then all of them fell upon, their faces to the earth, and promised that they would do as he advised.

## IV

Dorotheus the Theban, being persuaded that the flesh and the spirit are contrary one to the other, mortified the flesh with his exceeding toil. This he did that he might be partaker of the life which is in Jesus.

All day long, even in the heat of summer, Dorotheus used to collect great stones along the shore of the sea. Though now an old man, he never ceased from the labour of building cells of the stones which he gathered. These cells he gave to hermits who could not build for themselves. Once a certain man asked him, "Why, my father, do you in your old age persist in slaying your body with such toil as this in the intolerable heat?" He answered, saying, "My body is slaying me. I am determined therefore to slay it."

## V

How St. Macarius taught the meaning of the apostle's words "Dead with Christ," "Buried with Christ."

A brother once came to the abbot Macarius and said to him, "Master, speak some word of exhortation to me, that, obeying it, I may be saved." St. Macarius answered him, "Go to the tombs and attack the dead with insults." The brother wondered at the word. Nevertheless he went, as he was bidden, and cast stones at the tombs, railing upon the dead. Then returning, he told what he had done. Macarius asked him, "Did the dead notice what you did?" And he replied, "They did not notice me." "Go, then, again," said Macarius, "and this time praise them." The brother, wondering yet more, went and praised the dead, calling them just men, apostles, saints. Returning, he told what he had done, saying, "I have praised the dead." Macarius asked him, "Did they reply to you?" And he said, "They did not reply to me." Then said Macarius, "You know what insults you have heaped on them and with what praises you have flattered them, and yet they never spoke to you. If you desire salvation, you must be like these dead. You must think nothing of the wrongs men do to you, nor of the praises they offer you. Be like the dead. Thus you may be saved."

## VI

Of bearing with evil men, and how a man may thus be a peacemaker since he will refuse the occasion of strife.

A certain hermit saw some men toilsomely bearing a dead body to the burial, and said to them, "You do well that you thus bear the dead. You would do better still to bear with the living. Then you would be makers of peace, and inherit the blessing of the Lord."

## VII

Of two things by which a man is hindered from being truly dead to the world.

The abbot Pimenius said, "That monk may truly reckon himself dead to the world who has learnt to hate two things, ease for his body, and the vainglory which cometh of the praise of men."

## VIII

St. Antony teaches that a monk should be like a rock.

St. Antony spoke to the abbot Ammon saying, "You have still a long way to advance in the fear of the Lord." Then leading him forth of the cell he showed him a rock and said to him, "Go, hurt that rock. Beat it unmercifully." This he did, and St. Antony asked him whether the rock made any answer. He said "No." Then St. Antony said to him, "You must attain to the position of the rock and not know when anyone is trying to hurt you."

## IX

How the abbot Macarius used to avoid the conversation of those who honoured him, and preferred to talk with men who offered him insults.

When anyone came respectfully to the abbot Macarius, desiring to hear some exhortation from him, he received no answer at all. But if anyone came despising Macarius and did violence to him in such words as these, "Lo you there, father Macarius! You used to be a camel-driver, and steal the matron. How your master used to beat you when he caught you robbing him!" willingly, even joyfully, Macarius used to speak to such a man of whatever he wished to hear.

## Chapter IV:

### How We Ought to Return Good for Evil

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. -- St. Matt. v. 44.

"My friend," said the bishop, "before you go take your candlesticks."

He went to the mantle-piece, fetched the two candlesticks, and handed them to Jean Valjean.

"Now," said the bishop, "go in peace, Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. I have bought your soul of you." -- Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*.

## I

How an old man blessed one who injured him.

A certain brother came to the cell of an elder, one well known among the brethren for his holiness. Entering in, he stole the food which was there. The old man saw him, but did not accuse him. He only laboured more diligently to supply again what he had lost, saying in his heart, "I am sure that my brother must have been in great need, for else he would not have stolen." In spite of his toil, the old man came to endure great suffering for want of food. At last he was brought even to the point of death. The brethren, knowing only that he was dying, came and stood round his bed. Among them he saw the brother who had stolen his food. "Come hither to me," he said to him. Then taking his hands and kissing them, he said to those who stood around, "I pay my thanks to these hands, brethren, for because of them I am going, as I trust, to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Then that brother was stricken to the heart, and repented. He also in the end became an eager monk, wrought upon by the deeds of the elder which he saw.

## II

How the abbot Sisois taught a brother that the desire of vengeance separates a man from God.

There was a certain brother who had suffered an injury at the hands of another. Coming to the abbot Sisois, he explained the wrong which he had suffered, and then said, "My father, I desire to be avenged." The old man begged him to leave his avenging in the hands of God, but he persisted, saying, "I cannot rest until I have well avenged myself." Then Sisois said to him, "Since your mind is altogether made up with regard to this matter, I need not reason with you. Let us, however, pray together." Thus saying, he arose and began to pray in these words: "O God, Thou art no longer needful to us. We do not require Thy care of us. We ourselves are willing, yea, and are able to avenge ourselves." As soon as the brother, who had desired vengeance, heard these words, he fell at the old man's feet and begged for pardon. "As for him with whom I was angry," he said, "I shall not in any way contend with him."

### III

A doctrine concerning injuries done to us by which we may escape from the danger of being angry, and even turn such wrongs into a source of profit for our souls.

A certain brother, who had been injured by another, came and told the story of what had happened to one of the elders. This is the reply which the elder made to him: "Set your mind at rest concerning the wrong done to you. The harm was not meant for you, but for your sins. In every temptation to anger or hatred that comes to you through the act of man, accuse not him who does the injury. Say simply, 'It is on account of my own sins that this, and things like this, happen unto me.'"

### IV

Of the one which may be reckoned supreme amongst the commandments of the Lord, both inasmuch as it is beyond all difficult to be kept, and also in that the keeping of it makes us fellow-sufferers with Him.

A certain brother came to an elder seeking some word of exhortation. "Tell me," he said, "of some one commandment, such that I may keep it, and thereby attain unto salvation." The old man answered him, "When men do wrong to you and revile you, endure and be silent. To do this is a very great thing. This is above all other commandments."

### V

The abbot Poemen teaches that they who have grace to keep this commandment are very sharers in the death of the Lord upon the cross.

A certain brother once questioned the abbot Poeman, saying, "What is this word which the Lord says in the gospel, 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend?' How may one do such a thing?" The old man answered him, "Perhaps a man may hear from his friend some word which insults and angers him. Perhaps it is in his power to speak back to his friend in like manner. If then he chooses to endure in silence—if he does violence to himself, being fully determined to speak no angry word, nor any word to hurt or vex the other—then, verily, this man lays down, in sacrifice, his life for his friend."

### VI

The dealings of St. Antony with certain brethren who wished to be perfect, but sought for some other way than the way which the Lord taught.

Certain brethren once came to Saint Antony and besought him to speak to them some word through which they might attain unto the perfection of salvation. He, however, said to them, "Ye have heard the Scriptures. The words which have come from the lips of Christ for your learning are sufficient for you." when they still pressed him, begging that he would deign to speak some word to them, he said, "It is taught in the gospel that if a man smite you on the one cheek you are to turn to him the other also." They then confessed that they were not able to do this. St. Antony answered, "Is this too hard for you? Are you willing to let such a man strike you on the same cheek twice?" They said, "We are not willing," hoping to be told of some easier thing. But he said to them, "If this, too, is beyond you, at least do not render evil for evil." Again they answered him as they had done before. Then St. Antony turned to his disciple who stood by, and said, "Prepare some food and give it to these men, for they are weak." But to the brethren who had inquired of him, he said, "If you cannot do one thing and will not do another, why do you come seeking a word of exhortation from me? To me it seems that what you need most is to pray. By prayer perhaps you may be healed of your infirmity."

### VII

A story of St. Macarius, showing how he would not resist one who robbed him.

The abbot Macarius, when he dwelt in Egypt, once had occasion to leave his cell for a little while. At his return he found a robber stealing whatever was in the cell. St. Macarius stood and watched him, as one who was a stranger might watch having no interest in what was stolen. Then he loaded the robber's horse for him and led it forth saying, "We brought nothing into this world. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. According to his will so things happen. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

### VIII

How the abbot Anastasius would not resist an evil done to him, and thereby won his brother's soul.

Anastasius had a manuscript written on vellum which was worth a great sum of money, for it contained the whole of the Old and New Testaments. It happened that a certain brother who came to visit him, seeing this manuscript in his cell, coveted it. At his departure he stole it. After a little while Anastasius desired to read something in his manuscript. He searched for it but could not find it. Then he understood that this brother had stolen it. He was unwilling, however, to send after the thief or to ask him to restore the property lest, perhaps, he might add a lie to the sin of his theft. The brother who had committed the theft went straightway to a neighbouring town in order that he might sell the manuscript. When one came to buy it, he named a certain price. Then the buyer said, "Let me have the manuscript that I may find out whether it is worth so much." Receiving it, he went straightway to the abbot Anastasius, and said to him, "My father, I pray you look at this book, and tell me if it is

worth such a price. It is for such a sum that a certain man seeks to sell it to me.” The abbot Anastasius answered him, “It is a good book, and is well worth what you are asked for it.” Then he who was about to buy returned to the seller, and said, “Take the price you name. I have showed the book to the abbot Anastasius, and he told me that it was a good book, and well worth your price.” Then the seller, he who had stolen it, asked, “Did the abbot Anastasius say anything more to you about it?” The other said, “No. I have told you all he said.” Then the thief replied to him, “I have thought again about the matter, and I am not willing to sell the book at all.” This he said, being cut to the heart. He hastened to the cell of the abbot Anastasius, threw himself upon the ground, and with tears of penitence besought the abbot that he would take back the book. But Anastasius refused, saying, “Go! and my peace go with you, brother. Take the book for your own. I give it freely to you.” But he persisted weeping and praying, and he said, Unless you take back the book, father, my soul will never anywhere find peace.” At length he took back his own book. Afterwards that brother remained with the blessed Anastasius, sharing his cell with him until the day of his death.

## IX

How, by meeting evil which was done to him, a certain monk was led on to do a deed which grieved him greatly.

There was a certain great hermit who dwelt in the mountain called Athlibeus. It happened that he was attacked by robbers. He at once cried out, and the brethren who dwelt in the neighbouring cells ran to his assistance and captured the robbers. They were sent to the nearest city, and the judge condemned them to be put in prison. Then all those brethren were sad because on their account the robbers had been put in prison. They went to the abbot Poemen and told him all that had happened. He wrote a letter to the hermit, whom the robbers had attacked, in these words: “You have betrayed the robbers to punishment. Remember that was not your first act of betrayal. First you betrayed yourself. Unless you had been betrayed by the evil within into resisting the wrong done to you, you would not have made that second betrayal of which you now repent.”

## X

How the injuries done to us by evil men are means whereby we may attain perfection.

There was once a monk who observed this rule of life. The more anyone injured or insulted him, the more eagerly he sought that man’s company. This he did because, as he was wont to say, “Those whose company I seek are they who afford me the opportunity of perfection. They who speak well of us and bless us set our paths about with stumbling-blocks. It is they who deceive us.”

## Chapter V: On Charity to Sinners

Whosoever shall cause one of these little ones which believe on Me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea. -- St. Matt. xviii. 6 (R.V.).

Deal not roughly with him that is tempted; but give him comfort, as thou wouldest wish to be done to thyself.  
-- The Imitation of Christ, i. 13.

## I

The example of St. Antony, showing how he valued a sinner who repented.

It happened that a certain brother in the community of the abbot Elias fell into sin. The brethren expelled him from the monastery and he fled to St. Antony who then dwelt on the inner mountain. The saint kept him there some time and then sent him back to the monastery from which he had been cast out. The brethren, when they saw him, immediately drove him forth again. Then, as at first, he fled to St. Antony, and said to him, “My father, they will not receive me.” Then the saint was grieved, and sent to the brethren a message, saying, “A certain vessel suffered shipwreck in the sea, and all her cargo was lost. Yet with great labour the sailors brought the ship herself to land. Do you now wish to push forth into the deep and sink the ship that has been rescued? “The brethren meditated upon the message which the saint sent them. When they understood it they were greatly ashamed, and at once received again the brother. who had sinned.

## II

How the abbot Besarion desired to share the reproach of the Lord, of whom they said, “He eateth with publicans and sinners.”

A certain brother had sinned, and the priest ordered him to go out of the church and depart from the company of the brethren. Then the abbot Besarion arose and went out along with him, saying, “I also am a sinner.”

## III

How the abbot Pastor wished to deal gently with one of the Lord’s little ones.

A brother came to the abbot Pastor and said, "I am working hard at the tilling of my land, for I desire to make a feast for the brethren." The abbot Pastor said to him, "Go in peace, my son, you are doing a good work." Then the brother departed joyfully, and laboured yet more that he might add something to the feast he was preparing. But the abbot Anub, who had heard what was said, rebuked Pastor, saying to him, "Do you not fear God, that you have spoken thus to a brother, telling him to make a feast?" The abbot Pastor, being grieved, was silent. After two days, he sent for the brother to whom he had spoken and, Anub being present, said to him, "What was that which you asked me the other day, for my mind was wandering when I answered you?" The brother replied to him, "I told you about the tilling of my field and the harvest of it, and the feast that I was making." The abbot Pastor said to him, "I thought you were speaking of your brother who is still in the world. The making of feasts is no work for a monk." The brother was bitterly grieved when he heard this, and cried out, "I know no other good work to do, neither am I able to do any other; may I not till my farm for the sake of the brethren?" So saying, he departed. Then the abbot Anub was exceedingly sorry, and said, "My father, grant me your pardon." Pastor said to him, "Behold! I knew from the beginning that the making of feasts was no work for a monk, but according to the capacity of his mind I spoke to him. At least I excited his mind to a work of love. Now he is sad and despairing, and he will make his feast just the same."

#### IV

How one, through exceeding great love for his brother, suffered himself to lie, and how the fathers saw that he did well.

Two brethren once went together to a town in order to sell the things that they had made during the previous year. One of them went out to buy certain things that were necessary for them. The other, meanwhile, waited for him in the inn. At instigation of the devil this one fell into sin. When the other returned he said, "Lo, we have obtained what we wanted, let us now return to our cell. But he who had sinned replied, "I cannot return with you." The other pressed him greatly, saying, "But why can you not return." Then he confessed, saying, "Because when you were absent I fell into sin, and now it is impossible for me to go back." Then the other, being very desirous of winning and saving his brother's soul, said, and confirmed his words with an oath, "I also, while I was away from you, fell just as you did. Nevertheless let us return to our cell and repent. All things are possible with God. It is even possible that He will pardon us if we repent, and not allow us to be tormented in the eternal fires of hell." Thus these two returned to their cell. They went to the elders who dwelt near them, and casting themselves at their feet, told the story of their temptation and their sin. Whatever the elders bid them do as penance they faithfully performed. The brother who had not sinned did penance for the other's sin because of the great love that he bore to him. Then the Lord looked down from heaven and beheld this mighty labour of love. After a time the whole matter was revealed by the Lord to the fathers, and they saw the great love of the brother who had not sinned, how he afflicted himself for his brother's salvation, and how the Lord had granted pardon to the sinner. "This," they said, "is that which is written. He has laid down his own life for the sake of his brother's salvation."

#### V

The abbot Pastor teaches a certain hermit to think of his own sins and bewail them before judging and condemning a sinning brother.

Once one of the brethren in a congregation fell into sin. Now there happened to be in that district a hermit who was renowned because for a long time he had not left his cell. To him the abbot of the congregation went and told the story of the brother's fall. The hermit, when he heard it, said, "Expel that man." So the sinning brother, driven forth from the community, went away to a desolate swamp and lamented. Now it came to pass that certain brethren on their way to the cell of the abbot Pastor heard him weeping in the swamp. They went down and found him altogether overwhelmed with grief. Filled with pity, they asked him to go with them to the cell of the abbot Pastor. He would by no means agree to go, but kept saying, "Let me stay here and die." When these brethren came to the abbot Pastor, they told him of the man whom they had found weeping in the swamp. He immediately begged them to go back again and say, "The abbot Pastor bids you come to him." When the poor man heard their words, he arose and went with them. When Pastor saw him with all the marks of his grief upon him, he arose and kissed him. Then bidding him be of good cheer, he set him down to meat. In the meanwhile he sent a brother to the hermit who had condemned the sinner, with this message: "I have heard much of you, and now for a long time have desired to see you. Now, therefore, if it be the will of God and convenient to you, I beseech you to put yourself to the toil of coming hither." When the hermit heard these words, he said within himself, "No doubt God has revealed to him the kind of man I am, and therefore he has sent for me." Then rising up, he went to the cell of the abbot Pastor. When they had greeted each other and sat down, the abbot Pastor said, "There were two men who dwelt in one town. In the house of each of them there lay the dead body of a friend. The one of them forgot his own dead friend and the lamentation that was due to him, and leaving him unburied, went to weep at the other's funeral." The hermit when he heard these words was cut to the heart. He confessed that he had been angered at the sin of another while he forgot his own sin. Then he said, "Surely Pastor dwells in heavenly places, but I am here below on earth."



## VI

How the conviction of his own sinfulness manifests itself in more gentleness towards the sins of others.

The abbot Moses said, "Unless a man is convinced in his own heart that he is a sinner, God does not listen to his prayers." Then one of the brethren said to him, "What does it mean, this conviction in a man's heart that he is a sinner?" The old man said to him, "He who is conscious of his own sins has no eyes for the sins of his neighbour."

## VII

The story of a certain brother's love for a sinner, and how he gained thereby his sister's soul.

A certain brother dwelt in a cell in Egypt who was renowned for his humility. Now he had a sister who was a harlot in the city, and was working the destruction of the souls of many men. Many times the elders exhorted him, and at last hardly persuaded him to go to her if, perhaps, he might persuade her to leave her sinful life. When he came to the town one of the citizens ran before him to the harlot's house and told her, "Behold, your brother comes to see you." She then, because she loved him, left her lovers on whom she was attending, and without even covering her head, ran to meet him. He immediately stretched forth his arms to her, and said, "My sister, my dearest sister, have pity on your own soul. Do you not know that through you many are going to perdition? How can you bear this bitter life of yours? How will you bear the torments of eternity?" She trembled exceedingly, and replied to him, "My brother, are you sure that there is salvation for me even now?" He answered her, "If you wish for it there is salvation for you." Then she fell at his feet, and besought him that he would take her with him into the desert. He said to her, "Go, then, cover your head and follow me." But she replied, "No. But let us go straightway. It is better that men should see me walking through the streets with my head uncovered than that I should go again into the place where I sinned." Then they went together, and by the way he taught her the meaning of repentance. At last, as they journeyed, they saw some men coming towards them on the road, and the brother said, "Since these men will not know that you are my sister, I beseech you go aside a little from the road until they pass." After the men had passed, he called her, saying, "Sister, let us go on upon our way." When she did not answer him, he went to look for her and found her dead, and lo! her footprints were full of blood, for she had started on their way barefooted.

When the elders heard the story they talked among themselves of whether she was saved. God in the end revealed it to one of them, that inasmuch as she had cared nothing for her body or its pain upon her journey, inasmuch as she had counted her wounds as nothing for the great longing that she had to escape perdition, that therefore, for the sake of her heart's devotion, God had received her repentance.

## VIII

How an old monk was redeemed from his sin by the gentleness and patience of his disciple.

There was a certain old monk who was a drunkard. He used to weave a mat every day, sell it in a neighbouring village, and spend the money he got on wine. After a while there came a younger brother, who dwelt with him as a disciple. He also wove one mat every day. The old man used to take his mat, too, and sell it, and spend the price of both on wine. Late in the evening he used to return and bring the disciple a very small piece of bread. Thus three years went by, and the young man spoke no word of complaint. At last he said within himself, "I am nearly naked, for my clothes are worn out. I am half starved for want of food. It is good that I arise and go hence." Then again he said within himself, "Whither have I to go? Better that I stay here. It was God who set me here. For God's sake, therefore, I will stay, enduring the life which I live." Immediately that he had thus resolved an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said, "You need not depart. To-morrow we shall come to you." Then the brother said to the old man, "Do not leave the cell to-morrow, I beseech you, for some friends of mine are coming to take me away." The next day, when the hour came at which the old man was wont to go down to the village, he grew impatient, and said to the disciple, "I think your friends will not come today. See how late it is." But the brother besought him very earnestly to stay saying that his friends most certainly would come. While he was speaking death came to him, and he slept peacefully. Then, when the old man saw that he was dead, he wept bitterly, and cried out, "Alas! alas! for me, my son! These many years I have lived carelessly; but you, in a brief time, have gained salvation for your soul by being patient." From that day forth the old man was sober, and well reported of for his good life.

## IX

How the abbot Macarius by his love won for Christ the soul of a heathen priest.

Once the abbot Macarius took a journey to Mount Nitna, and, as his custom was, sent his disciple to walk some way in front of him. The young man, as he went, met one whom he recognized as the priest of a heathen temple, bearing upon his shoulders a heavy log. At once he cried out against him, saying, "Where are you going, you devil?" The priest, goaded to anger by his words, beat him and left him fainting. Then he went again upon his way. Soon he met the abbot Macarius, who said to him, "Peace be with you, toiler, peace be with you." The priest replied, "What good do you see in me that you greet me thus?" Macarius said, "I wish you peace because I see you toiling, and because you know not where you go." Then said the priest, "Your words have touched my heart. You are, indeed, a true servant of God. As for that other wretched monk who met me and insulted me, I replied to his words with blows." Then, taking hold of the feet of the saint, he said, "I shall not leave you till you teach me to be

a monk." They walked together to the place where the disciple lay. Together they bore him, for he could not walk, until they brought him to the church. There the brethren were struck with astonishment to see the heathen priest in company with Saint Macarius. Nevertheless, they received him and taught him to be a monk and many of the heathen round about were converted along with him. Often afterwards Macarius used to say to them, "See how haughty words turn even good men into bad, and how true it is that loving, lowly words change bad men into good."

## X

How the abbot Ammon hid a brother's sin, but warned him of his danger.

Once the abbot Ammon came to a certain place to eat bread with a brother who bore an evil reputation. Now it happened that a woman had gone into this brother's cell. The inhabitants of the place were aware of it, and gathered together in great wrath to expel that brother from his cell. Hearing that Ammon was present, they asked him to go with them. As soon as the brother saw them coming, he hid the woman whom he had received in a large chest. When the crowd arrived at his cell, the abbot Ammon guessed what he had done, but for God's sake he concealed it. He entered the cell, sat down on the chest, and then bid them search. When they had looked everywhere and not found the woman, the abbot Ammon said to them, "Where now are your suspicions? God grant you pardon for them." Then he prayed with them, and bid them depart. After they were all gone, he took the brother by the hand and said, "My brother, beware." So saying, he departed.

## Chapter VI: On Humility

The Lord said: --

I am lowly in heart. -- St. Matt. xi. 29.

It is written of Him: --

He made Himself of no reputation,  
and took upon Him the form of a servant. -- Phil. ii. 7.

He came lowly, and riding upon an ass. -- Zech. ix. 9.

He humbled Himself, even to the death on the cross. -- Phil. ii. 8.

Unto the humble He revealeth His secrets,  
and sweetly draweth nigh and inviteth him unto Himself.  
-- The Imitation of Christ, ii. 2.

True humility,  
The highest virtue, mother of them all.  
-- Tennyson, Holy Grail.

## I

Of the great safety of being humble.

St. Antony tells how once in a vision he beheld all the snares of the evil one spread over the whole earth. When he looked upon them and considered their innumerable multitude, he sighed, and said within himself, "Who is able to pass safely through such a world as this?" Then he heard a voice, which answered him, "The humble man alone can pass safely through, O Antony. In no way can the proud do so."

## II

A story of how a certain one escaped one of the snares of the devil through humility.

The devil once appeared to a certain brother transformed into the likeness of an angel of light. He said, "I am the angel Gabriel, and I am sent unto thee." The brother, though he doubted not at first but that he saw an angel, yet out of his humility made answer, "Surely you are sent to some other one and not to me, for I am altogether unworthy to have an angel visitor." Then the devil, being astonished and baffled, departed from him.

## III

The humility of the abbot Arsenius who once dwelt in the emperors court.

The abbot Arsenius was one day talking with an ignorant peasant monk about spiritual thought. Another monk saw him doing so, and said to him, "How is it, Arsenius, that you, who know both Latin and Greek, consult this peasant about his thoughts?" Arsenius answered him, "I do, indeed, know Latin and Greek, which contain the wisdom of this world, but I have not yet succeeded in acquiring even the alphabet of what this peasant knows. His wisdom is of another world."

#### IV

How a brother once obtained a spiritual benefit as a reward for his humility. It is related of a certain brother that he once persevered in fasting for seventy weeks. This he did desiring to obtain a divine illumination on the meaning of a certain passage in Holy Scripture. Nevertheless, though he so fasted and desired, God hid the matter from him. Then, at last, he said within himself, "See, I have undergone great toil and am nothing profited. I shall go to one of the brethren, and inquire of him what this word of Scripture may mean." So saying, he went out and closed the door of his cell after him. Immediately then an angel met him and said, "The seventy weeks of your fasting have not brought you near to God that you should know His mind. Now, however you have humbled yourself in going to inquire of your brother. Therefore I am sent to reveal to you what you desire to know." Then the angel opened to him the matter about which he was perplexed, and departed from him.

#### V

How a divine and eternal reward awaits those whose humility has taught them to regard their own labour as nothing.

A certain father said, "He who labours and considers that by his labour he has accomplished or effected anything, has already, even here, received the reward of all that he has done."

#### VI

The way in which a certain brother learnt and practised humility.

There was a certain brother who belonged to a high family, as this world reckons rank and grandeur. He was the son of a count, and was extremely wealthy; also he had been well educated as a boy. This man fled from his parents and his home, and entered a monastery. In order to prove the humility of his disposition and the ardour of his faith, his superior ordered him to load himself with ten baskets and to carry them for sale through the streets of the city. If anyone should want to buy them all together he was not to permit it, but was to sell them each to a separate purchaser. This condition was attached to his task in order to keep him the longer at work. He performed his task with the utmost zeal. He trampled under foot all shame and confusion for the love of Christ and for His name's sake. He was not perturbed at all by the novelty of his mean and unaccustomed work. He thought neither of his present indignity nor of the splendour of his birth; he aimed only at gaining through obedience the humility of Christ, which is the true nobility.

#### VII

Words of the hermits concerning humility.

Evagrius said: "The beginning of salvation is to despise yourself."

Pastor said: "A man ought to breathe humility as his nostrils breathe the air."

Another said: "Humility is that holy place in which God bids us make the sacrifice of ourselves."

Synecletica said: "As no ships can be built without nails, so no man can be saved without humility."

Hyperichius said: "The tree of life is on high. Man climbs to it by the ladder of humility."

Another said: "It is better for a man to be conquered by others on account of his humility, than to be victorious over them by means of pride."

Another said: "May it ever be my part to be taught, and another's to teach."

Cassian said: "It is never said of those who are entangled in other sins that they have God resisting them, but only 'God resisteth the proud.'"

Motois said: "Humility neither is angry nor suffers others to be angry."

The abbot John the Short said: "The door of God is humility. Our fathers, through the many insults which they suffered, entered the city of God."

He also said: "Humility and the fear of God are pre-eminent over all virtues."

#### VIII

How one yearned for perfection, and God taught him to be humble.

There was a certain old man who dwelt in the desert, and it seemed to him that he had learnt the perfection of all the virtues which he practised. So he prayed to God, saying, "Show me what is yet lacking for the perfection of my soul and I will accomplish it." Then God, who wished to teach him humility of mind, said to him, "Go to the leader of a certain congregation of monks, and what he bids you, that do." At the same time God spake to that leader of monks and said, "Behold, the solitary of whom you have heard comes to you. Bid him take a whip and go forth to herd your swine." The hermit arrived, knocked at the door, and entered. When they had saluted each other and had sat down, the hermit said, "Tell me, what shall I do to be saved." The other, doubting within himself, replied, "Will you do what I bid you?" The hermit said, "Surely, yes." Then said the other, "Lo! Take this whip and go forth and herd my swine." While the hermit drove the swine out to their pasture there came by some men who knew him, and they said, "Do you see that famous hermit of whom we heard so much? He must have gone mad, or some demon possesses him. Look at him feeding swine." All this the hermit endured patiently. Then God saw that he had learnt

humility, and was able to bear the insults of men. Therefore He bid him return to his own place.

### IX

How a certain elder shrank from being praised, and rejoiced when he was despised.

A certain old man dwelt in the lower part of the desert, at peace, in a cave. A religious man from a neighbouring village used to bring him what he wanted. It happened that this man's son fell sick. With many prayers he besought the old man to come to his house and pray for the child. At length he prevailed with him, and running home, cried out, "Prepare for the coming of the hermit." When the people of the village knew that he was coming they went out with torches to welcome him as if he had been some prince or governor. The hermit, as soon as he perceived how they meant to greet him, stood upon the river-bank, and taking off his clothes, went naked into the water. When the man who was accustomed to minister to him saw this he was greatly ashamed, and said to the villagers, "Return to your homes, for our hermit has lost his senses." Then going to the old man, he said, "My father, why have you done this? All those who saw you are saying, 'That old man is nothing better than a fool.'" The hermit replied to him, "That is the very thing I wished to hear."

### X

How St. Ammon became a fool for Christ's sake.

This story is told of the abbot Ammon. Certain men came to him asking him to judge in a contention which they had. He, however, would not, and put them off. Then a woman said to another woman who stood near her, "The old man is silly." Ammon heard her words, and calling her to him said, "For very many years I have toiled in various solitary places to attain that silliness at which you scoff. Is it likely now that I shall be content to lose it because you taunt me.

### XI

The abbot Pastor's description of humility.

The abbot Pastor was once asked by a monk: "How ought I to conduct myself in the place where I dwell?" He answered, "Be cautious as a stranger among strangers. Wherever you are, never seek to have your own opinion prevail or your word influential. So you may have peace.

### XII

How the devil was vanquished by the great humility of one of the brethren.

There were two brethren, relatives according to the flesh, and bound to each other yet more closely by the spiritual purpose of their devotion. Against them the devil laid a plot that he might separate them the one from the other. Once, towards evening, the younger of the two, as he was wont, lit their lamp and put it on its stand. Through the malice of the devil the stand was overturned, and the lamp went out. By this means the devil hoped wickedly to entrap them into a quarrel. The elder of the two, growing suddenly angry, struck the younger fiercely. But the younger fell humbly on the ground and besought, saying, "Sir, be gentle with me, and I will light the lamp again." Then, because he gave back no angry word, the evil spirit was filled with confusion, and departed from their cell. That same night he told the chief of the devils the story of his failure, saying, "Because of the humility of that brother who fell upon the ground and begged the other's pardon I was unable to prevail against them. God beheld his humility, and poured His grace upon him. Now, lo! it is I who am tormented, for I have failed to separate these two or make them enemies."

### XIII

Another story of a devil vanquished by humility.

There was a certain hermit renowned among the monks. It happened that there once met him a man possessed by an evil spirit, who struck him violently upon the cheek. The old man straightway turned to him the other cheek, that he might smite him upon it also. The devil was not able to endure the flame of his humility, but immediately departed from him who was possessed.

## Chapter VII: On Discretion

The light of the body is the eye:

if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. -- St. Matt. vi. 22, 23.

Some persons, inexperienced in the grace of the devout life,  
have overthrown themselves,  
because they attempted more than they were able to perform,  
not weighing the measure of their own weakness,  
but rather following the desire of their heart  
than the judgment of their reason.

Better it is to have a small portion of good sense  
with humility and a slender understanding,  
than great treasures of knowledge with vain self-complacency.  
-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 7.

## I

A discourse of St. Antony, wherein is explained the meaning and the value of discretion.

Often men are most strict in fasting and in vigils. Often they nobly withdraw into solitude and aim at depriving themselves of all their goods so that they do not suffer even one day's supply of food or a single penny to remain to them. Often they fulfil all the duties of kindness with the utmost devotion. Yet even such men are sometimes suddenly deceived. They cannot bring the work they have entered upon to its fitting close, but bring their exalted fervour and noble manner of life to a terrible end. In these men, though the virtues I have mentioned abound in them, yet discretion is wanting, and they are not able to continue unto the end. There is no other reason for their falling away than that they have not obtained discretion, that spiritual wisdom which, passing by excess on either side, teaches a monk to walk always along the royal road. It does not suffer him to be puffed up on the right hand of virtue, that is, from excess of zeal, in foolish presumption, to transgress the bounds of due moderation. Nor does it allow him to become slack and turn away to vices on the left hand, that is, under pretext of duly managing the body, to become lukewarm. For it is discretion which is termed in the gospel the "eye" and "the light of the body" according to the Saviour's saying, because as it discerns all the thoughts and actions of men it sees and overlooks all things which should be done. But if in any man this be "evil," that is, not fortified by sound judgment and knowledge, or is deceived by some error or presumption, it will make the whole body "full of darkness." It will obscure all our mental vision, and our actions will be involved in the darkness of vice and the gloom of unpeacefulness. No one can doubt that when the judgment of our heart goes wrong and is overwhelmed by ignorance, our thoughts and deeds must be involved in the darkness of still greater sins.

## II

A story of the abbot John the Short: how he fell into the sin of presumption through lack of discretion, and afterwards was saved.

They tell this story about the abbot John the Short. Once he said to one of the brethren who was his senior, "I wish to be as the angels are, free from all care, doing no work, but ceaselessly praising and praying to God." Then casting off his raiment, he departed into the wilderness. After a week had passed, he returned to his brother and knocked at the door of his cell. Before he opened to him, the brother asked, "Who art thou?" John replied, "I am John." Then the brother answered him and said, "Not so, for John has become an angel, and no longer has intercourse with men." He, however, continued knocking, and crying out, "Indeed, I am he." The other, however, would not open the door, but left him suffering there. At last he opened the door and admitted John, saying to him, "If you are a man, need is for you to work that you may live. If you are an angel, why do you seek entrance to my cell?" John then, being truly penitent, replied, "Pardon me, O brother, for I have grievously sinned."

## III

The abbot Evagrius commends discretion in advising that all things be done moderately and at fitting seasons.

The abbot Evagrius said: Reading and watching and prayer are good for the slothful spirit and the wandering mind. Fasting and toil and carefulness will tame lust though it burn in us. The singing of psalms, together with patience and tenderness, will conquer wrath and bring peace in troubled times. Yet must all these be practised at due times, and all within the bounds of moderation. For he who exercises himself in these ways inopportunistly and excessively may indeed profit for a little while, but after a short time will be harmed, not helped, by them.

## IV

How the abbot Lucius rebuked certain brethren who showed that they lacked discretion, and taught them a better way.

Certain brethren once came to the abbot Lucius, and the old man asked them, "What work are you wont to do?" They said, "We do no work, but, according to the saying of the apostle, we pray without ceasing." Then said the old man, "Do you never eat?" And they replied, "Truly, we do eat." Then Lucius said, "And who does your praying for you while you eat?" They were silent. Then he asked them "Do you never sleep?" When they confessed that they slept, he asked, "And who does your praying for you while you sleep?" They could find no answer to give to him. Then he said, "I see that you do not perform what you boast. I will show you how to pray without ceasing. Sit working in the morning up to the accustomed hour; weave mats and make baskets. Meanwhile keep praying in these words: 'Lord, according to thy mercy pardon my offences and do away with my iniquity.' When you have finished a few baskets sell them for money. Give a portion to the poor, and keep the rest to buy your food. When, then, you eat or sleep, the poor whom you relieve are filling in the gaps in your ceaseless round of prayer."

## V

The abbot Pastor teaches discretion to a brother who repented truly of his sins.

A brother asked the abbot Pastor, "I have committed a great sin. Shall I do penance for three years?" Pastor replied to him, "That is too long." Then the brother said, "Do you advise one year?" Again Pastor replied, "That is too long." Those who were standing by asked, "Are forty days sufficient?" Pastor said again, "It is too long." Then he added, "If a man repent with all his heart, and fully determine not to commit again the sin which he deploras, God will receive his repentance though it endure but three days."

## VI

Of a wandering brother who lacked discretion, being puffed up with spiritual pride.

A certain wandering brother came to the monastery of the abbot Silvanus. He saw the brethren working, and rebuked them, saying, "Why do ye labour for the meat which perisheth? Mary chose the good part." Then said the abbot Silvanus to his disciple Zacharias, "Give this brother a book to read and put him into an empty cell." At the ninth hour the brother looked out and gazed along the path to see if any man was coming to call him to a meal. After a while he went to Silvanus, and said, "Do not the brethren eat to-day?" The abbot confessed that they had already eaten. Then said the brother, "Why did you not send to call me?" Silvanus answered him, "You are a spiritual man. You have surely no need of such food as we eat. We, indeed, are but carnal; we must eat. We labour, but you have chosen the good part. You read all day, and have no wish to receive carnal food."

## VII

Of discretion in prayer. Certain brethren asked St. Macarius how they ought to pray. He answered them, "There is no need of much speaking in our prayers. Stretch out your hands and say, 'Lord, have mercy upon me as Thou wilt and as Thou seest best.' If your mind is disquieted, then say, 'Help Thou me.' He knows well what is best for us. Of His own will He grants us mercy."

## VIII

How discretion taught Nathyra to alter his rule of life according to the circumstances amid which he found himself.

The abbot Nathyra, the disciple of Silvanus, when he lived as a hermit in his cell, adopted a very moderate rule of life, allowing himself all that was necessary for the welfare of his body. Afterwards, when he became a bishop, he used a much severer discipline. One of his disciples asked him, saying, "Master, when we dwelt together in the desert you used not thus to crucify yourself; why do you do so now?" The bishop said to him, "My son, there in the desert we had solitude and quietness and poverty; therefore I so regulated my bodily life that I should not grow weak, but be able to strive for those graces which I desired. Here in the world are many temptations to excess of every kind; moreover, here there are many to warn me should I overtax my strength with fasting. I live austere here, lest I should let slip the hope of perfection which led me to become a monk."

## IX

The abbot Agathon gave evidence of his discretion by avoiding all extravagance.

The abbot Agathon so managed his life and his affairs that discretion appeared to govern everything he was or did. This was the case not only in great matters, such as the labour which he performed, but even in the details of his dress. Thus he wore such clothes as never could strike anyone as either particularly good or particularly poor.

## X

How one was preserved from a snare by discretion. They tell about a certain old man that sometimes in his struggles against temptations he saw the devils, who surrounded him, with his bodily eyes. Nevertheless, he despised them and their temptations. Seeing that he was being vanquished, the devil came and showed himself to the old man, saying, "I am Christ." But when the old man beheld him, he shut his eyes. Then the devil said again, "I am Christ; why have you shut your eyes?" The old man answered him, "I neither expect nor wish to behold Christ in this present life. I look to see Him only in the life beyond." Hearing these words, the devil straightway vanished from his sight.

## XI

The story of another who was saved by discretion from an illusion.

There was another old man whom the demons wished to seduce. They said to him, "Do you wish to behold Christ?" He replied to them, "May you be accursed for the words you speak. I believe my Christ when He says to me, 'If anyone shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ or lo there, believe him not.'" When they heard him answer them thus the devils immediately vanished.

## XII

A way in which a man may order his life wisely.

A certain brother asked the abbot Antony, "What shall I do that I may please God?" The old man replied, "Keep these commandments which I give you. Wherever you go, have God always before your eyes. Whatever work you do, set before yourself an example from the Holy Scriptures. Wherever you dwell, be not hasty in removing thence. Stay patiently in the same place. If you guard these three precepts without doubt you will be saved."

### **Chapter VIII: On the Necessity for Striving**

The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and men of violence take it by force. -- St. Matt. xi. 12 (R.V.).

Be thou therefore ready for the conflict, if thou wilt have the victory.  
Without a combat thou canst not attain unto the crown of patience.  
Without labour there is no arriving at rest;  
nor without fighting can the victory be attained.  
-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 19.

#### **I**

How the abbot John learnt the lesson that inward strife is better than inward peace.

The abbot Pastor relates of John the Short that he once prayed, asking God to take away from him all passion. God granted his prayer; and he, being free from envy, anger, and all evil thoughts, was at peace. In his great gladness he went to a certain elder, and said to him, "Behold in me a man who has no strife nor contests. I am altogether at peace." But the old man, being grieved for John's sake, replied to him, "My son, go, ask the Lord to grant you occasion for strife. There is no way in which the soul advances towards God but by striving." Then John, knowing in himself that this was true, did as the old man bade him. Afterwards, when the necessity for constant strife came back upon him, he never again prayed that it should be taken away from him. Always be made this petition "Lord, give me grace to conquer in the strife."

#### **II**

A story setting forth how toil in itself is for the soul of him who desires to enjoy the kingdom of God.

There was a certain old man dwelling in the desert whose cell was above two miles distant from any water. Often when he went to draw water, and the sun shone hot on him, he grew weary. Once, as he went, he said to himself, "There is no need for me to endure all this labour. I shall go and dwell nearer to the water." As he so spake he turned and saw one following him who seemed to mark his footsteps. The old man asked him, "Who are you?" The stranger answered, "I am an angel, and the Lord sent me to count your footsteps and give you your reward." When the old man heard this he remembered that he had not come out into the desert for the sake of ease, but to travel on the narrow way that leadeth unto life. Then he became yet bolder in heart and more violent, and set his cell even further from the water.

#### **III**

The abbot Pastor's strange interpretation of a saying of the Lord.

The abbot Pastor said, "It is written in the gospel, He who has a coat, let him sell it and buy a sword. This word is to be understood by us in this manner: He who has peace let him cast it away, and in its place take unto himself strife. Now our strife is against the devil."

#### **IV**

A saying of the abbot Serenus showing that the strife is severest for those who are furthest advanced towards the kingdom of heaven.

We know well by our own experience and the testimony of the Fathers that devils have not the same power against us which they had formerly in the days of the first anchorites, when there were only a few monks living in the desert. This is because of our carelessness which makes them relax somewhat of the violence of their first onslaught. They scorn to attack us with the same energy with which they formerly raged against those most admirable servants of Christ.

#### **V**

A parable of the abbot Achilles, showing how our strife is not only against the powers of evil which are without, but also, even chiefly, against the evil that is within.

A certain brother said to the abbot Achilles, "How is it that the demons have power against us?" The old man answered him thus: "The trees of Lebanon said, 'How great we are and high! Yet we are cut down with a very small axe. Yes, and of the axe which cuts us down the greater part is wood, and comes from us. Let us therefore give no part of ourselves, and the axe will have no power against us.' Soon there came some men seeking timber, and they made a handle for their axe out of these very trees in spite of their boasting. So the trees were cut down. Now the trees are the souls of men. The handle of the axe is man's evil will. So we are cut down by means of the

evil that is within us.”

## VI

Of one who, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, did not shrink from the conflict.

The disciple of a certain holy old man was once attacked by a spirit which tempted him. By the grace of God he fought valiantly against the vile and impure thoughts of his heart. He used the discipline of fasting. He prayed often. He worked diligently and vehemently with his hands. The holy old man beholding his labour and strife, said to him, “If you wish it, my son, I will pray to the Lord and ask Him to remove this adversary away from you.” The disciple, however, replied to him, saying, “I perceive, my father, that although I am enduring what is hard, yet good fruit is being perfected in me. By reason of the temptation which besets me I fast more than if I were at peace. I am more steadfast in waiting. I am, as I think, more earnest in prayer. I beseech you, nevertheless, that you pray for me and seek the mercy of God for me. Ask that I may be given valour to endure and to fight according to God’s will.” Then the old man was filled with joy, and said, “Lo! now I know, my son that you understand this spiritual conflict, how it works in you for the perfecting of your eternal salvation.”

## VII

Why no man may dare to think within himself ‘I have conquered, and need strive no more.’

A certain old man came to another and said, “I, indeed, am already dead unto the world.” But the other, seeing the danger in which he was, thus warned him, “Be not ever sure of yourself while you remain in the body. Although perhaps you may say, ‘I am dead unto the world,’ yet there is one who is by no means dead to you even your adversary the devil. Surely innumerable are his evil ways, and immeasurable is his craftiness.”

## VIII

Of toil and peace.

Isidore, a priest in Scete, said once to the brethren who were gathered round him, “Brethren, was it not in search of toil and hardship that we came hither? Behold, I find here no sufficient toil. I shall therefore gird myself, and go elsewhere and find toil. Then I shall also find peace.”

## IX

How toil and patience are the means of spiritual gain.

A certain elder said, “We often fail to advance because we know not the conditions of our strife, nor have we patience to complete the work we have begun. No virtue can be attained without toil.”

## X

How no man must cease from striving until he has attained perfection or ceased to wish for it.

A certain brother used often to go to the abbot Sisois and ask advice from him, saying, “My father, what shall I do, for I have fallen into sin?” Sisois replied, “Rise out of your sin.” Again the brother came with his confession, saying, “I have fallen into sin again.” The old man said to him, “Then again you must rise from your sin.” Very often the brother came to him, saying, “I rose again, indeed, but again and again I have fallen.” Still Sisois gave him the same advice, “You must not cease to rise from your sin again and again.” At last the brother said to him, “My father, how long shall I go on rising again from my sin? Tell me this.” The old man said to him, “Until you are at rest in the perfect performance of what is good, or have found quietness in complete bondage of evil.”

## XI

We must not think that even repeated victory over any fault frees us from the necessity for strife against it.

There was a certain old man who dwelt for fifty years in the desert. He neither tasted bread. nor even drank enough water to satisfy his thirst. At last he said, “I think I have conquered utterly—yea, slain—the sins of avarice and vainglory.” When the abbot Abraham heard that he had spoken these words, he came to him and asked if it was true that he had so spoken. He confessed that it was true. Then Abraham said to him, “Suppose, now, that you were walking along the road and you saw a pile of stones and broken bricks, and suppose that you saw in the midst of them a lump of gold, are you able to look upon it just as you look upon the stones and bricks?” The old hermit answered, “No. I should feel that it was precious, but I should fight against the thought.” Then said the abbot Abraham, “See, therefore. Avarice still lives in you, but you have fettered it.” Again the abbot Abraham spoke to him, “Here is a man who loves you well and praises you. Here is another who hates you, and is for ever slandering you. If both of them come to you, can you look upon both of them with the same affection?” The old hermit answered him, “No. I cannot do this at once, but I should struggle with myself until I felt that I loved him whom at first I did not love.” Then Abraham said, “See, now; your passions are yet alive in you, but they are bound with holy bands.”

## XII

How we must ever be ready to do violence to ourselves.



A certain elder was once asked, "What is the meaning of this which is written: 'Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life'?" He answered, "The strait and narrow way is this: that a man do violence to his thoughts and destroy his own will for God's sake. This is what we are told the apostles of whom it is written: 'Lo, we have left all and followed Thee.'"

### XIII

How in this life it is only possible to escape from strife by yielding entirely to all temptation.

A certain brother said to one of the elders, "In my life there is no strife. My soul is at peace." The elder said to him, "If that be so, you are like a wide-opened door. Whatever likes can enter into you, whatever likes can go out. You know not what is happening in your heart. For if you hold your heart's door fast, and keep it shut so that you refuse entrance to all evil thoughts, then you will see them standing without and feel that they are fighting against you.

### XIV

How the life of a monk is a life of ceaseless strife.

The abbot Macarius once said to the abbot Zacharias, "Teach me wherein a monk's life consists." Zacharias replied, "Do you, my father, ask this question of me?" "I am fully determined to ask you," said Macarius, "for there is One who is spurring me on to do so." Then Zacharias said to him, "In my opinion, my father, he is truly a monk who in all things does violence to himself."

## Chapter IX: On Fasting

And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights,  
He was afterward much hungered. -- St. Matt. iv. 2.

It is possible to be saved without virginity.  
It is not possible to be saved without humility.  
Without humility (I dare even to say this)  
even the virginity of Mary would not have pleased God.  
-- St. Bernard, 1<sup>st</sup> Homily in praise of the Virgin Mother.

Sackcloth is a girdle good,  
Oh, bind it round thee still.  
Fasting, it is angels' food,  
And Jesus loved the night air chill;  
Yet think not prayer and fast were given  
To make one step 'twixt earth and heaven.  
-- Lyra Apostolica, xxxvi.

### I

How the spirit of love may loose the obligation of a fast, and yet where love makes no call on us the days of fasting ought to be observed.

The abbot Silvanus came one day with his disciple Zacharias to a certain monastery. The brethren who dwelt there besought them to eat something before they departed. They willingly received the food placed before them, lest they should grieve the brethren who offered it. Afterwards they departed. As they journeyed they came to a pool of water, and Zacharias wished to drink of it. Silvanus rebuked him, saying, "This is a fast day. You ought not to drink." He replied, "But, my father, have we not already eaten and broken our fast?" "My son," said Silvanus, "that eating was for the sake of the brethren, because we loved them. Now let us keep our fast."

### II

How it is better not to fast than to boast about our fasting—as the Lord saith, "When ye fast, appear not unto men to fast."

There was an assembly of monks in a certain church on a feast day. As the custom was, after the sacrifice had been offered among them, the brethren dined together. One of them said to the disciple who set food before him, "I will not eat this. I eat no cooked food." This he said boasting of his own abstinence. Then said the blessed Theodorus, "It would be better for you, brother, to be eating flesh in your own cell, than that such a word should be heard among the brethren."

### III

How humility is to be preferred before fasting.

A certain anchorite dwelt in a cave not far from a monastery, and led a life of great privation. Once some

brethren came from the monastery to visit him. As the custom was, he set food before them to refresh them after their journey. The brethren compelled the old man to eat with them, saying that they would not eat without his company. Afterwards, when they thought upon what they had done, they said to him, "We fear that you are grieved, father, because today for our sakes you have eaten more than you are wont." But he replied, "Brethren, I am not troubled in this matter. I am only grieved when I have acted according to my own will."

#### IV

How charity is to be preferred to fasting.

Epiphanius, the Bishop of Cyprus, once sent a message to the holy Hilarion, saying, "Come hither, that we may see each other and converse together before we depart from the body." Hilarion came, and the two old men sat down to eat together. There was set before them the flesh of some birds. Of this the Bishop partook, but Hilarion refused it, saying, "Pardon me, but since I became a monk I have never eaten anything that had life." At these words the Bishop was grieved, and replied, "Since I became a monk I have tried never to allow anyone to sleep until I had removed any cause of complaint he had against me, nor myself to go to sleep while I was vexed with anyone." "My father," said Hilarion, "I pray you pardon me. Your way of life is far more excellent than mine."

#### V

The saying of an unknown monk, teaching the same thing.

It is better to eat meat and to drink wine than to feed upon the flesh of your brother by envying him.

#### VI

The teaching of St. Antony, that wisdom is to be preferred to fasting.

There are some who keep under their bodies by fasting, and yet are far from God because they lack discretion.

#### VII

The teaching of the abbot Moses on fasting as an aid to perfection.

Fastings, vigils, meditations on the Scriptures, self-denial, and the abnegation of all possessions are not perfection in themselves, but aids to perfection. The end of the science of holiness does not lie in these practices, but by means of them we arrive at the end. He will practice these exercises to no purpose who is contented with these as if they were the highest good. A man must not fix his heart simply on these, but must extend his efforts towards the attainment of his end. It is for the sake of the end that these things should be cultivated. It is a vain thing for a man to possess the implements of an art and to be ignorant of its purpose, for in it is all that is of any value.

#### VIII

The teaching of the abbot Theonas about the occasions on which men ought not to fast.

If at the coming of a brother, in whose person a man ought to refresh Christ with courtesy and embrace Him with a kindly welcome, he should choose to observe a strict fast, would he not be guilty of churlishness rather than be deserving of praise for devoutness? If, when the failure or weakness of the flesh requires the strength to be restored by partaking of food, a man will not consent to relax the rigour of his fasting, is he not to be regarded as a cruel murderer of his own body rather than as one who is careful for his own salvation? So, too, when a festival season permits a suitable indulgence in food and a liberal repast, if a man will resolutely cling to the strict observance of his fast he must be considered as not religious, but rather boorish and unreasonable.

#### IX

How spiritual thoughts put to silence the demands of the body.

Once there came a hermit to the cell of an elder to talk with him. The elder said to his disciple, "Prepare some vegetables for us, and moisten some bread." The disciple did so. But the two old men remained in spiritual converse till the sixth hour of the next day. Then said the host again to his disciple, "Prepare some food for us." The disciple answered him, "My father, I prepared it yesterday." Then the two old men rose up and ate together.

#### X

Of a certain brother who conquered his body lest he should grieve another.

One of the elders was sick, and for many days could not eat. At last his disciple asked to be allowed to prepare a special dish that he might relish. Now there was in the cell a jar in which there was a little honey. Beside it there hung another containing oil, and that rancid, for the lamp. The disciple by mistake poured the oil and not the honey on the dish he had prepared. The old man, when he had tasted it, said not a word but silently swallowed a mouthful. The disciple then constrained him to eat some more. With difficulty he did so. Again the disciple pressed him to take of it a third time. But the old man replied, "In truth, I cannot eat again, my son." The disciple still pressed him, saying, "It is very good. See, I will eat with you." When he tasted the dish, and knew what he had done, he fell upon his face and said, "Alas, my father, I have poisoned you. Why did you not speak?" Then the old man said,

“Be not grieved, my son. If it had been God’s will for me to eat honey then you would have put honey in your dish.”

## XI

The use of fasting, and how it helps the life of the soul.

Fasting is the bridle in the mouth of the monk. It holds him back from sin. He who rejects the practice of fasting is like an unbridled, fiery horse. He is swept away by passion.

## XII

The conduct of the abbot Moses, and how the brethren recognised that charity is above rubrics.

Once a rule was made in the Scetic desert that the monks should fast during the week of the Passover. It happened, however, that certain brethren from Egypt came to visit the abbot Moses during that very week, and he prepared some food for them. Some of the neighbouring monks saw the smoke of his fire rising from Moses’ cell, and they said to the clergy of the church which was there, “Lo! Moses has broken our rule and cooked some food.” Then the clergy replied, “When he comes we will speak to him about the matter.” On the Sabbath, when the abbot Moses came with the strangers to the church, the clergy understood his conduct, and cried out in the presence of the assembled brethren, “Oh, abbot Moses, you have indeed broken a commandment of men, but you have bravely kept the commandments of God.”

## XIII

A rule of life.

A certain brother once visited a hermit, and was entertained by him. He feared lest his entertainment had interfered with the severity of the hermit’s living, and when he was departing he said, “My father, pardon me if I have hindered the observance of your rule of life.” The hermit answered him, “My rule of life is to receive you with hospitality, and let you depart in peace.”

## XIV

How a man may break his fast through love, and another who keeps his fast may yet be yielding to a base kind of self-indulgence.

Once there were some brethren who, for the love they bore their guests, ate with them, though it was a season of fasting. There was another brother who scorned them as they sat at meat. When the abbot John beheld him he wept, saying, “What kind of spirit has this man in his heart that he laughs at the brethren, scorning them? He ought rather to be weeping for himself. It is he who breaks his fast, not they. It is he who is eating. He devours charity.”

## XV

It is better not to fast than to be praised for fasting.

In a certain region there was a man who fasted much, so that the name of Faster was given to him. Hearing this the abbot Zeno sent for him. He came joyfully. After praying together they sat down, and the abbot Zeno began to work in silence. Having no chance of speaking, the Faster was attacked by a restless spirit of accidie. At last he said, “Pray for me, my father, for I am going away.” “Why are you going?” asked the old man. “Because,” said the other, “my heart is as if it were on fire, and I know not what is the matter. When I was at home I used to fast until the evening time, and no such thing happened to me.” Then said the old man, “At home you were fed through your ears by men’s praises. Now, go away. Eat at the ninth hour, and if you do anything, do it secretly.” In following this advice he found that he came to look forward eagerly to the ninth hour. Those who knew him began to say of him, “The Faster has fallen under the power of some devil.” He then came and told all this to the abbot Zeno, who said to him, “This way and this leading is according to God’s will.”

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