

The Wisdom of the Desert: Part 2

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Chapter X: On Poverty

If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast,
and give to the poor . . . and come and follow Me.
-- St. Matt. xix. 21.

Sell that ye have, and give alms;
provide yourselves bags which wax not old,
a treasure in the heavens that faileth not,
where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth.
-- St. Luke xii. 33.

If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.
If thou wilt know the truth, believe Me.
If thou wilt be perfect, sell all.
If thou wilt be My disciple, deny thyself utterly.
If thou wilt possess a blessed life, despise this life present.
-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 56.

Keep this short and perfect word:
Let go all, and thou shalt find all;
leave desire, and thou shalt find rest.
-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 32.

VOLUNTARY poverty is half-way between the kind of asceticism which we have called physical and that which may properly be described as spiritual. On the one hand, it is clear that poverty like that of the hermits deprives a man not only of all the luxuries of life, but of what are generally regarded as its necessary comforts. On the other hand, the sin which stood in direct antithesis to their conception of poverty was covetousness; and this is a sin of the soul, not of the body.

The absolute renunciation of all property was the initial act of the hermit's entrance upon his new life. From the point of view of the fathers of monasticism, the necessity for this renunciation was obvious. Every possession was a tie to the world, and the great object was to get free of the world, to stand clear of its ambitions, its pleasures, and its cares. A man who possesses property, even if he is content to forego the possibility of increasing it, must yet take care to preserve it. He must dedicate some portion of his time, his ability, and his energy to the getting or the management of his income. All such care and expenditure of strength was, from the hermits' point of view, a service of mammon, and they remembered the Lord's words—"Ye cannot serve God and mammon." There was no point, therefore, of their life on which the hermits insisted more vigorously than the completeness of the original renunciation. What the postulant ought to do with his money was not definitely settled. Sometimes it was given to his relatives, sometimes it was handed over to the clergy for the use of the church. Oftenest, perhaps, in strict obedience to the Lord's command, it was given to the poor. Whatever the destiny of the money might be, it was essential for the hermit to get rid of it entirely. No half measures were tolerated. The parable which St. Antony made the young monk act, who wanted to keep something for himself, is almost savage in the intensity of its insistence on absolute renunciation. The personal possessions which a monk might retain were not, any more than the manner of his fasting, settled by definite rule. That their theory of poverty was spiritual, as opposed to mechanical, may be seen in the saying which described true poverty as the possession of nothing which it would cost a pang to give away. He who lives in such poverty as this places no obstacle in the way of his fulfilment of the Lord's words—"Give to him that asketh thee." How complete the renunciation occasionally became may be seen in a fine story of Besarion. He owned nothing in the world but a cloak, an undergarment, and a copy of the gospels. Once, as he went upon a journey, he threw his cloak over a dead body which lay

exposed on the roadside. Further on his way he gave his other garment to a naked beggar. Then, moved by the recollection of the Lord's words, he sold his copy of the gospels and gave the proceeds to the poor.

Even, however, when the initial act of renunciation was as complete as possible, there still remained for the hermit the possibility of being ensnared by covetousness or entangled in worldly cares. It must not be forgotten that the hermits were diligent workers. They preferred such kinds of work as could be done in or near their cells. They wove mats and baskets, or cultivated little gardens; the fruits of their labour they sold, sometimes carrying them to neighbouring villages, sometimes sending them in boat-loads down the Nile to the great cities. At harvest-time they frequently hired themselves out as labourers. The money thus earned they used first for the supply of the few necessities of their own lives, and what remained for the relief of the poor. The marketing of their goods was, as may readily be supposed, a distasteful task. Haggling and bargaining involved them in what must always be a degrading struggle. Some of them simply named a price for their goods, and then, if they were offered less, took it without protest. Others declined even to name a price. They exposed their wares in the market-place, and took the price offered by the first buyer who approached them.

Even, however, when their traffic was regulated by these principles, there remained a possibility of covetousness. There are grievous stories of men who hoarded little stores of money. Sometimes the motive seems to have been mere desire of possession. Sometimes it was, at first at all events, a less unworthy one. It was in order to make some provision for future sickness that the brother, whom the angel healed, began to lay by some portion of his earnings. All such saving was regarded as displaying, at the least, a lamentable want of faith. The ideal of the hermits was a perfect trust in Him who feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies of the field. To save and make provision for the future was to call down the Lord's rebuke—"Oh, ye of little faith."

I

How a certain brother understood the words of the Lord very literally.

A certain old man was once asked by one of the brethren what a monk ought to do to be saved. The old man took his raiment and stripped it off. Then, stretching forth his hands, he said, "Thus ought a monk to be naked of all that belongs to this world. Thus also should he stretch himself out in crucifixion, that he may come out conqueror from the temptations and struggles of this world."

II

The advice of St. Antony to a disciple who desired to be a monk, and yet was unwilling to give away all that he had.

A certain brother renounced the world, and gave what he possessed to the poor. Yet, because he was fearful of heart, and had little faith, he retained somewhat in his own power. This man paid a visit to St. Antony. When the saint perceived how the case was with him, he said to him, "Go thou to yonder village. There buy meat, and bind it with cords round thy naked limbs. Then return to me." The disciple did so, and lo! as he was returning to the saint the dogs from the village and afterwards the birds of the air, tore his limbs, grasping at the meat bound to them. On his return, the saint asked him how he had fared, he replied by displaying his wounds and blood. Then said St. Antony, "They who renounce the world, and yet desire to possess money, lo! like dogs and birds, the demons strive with them and tear them."

III

Of the measure of renunciation, and when it may be regarded as complete.

An old man said, "Own nothing which it would grieve you to give to another, nothing which would lead you to transgress the commandment of the Lord—"Give to him that asketh you."

IV

The word of Serapion to a monk who owned what he was unwilling to part with.

A brother asked the abbot Serapion to speak some word of exhortation to him. Serapion said, "What can I say to you, seeing that you have taken the property of the widow and the orphan and put it on the window-sill of your cell?" He said this, having seen that this brother had many books which he kept in his window.

V

How the same Serapion who spoke thus had himself made a perfect renunciation.

One of the monks, a certain Serapion, possessed a copy of the gospels. This he sold, and gave the price of

it to the poor and hungry. Then he went home rejoicing, saying to himself, "Lo! now I have sold even that very book which was for ever saying to me, 'Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor.'"

VI

A description of the sin of covetousness, through which men fail in making their renunciation perfect.

We must not only guard against the possession of money, but also expel from our souls the desire of possessing it. For it is necessary not so much to avoid the results of covetousness, as to cut off by the roots all disposition towards it. It will do no real good not to possess money, if there exists in us the desire of getting it.

VI

The story of a monk who fell before a very subtle temptation, but in the end was saved.

The elders relate a story of a certain monk who was a skilful gardener. He laboured diligently, and all that he earned he gave to the poor after he had supplied his own necessities. After a while Satan found entrance into his heart, and said to him, "Keep something of what you earn for yourself. Some day you will be old or fall sick, and then you will have need of what you can save now." It seemed wise to the monk to do this, and he saved until he had filled a large pitcher with coins. It happened that he fell sick, and an abscess gathered on his foot. He expended all that he had saved on doctors, neither was made any better. At last one of the most skilful doctors said to him, "Unless your foot is cut off you cannot recover. And they fixed a day for the amputation of his foot. That night he came again to his right mind, and wept bitterly for what he had done, being truly repentant. Then, groaning frequently, he prayed, and said, "Be mindful, O Lord, of the work which once I did, how I laboured in my garden and gave the reward of my labour to the poor." When he had so prayed, behold an angel of the Lord stood by him and spoke to him, saying, "Where is now the money you saved? Where is the hope with which you saved it?" He, understanding well what the angel said, replied, "I have sinned! O Lord, pardon me. Henceforth I will do no such things as these for which you reproach me." Then the angel touched his foot, and immediately it was healed. In the morning he arose and went forth to labour in his garden.

VIII

How all we give, we give to God, and not to men.

Melania relates that she brought three hundred pounds of silver to the abbot Pambo, and asked him to accept the gift for the use of the monks who were in need. He said to her, "May God give you your reward." Then, turning to his servant Theodore, he said, "Take this money and distribute it among the brethren who dwell in Libya and in the islands, for the monasteries there are very poor." Melania, in the meanwhile, stood waiting for his benediction, and expected that he would speak some word of praise to her for the greatness of her gift. At length, when he remained silent, she said, "Master, do you know how much I have given? There are three hundred pounds of silver." But Pambo took no notice of her, and did not even glance at the boxes of money. At length he replied, "He to whom you make this gift, my daughter, does not need that you should tell Him how much it is. If you were giving this money to me, you would be right to tell me the sum of it. Since, however, you are giving this money to God, who did not despise even the two mites, but valued them above all other gifts, you may well be silent about the amount of it."

IX

How a hermit refused to receive a gift of money, even for the use of the poor.

A certain man asked a hermit to receive a gift of money for his own use. He refused, saying that the earnings of his labour sufficed him. The other, however, besought him to take the money and use it for the poor, if not for himself. The hermit replied, "So I should run a double risk. I should take what I do not want. I should distribute what another gave, and be praised."

X

You cannot serve God and Mammon.

A certain brother once came to an elder, and said, "My father, of your kindness tell me, I beseech you, what I ought to strive for in my youth, that I may own something in my old age." The old man replied to him, "You may either gain Christ or gain money. It is for you to choose whether you will have for your God the Lord or mammon."

XI

The story of three monks who were not greedy for money.

Once three brothers hired themselves out as harvest labourers, and agreed together to reap a certain field. On the very first day of their labour one of them fell sick and returned to his cell. The other two remained, and one of them said to the other, "You see how a sickness has fallen upon our brother so that he cannot work. Do you therefore do violence to yourself, and I shall do likewise. We shall put our trust in God. Our brother who is sick will pray for us. It may be that we shall be enabled to do double work and reap his part of the field as well as our own." They did as they had hoped, and reaped the whole field which they had undertaken. On their way to receive their wages they called the brother who was sick, saying, "Come, brother, and receive your pay." But he said, "What pay shall I take, seeing I did not reap." They replied, "It was through your prayers that the reaping was accomplished. Come, therefore, as we say, and get your wages." Then there was strife between them, for he kept saying, "I will take no pay, for I have done no work"; and they refused to take any wages at all unless he got his share. At last they referred the matter to the judgment of a certain renowned elder. The brother who had been sick told his story first: "We three went to reap a certain field for hire. When we came to the place where we were to work, on the very first day I fell sick. I returned to my cell, and from that time on I did no work at all. Now these brethren come to me insisting and saying, 'Brother, come, take pay for work you did not do!'" Then the other two brethren spoke and said, "We did, as he says, go to work, and did undertake to reap a certain field. It was such a field that if we had all three been there we could hardly by great toil have fulfilled our task. Yet through the power of this brother's prayers we two were able to reap the whole field more quickly than the three of us expected to do it. Now when we say to him, 'Come and receive your hire,' he will not do so." When the old man who judged between them heard their stories, he marvelled greatly. Then he said, "Give the signal for the brothers to assemble." When they were gathered together he said, "Listen, brethren, to the righteous judgment which I give." Then he told them the whole story, and gave his decision that the brother who had been sick should receive for his own the share of the pay which ought to have been his. That brother, however, departed sorrowful, like one to whom an injury is done.

Chapter XI: On Obedience

I came not to do Mine own will.

-- St. John vi. 38.

Be desirous, my son, to do the will of another rather than thine own.

-- Imitation of Christ, iii. 23.

Thirty years of Our Lord's life are hidden in these words,

"He was subject unto them."

-- Bossuet.

OBEDIENCE is the sacrifice of self-will. It may consist passively in a man's refusing to insist on acting in accordance with his own conception of what is pleasant, or his conviction of what is expedient or right. It may involve an act or a course of action directly opposed to such convictions. The Egyptian hermits recognised unquestioning obedience as a great virtue. The language in which they praise it is fervid. Its place in the hierarchy of virtues is supreme. The examples which are quoted for imitation show that no idea of compromise was to be entertained. It is apparent at once that the general conscience of mankind endorses under certain circumstances all that the hermits taught about obedience. The citizen of a state must submit to the will of the power that governs. The soldier must obey promptly and unquestioningly the orders of his officer. The sailor has no right of self-assertion against the will of his captain. No consideration of the justice or injustice of a law will absolve a citizen from obeying it so long as it continues to be the law. No conviction of the folly or inexpediency of an order can be held to justify the mutiny of the soldier or the sailor. Under certain circumstances we are as much convinced as the hermits were that obedience without delay or protest is an essential duty—is even the highest virtue. Of all conceivable circumstances only one is generally held to justify disobedience. If obedience involves, directly and unmistakably, a transgression of the law of God, then every man, citizen, soldier, sailor, or monk is held to be right in disobeying.

So far there is nothing in the hermits' position about obedience which seems to conflict with the feeling

even of men fundamentally opposed to monasticism. Nevertheless, there is felt to be a difference somewhere. A man who willingly recognises the soldier's obedience to his officer as a virtue, finds a feeling of irritated hostility arise in his mind at the contemplation of a monk's obedience to his abbot. Here, as very often elsewhere, a feeling which is, as one may say, instinctive to many men, is found upon examination to have a reasonable justification. The obedience of the hermit is a different thing from that of the soldier or the sailor. It rests upon a different basis, aims at a different result. The soldier obeys because, without discipline, an army is a useless mob. The sailor obeys because considerations for the common safety necessitate the predominance of one man's will. If the conditions which necessitate obedience are removed, obedience itself ceases to be a virtue, and may become even a vice. When a volunteer regiment is disbanded, at the end of a war, the trooper no longer owes, or is supposed to owe, any kind of obedience whatever to the man who was his officer. When a ship comes to a port, and the crew is paid off, the sailor has no special duty to his captain. This is only to say that obedience is regarded simply as a necessary condition for success in all cases where combined effort is required. Once the success is attained there is no more reason for obedience. Apart from the obvious advantages of discipline, obedience—that is, obedience simply for the sake of obeying—strikes the ordinary conscience as silly, if not actually wrong. The hermits looked at the matter altogether differently. To them obedience was not a means of perfecting any organisation, but was a virtue in itself. It was one of the marks of the ideally perfect character. A hermit obeyed his abbot or his elder brother because he wanted to be good, and being good involved the total conquest of that self whose outworks were passions and lusts, but whose last stronghold was the desire to express in act its own convictions and will. Here we see why in the case of the hermit the wisdom or folly, the expediency or in expediency of the command given were quite unimportant. John of Lycophis was ordered, when he was young, to plant and water a dried-up stick. In itself the command was a silly one. Neither planting nor watering made any difference to the stick. Obedience or disobedience did, however, make all the difference possible for John. He obeyed, and by obeying built up within himself a certain character. He so far annihilated self and self-will that it ultimately became possible for him to receive direct revelations of the divine purpose. He might have disobeyed. Then also he would have built up a character—forceful, dominant, masterful—but not such as enables a man to be the intimate friend of Jesus Christ.

The judgment which condemns obedience like John's as a worthless waste of time and energy is based upon a mistaken estimate of the relative value of what a man is and what he does. John, and others like him, might have spent their time in doing things that would have seemed to us more useful. Supposing that they had, the value of their work would be all exhausted centuries ago. The fields they dug would have gone back to barrenness or been dug again a thousand times. But the character which these men built up, by God's grace, is to-day, as we believe, in Paradise a joy to the angels, a glory to the Master whom they served. By asserting themselves against a command which seemed foolish they might have accomplished something effective for a year or two. They might have cast deeds, like stones, into the pool of human life, have watched the waters splash and ripple, and close calm again. By obeying they built into eternity, reared the fabric of a beautiful and everlasting human soul.

I

The praise of the virtue of obedience.

Oh, my son, good indeed is that obedience which is rendered for the Lord's sake. See to it, therefore, that your feet are placed upon the pathway that leads to the perfection of obedience. In obedience is the safety of all faithful souls. Obedience is the mother of all kinds of virtue. Obedience discovers the road that leads to heaven. It is obedience that opens heaven's gates and raises men above the earth. Obedience hath her home among the angels. Obedience is the food of all the saints. From her breasts they suck the milk of life, and grow up to the measure of perfection.

II

The vision which one of the fathers saw, wherein was manifested the greatness of obedience.

One of the fathers, being in a trance, saw four kinds of men standing before God. First he saw those who, though they suffer in the body and are sick, yet give thanks to God. Next were those who give themselves to hospitality and are devoted to the relief of others' needs. Next were they who dwell in solitude and see not the faces of men. The fourth kind were they who strive to be obedient and submit themselves unto the will of the fathers. He beheld, and lo! this last kind was superior to the other three. They were wearing golden crowns, and had received an excellent glory above the glory of the rest. Then the old man spoke to him who showed

the vision to him, saying, "Why has this fourth kind of men a greater glory than the others?" He was answered thus, "They all find some satisfaction in doing the things they wish to do, albeit the things they wish are all of them good. He, however, who obeys renounces the fulfilment of his own will. He gives himself up to the will of the father who orders him. Therefore to his share there falls an excellent glory above the glory of the rest."

III

How obedience is no virtue if we only render it to those whose commands are according to our inclinations.

There was a brother once who said to a famous elder, "Father, I wish to find an old man with whom to dwell. I seek for one whose ways will be altogether according to my ideas of what is right. With him I wish to live and die." The elder said to him, "Of a truth you are on a noble quest, my master." Then he repeated his desire, being proud of it, and not understanding the meaning of the other's words. When the elder perceived that he still regarded his desire as a good and noble one, he said to him, "Then, if you find an old man whose ways answer to what you think is right, do you think that you will stay with him?" The brother replied, "Certainly I should stay with such a one if he indeed answered to my expectations." Then said the elder again, "Do you not see that you would not be following the teaching of him whom you seek for a master? You would be simply walking according to your own will." Then that brother, understanding what the old man said to him, fell at his feet in penitence and said, "Pardon me, for certainly I have boasted greatly. I thought that I was saying what was good, and all the while there was no trace even of goodness in my words."

IV

The obedience of Mark, the disciple of Silvanus.

The abbot Silvanus had a disciple whose name was Mark. He was remarkable for his obedience, and therefore Silvanus loved him. Now he had also eleven other disciples, and they were vexed because Mark was more beloved than they were. When the elders heard this they were grieved, and came to Silvanus, intending to ask him to give up his favourite, since the brethren were offended. Before they had said anything Silvanus took them with him to make a round of the various cells. He called each monk by his name, saying, "Come out, for I have work for you to do." No single one of them was willing to come out. The last of all of those to whom they came was Mark. Silvanus knocked at his door, and called his name. Immediately Mark came out, hearing his master's voice. Then the abbots entered Mark's cell. Now Mark was a writer who copied books. Looking at the manuscript at which he had been at work, they found that he had left unfinished the letter which he was forming when he heard the voice of the old man. This he had done that his obedience might be prompt. Then said the other elders to Silvanus, "Truly him, whom you love, we also love; and no doubt God loves him because of his obedience."

Chapter XII:

On Avoiding the Praise of Men

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men,
to be seen of them.
-- St. Matt. vi. 1.

When thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are:
for they love to pray . . . that they may be seen of men.
-- St. Matt. vi. 5.

When thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face
that thou appear not unto men to fast.
-- St. Matt. vi. 17, 18.

Never desire to be singularly commended or beloved,
for that pertaineth only unto God, who hath none like unto Himself.
The Imitation of Christ, ii. 8.

Mere empty glory is in truth an evil pest, the greatest of vanities; because it draweth man from the true glory, and robbeth him of heavenly grace.
The Imitation of Christ, iii. 40.

THAT is a fine saying in which vainglory is compared to an onion or other bulbous root. In the region of spiritual asceticism there is no struggle more difficult than that against the spirit of vainglory. The desire of being praised—and this is what the hermits meant by vainglory—is natural to every man, Christian or pagan, good or bad. In whatever sphere of human activity a man may elect to spend his energies, the praise of some men will wait for him. One man may desire and work for the praise of the crowd, another may find a subtler measure in the congratulations of the few. To one it is enough that the multitude should reckon him to be a good man and throng to listen to his teaching. To another the recognition of his merits by the multitude seems in itself a kind of condemnation. He desires the less audible approbation of the one or two whose own righteousness constitutes them fit judges of what is good. Some men are found openly exulting in being praised. No flattery is too coarse or obvious for them. When it is withheld they demand it blatantly. Others shrink from the sound of open praise, and yet go through life, cautiously feeling about for signs of the esteem in which their neighbours hold them. The hermit who compared the love of praise to an onion had probed far down into human weakness. His sight was keen when he saw that to escape the desire of praise for one kind of virtue is to find oneself seeking it all the more earnestly for another, until the soul is caught in the paradox of desiring to be known as one who does not wish for praise at all.

Vainglory must not be confused with pride. It is the strong man who is proud. In proportion as he grows stronger he feels less and less need for the approbation of others. Milton's heroic Satan may stand as a type of strength and pride. We do not think of him as troubled much about any judgment passed on him. He neither seeks praise nor dreads blame. It is our weakness which makes us long for approbation. We are not sure enough of ourselves to stand alone or persevere without someone to tell us we are doing well. Thus pride and vainglory are opposed to each other. They are the besetting sins of opposite types of character. A man may even be cured of overmuch desire of praise by teaching him to be proud enough to disregard the opinions of the crowd about his acts. Yet it was not because vainglory was an indication of weakness that the hermits strove so hard against it, nor was it along the way of pride and strength that they sought to escape. They thought of virtue as such a tender plant that the breath of praise withered it. Goodness, in their opinion, actually ceased to be the highest kind of goodness when it was recognised. The ideal was to live and die unknown. I do not remember that the hermits ever appealed directly to the example of the Lord in their shrinking from vainglory, but I am sure that their teaching was entirely in accordance with the spirit of His life. For far the greater part of the time of His dwelling among us He chose to remain unknown. Even when the fulfilment of His mission involved His doing works which some men were sure to praise, He strove by all means to avoid publicity. The very manner of His great sacrifice of Himself was so devoid of all obvious heroism that it was only after its consummation that His lifting up began to draw all men unto Him.

Just as it was not because the desire of praise is a sign of weakness that the hermits condemned it, so it was not by trying to be strong and independent that they avoided it. The story of the abbot Nisteros' flight from the serpent is so quaint that at first the reader is moved only to smile. Yet in it we find a man avoiding the peril of being praised by a display of weakness and even cowardice. So, too, the abbot Sisois does not try to attain that position of haughty isolation which would have made him indifferent to the judge's praise or blame. He, like Nisteros, in order to avoid vainglory, deliberately courts contempt. He aims at being despised, lest the Lord's "woe" should fall upon him, and men learn to speak well of him.

I

A saying concerning virtue, how it should be hidden.

A certain one said, "As treasure when it is discovered speedily becomes less, so virtue made known unto man vanishes. As wax melteth at the fire, so the virtue of the soul is thawed and runs away when it is praised."

II

A warning against the danger of being praised.

A brother once asked the abbot Mathoes: "If I go to dwell in any place, what shall I do there?" The old man answered him, "If you dwell in any place, do not make a name for yourself there for anything. Do not say that you will not join the meetings of the brethren, or that you will not eat this or that. So doing, you will make a name for yourself. Afterwards you will perhaps be praised and become famous. Then others will come to inquire of you concerning the way of life, and your own soul will be injured by their frequent comings."

III

“Love to be unknown.”

The abbot Zeno, the disciple of Silvanus, said, “Never dwell in a famous place, or make a friend of a famous man.”

IV

The advice of the abbot Macarius to those who desire eminence.

St. Macarius once said, “Do not desire, nor, if you can help it, permit yourself to be made the head of a congregation, lest perhaps you lay the weight of other men’s sins upon your neck.”

V

A story of the abbot Nisteros, how he escaped the temptation of vainglory.

The abbot Nisteros the elder was one day walking in the desert with one of his disciples. Seeing a serpent in their path, they both turned and fled from it. Then the disciple said, “My father, were you afraid?” The old man answered him, “I was not afraid, my son, but it was better for me that I should flee before the serpent. If I had not at once fled from it, I should afterwards have had to flee before the spirit of vainglory.”

VI

A story of the abbot Sisois, how he avoided being praised by one who wished to admire his way of life.

On one occasion a certain judge wished to pay a visit to the abbot Sisois. Some of the clergy went beforehand, and said to him, “Father, prepare yourself, for the judge has heard of your works and your piety, and is coming to visit you. He desires also to receive your benediction.” Sisois said, “I shall do as you desire. I shall prepare myself for his visit.” Then he clad himself in his best garments, took bread and cheese in his hands, and seating himself with outstretched feet at the door of his cell, began to eat. When the judge with his retinue arrived and saw him, he said, “Is this the famous anchorite of whom I heard so much?” So, despising Sisois, he departed.

VII

A comparison which shows the nature of vainglory.

The elders admirably describe the nature of this malady as like that of an onion, and of those bulbs which when stripped of one covering you find to be sheathed in another; and as often as you strip them you find them still protected. All other vices when overcome grow feeble, and when beaten are rendered day by day weaker. But vainglory, which is the desire of praise, when it is beaten rises again keener than ever for the struggle. When we think it is destroyed it revives again, and is stronger than ever on account of its death. The other kinds of vices only attack those whom they have overcome in the conflict. This one pursues those who are victorious over it all the more keenly. The more thoroughly it has been resisted, so much the more vigorously does it attack the man who is elated by his victory over it.

VIII

A word of St. Antony, teaching that he who suffers himself to be counted foolish, alone is wise.

Some of the elders once visited St. Antony, and with them came the abbot Joseph. St. Antony, wishing to prove what manner of men they were, started a question about the meaning of a passage of Scripture. One by one they gave their opinions about the meaning of it. To each of them he said, “You have not hit it.” At last it came to the turn of the abbot Joseph, and the saint said to him, “In what way do you understand this passage?” He replied, “I do not know.” Then said St. Antony, “Truly, the abbot Joseph has discovered the way in which Scripture is to be interpreted, for he acknowledges his own ignorance.”

IX

Of the subtlety of the temptation of vainglory, which is the pleasure of being praised by men.

Our other faults and passions are simpler, and have each of them but one form. This one takes many forms and shapes, and changes about and assails the man who stands up against it from every quarter, and assaults even him who conquers it on every side. It tries to find occasion for injuring the servant of Christ in his dress, in his manner, his walk, his voice, his work, his vigils, his fasts, his prayers. It lies in wait for him when he withdraws to solitude, when he reads, in his knowledge, his silence, his obedience, his humility, his patience. It is like some most dangerous rock hidden by the waves. It causes miserable shipwreck to those who are sailing with a fair breeze, while they are not on the look out or guarding against it.

A rebuke of ostentation.

There was a certain brother who practised abstinence from various kinds of food, and especially refused to eat bread. He went once to visit a renowned elder. As it happened, while he was there, some strangers arrived, and the old man prepared a scanty meal for them. When they sat down to eat the brother who practised abstinence would eat nothing except a single bean. When they rose from the table the elder took him apart privately, and said to him, "Brother, when you are in the company of others do not be anxious to display your own way of living. If you really wish to keep your rule of life unbroken, sit in your own cell and never leave it." When he heard these words he felt that the elder was right. Therefore ever afterwards he conformed his ways to those of the brethren among whom he found himself.

**Chapter XIII:
On Anger**

Every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire.

-- St. Matt. v. 22 (R.V.).

Nothing so stills the elephant when enraged as the sight of a lamb;
nor does anything break the force of a cannon-ball so well as wool.
Correction given in anger, however tempered by reason,
never has so much effect as that which is given altogether without anger;
for the reasonable soul, being naturally subject to reason,
it is a tyranny which subjects it to passion,
and whereinsoever reason is led by passion
it becomes odious, and its just rule obnoxious.

-- St. Francis of Sales, *The Devout Life*, viii.

THE only point which is really peculiar in the hermits' teaching about anger is that the possibility of righteous anger is altogether denied. No matter how wicked a brother might be, or how serious the consequence of his sin, it was not right to be angry with him. To try to cure another of sin by angry denunciation was the same thing as for a physician to try to cure his patient by innoculating himself with a similar fever, for to be angry even with sinfulness is to sin.

Apart from this one point, the hermits' teaching is only remarkable for the accuracy of its analysis of the source from which anger springs, and its thoroughness in the practical treatment of the fault.

Anger is traced back to the hermits' most intimate enemy—self. It is an expression of selfishness, a sign that self has not wholly and really been conquered. Thus anger may spring from avarice. It is then the protest of self against any interference with what are regarded as possessions. Where the renunciation of property is really complete this kind of anger becomes impossible. There is a beautiful story of two hermits who determined to find out by experience what it was like to be angry. They planned that each of them should claim for his own an earthen pot which lay in their cell. The attempted quarrel began well enough, for the first monk said, "The pot is mine," and the second replied to him, "No, it is mine." But at this point the first man's resolution broke down, and he said, "As you say, brother, it is yours." This hermit had so entirely renounced the satisfaction of possessing anything that it was as impossible for him to grow angry in a dispute about property as it would be for a sensible man to do battle with a child for the sake of some treasure of broken glass or coloured stone. The desire of impressing his own will or opinions upon others is another sign that the old self in a man is not wholly dead. Where such a desire exists in any strength, and others thwart it, the result is anger. In the same way vainglory, when it is starved for want of praise, and pride when it proves to be indulged in foolishly, give birth to anger. Vainglory and pride are alike vices of selfishness.

The hermits distinguished various stages of anger, to each of which was attached a certain degree of guilt. There was first the feeling of anger in the heart, the sudden rush of bitter feeling consequent on suffering unjustly. This cannot be fought against. It may be avoided only by those in whom the old self is utterly dead. Next comes the expression of anger on the countenance. It is at this point that the hermits' battle with anger

really begins. It is possible to choke down at once the emotion so that not even the tightened lips or frowning brow betray its presence. Then there is the vent which anger finds in words. Here is another point of defence for the hermit. He may and ought to be able to bridle his tongue. The final stage of anger is when a man so loses self-control as to strike or injure another. It is something to have stopped short of this.

There is an altogether different kind of anger, which has its origin not in the negative side of the religious life, through failure to eradicate the old selfish instincts, but in the positive side, in coming short of absorbing interest in divine things. To the hermit who fell away from his loving desire for the Lord, whose mind ceased to be dominated by visions of the King in His beauty, the life of the cell or the community became an intolerable weariness. A craving for change and excitement seized upon him. The monotony of his daily round alternately oppressed and goaded him. In this condition he was a ready prey to peevishness and irritability. He flew into sudden fits of unreasoning fury with brothers who had in no way offended him; or if human objects were absent, vented his ill-humour by cursing his pen or his knife or the stones on the road when his feet tripped on them. This kind of anger was the result of a morbid spiritual state which the hermits recognised as sinful, and called *accidie*. To fly from the circumstances which gave excuse for its expression was manifestly useless. It is possible to fly from men but not, as the hermit in the story found, from the demon who excites to this kind of anger. Even the attainment of a sleepy apathy is not a real cure for it. The serpent is venomous still, though he lies torpid and bites no one. The true cure lies in the renewal of the broken communion with God. Then the weariness and *accidie* give place to active joy, and the temptation to sudden anger-fits disappears.

I

The teaching of a certain elder, concerning the nature and origin of anger.

A certain elder said, Anger arises through four things—through the greed of avarice, whether in giving or receiving; also through loving and defending one's own opinion; through a desire of being honourably exalted; also through wishing to be learned or hoping to be wise above all others.

In four ways anger darkens the nature of a man—when he hates his neighbour, when he envies him, when he despises him, and when he belittles him.

In four places anger finds scope—first in the heart, second in the face, third in the tongue, fourth in the act. Thus if a man can bear injury, so that the bitterness of it does not enter into his heart, then anger will not appear in his face. If, however, it find expression in his face, he still may guard his tongue so as to give no utterance of it. If even here he fail and give it utterance with his tongue, yet let him not translate his words into acts, but hastily dismiss them from his memory.

Men are of three kinds, according to the place which anger finds in them. He who is hurt and injured, and yet spares his persecutor, is a man after the pattern of Christ. He who is neither hurt himself, nor desires to hurt another, is a man after the pattern of Adam. He who hurts or slanders another is a man after the pattern of the Devil.

II

How we must not suppose that the spirit of anger is dead in us when we happen to escape for a time from the things which are wont to arouse it.

Anger is like all poisonous kinds of serpents and wild beasts, which while they remain in solitude and in their own lairs are still not harmless; for they cannot really be said to be harmless because they are not actually hurting anyone. For this results in such a case, not from any feeling of goodness, but from the exigencies of solitude. When they have secured an opportunity of hurting anyone, at once they produce the poison that is stored up in them, and show the ferocity of their nature. So in the case of men who are aiming at perfection, it is not enough not to be angry with men. I recollect that when I was dwelling in solitude a feeling of irritation would creep over me against my pen because it was too large or too small; against my penknife when it cut badly or with a blunt edge what I wanted cut; and against a flint if by chance when I was rather late and hurrying to the reading, a spark of fire flashed out. Then I could not get rid of my perturbation of mind except by cursing the senseless matter or, at least, the devil. Therefore for one who is aiming at perfection it is not enough that there should be no men who afford occasion for anger. If the virtue of patience have not been acquired, the feelings of passion which still dwell in his heart can equally well spend themselves on dumb things and paltry objects, and not allow him to gain continuous peace.

III

Of a certain brother who tried to avoid the occasions rather than conquer the spirit of anger.

A certain brother was frequently moved to anger while he dwelt in a monastery. He said, therefore within himself, "I shall go forth into solitude, and when I have no one to quarrel with I shall find rest from this spirit of anger." So he went and dwelt in a certain cave. One day, after he had filled his pitcher and placed it on the ground, it was suddenly upset. Three times he filled it, and three times in the same way the water was spilled. Then, in a rage, he seized the vessel and broke it. When he came to himself, and began to consider how he had been trapped by the demon of anger, he said, "Lo, I am here alone, and yet I have been vanquished by anger. I shall return to my monastery, because, wherever there is most need of striving and of patience, there, no doubt, chiefly is the grace of God to be found." Then, rising up, he returned to his own place.

IV

How by gentleness we may overcome another's anger.

A certain old man had a faithful disciple. Once, in a fit of anger, he drove him from his cell. The disciple waited all night outside the door. In the morning the old man opened it, and, when he saw him, was struck with shame, and said, "You are my father now, because your humility and patience have conquered my sin. Come in again, and from henceforth be you the elder and the father. I will be the disciple, for you have surpassed me, though I am aged."

V

The advice of an elder, showing how we may avoid feeling angry with those who injure us.

A certain monk was injured by one of the brethren. He told what had happened to one of the elders, who said to him, "Let your mind be at peace. The brother has done no injury to you, nor must you think he wished to. He has done injury to your sins. In any trial which comes to you through man, do not blame the man, but just say, 'On account of my sins this thing has befallen me.'"

VI

He who is a slave to anger is not likely to conquer other sins.

A certain one said, If a man cannot bridle his tongue in the moment of anger, he will certainly not be able to be victorious over any lust of his flesh.

Chapter XV: On Evil Thoughts

These are the things which defile a man.

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

-- Phil. iv. 8.

O Lord, my God, be not Thou far from me; my God, make haste to help me:
for there have risen up against me sundry thoughts, and great fears afflicting my soul.

Do, O Lord, as Thou sayest,
and let all evil thoughts fly before Thy face.

-- The imitation of Christ, iii. 23.

THE necessity for struggling against evil thoughts occupies, as we might expect, an important place in the hermits' scheme of the religious life. The circumstances under which they lived afforded ample opportunities for all kinds of thought and meditation. Often for whole days literally nothing happened to distract the mind from its own musings. The voices of the world were silenced. Only occasionally faint rumours of great events reached the lauras in the desert. The isolation of even those of the Lower Egyptian hermits, who came nearest to living a community life, was for five days of the week almost complete. Other cells were in sight. The figures of other hermits could be descried going for their water-supply or toiling in their gardens. Yet, save for the weekly gatherings on Saturdays and Sundays, there was, under ordinary circumstances, little or no intercourse even between members of the same laura. The rare advent of some stranger might bring the hermits swarming from their cells to bid him welcome; an event of peculiar importance might set the abbot's

rude bell ringing to summon the brethren to a consultation; but, as a rule, the life was solitary, and there was little or nothing in its outward circumstances to distract the mind. The work of mat-weaving and basket-making became, for their skilled fingers, purely mechanical. The thoughts were elsewhere even while the hands were busy. So it came that thoughts were not, as they are for men who live amid the world's hurried happenings, swift reflex responses to the excitements of impressions from outside, but wrought out mind-pictures and imaginings of things on earth and things in heaven. We think of such day-dreams as the result of the mind's working upon the recollection of experiences long past, or its effort to realize the imagery of Holy Scripture. The hermits conceived them as the result of the mysterious suggestions of powers outside themselves, powers bent upon the conquest of their minds for good or evil. Thus when Isidore showed the abbot Moses the vision of Dothan he displayed a picture of what seemed to him to be literally taking place around the mind of every hermit. The demons never ceased suggesting evil thoughts. The hosts of angels crowded round with thoughts of what was holy and honest, and of good report.

Though the battle was thus being fought by powers outside himself, the hermit was no passive spectator, nor his mind the mere booty of the victorious side. He himself took an active part—indeed, bore the chief share in the strife. On him depended, in the end, the issue of the conflict. It was, indeed, beyond his power to prevent the suggestions of the demons. He could not check the entrance of evil thoughts into his mind. He was, however, able to prevent the evil from obtaining a lodgment in his mind. He could refuse to dream and meditate on thoughts of pride, or hatred, or impurity. According to the vivid imagery of one of their teachers, the mind was a house into which the devil cast sordid things. It was the part of the good householder to pitch them out again speedily, before their accumulation made the home uninhabitable for what was good. Or, as another taught, the evil thoughts might be smothered and packed away, given no opportunity to develop their horrible nature, until, like garments shut unaired into boxes, they mouldered into decay.

The advice of the teacher who would have us struggle against only one kind of evil thought, since for each man there is one from which all others draw their power, is suggestive of some deep spiritual experience. It seems as if there is in each soul some one weak point where, once the entrance is won by the demon who assaults it, all other demons are easily able to follow him. Thus to him who has given way to dreams of pride there comes a time when avarice and lust will obtain possession also of his mind. For each man, therefore, it is necessary only in reality to set himself to strive with one kind of evil thought.

While the hermits felt the necessity for watchfulness and struggle, lest they should fall, they gladly recognised that it was through the same strife that they obtained the chance of rising. It is, they taught, through evil thoughts that men make shipwreck of their souls, but also it is through evil thoughts that men are crowned. To them it did not seem a desirable thing to be freed, if that were possible, from the suggestions of evil. What they did wish was to meet the evil at its strongest, and then, through Christ, to vanquish it. To have no evil thoughts is to be no better than a beast. To be afflicted with them, and yet conquer them, is to rise into communion with God.

There are infirmities of the mind, like forgetfulness, which are not evil save in so far as they hinder the soul from the highest flights of all. To those who suffered thus the fathers were very tender. It is most comforting to read the gentle parable by which the brother was encouraged who was unable to bear in mind the religious exhortations which he heard.

In all their teaching about the struggle against evil thoughts the hermits recognised that the truest victory is to be obtained by filling the mind with holy imagery. It is not enough to cast the demons out. We must welcome the angels when they come, must store the mind with good thoughts by constant reading and repetition of Holy Scripture, must keep it stretched in meditation upon the love and the work of the Lord. This, if we can perfectly accomplish it, will certainly give us the victory over evil thoughts, and reduce to impotence the demons who suggest them.

I

Of a certain brother who was continually on the watch against evil thoughts.

It is related that seven brethren used to dwell together on the mountain of St. Antony. At the time of the date-harvests one of them used to be always keeping watch, so as to drive away the birds from the dates. One of the seven, an old man, when it came to his turn to guard the dates, spent the day in crying out, "Depart from within, ye evil thoughts; depart from without, ye birds."

II

The abbot Pastor teaches that evil thoughts are not to be avoided, but overcome.

A certain brother came to the abbot Pastor, and said, "Many evil thoughts come into my mind, and I am in danger through them." The old man led him out into the air, and said to him, "Stretch yourself out, and stop the wind from blowing." The brother, wondering at his words, replied, "I cannot do that." Then the old man said to him, "If you cannot stop the wind from blowing, neither can you prevent evil thoughts from entering your mind. That is beyond your power; but one thing you can do—conquer them."

III

The teaching of the abbot Moses on the same subject.

It is impossible for the mind not to be approached by thoughts, but it is in the power of every earnest man either to admit them or reject them. Their rising does not depend upon ourselves, but their admission or rejection is in our own power. The movement of the mind may well be illustrated by the comparison of a mill-wheel. The headlong rush of water whirls it round, and it can never stop its work so long as it is driven by the water. Yet it is in the power of the man who directs it to decide whether he will have wheat, or barley, or darnel ground by it. For it must certainly crush that which the man in charge of it puts in. So the mind is driven by the torrents of temptation which pour in on it from every side, and cannot be free from the flow of thoughts, but the character of the thoughts we control by the efforts of our own earnestness.

IV

The abbot Pastor speaks of a way in which we may overcome evil thoughts.

The abbot Isaiah once asked the abbot Pastor about evil thoughts which troubled him. Pastor answered him, "Just as clothes which are put away for a long time in some trunk, and not taken out at all, moulder and decay, so the evil thoughts of our hearts, if we do not put them into action, after a long time will fade away.

V

The abbot Moses speaks also of a way of overcoming evil thoughts.

We must constantly fall back upon meditation on the Holy Scriptures, and raise our minds towards the recollection of spiritual things, and the desire of perfection, and the hope of future bliss. In this way spiritual thoughts are sure to arise in us, and our minds will dwell on the things on which we have been meditating. If we are overcome by sloth and carelessness, and spend our time in idle gossip, or if we are entangled in the cares of this world and unnecessary anxieties, the result will be that tares will spring up in our hearts and take possession of them. As our Lord and Saviour says, Wherever the treasure of our works or purpose may be, there also our heart is sure to continue.

VI

Of the infirmity of forgetfulness, and how we ought not to despond because of it.

A certain brother said to one of the elders, "Lo, my father, I frequently consult the elders, and they give me advice for the salvation of my soul, yet of all that they say to me I can remember nothing." Now it happened that there were two vessels standing empty beside the old man to whom he spoke. He therefore said to the brother, "Go, take one of the vessels. Put water in it. Wash it, and pour the water out of it again. Then put it back, clean, into its place." The brother did so. Then said the old man, "Bring both vessels here. Look at them carefully, and tell me which is the cleaner." "Surely," said the brother, "that is the cleaner which I washed with the water." Then said the old man to him again, "Even so it is, my son, with the soul which frequently hears the words of God. Even although the memory retain none of them, yet is that soul purer than his who never seeks for spiritual counsel."

VII

Advice for the conquering of evil thoughts.

A certain brother once asked one of the elders, "How shall I overcome the evil thoughts which ceaselessly trouble me?" The elder said to him, "Do not attempt to strive with all of them. Strive only against one. All evil thoughts have a single head and source.—In one man it is this, in another that. It is necessary, first of all, to find out each man for himself what is the origin of his evil thoughts. Then let him bend his energies to the conquest of that one thing, and all other evil thoughts will give way before him."

VIII

That evil thoughts are evil deeds.

“Brethren,” said a certain elder, “you are striving to commit no evil deed. I beseech you strive, at the same time, to think no evil thought.”

IX

How temptation is not sin, but the means of being good.

A certain elder said, God will not condemn us because evil thoughts enter our hearts, but only if we make a bad use of our evil thoughts. It happens sometimes that men’s souls are shipwrecked through evil thoughts, but also it is by the entering in of such thoughts that we become worthy of being crowned.

X

How we are to deal with evil thoughts.

A certain elder said, The devil is an enemy, and your mind is a house. The enemy ceases not to throw into your house every kind of filth that he can find, and to pour into it a world of sordidness. It is your part to be diligent in casting out of your habitation what he throws in. This if you neglect to do, your house will soon be filled with sordid things, and even you yourself will strive in vain to enter into it. Therefore, from the very first, cast out bit by bit everything that he puts in. Then will your house remain clean for you, by the grace of God.

XI

Of our strife against evil thoughts.

A certain elder said, If we have no evil thoughts we are no better than the beasts. The enemy does what is in his power when he suggests them to us. Let us also do the duty which lies within our power. Be instant in prayer, and the enemy will flee. Find time for meditation on divine things, and you will conquer. Persevere, and the good in you will win. Strive hard, and you will be crowned.

XII

How the abbot Moses saw the vision which once the servant of Elisha saw, and was strengthened.

Once, while the abbot Moses dwelt in the region called Petra, he was attacked by the demon of impurity with such fierceness that he could not remain in his cell, nor dared he be alone. He went, therefore, to the holy abbot Isidore and told him of the vehemence of the evil thoughts which came to him. The abbot Isidore bid him be of good cheer, and brought forth from the Holy Scriptures many words of encouragement and strength. Then he bid Moses return to his cell. But this Moses was not willing to do, dreading still to be alone. Then Isidore led him up to the hill which was behind his cell, and said to him, “Turn your eyes westwards and look.” He gazed as he was bidden, and beheld a host of demons. Their regiments swept passionately past. They seemed as those prepared for battle, and eager for strife. Then said the abbot Isidore again, “Turn your eyes to the east and look.” He gazed as he was bidden, and beheld a numberless array of holy angels. They seemed more glorious and splendid than the shining of the sun, and marched as the army of the good powers of heaven. “Behold,” said Isidore, “those whom you saw in the west are the powers which fight against the saints of God. Those whom your eyes looked on in the east are they whom God sends to help His saints. Be sure that the army which fights for us is the stronger one, as saith the prophet Eliseus. Truly, also, St. John saith, ‘Greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world.’” When he heard these words Moses took heart of grace, and, being comforted in the Lord, returned to his cell. There he gave God thanks, and praised the long-suffering and the kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

XIII

How a certain elder overcame the evil thought which prompted him to postpone his penitence.

It is told of a certain elder that very often his thoughts said to him, “Let today go by. Tomorrow will be time enough to repent.” He always answered them, “I cannot do this, because to-morrow some other part of God’s will must be worked out in me.”

Chapter XVI: On the Life in the World

This day is salvation come to this house,
forsomuch as he also is the son of Abraham.

-- St. Luke xix. 9.

This the Lord said,
rebuking those who thought that Zacchaeus
was outside the region of the grace of God.
It is not granted to all to forsake all, to renounce the world,
and to undertake a life of religious seclusion.
-- The Imitation of Christ, iii. 10.

THE hermits succeeded in separating their lives not only from the world but from the ways of those Christians who lived in the world. Save for their own brief excursions into village market-places to sell their baskets, and the visits of pilgrims in search of teaching or healing to their cells, the hermits came very little into contact with ordinary members of the Church. It is not to be supposed, therefore, that they either gave much thought to the position of Christians in the world or tried to persuade them to leave it. The hermits were neither theorists nor philosophers. Their religion was entirely practical, and mainly personal. They made no effort whatever to explain why some Christians married, grew rich, and accepted the world's honours, while others retired into the solitude of the wilderness. The hermit was very vividly conscious of his own call to the ascetic life, but he was content to leave others to work out for themselves their own salvation in their own way. The question of the relation of the monastic to the secular life had occupied the mind of Origen, but the hermits either did not know or were totally uninterested in his speculations. The same problem came up for solution afterwards, and was argued out by men like St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, but the hermits did nothing towards providing a philosophy of the life they lived. In spite of the mass of teaching that they left behind them, references of any sort to Christians who lived in the world are extremely few.

The spirit of these few references is wholly different from what we might expect. Experience teaches us that men who are rigorists, who, to a greater or less extent, stand aloof from the common joys and labours and ambitions of mankind find it necessary, as it were in self-defence, to judge sternly of those who do not walk in their ways. It is a lamentable fact that the great earnestness which enables men to make real renunciations is too often connected not only with want of charity, but with a total incapacity to appreciate the amount of genuine religion which exists in systems less rigorous than their own. It has come to be recognised as almost an unvarying law that the Christian who fasts and weeps, even if he does not fail in charity to individuals will never be able to recognise that there is a real religion in which laughter and dancing find their place. Of all men the hermits were the most rigorous in their life. We should expect therefore to find them most ready in definite condemnation of religious ways which differed from their own. I do not suppose that anyone who has learnt to appreciate the depth and spirituality of their religion would expect to find them bitter and uncharitable towards individuals. Such a spirit cannot coexist with the seeing and desiring to see the God who is love. Nor, I think, should we be surprised to find them recognising some possibility of good in the life of the Christian in the world. It is, however, with real amazement that we read the few judgments which they passed on the secular life. It is not that they look on such life as good, though poorer and lower than their own; still less do they regard it with that pitying contempt which is often misnamed charity. They recognise gladly that it may be in every way equal to their own lives. They go back to their cells from the kitchens of housewives and the workshops of tradesmen humbled by the contemplation of a perfection to which they themselves have not been able as yet to attain.

St. Macarius of Alexandria was one of the very sternest of the hermits in his ascetic practices. The fierceness of his efforts to subdue his body shock us, while we wonder at the strength of the man who made them. Of all the leaders of the movement he would seem the least likely to appreciate the beauty of a Christian life lived in the world. Yet it is he who says, "Truly virginity is nothing, nor marriage, nor the monk's life, nor life in the world." Certainly it was a special revelation which led him to the house of the two women whose way of life taught him this truth; yet we must suppose an almost incredible magnanimity in the man, placed as St. Macarius was, who could receive and profit by such a revelation. It is not so wonderful that St. Antony should have reached to the understanding of the many different ways in which God leads men upwards to Himself. We know enough about him to appreciate the broadness and sanity of his character. Yet even from him it is startling to hear such words as those he spoke to the Alexandrian tanner: "Of a truth, my son, you are on your way to the kingdom of God, and I, like a man without wisdom, am passing the time of my solitude without attaining to the measure of the perfection that you have told me of."

The words of Muthues are poorer, perhaps, than the confessions of St. Antony and St. Macarius, yet they have a special value. They show us how it was that the hermits became capable of such clear-sightedness in

the recognition of good. It was through their humility, that virtue which is likened, aptly, to the rudder of a ship. God Himself could not have revealed the great truths about life, which these saints saw, except to men whose hearts were well prepared for His Spirit by a long discipline of subduing pride.

I

How the divine guidance enabled St. Antony to see that a life well pleasing to God may be accomplished by one who is in the world as well as by a monk.

Once, while St. Antony was praying in his cell, there came to him a voice which said, "Oh, Antony, for all your life in the desert you have not yet attained the measure of the perfection of a tanner who lives in Alexandria." When he heard this the saint rose up early, took his staff; and came with haste to Alexandria. He speedily found the man of whom he had been told. The tanner was struck dumb at the sight of so great a saint. St. Antony said to him, "Describe to me the manner of your life. I have come here from the desert to learn about your good deeds." The tanner answered him, "I have not, so far as I know, done anything good at all. I am a very sinful man. When I rise from my bed in the morning, before my work begins I say, 'All the people in this city must be better than I am. From the least to the greatest they may well be entering into the kingdom of heaven. I, because of my sins, am certainly going to everlasting punishment.' Then when I am going to rest at night I find myself obliged to repeat this same saying." Then St. Antony replied to him, "Of a truth, my son, you, as you sit here quietly in your house, are on your way to the kingdom of God. I, like a man without wisdom, am passing the time of my solitude without attaining to the measure of the perfection that you have told me of."

II

How St. Macarius was guided by the Spirit to a knowledge of the same truth.

Once, while the abbot Macarius was praying, a voice sounded in his ears, which said to him, "Macarius, you have not yet arrived at the measure of the sanctity of two women who dwell in the neighbouring city." When he heard this he arose and, taking his staff, set forth for the city which had been named. He sought and found the house where the women lived. When he knocked at the door one of the women came out, and, perceiving who he was, welcomed him into the house with great joy. St. Macarius called the two together to him, and said, "On your account I have endured the toil of coming here from my solitude. I desire to know your way of life. I pray you to describe it to me." They, however, replied to him, "Most holy father, what kind of life is ours for you to ask about?" He persisted in asking that they would describe it to him. Then, since he compelled them, they said, "We are not, indeed, related to each other by blood, but it happened that we married two brothers. Now, though we have lived together for fifteen years, we have had no quarrel, neither has either of us spoken a sharp word to the other. We both desired to leave our husbands and enter a community of holy women. We begged our husbands to permit us, but they would not. Then we vowed that until the day of our death we should hold no worldly talk with each other, but converse only about spiritual things." When St. Macarius heard what they told him, he said, "Truly virginity is nothing, nor marriage, nor the monk's life, nor dwelling in the world. It is purposes and vows like this which God seeks from us, and He gives the spirit of life to all alike."

III

How the monk must not reckon himself safe because he is a monk, nor must think of those who live in the world as lost.

The abbot Muthues said, The nearer a man draws to God the more he sees his own sinfulness. Thus when the prophet Isaiah had his vision of God he exclaimed that he was wretched and unclean. Let us be careful to hold this truth fast, for the Scripture saith, "Let him who thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." We voyage doubtfully across the waves of this world. We indeed may seem to be sailing over quiet seas while they who dwell in the world go amid dangers. We shape our course in the daylight, lit upon our way by the Sun of Righteousness. They, as if in the night-time, may steer in ignorance of where they go. Yet it often may come to pass that the dweller in the world, just because he voyages through a dark night, is very watchful, and his ship comes safe to port. So too we, just because we voyage over quiet seas, grow careless. Too often from our very security we perish, letting go the helm, which is humility. Just as no ship can be safe without a rudder, so it is impossible for a man to come safe to his journey's end without humility.

Chapter XVII: The Inner Life and the Visible Church

The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat:
all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do;
but do not ye after their works.
-- St. Matt. xxiii. 2, 3.

DURING the earlier stages of the monastic movement the hermits came very little into contact with Church authority. They lived, at first, outside the sphere of clerical activity. They were often far out of reach of village churches, and a priest in order to minister to them must have been himself prepared to become a hermit. They were, I believe, at first almost entirely uninterested in the controversies which rent the Church. Their devoted loyalty to St. Athanasius was less the result of their dogmatic orthodoxy than a tribute to the noble unworldliness of the great patriarch's character. For them the entire interest of religion centred in the effort to keep the commandments of God and follow the example of Jesus Christ. Afterwards, of course, their spirit changed, and they became the earnest and sometimes even fanatical opponents of positions deemed heretical. Long before that time came, however, they had been obliged to adjust their relations to ecclesiastical authority.

It is not to be supposed that even the earliest hermits were in any way hostile to the clergy or opposed to the system of Church government, still less that they were contemptuous of the means of grace committed to the Church's guardianship. Rather, we must think of them as men so absorbed in fostering and perfecting the inner life of personal communion with God, that they did not feel the need of absolution or of Sacraments. It was inevitable that as their numbers grew, and as they gathered into the communities of the lauras, this position must give way. The change was a very critical one. There was the possibility of a revolt against all the external machinery of religion. It is quite easy to understand that this was the most likely consequence of the earlier aloofness. Men who are genuinely on fire with a love for holiness are sure to resent the marks of corruption and insincerity which must ever be visible in the garments of the Church on earth. Men of intense spirituality are likely to revolt against the claims of authority which sometimes must seem to break in upon their own communion with God. It is not the least wonderful thing in the history of Egyptian monasticism that it never produced even the beginnings of a schism.

The change from the original position of entire spiritual independence to that of faithful loyalty to the Egyptian patriarchs took place silently, and has left but few traces of the steps by which it was accomplished. The two stories which form this chapter are quoted as examples of the way in which the hermits learned their lesson of obedience. They furnish us, I think, with valuable spiritual lessons, and give evidence of a grace in their heroes which is very worthy of imitation.

I

Of a hermit who refused the ministrations of a priest who was a sinner.

Once a man said to a certain hermit, "The priest who ministers to you is a sinner." Then doubt concerning the priest took possession of the hermit's mind, and when, according to his custom, the priest came again he shut the door against him. There came a voice to him as he sat in his cell, which said "Assuredly men are governed by someone else than me." Then he beheld a vision. He stood in a great garden wherein were fruit trees of every kind. He saw there the engine by which water was raised from the river for the watering of the garden, and lo, all the vessels connected with it were of gold. He was about to drink of the water when he saw that the man who tended the engine was a leper, loathsome to behold. Then all desire of drinking departed from him. There came the voice and spoke to him again, "Oh man, have you beheld the beauty of the garden and the trees? Have you seen the wheel with its golden furniture? Have you seen, too, the gardener and the misfortune which has overwhelmed him?" The hermit answered, "I have seen all this." Then said the voice, "Does his disease injure at all the trees or the beauty of the garden?" And he answered "No." The voice said to him, "It is even so with the priest who makes the sacrifice. He may be a sinner, but his sin diminishes nothing of the honour due to the body of the Lord. The divine virtue is ever active in the Eucharist. The prayers with which he celebrates are always the same as the prayers of holy fathers."

II

How the Lord himself taught the abbot Schnoudi the respect due to those who sit in Moses' seat.

It happened one day that the abbot Schnoudi was holding converse with our Saviour Jesus Christ, when the

Bishop of Schmin arrived at the monastery. He sent to ask the abbot to come to him that he might talk to him. But Schnoudi, the Saviour as has been told being with him, sent back a message by the servant, "Schnoudi at this time has no leisure." When the servant had given this message to the bishop he sent again, saying, "Bid him be kind to me, for I have come here for the purpose of knowing him." But Schnoudi said to the brother who brought the message, "Tell him again that I have no leisure to see him." Then the bishop was vexed, and said, "Say to him, If you do not come I shall excommunicate you." Schnoudi, when he heard the message, smiled and said, "Behold the folly of this man of flesh and blood. Lo, here is with me the creator of heaven and earth. I shall continue to abide with Him." Then the Saviour Himself spoke, and said to him, "Oh, Schnoudi, rise and go to the bishop, lest he excommunicate you. If he does I shall not receive you into heaven. The Father promised, saying, 'Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'" Then when Schuoudi had heard these words he hastened to the presence of the bishop.

Chapter XVIII: In the Hour of Death

If a man keep My saying, he shall never see death.
-- St. John viii. 51.

Love Him and keep Him for thy friend,
who when all go away will not forsake thee,
nor suffer thee to perish at the last.
-- The Imitation of Christ, ii. 7.

In the hour of death, and in the day of judgment,
Good Lord, deliver us.
-- The Litany.

THE tendency which sometimes manifests itself among pious people to think much of the last moments of those who depart hence in the faith of Christ is certainly morbid and leads to devotional thought of a sentimental kind. For most men the arrival of the supreme moment has been preceded by a weary period of physical suffering. The body is worn and wasted. The mind has lost its power, even the power of expectation. The spirit is depressed with weakness, sympathetic with the decay of the home God formed for it. Neither brave words nor clear vision of what lies beyond are commonly to be looked for. Very often, too, a certain self-forgetfulness which we cannot but praise fixes the thought of him who is to go more on the grief of the parting and the foreseen desolation of those who are left, than on the hope of the breaking forth of glory when the veil is lifted. Then from the mouth of the dying believer come, haltingly, words meant to be comfortable. They form no message from beyond. That they are spoken from the grave's brink adds only a great pathos to the familiar attempts at consolation with which we who are left try to lighten the mourners' grief. Yet sometimes, even in the hour of death, the spirit is so far triumphant over bodily decay as to recognise the supreme importance of the crisis through which it passes. The world beyond is realized, is felt—we may say, is seen. This world, and all that life in it has meant, is seen too, not any longer as a succession of incidents of which the nearest alone seem great, but seen whole with all its days in true perspective. From such vision there is every hope that we should learn. The Christian will not indeed expect or hope to grasp at secrets unrevealed, but he may reverently expect to be told of what the great emotion will consist. Is it to be joy or fear? Shall we be absorbed with regret looking backwards, or rapt in expectation of what is to come? Will joy and fear, regret and hope, all alike yield to an overmastering curiosity about what that other world is like? Will doubt for the last time harass us, or may we look for the extreme beatitude of the satisfaction at length of desire for the Beloved?

Of the four death-bed stories which I tell, one seems at first to speak only of regret for past mistakes. The Archbishop Theophilus tells us only that he knew at last that death ought to have been more often present in his mind. No doubt he was conscious that he would have lived better had he lived more as one who was about to go. Yet even here it is possible to feel that he regretted not only a mistake, but the missing of a great source of joy. If the passing away was a glad thing to him when it came, he would regret that he had failed to get the joy of its anticipation. The abbot Pammon saw his past life in the light of that which was dawning for him. We catch in his summary of his life's accomplishments something of the triumph of St. Paul's—"I have fought

the good fight. I have finished my course.” Yet all that he was, or did, or felt seems nothing to him in comparison to the vista of devotion which stretches before him. Some regret there is in what he says, but in the main he speaks to us of expectation. To the abbot Agathon the hour of death brings a certain doubt. He, too, sees the life that is past, but his vision of that which is to come stops short at the judgment act. God is to pronounce that he has done well or been mistaken. He is not sure, even at the last, what God’s pronouncement is to be. This is his doubt. But it is a doubt which neither terrifies nor unmans, for it is covered by a larger faith. The pronouncement is to be God’s. That insures that it, at least, will be just and right. The man may have been mistaken. Death takes him where his mistake is surely to be rectified. For Sisois the hour of death brings an unspeakable rapture. St. Antony is with him, and the prophets and the apostles. He speaks to the angels, and they to him. Death means union with all whom he loved best. It is the satisfaction of long unfulfilled desire. Yet even for him there is regret. He knows that he is not good enough to join such company. Sins only half repented of crowd to his remembrance. He asks for time for more repentance. He is answered by the beatific vision of the Lord Himself, and love made perfect casts out fear.

I

How in the hour of death Pammon was fain to confess that his service of God had been but very imperfect.

The abbot Pammon in that hour when he was passing away from the body spoke thus to the other holy men who stood around him, “Brethren, since the day that I came here to the desert, amid built this cell of mine, I do not think that I have ever eaten anything except what the work of my hands earned. I do not remember that I have reason to repent of any exhortation which I ever gave to the brethren. Yet, if indeed I am now going to God, it seems to me that I have not yet begun to learn to worship Him.”

II

How in the hour of death the abbot Agathon, though he knew nothing against himself, yet was not thereby justified.

At the time when the abbot Agathon lay dying his eyes were fixed for three whole days, as if he were in a trance. The brethren who were with him touched him to awaken him, and said, “Father, where are you now?” He replied, “I stand gazing at the God who judges me.” Then the brethren said, “Surely you are not afraid.” He answered them, “While I was with you on earth, as far as in me lay, I strove to obey the commandments of God. Yet I am but a man, and now I am not sure—how can I be sure? -- that the things I did were really pleasing in God’s sight.” The brethren said, “have you no confidence that your deeds were in accordance with the will of God?” He replied, “I have no confidence now that I am standing in the sight of God. Man judges about what is right and wrong. That is one judgment. God also judges what is right and wrong. His judgment is another and different.”

III

The glorious vision of the abbot Sisois in the hour of death.

Many elders gathered round the abbot Sisois when the time of his falling asleep came to him. They saw his face shining with a wondrous radiance, and he said to them, “Lo, the abbot Antony is coming to me.” After a little while he said, “The company of the prophets is along with him.” Then his face shone with a brighter light, amid he said, “The blessed apostles are beside me.” It seemed, then, to those who stood by as if he spoke to someone, and they asked him to tell them with whom he talked. He said, “The angels have come to bear away my soul, and I am asking them to grant me yet a little while for penitence.” Then the fathers said to him, “Surely you have no need of penitence?” But he replied, “Verily I say to you that I have never yet grasped even the beginning of true penitence.” Then they felt that in him the fear of God was indeed perfected. Suddenly his face was lighted with all the splendour of the sun, and he cried out to them, “Behold, behold my brethren, the Lord Himself is come to me.” Then while he spoke these words, his spirit fled, and all the place was filled with a sweet smell.

IV

The words of Theophilus the Archbishop, which he spoke in the hour of death.

Theophilus the Archbishop, of blessed memory, when he was about to depart, said, “Blessed art thou, Arsenius, for thou hast always had this hour before thine eyes.”
