

infancy, and inquire how it was it came to find favour among Christian people, and how far it was right and proper, and beneficial to the world at large.

We trace its beginning in the history of S. Antony. We must picture this remarkable man as he was in his own day and in his own country, wearing a coarse garment of hair, and with long, unkempt locks—a wild, free son of the Egyptian desert—an Elijah, or a John the Baptist. He was born of Christian parents in the year 251 A.D., and he was brought up in his native village, not far from Thebes, on the banks of the Nile. From his earliest years he is said to have shown signs of a thoughtful and religious mind; and, doubtless, the silence and the solitude of the desert helped to strengthen this characteristic. Before he was twenty years old both his parents died, leaving their son an ample fortune. This fortune Antony proceeded to divide amongst his fellow-villagers. He was led to do this, it is said, by listening one day to a sermon in church, the subject of which was the story of the rich young man in the Gospel, who was charged to sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor, that he might have treasure in heaven. You see, the Christians of these early days were eminently practical, and though sometimes possessed of mistaken ideas they carried out what they believed to be right with a thoroughness we can admire, and might well imitate.

Having sold his possessions, and thus literally fulfilled our Lord's command, Antony turned his thoughts to a quiet, self-denying life, in which he might hold sweet and uninterrupted converse with his Saviour. For this purpose he fixed his home near, but outside, his native village. Here he laboured with his own hands, bestowing the fruits of his labour upon those around him. But not satisfied with this, he retired from one retreat to another—now taking up his abode in a tomb, and now again in a ruined castle, until he found himself far removed from the voices and strife of men. He wished for peace, to serve God without distraction; he desired to be away from temptation, but he found, as he confessed, that the tempter

followed him. He chastised himself severely. He had fierce conflicts with his ghostly assailants, so fierce that passers-by once found him half dead.

There was indeed no question as to the sincerity and earnestness of Antony's faith. In the time of persecution he journeyed to Alexandria, partly with the desire of comforting the suffering Christians, and partly in the hope that he might win the martyrs' crown. When, however, the persecution was over, he returned to his solitary life. His abode was now a cave on the slope of a lofty mountain, with a fountain of water near and a few palm trees; and his friends, who had tracked him to his retreat, found him cultivating his little patch of corn and vegetables for the sustenance of himself and his visitors.

Antony was by this time celebrated, and was no longer suffered to remain undisturbed. Multitudes flocked out to him from the cities for counsel and comfort in their troubles, and numerous followers began to imitate his mode of life. His fame reached the ears of the Emperor Constantine, who wrote, asking his prayers and inviting him to his court. Antony declined to go, for 'a hermit out of his solitude,' he said, 'is like a fish out of water.' And doubtless he was right. He felt he could do more good by his prayers and his advice from a distance than by going and mixing himself up once more in the intrigues and ambitions of men. He was a true friend to Athanasius in his fight for the orthodox faith, and he used his great influence with the Emperor to get him recalled from exile to his see at Alexandria.

Antony lived to the great age of 105, having already witnessed a large increase in the number of those professing a hermit's life. Many of them fixed their abodes near his own, and thus the idea originated, which was shortly afterwards realised, of men associating together in small communities.

And now let us proceed to the further question—What need did this monastic system supply? How was it that it came to receive so much support from the Christian world? Why did people become monks and hermits?

Mainly because they desired to get out of