

# PART THE THIRD

Paphnutius, having returned to the desert from Alexandria where he converted the courtesan Thais to a life of piety, struggles with temptations and doubts about his faith. The holy desert, his former haven of peace, now feels alien to him. Despite the joyous welcome from his disciples, Paphnutius finds himself disenchanted with his cell and the ascetic life he once cherished. The tranquility and sense of divine presence he used to feel are replaced with a profound sense of loss and a questioning of his spiritual state. His attempts to pray and reconnect with God are interrupted by vivid, unsettling visions of Thais, who he cannot escape in his mind, leading him to question the nature of his deeds and his spiritual worthiness.

Haunted by his experiences in Alexandria and tormented by a vision of Thais that he interprets as a divine message, Paphnutius grapples with feelings of emptiness, regret, and confusion about his purpose. Despite his renowned deeds, including converting Thais and enduring extreme ascetic trials like living atop a column, he feels spiritually abandoned and vulnerable to demonic influences which mock his sacrifices and question the very foundations of his faith.

In a desperate quest for redemption and clarity, Paphnutius seeks out the advice of the wise old hermit, Palemon, who suggests a more moderate approach to monastic life and highlights the limitations of excessive asceticism. Despite Palemon's counsel, Paphnutius decides to isolate himself further, symbolically moving to an even more desolate part of the desert, signaling his profound inner turmoil and distancing from human connections and previous spiritual consolations.

Paphnutius' further self-imposed isolation leads him into deeper spiritual crisis, where hallucinations and demonic visions become indistinguishable from divine messages. His doubts escalate to a point where even his once steadfast faith appears to crumble

under the weight of his personal ordeal. He finds himself at a crossroads, questioning the very essence of his religious convictions and the nature of divine will, culminating in a poignant, introspective narrative of human frailty, the search for divine truth, and the complexities of faith.

Ultimately, in a moment of profound despair and realization of Thais' impending death, Paphnutius abandons the hermitage, rejecting his past asceticism and piety in a passionate plea for Thais' life, revealing the depths of his human love and attachment that transcends his once unyielding spiritual pursuits. The narrative closes on a tragic note with Thais' peaceful passing into the afterlife, contrasted with Paphnutius' agonizing loss of faith and unrequited love, encapsulating the eternal struggle between spiritual asceticism and earthly desires.