

## Chapter Eleven.

The 'Desert' House at Tarasteix near Lourdes.

(1857.)

During his year in the novitiate at Le Broussey, Hermann Cohen would have studied the contemplative origins of the Carmelite order.

There he would have learned about the tradition of 'desert houses' which were intended to preserve the original inspiration of prayer begun by the first hermits on Mount Carmel in the thirteenth century.

The primitive rule given to Carmelites by St. Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem, urged the imitation of the prophet Elijah, regarded as their father and founder. Elijah's disciples were known as the 'sons of the prophet'. The rule enjoined on them to remain in their cells (rooms) so as to meditate on the law of the Lord day and night and to watch in prayer. The hermits were called the 'Brothers of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Carmel'. Occasionally they came down from the mountain to communicate to the people below the fruits of prayer which they had received from God in solitude.

Hermann would have been familiar with the book of Nicholas the Frenchman, called the "Flaming Arrow". Nicholas had spent a long time on Mount Carmel.

After the Saracen invasions, the hermits fled to Europe, where they were to officially become mendicants like the Dominicans and Franciscans, leaving their solitude to preach and work in the apostolate under its various forms.

Carmelites throughout the 14th. and 15th. centuries always looked back to the origins of their sublime vocation in solitude. Some tried to retain the original form of the life in silence and contemplation. There existed hermitages which facilitated this style of life by contrast with the houses which carried on a more active apostolate.

In the 17th century, a Carmelite named Thomas of Jesus, soon after the time of St.

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Teresa and St. John of the Cross, inaugurated the idea of the 'desert house.' In his ideals and struggles he resembles Hermann Cohen. He wished that the purely contemplative life ought to be made available to all from time to time. There would be a stable community of friars in the desert house, who could be joined by other friars on a prolonged retreat after a period of busy apostolate. Here they could come to be spiritually refreshed for some months and return home to work with new energy.

Thomas of Jesus encountered many obstacles and had himself to leave the desert of Balarque which he founded, after only a few days! However his ideal bore fruit and deserts flourished in the order. Soon almost every province in the order had a desert house, a place of silence, solitude and prayer. There the religious "waited on God alone, in the desert, where uncreated wisdom ordained that his friends speak to him heart to heart."

In the year 1856, amid all his work in Lyons and Bagnères-de-Bigorres, Hermann discovered a vast wooded solitude near the Pyrenees and about twenty kilometers from Lourdes at a place called Tarasteix. A letter written in 1857 shows us what he was thinking.

"I can't tell you how much I long for the solitude of Tarasteix. I am collecting funds to pay off the debt here (Lyon), and then I shall make my way there."

Hermann found Fr. Dominic, the Superior General, sympathetic to the idea of a mountain retreat. He was himself ready to abandon everything and even resign as general to join Hermann there. As it turned out Hermann himself was to spend two years at Tarasteix before his death.

Hermann's choice of location for the desert could not be better. It would have appealed to his spiritual father St. John of the Cross who loved places in beautiful settings which would promote contemplation and union with God. We have a description of the place left by the last Carmelite to reside there before religious were again expelled from monasteries at the end of the 19th. century.

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"Here one can only see the sky and wooded areas, and one hears only the murmur of a fountain flowing under the trees nearby. Imagine a chain of wooded hills stretching from north to south, from Maubourgnat to Lourdes, about thirty five kilometers long and four to six kilometers wide. There are tranquil valleys lying between the hills, evergreen and dotted with clusters of oak trees. From Tarasteix the forest is deep and dense."

Hermann chose a site on high ground but sheltered by the highest peaks. It would not be too cold in winter, while in summer it would be cooled by refreshing breezes....it is difficult to imagine a more beautiful spot for the cells of the hermits both as regards the views from there and the purity of the air, two things which St. Teresa looked for in her foundations."

From here in fact you can see the whole range of the Pyrenees extending in all directions, and broken only by a gap through which the green fields of Ariege can be seen. From this point according to a native of the place who became a Carmelite, you have the finest view of the Pyrenees. Here too the shrine of Lourdes can be found.

At the time when Hermann was surveying the area, a ten year old child near the hamlet of Bartres was minding sheep in the hills overlooking Lourdes. She wished to make her First Holy Communion and prevailed on her parents to allow her to go down to Lourdes to learn her catechism in preparation for this event. Hermann could not foresee that two years later, not far away at the grotto which could in fact be seen with binoculars from Tarasteix, he would have the privilege of meeting Bernadette.

Hermann marked the chosen site by erecting three crosses on a hill immediately behind it. The funds for the purchase of the site came partly from a lady who had also helped with the Carmel at Lyon. She had entered the Carmel there but left through ill-health. Hermann was also helped greatly by the

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parish priest of Tarasteix who also provided him with accommodation.

While Hermann was still involved with the Carmelite houses at Bagnères and Lyon, Our Lady appeared to Bernadette, so near the site of the future desert of Tarasteix. He seems to have heard the news from one of his friends in March 1858. Antoinette Tardhival was a visitor at the Carmel at Bagnères. She entered there for a while but then returned to Lourdes where she was one of the first people interested in the apparitions. As early as March 9th. 1858 she mentioned the event which took place on February 18th. On March 28th. three days after the great apparition, Antoinette met Bernadette and was very impressed with the girl. She writes:

"Yesterday we talked a long time with the child. She told us everything, even about the interview she had to have with the doctors, and she laughed heartily as she told us how the doctors had tried to make out that she was ill. She said they could put her in prison if they wished, it made no difference to her. How could they say she was ill, seeing her rosy complexion. We asked her yesterday if she noticed people around her when she saw the Virgin Mary. She replied that everything vanished and she saw and heard nothing, but the Blessed Virgin who spoke to her in the normal tone of voice that we ourselves were using." Antoinette ended her letter:

"I found Fr. Augustine, (Hermann) in good health and he preaches every Sunday."

We can easily imagine that Hermann must have been very pleased to learn what was happening so near to the desert house he was in the process of founding here in the Pyrenees. On March 25th. 1858, Mary appeared to Bernadette and said, 'I am the Immaculate Conception'.

On April 7th. Antoinette herself was present at one of Bernadette's visions of Our Lady. She has left a precise, truthful, simple and convincing account.

"Since the feast of the annunciation, the little girl had not returned to

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the grotto until yesterday. I witnessed one of her ecstasies, which according to Dr. Dozous who was observing her closely, lasted an hour. I finally reached the place, but I had left home before four o'clock in the morning and she only arrived at about seven o'clock. On arriving she fell on her knees beside the Gave just a few yards from the grotto and from there she was beginning to see the Blessed Virgin on the rose bush near the entrance. At that moment her ecstasy began. We noticed her smile, then become serious and thoughtful and sometimes sad in tune with what Our Lady was telling her. We saw her greet Our Lady and then she began to talk to her, but no one could hear anything. You could see her lips moving and she followed all the movements of Our Blessed Lady. Yesterday she asked her to work a miracle so that unbelievers would accept all she said, but the Blessed Virgin only replied by a very sad smile which made the child sad as well. Everyone shows great respect for the young person when her ecstasy begins until it is completed. The men uncover their heads and people go down on their knees to pray. I am sending you a little piece of the rose bush near which Our Lady stood. I managed to get it with a great deal of trouble, because I thought if anyone saw me taking the cutting in would be in for it!"

Hermann returned to Tarasteix in May but he did not go immediately to the grotto according to Antoinette. She had described to him what she saw. Since April 7th. the apparitions had ceased and Bernadette was forgotten. People got involved in unusual phenomena and there were plenty of bogus reports. The authorities also got worried and started to dismantle the grotto and prohibited people from drinking at the spring. Finally they were ready to take the original advice of a commissary called Jacomet and close the grotto altogether. On June 15th. they set up barricades. The parish priest of Lourdes intervened on July 8th., and the Bishop got involved on July 1th. and calm was restored. People started to pray away from the grotto. Then the last happening took place. Bernadette must have suffered a lot with this turn of events. She did not attend the grotto. She made her

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First Holy Communion at this time but she had no apparition on that day. Bernadette advised people not to go to the grotto because the barricades had been erected. Then on July 16th., the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Holy Virgin appeared to Bernadette for the last time. At sunset Bernadette felt an impulse to go to the grotto in spite of the prohibitions of the authorities and respond to Our Lady's invitation. She disguised herself and went with her aunt, Lucile Casterol, but not directly to the grotto. She crossed the Gave and remained on the right bank. She knelt down and began the rosary. In spite of the distance and the twilight, she had no difficulty in seeing Our Lady. She raised her hands in a gesture of joyful greeting. In the semi-darkness several people noticed Bernadette smile. Someone lit a candle and people could see the joy on Bernadette's face. In the lovely light of the setting sun people began to recite the rosary. After her ecstasy Bernadette was questioned by Antoinette and she said:

"I did not see the Gave or anything else..I only saw her.I have never seen anybody as beautiful as she is."

The apparition bowed towards the humble little visionary as though in a farewell greeting and then disappeared. In her farewell, Our Lady of Lourdes left one final message: 'Silence', - for she appeared without saying anything! This last apparition on the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Our Lady's invitation to silence turned Bernadette's thoughts towards the solitude of Carmel.

While Hermann Cohen was engrossed with the foundations at Tarasteix and Lyon in the summer of 1858, his friend, the great journalist Louis Veuillot was on a visit to the health spa at Bagnères. He passed through Lourdes and spoke to the Abbe Peyramale who had been won over by Bernadette's sincerity as had three local bishops. He called on Hermann and they were both disposed to believe in the apparitions. Both were afterwards to defend Lourdes - Veuillot in his frequent articles in 'L'Univers',

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and Hermann at the grotto itself with his first pilgrimage there where he was the first religious and priest to give public honour to God in that place. He led hundreds of people in front of the grotto although it was still enclosed behind barricades and access forbidden by the civil authorities. This happened two months after the last apparition on September 20th. 1858. Hermann, together with Abbe Rozies led a pilgrimage to the grotto. Bishop Laurence of Tarbes was at this time studying the dossier on the apparitions and was soon to give a favourable decision. The two priests were met by Abbe Peyramale who offered them hospitality. He went to see the mayor to ask permission for a visit to the grotto and it was reluctantly given - and then only provided they went before dawn. They said mass at 3.a.m. and then went on their way to Massabielle accompanied by Dr. Dozous who had drawn up an official report of several miracles which had taken place there the previous month.

Abbe Rozies relates:

"We arrived at the grotto at dawn, but we were already meeting pilgrims returning from there reciting the rosary and carrying water from the grotto with them in jugs and decanters. Something unusual happened to Fr. Augustine (Hermann) when he bent down to drink from the spring at the grotto and as he did so his breviary fell into the basin. A lady quickly tried to retrieve it from the water and the priest also looked to see if the pages had got wet. There was one particularly beautiful one of Our Lady which he expected to find soaked. But not only was the coloured picture of Our Lady not spoilt, but a perfect copy of it was imprinted on the blank page of his breviary. Hermann remarked, 'Holy Virgin, you have done me a great favour, instead of one picture of you, you have given me two.'!..... We then returned to the village to meet up with other people who had received favours from Our Lady. Among them there was a man who had lost a eye and had been in a lot of pain for two years. His pain ceased after washing in the

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spring at the grotto."

The next day Hermann wished to return to the grotto and told Abbe Peyramale but he had no official permission and the Abbe told him to be careful. Hermann replied: "I have not seen Our Lady but I experience the same sensations at the grotto that I received at my conversion".

There is a report by the commissary Jacomet dated September 21st., and addressed to the prefect which tells us about that pilgrimage the night before:

"Early this morning there was a lot of agitation at the grotto, caused by Fr. Hermann and Dr. Dozous who left the town together and went to the grotto, and there, surrounded by a curious crowd who had come with the Carmelite Fr. Hermann, they sang the magnificat and another psalm so loudly that his voice could be heard on the way to Pau."

The report reminded people that access to the grotto was forbidden except with the formal permission of the mayor".

The above official confirms the historical accuracy of Abbe Rozies' account, who, the day before had been the first to intone the magnificat before a gathering of two hundred people. That same day Hermann had a long talk with Bernadette Soubirous. Hermann's spiritual daughter, Antoinette Tardival had very quickly won the confidence and affection of the little visionary up to the day when she became her teacher and taught her to read at the end of the year 1858. Bernadette in fact was not too keen on meeting priests as she had been questioned so much by them, but it would have been different in the case of this Carmelite who directed her teacher, who had also entered a Carmelite convent. It is not surprising then that she spent a long time talking to this priest. We can assume too that Bernadette was glad to meet a Carmelite recalling the last apparition on July 16th. In fact Bernadette's aunt wrote in regard to her vocation:

"From the beginning her attraction would have taken her to Carmel - she wanted to be a Carmelite."

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However her mother, her aunt and Abbe Peyramale advised her to join the sisters of Nevers, as they feared Bernadette's health was not good enough for the Carmelite life. And Bernadette in fact went to Nevers some years later. But she also had a certificate of affiliation to the Carmel at Rennes, given her by the Prioress of that convent. It had been arranged for Bernadette by one of her friends, who was aware of her attraction for Carmel. Many years later a friend gave Bernadette a picture of Fr. Hermann and she wrote:

"I cannot tell you how happy I was to see the portrait of Fr. Hermann. Your inspiration was a good one for I longed to have one." (February 24th. 1865.)

For his part, Hermann never forgot Bernadette. He wrote from London in 1865:

"I was so pleased to hear that young Bernadette is as good and humble as ever." In 1871 he remarked:

"I am very glad that Bernadette has become a religious - she will be protected from many dangers."

Hermann gave a parting address after his first pilgrimage to people who were gathered around.:

"People of Lourdes!

The Blessed Virgin has done great things in your city. I have travelled a lot and I would like to tell you that I have not found a church like yours anywhere else, bearing witness to your great devotion to the Blessed Virgin. In fact in your basilica there is not a single altar that does not represent a mystery in the life of the blessed mother of God. You have received a great grace."

Nine days after Hermann's visit, Napoleon cancelled the prohibition on visiting the grotto.

