

III. First Apparition

May, the month of flowers, follows the long April rains that wash the face of mother earth after her long winter sleep. Then God covers the world with jewels more beautiful than any precious stones. What can be more beautiful than the dainty, many-colored flowers of May?

On Sunday, the thirteenth of May, in the year 1917, during the midst of the First World War, God sent to earth the loveliest flower of the ages, His own beautiful Mother, Mary, Whom we address as Queen of the May. On that day the children went to early Mass. "Heaven forbid," Senhora Marto said, "that we should ever miss hearing Mass on Sundays, whether it rained or thundered or even if I were nursing my babies. Sometimes we had to go to Boleiros, Atouguia or Santa Catarina, almost six miles journey. I had to get up early and leave everything in my husband's care. He would go to a later Mass. We could not take the babies with us when they were little, for then, neither we nor anyone else in church would have been able to hear Mass. Babies look like angels, but they don't act like angels." Returning from Mass, the mother packed the children's lunches and sent them off with the sheep.

This day Lucia and her little cousins met as usual at the small bog, beyond the village, called the Barreiro, on the way to Gouveia, whence they proceeded to the Cova da Iria. Because the ground was rocky and filled with so much brush, they crossed it very slowly. It was almost noon before they reached their chosen spot. When they heard the church bells summoning the people to the last Mass they knew it was time for lunch. So they opened their bags and ate, as usual saving a little for later on. Their meal finished, they sped through their Rosary and then chased the sheep up the hill. Their game today would be building, making castles out of the rocks. Francisco was the mason and architect, Lucia and Jacinta gathered the stones.

While they were thus busily intent upon their building projects, a sudden bright shaft of light pierced the air. In their efforts to describe it they called it a flash¹ of lightning. Frightened,² they dropped their stones, looked first at each other, then at the sky which was clear and bright without the least spot of a cloud. No breeze stirred the air, the sun was shining strong. Such perfect weather belied this flash of lightning, the forerunner of a storm. The children decided that they had better start for home before it rained. Quickly they gathered the sheep and started down the hill. Half way down, just as they were passing a tall oak tree, another shaft of light split the air. Panicky with fear, and as if led by some unknown power, they took a few steps, turned towards the right, and there, standing over the foliage of a small holm oak³ they saw a most beautiful Lady.

¹ "It was not really lightning but the reflection of a light which approached little by little. In this light, we could see Our Lady only when She was above the holm oak. We could not explain the fact to ourselves and to avoid questioning was the reason that we sometimes said that we saw Our Lady coming, sometimes not. When we said that we saw Her coming, we were speaking of this light that we saw approaching which was afterward the Lady Herself. When we said we had not seen it come, we meant that we saw the Blessed Virgin only when She was nearer the holm oak." (*Memoirs of Lucia*).

² "The fear which we experienced did not properly have to do with the Blessed Virgin but rather with the storm which we believed imminent and which we wished to escape. The apparition of Our Lady inspired neither fear nor dread but only surprise." (*Memoirs of Lucia*).

³ Two kinds of oak grow in Portugal, the azinheira and the carrasqueira. The azinheira is the *Quercus ilex*, famous in classical literature. It is one of the most ornamental oaks, compact and regular in form, beautiful in its glossy foliage the year round. Its acorns form one of the edible sorts in Europe. The carrasqueira is the *Quercus coccifera*. It is a small evergreen about three feet high, with glossy and sharp foliage, and does not give acorns. It was over a carrasqueira that Our Lady appeared at Fatima.

“It was a Lady dressed all in white,” Lucia records, “more brilliant than the sun, shedding rays of light, clear and stronger than a crystal glass filled with the most sparkling water, pierced by the burning rays of the sun.”

“*Fear not!*” the Lady said, “*I will not harm you.*”

“Where are You from?” Lucia made bold to ask.

“*I am from Heaven,*” the beautiful Lady replied, gently raising Her hand towards the distant horizons.

“What do You want of me?” Lucia humbly asked.

“*I come to ask you to come here for six consecutive months, on the thirteenth day, at this same hour. I will tell you later who I am and what I want. And I shall return here again a seventh time.*”

“And I, am I, too, going to go to Heaven?” Lucia asked.

“*Yes, you shall,*” the Lady assured her.

“And Jacinta?”

“*Yes.*”

“And Francisco?”

“*He too shall go, but he must say many Rosaries,*” the Lady responded.

Lucia asked some more questions of the Lady. Two girls who used to come to her house to learn sewing from her sisters had recently died. Lucia wanted to find out about them, too.

“And Maria do Rosario, daughter of José das Neves, is she in Heaven?”

“*Yes,*” the Lady replied.

“And Amelia?”

“*She is still in Purgatory.*”

Lucia’s eyes filled with tears. How sad, that her friend Amelia was suffering in the fires of Purgatory. Then the Lady said to the children:

“*Do you want to offer yourselves to God to endure all the sufferings that He may choose to send you, as an act of reparation for the sins by which He is offended and as a supplication for the conversion of sinners?*”

Promptly Lucia responded for all three, “Yes, we want to.”

“*Then you are going to suffer a great deal,*” the Lady promised, “*but the grace of God will be your comfort.*”

As She pronounced these words, the Lady opened Her hands and shed upon the children a highly intense light, that was as if it were a reflection shining from them. “This light penetrated us to the heart,” Lucia reported, “and its very recesses, and allowed us to see ourselves in God, Who was that light, more clearly than we see ourselves in a mirror. Then we were moved by an inward impulse, also communicated to us, to fall on our knees, while we repeated to ourselves:

“O Most Holy Trinity, I adore Thee; my God, my God, I love Thee in the Most Blessed Sacrament.”

Again the Lady spoke to them, “*Say the Rosary every day to bring peace to the world and the end of the war.*”

“She began then to elevate Herself serenely,” Lucia said, “going in the direction of the East until She disappeared in the immensity of space, still surrounded by a most brilliant light that seemed to open a path for Her through the myriad galaxies of stars.”

The children stood riveted to the spot for some time, their eyes fastened on the skies where they last saw the Lady. Gradually they returned to themselves, and looking around

for the sheep, they found them grazing upon the sparse grass under the shade of the holm oaks. They noticed that the vegetables in the garden were not even touched. They were ever so happy, and grateful to the Lady for Her caring for the sheep, and thereby sparing them punishment at home; but their joy was supreme and beyond all description for having seen the exquisitely beautiful Mother of God. She was so wonderful, so lovely! They felt the same joy now as when the Angel visited them, only when the Angel came, they felt a sort of annihilation before his presence; whereas, with Our Lady, they received strength and courage. "Instead of bodily exhaustion, we felt a certain physical strength," Lucia described her reaction. "In place of annihilation before the Divine Presence, we felt exultation and joy; in place of difficulty in speaking we felt a certain communicative enthusiasm."

The children spent the rest of the afternoon in the fields, living over and over again the short visit of Our Lady. They were so supremely happy, though mixed with deep concern. Our Lady seemed unhappy over something and they tried to fathom the meaning of Her every word. Meanwhile, Francisco pressed the girls with questions to learn everything She had said. They told him everything. When they told him that Our Lady promised that he would go to Heaven, bursting with joy, he folded his hands in front of his breast and exclaimed aloud, "O My Lady, I will say all the Rosaries You want."

Lucia thought it best for them to keep the vision secret. She was old enough to realize how incredulous people are about such things, and more, she had had previous and bitter experience when the girls who first saw the Angel spread the news through the neighborhood. Francisco and Jacinta both agreed to Lucia's suggestion. Lucia, however, doubted Jacinta's ability to keep it secret, for the little girl's face shone with joy and she would say every so often, "*Ai que Senhora tão bonita!* Oh, such a beautiful Lady!"

"I just know you are going to tell it to everyone," Lucia warned Jacinta.

"Honest, I will not tell anyone," Jacinta assured her.

"You won't breathe a word, even to your mother?"

"I won't tell anyone."

"We'll keep it a secret," they all agreed.

But how could little Jacinta keep it a secret, when she had seen such a beautiful Lady?

When Lucia reached home, she said not a word to anyone about the Heavenly Visitor. After supper and prayers, she listened to the reading from the New Testament and went right to bed. How different were things in her cousins' home! The Martos had gone to market that day to buy a pig. They were not home when Francisco and Jacinta returned from the fields. Francisco, meanwhile, busied himself in the yard but Jacinta waited at the door for her parents' arrival. She had already forgotten Lucia's solemn warning, "Not a word, even to your mother." Jacinta never kept any secrets from her mother, and today, when the greatest thing on earth had happened, how could she keep it from her mother?

Finally, her mother and father came in sight, her mother walking ahead, the father guiding the little animal. "The child ran to me," her mother described the scene, "and took hold of me as she had never before done. 'Mother,' she burst out excitedly, 'I saw Our Lady today in the Cova da Iria.' 'My! My!' I said. 'Don't tell me. You must certainly be a good little girl to see Our Lady!'

"Sad and disappointed, she followed me into the house, insisting over and over again, 'But I did see Her!' Then she began to tell me all that had happened, the flash, their fear, the light. She told me how beautiful and pretty the Lady was, how the Lady was surrounded by a blinding light and how the Lady asked her to say the Rosary every day.

I put no stock in her words, saying ‘You are really silly. As if Our Lady would appear to a little girl like you!’

“Then I began to mix the feed for the little pig. My husband was standing by the pen, watching to see how it would get along with the other animals. After the animals were fed, he came into the house and sat by the kitchen fire to eat his supper. His brother-in-law, Antonio da Silva, was with us and all my children were there. Then, with some severity, I told Jacinta to repeat this story of Our Lady at the Cova da Iria. Right away she began, with all the simplicity in the world.”

“It was a Lady so beautiful, so pretty... dressed in white, with a chain of gold around Her neck extending down to Her breast... Her head was covered with a white mantle, yes, very white... I don’t know but it was whiter even than milk... which covered Her to the feet... all embroidered in gold... how beautiful! She kept Her hands together, in this way.’ The child rose from the stool, joined her hands at the breast, imitating the vision. ‘She had beads between Her fingers... Oh! what a beautiful Rosary She had... all of gold, brilliant as the stars at night with a crucifix that was shining. The Lady spoke a lot with Lucia, but never with me or with Francisco. I heard everything they said. Mother, it is necessary to say the Rosary every day! The Lady said this to Lucia. She said also that She would take the three of us to Heaven, Lucia, Francisco and me, too... and many other things I don’t know, but Lucia does. And when She entered into Heaven it seemed that the doors closed with such speed that Her feet were almost caught outside.”

Francisco confirmed the words of Jacinta. The girls in the family were most interested, but the boys all laughed at the story, echoing the words of their mother, “A good little saint you are, for Our Lady to appear to you.” Antonio da Silva tried to offer his explanation, “If the children saw a Lady all dressed in white... who could it be but Our Lady?”

The father, meanwhile, was mulling it over in his mind, trying to fit together the religious principles involved. Finally he said, “Since the beginning of time, Our Lady has appeared many times and in many ways. This is what has been helping us. If the world is in bad shape today, it would be worse, had there not been cases of this sort. The power of God is great! We do not yet know what it is, but it will be something... God’s will be done.” Later he confessed, “I believed what the children said was true almost at once. Yes, I believed immediately. For I was thinking that the children had received no education, not the least. Were it not for the help of Providence, they would never even have thought of it. Did I think the children might be lying? Not at all! Francisco and Jacinta were too much opposed to untruths.” Some time later, when the Bishop of Leiria published his official decision on the matter, he did no more than develop the arguments advanced by Ti Marto over his bowl of soup. Finally, they all retired, taking the father’s advice that they should leave it in God’s hands.

When Jacinta’s mother saw the next morning some of her neighbors, she related with a smiling condescension the children’s secrets. The news caused such a sensation that in no time at all it spread all through the village, finally reaching Lucia’s family.

Maria dos Anjos was the first to hear the news. “Lucia,” she said to her sister, “I have heard people talking, saying that you saw Our Lady at the Cova da Iria. Is that true?”

“Who told you?” Lucia was so surprised that the news had gotten out. She stood there, thinking. Then, after a while, she mumbled, “And I had asked her so much not to tell anyone!”

“Why?”

“I don’t know if it is Our Lady. It was a most beautiful Lady.”

“And what did that Lady tell you?”

“She wanted us to go to the Cova da Iria for six months, without interruption, and then She would say who She is and what She wants.”

“Didn’t you ask Her who She was?”

“I asked Her where She was from; and She said to me, ‘I am from Heaven.’”

Lucia fell into great silence so that she would not have to tell anything, but Maria coaxed her so much that she told her more.

Lucia was very sad. At this point Francisco came along and confirmed Lucia’s suspicion that it was Jacinta who had wagged her tongue. Senhora Maria Rosa laughed at the whole thing. But when her eldest daughter told her what Lucia had said, she realized something serious was taking place. Calling Lucia immediately, she made her repeat the whole story. The gossip is true! She hated to believe it, but it was beginning to appear that her child was turning out to be a liar!

The afternoon of the fourteenth, the children went out as usual with their sheep. Lucia, frightened as she was by her mother’s unbelieving attitude, walked along in silence. Jacinta, too, was miserable, embarrassed because she had broken her promise to Lucia. The joy of the vision had been quickly destroyed by the ridicule and disbelief that had met their sincere account of the vision. Finally, they reached the Cova da Iria, and Jacinta sat on a rock silent, gloomy as could be. Lucia, feeling sorry at her little cousin’s grief, forced a smile and said, “Jacinta, let’s play.”

“I don’t want to play today!”

“Why?”

“Because I am thinking that the Lady told us to say the Rosary and make sacrifices for the conversion of sinners. Now, when we say the Rosary, we have to say every word in the *Hail Mary* and the *Our Father*.”

“Yes,” Lucia agreed, “but how are we going to make sacrifices?”

“We can give our lunch to the sheep,” Francisco suggested.

When noon came, they did give their lunches to the sheep. Hungry as they were, it was a hard thing to do, to give away the bread and cheese that their mothers had prepared for them. As the days went by, they thought it would be more pleasing to the Lady to give their lunches to some poor children instead of the sheep. When they themselves got hungry, Francisco climbed the holm oaks and picked acorns, even though they were still green. But this wasn’t enough of a sacrifice for Jacinta. She suggested that they should prefer the acorns from the oak trees, for they were more bitter.

“That first afternoon,” Lucia recalled, “we relished this delicious meal. Other times, we ate pine seeds, roots of bell-flowers (a little yellow flower on whose root grows a little ball the size of an olive), mulberries, mushrooms and some things that we picked from the roots of pine trees, but I don’t remember what they are called. We did have some fruit, if we happened to be near our parents’ property.”

Those days were long days for the children, for there was no song or peace of mind to help speed the hours away. Their greatest trial came from their families. Lucia’s lot was the worst. Mother, sisters, friends and neighbors, all heaped abuse upon the little one. Her father, however, refused to let the affair bother him. He shrugged his shoulders and called it just some more women’s gossip. Yet if he was indifferent, Lucia’s mother worried a great deal about it. She used to say, “And I was the one to be burdened with these things. This was all I needed for my old age. To think that I was always so careful to bring up my children to tell the truth, and now that girl comes up with such a lie.”

Nor did Senhora Maria Rosa content herself with mere talk. She took action to stop this carrying-on of her child. One day before Lucia went out with the sheep, her mother tried to force her to confess that she was lying. She tried caresses, threats, then

resorted to the broomstick. Lucia's answer was either silence or continued confirmation of what she had already told. Finally, in desperation, the mother commanded her, "Take the sheep out and think over during the day that I have never approved lying in my children, much less will I overlook such a lie as this. When you return in the evening, I will force you to meet those whom you deceived, — confess to them that you have lied and you will ask for their forgiveness." Lucia went away with the sheep, and when her companions saw her coming, for they had been waiting for her, they noticed she was crying. They ran to meet her. She told them what had happened and asked for their advice "Mother wants me to say that I lied. How can I say that? What am I going to do?"

"It's all your fault," Francisco said to Jacinta. "What did you tell it for?"

Jacinta fell on her knees crying, and stretching out her arms, begged to be forgiven. "It's all my fault, but never again will I tell anybody else."

In the evening Lucia's mother sought again to obtain a confession, so she decided to take her to the Pastor. "When you get there," she scowled at Lucia, "you fall on your knees before the priest, — tell him that you lied and ask to be forgiven. Do you hear? I don't care what you think. Either you clear things up now, admit that you lied, or I will lock you in a room where you won't ever again see the light of day. I have always succeeded in having my children tell the truth before. Am I going to let a thing of this sort pass in my youngest child? If only it wasn't such an important matter!" But how could the child say that she had not seen what she did see? The words of the Lady were proving true: "You are going to suffer a great deal. But the grace of God will be your comfort."



Arturo de Oliveira Santos, the Mayor of Ourem, who had the Fatima seers kidnapped and imprisoned in August 1917, threatening the children with execution if they did not reveal the Secret the Virgin Mary told them. They refused to give in to the threat and were finally released. (See Chapter VII starting on [page 34.](#))