

# HIERONYMUS JAEGEN

BANKER AND MYSTIC

BY

A DISCALCED CARMELITE



VERY little seems to be known in England as yet concerning this truly remarkable man. He is, indeed, all the more remarkable that his life attracted little attention, and that all his secular activities and circumstances were those of the most ordinary person, while there was no exterior manifestation of the very unusual, supernatural favours of which, for more than fifty years, he was the recipient.

Hieronymus was born at Trèves on 23rd August 1841. His father, Paul Jaegen, was an elementary school teacher. And father, mother and son lived in the school-house—there were no other children. At the age of nineteen Hieronymus finished his schooling and was sent to the Royal Technical College in Berlin, where for nearly three years he studied engineering and kindred subjects. His parents seem to have given him a good grounding in Catholic faith and practice, and at the age of sixteen he joined the Confraternity of the Holy Family, and a zealous Redemptorist became his confessor. In Berlin he was enrolled by Provost Mueller in the young men's sodality, known as the Catholic Students' Union, or *Academia*, and he also joined the Society of St Vincent de Paul, and the choir of the Catholic church. Provost Mueller seems to have had a strong influence over him, which Hieronymus says was 'good and lasting'. The Redemptorist confessor insisted on spiritual reading, the practice of the virtues, and he required him to give in confession an account of these exercises. To all these good influences Hieronymus lent his full co-operation, and it may be that this was the true secret of his later experiences. He did not look back from the plough.

His studies in Berlin concluded with his appointment to a post in his native town, in the engineering works of Edward Laeis and Co. In 1864 he began his year's voluntary service in the army, and on 1st October, a year later, he entered the Frederick William Foundry near Cologne as engineer for furnace and mining equipment.

The following May he was demobilised, but had to go to Aix-la-Chappelle to report for service to the 1st Battalion of the 28th Regiment. Before leaving he visited the cathedral at Cologne, and in the chapel of our Lady there he received the first of the great graces

with which his life was from time to time illuminated. Speaking in the third person, he describes it thus: 'He wished in some way to take leave of Jesus and Mary. While he was uttering interior prayers, all at once he seemed to hear a voice from heaven, saying to him clearly and impressively: "Go in peace. In every spiritual need, pray to our Lord. In every bodily need, pray to our Lady. Both will aid you." With his ears he heard nothing. They were therefore imaginative locutions. The young soldier (himself) was, as it were, completely transformed. He went on active service so joyfully that his companion thought him an extraordinarily enthusiastic patriot.'<sup>1</sup>

While under fire in the battle of Koniggratz, in Bohemia, 3rd July 1866, the idea came to him to beseech the heavenly Father either to grant him the grace never more to offend him by mortal sin, or else to allow one of the bullets whistling around him to put an end to his life. He came out of the action unscathed, and in September of the same year he returned to Trèves and to the engineering works of E. Laeis and Co. He continued to live with his parents, and went back to his first Redemptorist confessor.

At the end of 1867, taking the Berlin Academia as his model, he founded a religious study circle for young men. Later the circle was styled 'Harmonia'. He remained its president for some years, and at the time of his writing of it in 1918 it had been in existence for over fifty years.

About this time, in his room in his parents' house he received a fresh intimation of divine favour. For many months he had been possessed by a deep longing for a more intimate converse with our Lord, and on a certain night he was praying very earnestly to our Lady for her co-operation when, in imagination, his eyes being closed, he saw our Lady standing before him, and shortly afterwards our Lord himself. He rushed into his arms, and our Lord embraced him. Hieronymus did not lose consciousness, but for the rest of the evening he was almost beside himself with joy.

Examining critically this experience, he says: 'Our Lord and our Lady certainly did not descend from heaven in bodily form to visit this soul . . . but they gradually infused into the understanding . . . the ideas which we have just indicated. Our Lady visits the soul to grant its request. Our Lady delivers over the soul to our Lord. The Saviour willingly allows himself to be found by the soul in the way we have described. Thus our Lord, our Lady and the favoured soul together produced in its understanding and imagin-

<sup>1</sup> *The Mystic Life of Graces*. By Hieronymus Jaegen. (Burns Oates.)

ation an effect which caused the soul an extraordinarily great consolation that is unassailable by any doubt.'

Once more, in the war of 1870, Hieronymus was called to the army, and was stationed at Coblenz as Lieutenant, acting at times as Deputy Company Commander. He was cashiered by a Royal Decree for political activities in 1873.

Either during or just before 1876 Hieronymus received the grace of the spiritual betrothal, or, as he calls it, the mystical espousals. The unmistakable stamp of authenticity is upon all that he writes. His deep humility, small concern for self, his hatred of sin, and heroic efforts to acquire and practise every virtue, his sincere longing for God, his veneration for our Lady, and his all-embracing charity towards his fellows betray his saintly soul.

At the time of the espousals our Lord made known to him his desires in an ecstacy of vision. Humility led Hieronymus to resist this choice, and for several days he struggled against the attraction. But our Lord conquered, and hereafter the soul of Hieronymus was frequently visited by the Spouse, until the time appointed, when he became its constant and intimate companion. In his experience the mystic or spiritual marriage was not the occasion of any new or definite manifestation from God, but gradually the soul was 'brought to this state in a way almost unobserved by itself, and not by any special mystical act'. 'The mystical marriage consists in the fact that our Lord dwells continually, in a mystical manner, so closely with the soul that it then does not need first to seek him when it desires to have converse with him.'

At the end of 1879 Mr Laeis's eldest son completed his studies, and the services of Jaegen were no longer necessary to the firm. He was immediately appointed manager of the Savings Bank in Trèves, and continued in this post for nineteen years. Severe headaches caused him to send in his resignation on 31st December 1898. It was not accepted, but he was sent for a holiday to the Tyrol. While there, he received a letter asking him if he would stand as a candidate for election to the Landtag, to represent the district Wittlich-Bernkastel. On 7th March 1899 he was elected, and re-elected five years later, and he remained a member until 1908.

Besides these secular activities, he was an honorary business director of several Catholic institutions: the Providentia Co. Ltd., the St Helen's Homes at Trèves, the Young Men's Hostel at Trèves, and he was diocesan treasurer of the St Boniface Society.

At the age of seventy-six he was urged by his Redemptorist confessor to write some account of his life and spiritual experience, and he wrote two brief autobiographies, one of his external, and the

other of his interior life. These reveal that his book, *The Mystic Life of Graces*, is based on his personal experience. He had, it is evident, wished to remain unknown, and merely out of his rich store of spiritual knowledge, to point the way to other souls, so that they might be sharers with him in the peace and joy to which he had attained.

At this time, when many souls are seeking sanctification outside the cloister, the life and writings of Hieronymus Jaegen should be an inspiration and an encouragement. This saintly man never at any time seems to have had any attraction towards religious life in a community. As a very young man, he merely sought perfection of life, and he profited by every means at his disposal to attain his end. This integrity of soul, this singleness of aim, and humble acceptance of the ordinary means offered him for his sanctification, were, it is clear, more pleasing to God than he realised. His astonishment was therefore very great when he received the grace that came to him in Cologne Cathedral. This experience fortified his faith, and induced in him an increased fear of sin, a deeper love of God, and a consuming thirst for holiness. Thus he advanced rapidly from grace to grace.

He found in the daily round of duty and in the opportunities he had for social service full satisfaction for his burning desires. By mortification, self-sacrifice, and the humble acceptance of the will of God as revealed to him in his circumstances, he mounted superior to earthly things, permitting the Holy Spirit to purge his soul of all dross in the crucible of suffering.

He describes the conditions necessary for the attainment of the mystic marriage with the greatest clearness. 'The favoured soul has to accustom itself to a constant mystical life with God, so that it may fulfil to the best of its power all its active exterior duties, and yet keep its spirit and its heart constantly turned towards God. At one moment it is externally occupied with its duties and its friends, and at the next, internally and mystically with our Lord. That is not difficult for the soul, because spirit and heart are no longer fixed on created things which are not God, and no disordered inclinations disturb its peace. The soul permits everything to approach it peacefully. It treats everything as no longer its own personal affair, but as part of its life with and for God. As far as its spiritual life is concerned, the soul now finds itself in great repose.'

This union of the soul to which Hieronymus attained deepened as the years passed, and not long before his death on 26th January, 1919, he concluded his work with these words: 'We have reached the end. I hope that I have convinced my readers that a reasonable

and well-timed effort to reach Christian perfection is quite within the possibility of all souls, even of many who live in the midst of the world. . . . It is entirely unnecessary that the exterior life of those who are making this effort should differ essentially from the exterior life of all really good Catholics. . . . The duty of man is to co-operate resolutely and constantly. Goodwill, continual perseverance, great self-conquest and a great spirit of sacrifice are very necessary for overcoming any difficulties. But all can at any time be obtained . . . by a zealous use of the means of grace. The Creator willingly supports those who take refuge in Him, especially those who endeavour by prayer, work and suffering to give Him ever greater glory and joy.'

Although audible words were spoken to Hieronymus on more than one occasion, and at other times he had visions, both imaginative and intellectual, like Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa, he insists that sanctity does not consist in these things, but only in a virtuous life and conformity with the will of God. Equally with the great Carmelite mystics he feared to be deceived by the evil one, and he judged the favours that he received only by their effects. If they produced peace and holy joy, and incited to the exercise of a higher virtue, he allowed that they must come from God; but he recognised that not the external manifestation, however seemingly authentic, but the inner grace signified by it, is of value to the soul.

I have not attempted any real analysis of Jaegen's spiritual life, nor made any comparison of his methods with those of other mystics. My purpose in writing at all is to call attention to the striking fact of his having attained to the highest degree of union with God, in a life beset with all the attractions, temptations and absorbing occupations of an ordinary business man. His message surely is that God's grace suffices, and that heaven is within the reach of all.