

Cheshire V. C.

Victoria Cross Winner and Convert.

By Father Bernard Hosie, S.M.

Australian Catholic Truth Society No.1472 (1966)

"The Story of one of the greatest acts of humanity of our time." — H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh.

The Atom Bomb.

Suddenly the whole world seemed to come apart. The centre of the city collapsed like a pack of cards; a gigantic 'bubble of fire' leaped 2,000 feet into the air; wood, bricks, mortar, even steel, were vaporised in that searing heat. In a fraction of a second, tens of thousands of people went to meet their God; more, far more, were penetrated through and through by the deadly waves they could neither see nor feel, but which would inevitably bring them to a lingering and horrible death.

Eight miles above the stricken city of Nagasaki circled the three Super-fortresses, like great silver birds of prey. They watched the smoke rise ever higher, until it towered 60,000 feet into the air. At its two miles wide base they could dimly see the great tongues of flame that were engulfing the pitiful remnants of the city.

There was silence in the heavens; the men seemed stunned by the awful force they had unleashed. They shuddered as they thought of the agony below; the twisted and broken bodies; the screaming agony of the children who were perishing in the flames. They knew that this was a day the world would never forget; they knew the world would never be quite the same again.

One of the planes contained Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, V.C., (Victoria Cross winner,) Britain's ace bomber pilot, Winston Churchill's choice as official British observer of the atom bomb attack. This day was to change his life.

From War to Peace.

It would be strange indeed, if such a tremendous experience did not have a strong effect on Cheshire, and he himself tells us it did. Years later, when he was founding his first home in India, he was asked what had turned him from a man of war to a man of peace.

"It was the sight of the atom bomb exploding on Nagasaki that made me really think about the purpose of life. I decided that I should like to help to see that such a bomb never had to be dropped again, for I felt that to win the war was not enough; one must also win the peace. But I started at the wrong end. I thought in terms of big plans and ambitious schemes. And I failed. Then I understood that to achieve anything lasting you must start from small beginnings, and build outwards; that the way to contribute towards the peace of the world is to bring peace into your own surroundings, into someone else's life — first, of course, into your own."

Cheshire the Pilot.

Cheshire had begun his flying career while still at Oxford, in the years before the war. At Oxford, he was not particularly brilliant as a student, largely because he was not over-keen on hard work, and spent too much of his time just enjoying life. Still, he managed to pass his examination very creditably, and at the same time show exceptional ability as a pilot. It was natural that he should join the R.A.F. (the Royal Air Force) when the war began.

As the years went by, the name of Leonard Cheshire became a legend in the R.A.F. It was not merely that he was a brilliant pilot; it was more than the fact that he was probably the cleverest tactician that the R.A.F. produced. It was rather that he was such a lovable character; one of those born leaders that men will follow anywhere; a man with the common touch, who was loved by the ground staff technician for his human, approachable ways, no less than by the aircrew he led over Germany.

As the number of sorties he had flown over Germany steadily increased, the R.A.F. tried several times to ground him.

They knew only too well the terrible nervous strain of operational flying.

The average aircrew did 25 sorties over Germany; some of those who survived did a second tour of 15. There was the occasional intrepid veteran who did a third, and, in the unlikely event that he survived to tell the tale, finished with 55 sorties to his credit. Cheshire did over 100.

Somehow, Cheshire always managed to elude the authorities, and get back into the air. On one occasion, he appealed to a flabbergasted R.A.F. psychiatrist, explaining that not being allowed to fly was seriously affecting his nerves!

The Munich Raid.

It was especially for the famous "Munich Raid" that Cheshire was awarded the V.C. (Victoria Cross.) From some points of view it was the most successful and significant raid of the war. It inaugurated a new technique of bombing which was to be of crucial importance in the air war — and from beginning to end it was the work of the organizing genius and the cold courage of Leonard Cheshire.

Always the primary problem in bombing was accuracy. Cheshire believed that the solution lay in low level marking and directing of bombers. As early as 1940, as a fledgling pilot, he had tried to "sell" his idea, but it was regarded as quite impossible — a low flying plane would never survive the maelstrom of lead that would be hurled against it.

In 1944 Cheshire took command of the famous 617 Squadron — the "Dam-busters". The extraordinary success he achieved caused Air Marshall Harris to send for Cheshire, to ask him to explain his methods.

Cheshire put forward his theories eagerly. Harris was rather sceptical, but agreed to let Cheshire give it a try; he could choose his own target. It was typical of Cheshire that he chose Munich, one of the most difficult and heavily defended targets in Germany.

The success of the raid is history. As the 300 heavy bombers lumbered in towards the target at 20,000 feet, Cheshire came hurtling in below them, not much above the ground, in a Mosquito. His comrades could follow his path by the line of tracer bullets that followed him as he raced in at 400 miles per hour to drop his markers. Ninety per cent of the bombs fell in the target area, and the vital marshalling yards were smashed to pieces. Air Chief Marshall Ralph Cochrane wrote later:

"Cheshire was the first man to understand the problem, to grapple with it in his own thorough fashion, and to solve it in action. The entire burden of proof was his, and his greatness as a tactical thinker was established in the process."

The day was to come when Cheshire was to use these same qualities to grapple with a very different problem.

After the War.

Cheshire ended the war with the V.C., the D.F.C. (the Distinguished Flying Cross), and the D.S.O. (Distinguished Service Order) with three bars (that is, the award was earned a total of four times) — the most highly decorated airman of the war. What did the future hold for this brilliant young man of 28? That was a question that Cheshire asked himself.

Not that he was in any hurry to answer it; he enjoyed the happy life of the London nightclubs; he dabbled rather uninterestedly in journalism; he seriously considered taking up scientific research. There is little doubt that he could have succeeded in any of these if he had really tried.

But the fact is that he had not set his heart on any of these things. He was in considerable demand as a lecturer, and gave some sober and well judged lectures on such matters as the implications of the advent of the atomic age. He saw clearly that the atomic bomb had brought a new factor into the world; the avoidance of war had now become, he considered, a biological necessity. Man had the choice of avoiding war or wiping himself out.

The Good Pagan.

No doubt, issues like this made Cheshire think deeply, and perhaps account for his growing interest in social reform.

But there is no indication that they were turning him towards Christianity, or even towards God. He had been brought up in the Church of England, but what little faith he had had soon died at Oxford, and he had long been only a good pagan.

Even the idea of a personal God had disappeared.

The first step on the long road to his conversion occurred in a most unlikely place, and under the most unlikely circumstances. He was on leave in London in 1945, and indulging in one of his favourite occupations — drinking in a bar in the West End of London, and chatting with his fellow-drinkers. They had been discussing the purposelessness of existence when Cheshire arrived and joined in. Someone mentioned God, and Cheshire laughed at the idea of God — it was nothing but an invention of the human mind, he stated dogmatically. A woman friend listened carefully, and at the end of Cheshire's little speech, she challenged his smug self-confidence. Where did he find out there was no God? What did he know about God anyhow? He ought to be ashamed to be uttering rubbish like this publicly; certainly God exists, and He is not a mere figment of the human mind, but the Creator of the world.

God uses strange apostles. It was not that the woman advanced any learned arguments for the existence of God; it was rather her firm, calm conviction that shook the self-confidence of Cheshire. She was a woman he liked and respected, and for the first time for many years, he wondered uneasily if it was really quite so evident as he had thought that God did not exist.

The Restless Genius.

It is not surprising to find that Cheshire had such trouble settling down. His health was not good; his nerves had inevitably been affected by the unending strain of nearly six years of war, and the sudden release from that strain. His restless, fertile mind was forever evolving new schemes, most of them ludicrously impracticable.

At one time, he planned to transport migrants to Australia in renovated landing vessels. Fortunately, Government regulations made this impossible. His next venture was to put some money into a flower store in Kensington; eventually it was quite a successful little business, but long ere that Cheshire had sold his shares, and moved on to something else. He dabbled with the idea of an expedition to the North Pole, but soon lost interest in that.

Early in 1946, he began to become aware of the plight of many ex-servicemen. Thrown out into an indifferent world, trained only in the arts of war, which had no market value, many of them faced grave difficulties. Cheshire had always had a strong social conscience, and soon became their spokesman.

The Social Reformer.

It was a question, wrote Cheshire, of training these men. If the government could take accountants and draughtsmen and turn them into pilots and gunners, there seemed no reason why the process could not be reversed. The hundreds of letters Cheshire received soon convinced him that something must be done; but he soon saw it would not be done by any indifferent government.

It did not take the fertile mind of Cheshire long to evolve a plan. Not long before he had revisited one of the wartime aerodromes from which he had flown, and he had been saddened to see the loneliness and decay.

"There had once been laughter as well as tragedy in these ghostly surroundings and life had been simple; in four years the sense of purpose sustaining aircrews, ground-crews and a whole people behind them had withered. He saw the aerodrome as a mark of the futile emptiness of life without a common cause; a symbol of mute reproach, like the untended grave of a lover."

Cheshire published his plan in the newspapers — anything he wrote was still news. Ex-servicemen who had failed to find a place in the world were invited to join him in a plan to take over one of the hundreds of former aerodromes; they would farm the land, turn the hangars into workshops, and the billets into homes. Their aim would not be to settle there for life, but to establish a base from which they could go out into the world with the qualifications they needed.

Cheshire had quite a number of takers for his scheme, but the government showed no desire to give them an aerodrome, and they had little money. Fortunately, they were offered the loan of a 45 bedroom house for 12 months, rent-free. With his usual impetuosity, Cheshire decided to move in immediately. Cheshire called the group the V.I.P.'s; they had a total capital of — £400.

The Colony.

The 12 members of the advance party arrived at Gumley Hall before the house was ready for them to take over, so the colony began its days in the barn. They soon gained possession of the Hall, and before long 22 adults and four children were installed in the big house. Their weekly bills amounted to £75 — a big drain on their capital of £400! But difficulties like this didn't worry Cheshire.

The amazing thing is that V.I.P. endured so long; that it did so was in large part due to the fantastic qualities of leadership that Cheshire continued to show. He could persuade men to do almost

anything, even against their better judgement. As one of his supporters later expressed it, a little ruefully:

"If he had asked me to pull out my back teeth and lend them to him, I'd have thought twice before refusing. He somehow gave you the feeling that you were really doing yourself a favour in helping him."

Cheshire had over a thousand applicants to join the scheme, and was convinced that the possibilities were limitless. He was strongly tempted to take up an offer from a woman in Western Australia to sell V.I.P. 60,000 acres of land for £120,000. Only the fact that he had no money prevented him doing so!

The limited tenure the colony had on Gumley Hall, and the growing numbers, made it necessary to buy a new house. The assistance of his family made it possible to buy a large home at Le Court in Hampstead, and most of the colonists moved there.

There is little doubt that the scheme would have failed in any case, but its doom was sealed by the fact that Cheshire's health broke down. He went to Canada for a long spell, and gradually his health built up. He came back to England in time to preside at the death of V.I.P.

The Way to God.

Meanwhile Cheshire had been moving steadily back to God. He had long been doubtful about the ability of science to prevent war, and had begun to wonder if Christianity could do so. He had recovered his belief in God, and even began to attend Anglican services occasionally. While he was convalescing in Western Canada, the opportunity for solitude, and the wild beauty of the Rocky Mountains, brought him to an ever deepening belief and trust in an all-powerful Creator.

Looking back over his life, he began to feel, too, that there was some plan behind it all. His incredible "luck" in the war he now saw as something more than that — as the protective hand of God.

It was in Canada, too, that he first became interested in Our Lady. He went to great pains to find out what the Hail Mary was, and began to recite it frequently. "I was astonished at the sense of peace it gave me; it was a source of great comfort and help."

New Directions.

Most of the property at Le Court was sold to pay the debts of V.I.P., and the house was turned into flats. All but a handful of the original colonists had drifted away, most of them disillusioned with V.I.P. and with Cheshire. One of the few to remain was Arthur Dykes, who had looked after the dog kennels; breeding dogs was one of the many ways the colonists had tried to make a little money. Arthur never lost faith in Cheshire: "He is too big," he used to say, "Something will turn up. He can't fail."

In May, 1948, Cheshire went to The Hague as a delegate to the United Europe Movement. Here, for the first time, he publicly proclaimed his faith in God, and his belief that any attempt to build a united Europe not founded on Christian principles was doomed to failure.

When Cheshire returned to Le Court, he found Dykes had been taken to Hospital, and was dying. The Hospital Authorities explained that there was nothing they could do for Dykes; he had no

chance of recovering, yet they were anxious to get him out of the Hospital, as they were short of beds.

In view of subsequent developments, it is difficult to see this as anything other than God's way of showing Cheshire where his true vocation lay.

Cheshire the Nurse.

From what we have seen of the strong social conscience of Cheshire, and his compassion for others, it is not surprising to find that he at once assumed the responsibility for Dykes, and promised to find him a home. But Cheshire soon found, that there was no place for the Arthur Dykes of this world. No one was prepared to give a home to a dying man, and Cheshire became aware, for the first time, of a problem which was to occupy him for a great part of his life.

Cheshire told Dykes he was dying, and asked him to come back to Le Court — that was his home. Dykes was pathetically grateful. Cheshire knew nothing about nursing, but he received some instructions from a nurse on how to make a bed, and he was ready to start; He cleaned and painted the room at Le Court, and brought Dykes back.

Arthur was a lapsed catholic, but now found peace and solace in returning to his religion. Cheshire could not but realize that the dying man seemed happier and more settled after the visit of the catholic priest, Father Clarke. It contrasted with his own doubts and indecisions. He was by this time a convinced Anglican, yet he seemed able to find no clear-cut directions from his own church. He was becoming more than ever dissatisfied with the contrary and contradictory teaching that he found there.

As Dykes approached the end, his sufferings increased, but there was never a word of complaint: More and more Cheshire grew to love the undaunted courage of the emaciated little man; more and more he sensed that Arthur was drawing his strength from a source that was more than human. He had no fear of death, now that he was prepared for it, and no doubts about the fact that an infinitely good God was calling him.

Yet the last thing in the world that Cheshire thought of doing was to "become a catholic", as Arthur kept urging him to do. He knew little about the catholic religion, except that it was a foreign thing, quite alien to everything he had been brought up to believe in.

A Chance Visitor.

In August, 1948, a chance visitor called at Le Court. Harry Rae was thinking of starting a home for disabled Welsh workers, and was interested in the fate of V.I.P.

"The scheme was a flop," Cheshire told him bluntly. "The only thing it taught me was that man's happiness isn't determined by his surroundings, but by something deep in himself."

Rae recognized the spiritual dilemma in which Cheshire found himself, and sent him a little book about the Catholic Church. For a long time Cheshire didn't even read it; he had received his second patient, and was far too busy.

It was fitting that it should be on the day that Arthur Dykes died that Cheshire read the book. It was entitled "One Lord, One Faith", by Father Vernon Johnson. Formerly an Anglo-Catholic clergyman, he had, albeit very reluctantly, come to the conclusion that the Catholic Church was the true Church, and had become a catholic.

Cheshire was not very impressed with the early Chapters, describing Father Vernon's devotion to Saint Therese of Lisieux. (Strange, perhaps, because later he was to have great devotion to the Saint.) But he was very impressed by the sound, sober arguments of Father Vernon.

He felt quite confident, however, that his Anglican pastors could easily demolish the apparently solid arguments.

Cheshire was particularly impressed with the Catholic Church's claim to speak infallibly in the name of Christ. It seemed quite logical that if God should take the trouble to reveal truths to man, he would devise some means to make sure that these were preserved and properly interpreted. Yet at the same time, the claim irritated him. It seemed absurd, preposterous, to claim that the Keys of God's Kingdom had been entrusted to the hands of a mere man.

The Quest for Truth.

He lost no time in turning to his Anglican advisers, and was quite staggered by their reaction. It was not so much the fact that they seemed to have no adequate answer; it was their intolerance that surprised and worried him. He was solemnly warned that he was playing with fire; he was told he was betraying the faith in which he had been brought up; that he was imperilling his immortal soul. But answer there was none.

Rather diffidently, Cheshire approached Father Clarke, and mentioned the book he had read. Father Clarke, to Cheshire's amazement, advised him to make sure he read the Anglican answer! Cheshire borrowed a copy of "One God and Father of All" — and was singularly unimpressed. It seemed to him that it was no answer to the clean-cut claims and solid arguments for the Catholic Church.

Cheshire the Catholic.

In September, he visited Father Clarke, and asked for instructions in the catholic faith. He was told to wait for another two months; the priest felt that Cheshire should have time to consider the matter carefully, and not rush in, in his usual impetuous way.

Once the instructions started, it took Cheshire but a short time to make up his mind, and he soon asked to be received into the Church.

"I was now entirely convinced that the Catholic Church was the true Church," he wrote later, "not because of this or that or the other argument, but because all the arguments pointed in one direction. I was faced with unity of doctrine, unity of organization, unity of worship. If God exists and has spoken to us, then the facts he has revealed are no more capable of private interpretations than the facts, say, of aerodynamics. When I became a pilot, I had to learn the laws of aerodynamics and went to a training school with the authority to teach me. There I expected and found teachers to give me the facts — not their own personal ideas. To gain the freedom of the skies I had to learn the laws of flight and submit to them."

An Important Decision.

Cheshire had no thought of starting a permanent Nursing Home when he took Arthur Dykes to Le Court — it was a simple, humanitarian act. But the realization of the happiness he had brought to Dykes, and the empty, lonely death from which he had saved him, together with a growing sense of the thousands of others in the same position, set him wondering.

He asked Dykes' opinion — should he turn Le Court into a Home for people with nowhere to go, who were incapable of looking after themselves?

"Yes, Len," replied the dying man, "I think we ought to do it. I think God wants us to. And I think I can help you."

They decided they would not advertise for patients — they would leave it to God, just as they would leave God to provide the money. Dykes insisted, and Cheshire at once agreed, that they should make it a principle that no patient, however difficult, should be rejected, and that no help should be refused.

As the years went by, Cheshire was to find this policy difficult almost to the point of impossibility, yet he has never gone back on it. As the homes grew into institutions, with Committees to control them, it led to frequent disagreements between Cheshire and the Committees. The Committees refused to take patients they judged too difficult, or beyond their financial capacity.

When Cheshire realized what had happened, he started a new organization, under his own direct control, where he would be free to follow his almost incredibly high ideals. He remained as close as ever to his original Foundations, and eternally grateful to those who helped him. But he was never prepared to rely on merely human prudence and human means. He believed too deeply that it was God's work he was doing, and God would always provide the means. And somehow or other, God always has.

The First Cheshire Home.

The second patient arrived before Dykes died — a quite impossible old woman called Granny Haynes. Granny was 91 years old, bedridden, deaf, and with no one to care for her. Then came Ted French with osteomyelitis, Anne French with T.B. (tuberculosis), a man with paralysis, another in the last stages of meningitis, and so on.

A former Air Force comrade visiting Cheshire asked a question which was to be repeated over and over as the work steadily expanded: "What do you do for money?"

The reply was typical of Cheshire; lighthearted, almost flippant, yet absolutely true, and a summary of Cheshire's approach:

"We just don't worry about it. It works up to a point. The patients pay what they can. Sometimes we get a contribution from the hospitals which send them, sometimes we don't. But nobody has had to starve yet."

Everyone did what they could — much of the value of the homes has always lain in the fact that the patient feels he can do something, however little, towards the community, the home.

The First Helper.

The first permanent helper was Frances Jeram, an almoner from the Portsmouth Hospital. She was fascinated, not so much by Cheshire himself as by the work he was doing, the value of which she recognized instantly. After several visits, she left her well-paid job at the hospital, and came to work at Le Court. Fortunately she already knew Cheshire well enough to take the precaution of bringing her own bed; as it turned out, the room she was given had no furniture, not even a bed! However, there was some food in the house — two tins of spaghetti and a little tea and sugar between the twelve of them — so she was able to get something to eat.

Frances stayed two and a half years; her work was quite invaluable. Her experience enabled the Homes to tie in with the Ministry of Health, so that, at least in England, they never faced quite such dire poverty again.

Frances Jeram was also the first of dozens, indeed of hundreds, of dedicated helpers who always seemed to appear when they were most needed.

The First Committee.

A few months after the death of Dykes, the roll of patients was twenty-one. Cheshire's health was again failing, and the doctor ordered him to give up the work at Le Court and take a regular job. Reluctantly, sadly, Cheshire handed over the running of the home to a committee. Their first condition was that it be called the Cheshire Home; his protests were of no avail.

Quite independent of the committee to run Le Court was the Cheshire Foundation Homes for the Sick. [Then in 1976, it became the Leonard Cheshire Foundation. In July 2007, it changed to its current style, Leonard Cheshire Disability]. This was set up by Leonard's father, a Professor of Law at Oxford University, and a man of international fame as a jurist.

Both these moves were wise and farsighted; the phenomenal expansion of the work could scarcely have occurred without them. The Foundation made it clear, for example, that the Homes were not to be a denominational affair, belonging to the Catholic Church, since many of the trustees were Anglicans. Such an assurance was very necessary because for Cheshire the work was essentially associated with his new sense of purpose and his new happiness as a Catholic. But it is certain that the scope of the work would have been severely limited if it had become exclusively Catholic.

Yet the institutionalizing of the work also raised problems. Wilfrid Russell, himself a member of the Trust in later years, expresses it well:

"Here began the process of giving the work due form and order, and enshrining its spirit in a definable and lasting constitution. Here began the conflict which could never be truly resolved at any time in the future between Cheshire's unpredictable, soaring spirit and the business-like, pedestrian caution of his followers. He was to be more tolerant of their caution than many of them would be of his adventures, for he recognized always that the human soul cannot operate in this world without a body, and that a body without a soul is a lifeless organization. So it would be for him from now on. The Cheshire Foundation and Cheshire would be necessary and complementary to each other. He knew, too, that inevitably they would be at war with each other. The story, as it unfolds, will show how unerring was his instinct at this time."

A Regular Job.

The insistence of the doctor, strengthened by Fr. Clarke's reminder that everyone has a duty to take reasonable care of his health, led Cheshire to take a regular job. He was lucky enough to get a job with the Vickers Armstrong research unit — which meant that he was flying again.

His lack of experience and training made him of limited value on the research side — though some of his inspired guesses proved useful. But on the organizational side, Cheshire soon proved his worth. When the research unit moved to a deserted site in Cornwall, the administration was in the hands of Cheshire, and was executed faultlessly. It is not surprising that, when the time came for him to leave Vickers Armstrong, they tried hard to keep him.

Le Court prospered under the committee. It had become a registered charity, and so entitled to government assistance; this restricted the number and type of patients they could take in. Cheshire kept as close as possible to them; having a Spitfire available, he could fly across most weekends.

The Second Home.

Early in 1951, Cheshire chose his second home, in an abandoned Nissen hut on a lonely airfield in Cornwall. Anything less like a "home" than the dilapidated, filthy old building it would be hard to imagine. But Cheshire set to work with his usual enthusiasm, and had soon cajoled a team of rather sceptical volunteers to help him.

But their scepticism soon melted before the sunny optimism and example of Cheshire, and many of those who came to scoff remained to work. By May, the hut had been transferred, and "Saint Teresa's" was opened — newly painted, fresh and clean. And once more the dying, the homeless and the hopeless sick, found a place where they were wanted and loved, a place they could call "home".

It was at this time that Cheshire was wrestling with personal worries about his vocation in life. He felt strongly the attraction of the priestly and religious life, where his urge to give himself completely to God would be fulfilled. Eventually he decided to enter the Cistercian Monastery of Mellaray, in Brittany. He resigned from Vickers, and put his personal affairs in order. The two homes both had energetic and reliable Committees; the Cheshire Foundation was firmly established.

However, after careful thought and prayer, and discussions with his priestly friends and advisers, he was convinced that his true vocation lay in the world, helping to relieve suffering and misery. There too, he could work for God.

The Third Home.

Cheshire was soon in trouble with the committee about some of the patients he was introducing to Saint Teresa's. Frank, a schizophrenic, and Michael Gibson, an epileptic, were out of place among the chronically sick, and caused a lot of trouble.

Cheshire solved the problem in typical fashion — he started another home a few hundred yards from Saint Teresa's, for people whose problems were other than physical. And so "Holy Cross", the third Cheshire home, came into existence.

The Breakdown.

Cheshire had been driving himself unmercifully for years; it is no wonder that his rather frail body finally rebelled. In June, 1952, he joined a group of Catholic Missionary priests in a long and exhausting mission through Cornwall. At the same time, he was working hard founding Holy Cross, and consolidating Saint Teresa's. At the end of August, his health broke down.

Father Frank Ripley suspected T.B., and took him to a Sanatorium, X-rays showed that Cheshire was dreadfully ill with T.B.; one lung was already damaged beyond repair. For years, perhaps forever, Cheshire's career was ended. Yet he accepted the news quite calmly, without flinching or complaining — indeed with the famous Cheshire smile.

Sickness no Bar.

Even during his illness (and he was very sick indeed), the work continued. Cheshire's room in the sanatorium looked more like an office than a sick-room. His fourth home was founded, quite literally, from his sick-bed.

Once more he showed that he had not lost that magical leadership, which had made men ready to follow him to the very gates of hell during the war, by inspiring some casual visitors, the Worthingtons, to begin a new home in Kent — Saint Cecilia's.

The long, enforced rest had made Cheshire more than ever conscious of religion as the supremely important factor in man's life. Good works, even the care of the sick and homeless, were useless unless they brought helper and helped closer to God. To get this message to the people of England he equipped an old Bedford bus he had been given as a mission unit. It was set up to show a series of tableaux; Advent, Lent, the Nativity, Easter, and the Holy Shroud of Turin. A loudspeaker unit broadcast Church music, and tape-recordings made by the sick Cheshire about the Christian message of salvation. This work still continues, and has had great success.

The Cheshire Homes Overseas.

The work in England continues to expand, much of it being done by the dedicated followers that Cheshire attracted to his side. There were three new homes established in 1955; one the following year; then five; two; five again, and no fewer than twelve in 1961. By the end of 1963, there were thirty-five homes in England.

But more and more Cheshire's thoughts were turning overseas, to Asia and Africa, where he knew that the need was more urgent. He arrived in India in December, 1955, and founded a home immediately in the jungle outside Bombay. The "home" consisted of an asbestos cement hut without a roof — the roof could come later, Cheshire explained to a visitor. Within a few weeks, Cheshire had some volunteer helpers, several patients, and a roof; obviously, it was time to hand over the work to someone else, and move on. In 1956, he founded houses in Bengal, in Uttar Pradesh, in Southern India, Bihar, and New Delhi. The foundations were, in most cases, made in the same way as that in Bombay — with no money, and in dire poverty.

The Singapore Foundation.

Typical was the foundation of the Home in Singapore. His cousin Pamela Hickley persuaded Cheshire to come across from India for this work. As he was leaving India, someone asked him if he had any money. "Oh yes," he replied; "I have a little here." He put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out three rupees — about six shillings.

The situation in Singapore was quite impossible. It was the eve of independence; there was serious rioting; the City was fearfully overcrowded, and property values extremely high. Eventually Cheshire found an abandoned, roofless, ruined army hut near Changi beach. The British Government demanded £600 a year rent; a staggering figure for a group that had three rupees, but the Singapore Committee decided to go ahead anyhow.

Then suddenly all the obstacles seemed to crumble away. Phil Loneragan, the Australian girl, one of Cheshire's top trouble shooters and administrators, arrived to take charge of the organization side. The Malayan Government bought the site from the British and gave it to Cheshire of a rent of a dollar a year. Volunteer workers from The Royal Air Force, Rotary and similar organizations, even the Changi gaol, appeared as if by magic. Within six months, a 14 bed home had been built without a single penny being spent for labour.

Was it sheer luck, sheer coincidence — or was the hand of God present? Cheshire, anyhow, had no doubts on the subject.

Leper Colony.

The house at Kapadi in Southern India was for lepers who had been cured, but were so disfigured by the disease that they found it very difficult to find a place in normal society. Perhaps it is not quite accurate to call it a house; it was really half a house, with tenants in the other half!

The villagers were afraid and suspicious at first, but gradually realized that there was no danger of infection, and accepted the former lepers. One of the first helpers was the Australian girl Phil Loneragan, who had done sterling work on the organizational side in India and Singapore. The project proves that half a house can be a home, for Cheshire himself has always said that it is the happiest of all his homes.

"Raphael."

In the years that followed the work steadily expanded. Homes were built in Malaya, Jordan, Eire, Hong Kong, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and so on. Each of these foundations is a story in itself — a story of selfless, cheerful dedication on the part of many people of different colours and different religions, united in their common love for suffering humanity and their determination to do their bit, however small, to bring hope into the lives of the hopeless.

The most important of these foundations was that of "Raphael", at Dehra Dun in India. Here Cheshire met and married Sue Ryder. Like Cheshire, Sue has dedicated her life to the relief of suffering, and is internationally known for her work in Europe for the victims of Nazi tyranny. She created the Forgotten Allies Trust, and founded 20 or 30 homes throughout Europe to care for these unfortunate people. [Sue Ryder died in 2000.]

"Raphael" was unusual in that Cheshire deliberately kept it under his own direct control, instead of handing it over to a committee, as was his usual practice. While the committees did wonderful work, they did not always see eye to eye with Cheshire, and often restricted him in his plans. At "Raphael" he hoped to train a group of people who would understand his aims and methods, and be able to go anywhere in the world putting them into practice. It was peculiar, too, in having many branches, including backward children and lepers. It is really a group of homes rather than a single home.

Australia Helps.

Australia has played an important part in the work of "Raphael". Pamela Breslin of Brisbane was a qualified teacher of the deaf and dumb when she heard Leonard Cheshire speak, and promised two years work for "Raphael" — and for God. She paid her own fare across to India, and laid the foundations of a school which was soon the pride of "Raphael". She is still remembered with love by the children for whom she did so much.

Josephine Collins and Barbara Coleman both came in contact with "Raphael" through their Jesuit brothers, who were Missionary priests at Hazaribagh in India. (Father James Collins, S.J., has since been killed in a car accident in India). Barbara worked as a Secretary, Josephine assisted with the care of the mentally retarded children. Josephine is now the Secretary of the Victorian Branch of the Ryder-Cheshire Foundation.

At present (1966), two Australian girls, both nurses, are working at Dehra Dar; Anne Young of Sydney, and Christine Steers of Adelaide.

Scarcely less important is the financial help that Australia has contributed. Leonard Cheshire's visit to Australia in May, 1964, has led to the formation of enthusiastic support groups in Sydney, Lithgow, Melbourne, Coleraine, Ballarat, Geelong, and Pentridge prison. In the last 12 months, Victoria and New South Wales have each raised about £5,000. The Apex Club has given strong support, and is now raising the money for "Apex House", a hostel for the overseas staff at "Raphael".

Pentridge Prison.

Their own misfortunes have not blinded the prisoners in Pentridge of the needs of others. They have given enthusiastic support to "Raphael" — including the adoption of a leper family.

The adoption scheme has had strong appeal. It enables leprosy patients, mentally retarded and destitute children, to be adopted by a person or a group. Details of the adoptee are supplied, so a personal interest can be taken. Victorians have adopted 68 already, at a cost of £35 to £50 a year, depending on the nature of the case.

Charity — The Path to God.

Cheshire's path to God was through Charity. Each act of self-sacrificing love was a step towards God. The first step was the founding of his home for ex-servicemen; within a year, Cheshire had recovered his lost faith in God; Cheshire found what so many others have found — we cannot help others without coming closer to Christ, without ourselves becoming more like Christ. And Cheshire has surely modelled himself on Christ. Ian Johnson, the Australian cricketer, wrote of him:

"He possesses all those qualities we have been taught that Christ possessed. He has that serene, benign expression. He is a person who is humble yet proud, gentle yet resolute, persuasive yet not possessive."

Charity — The Driving Force.

Charity is also the secret of the dynamic energy of Cheshire. "The charity of Christ presses us on," wrote Saint Paul, and, surely, they are words that could be applied to Cheshire.

After the war, he felt strongly his brotherhood with the men who had stood shoulder to shoulder with him in the titanic struggle. But as a Christian, his charity needed to be as all-embracing as that of Christ. His Cheshire Homes are not restricted to any group, or nation, or colour or creed. Need and suffering are the only tickets of admission that Cheshire demands. Wherever there is pain and misery, he feels himself involved.

What of Us?

We cannot read the life of a man like Cheshire without doing some soul searching. Most of us look but little outside of ourselves. We are too busy looking after our own interests; building our own little home, our own little world, from which we deliberately exclude the harsh realities of the world around us.

If we hear about an incurable T.B. case, we give a cluck of sympathy, shake our heads and then turn back to the real business of our lives — looking after ourselves. If we read about famine in India, or

disease in the Pacific Islands, we feel we have fulfilled all our obligations if we give 10 shillings to the Freedom from Hunger Campaign. Or perhaps we don't even do that.

We don't want to become involved with others; it will make too many demands on our time, too many demands on our love. But we are involved with our fellowmen, because we are all brothers in Christ. We can only isolate ourselves from others, live in our own little world, at the risk of being eternally isolated from Christ.

Seeing the Need.

Cheshire has always been intensely sensitive to the needs of others. If he saw others in trouble, his first reaction, perhaps, was rather like ours: "Why doesn't someone do something?" When he became conscious of the plight of ex-servicemen in 1946, for example, he began agitating for the Government "to do something".

Most of us go no further — and so often nothing is ever done. But Cheshire is different; if nobody else will act, he will. We can easily laugh at his first, fumbling efforts with the ill-fated V.I.P. scheme — but he was one of the few men in England who tried to do something.

It was the same when he began his nursing homes. He saw a need — he saw a dying man, for whom the Hospital could do nothing, who had no home. And he gave him a home. From such small beginnings came "one of the greatest acts of humanity of all time". There were plenty ready to warn him off — it was not his responsibility; he did not have any experience in nursing; the problem was so vast it was ridiculous for him to try to tackle it; and so on.

Small Beginnings.

One of the greatest lessons we can learn from Cheshire is that anything we can do, however tiny, is of value. Cheshire's own experience taught him over and over again that great works spring from humble beginnings. One of his principles has always been to accept any help that is offered — however valueless such help might be from a material point of view. For the person who is helping others is asserting the brotherhood of man, and becoming more conscious of the Fatherhood of God. And so often, the first tentative offer of help, if eagerly received, leads on to ever more generous sacrifices.

So often, we become conscious of some problem; but we are daunted by its magnitude. We read of the great increase in juvenile delinquency, and feel helpless before the problem. Yet we can assist by letting Tommy Jones and Bill Smith play in our backyard, instead of in the street.

Or we see an article about the grave problems associated with the assimilation of migrants into the Australian community. It is, we feel, far beyond such unimportant persons as us. Yet as far as we are concerned, the problem might only be a few houses away, where Mrs. Buongiorno has recently arrived from Italy. We can help solve it by calling and wishing her welcome, and asking how we can help.

Or again, we hear of the problems of broken homes and broken marriages, and especially of the heartbreak involved for the children. Do we ever stop to think that we can do something for those children? That we need only lift the phone and dial the local orphanage, and we can bring happiness and a home for some short time at least, to some lonely heart.

Perhaps we could consider volunteering to work on some mission in Asia for a year or two. Our own particular trade or experience could be used to advantage.

To the person sensitive to the needs of others, and eager to help, there is always plenty to do. Once we start, we soon find more and more avenues of help. This is the very essence of Christianity; this is what Christ is asking of each one of us.

[Leonard Cheshire died in 1992.]
