



Josie in her wedding dress the day of her return to Gloucester.

MORE THAN I WENT TO ASK FOR

CHARLES FOLEY

Josephine Woollam was born in 1945 and romped through the first four years of life, a happy and healthy child. Then came trouble. She caught the pyogenic bacteria which causes osteomyelitis, and the acutely painful inflammation of the bones and marrow began to spread. Head, lungs and legs were all affected with the malignant disease; the septicaemia resulted in multiple abscesses in bones, lungs and scalp. At one time she had thirteen abscesses on her head alone. The infection focus was in her left hip, as a consequence of which her left leg ceased to grow; by the time she was ten years old, the left leg was some eight inches shorter than the right, and the left foot was twisted, pointing directly downwards. In 1952 she had to be put into traction and lie in a frame. By that time, she had spent more time in hospitals than she had spent at home. She was being worn down physically and mentally. Her weight a mere 3 stone (19 kilos).

In 1955, Group Captain Leonard Cheshire, V.C., of the Royal Air Force, wrote a short article for *Picture Post*, with several illustrations. On the Tuesday of Holy Week, Josie's father brought the magazine home. Josie had lost so much schooling that she did not read too well, but she became avidly interested in the illustrations, especially the one of the Holy Face. On Good Friday, her mind was centered on the Crucifixion and about 3 o'clock she asked her mother to read out the meditations of the Way of the Cross. After that she said several times that if she could see the Holy Shroud she knew she would walk again, and her heartsore mother murmured her agreement. Later the same day Josie's temperature shot up to an alarming 103° and she was rushed to hospital but her condition continued ominously to deteriorate. Her lungs began to haemorrhage and by the first days of May she was coughing up more than a cupful of blood each day. Dr. Stallman, the surgeon in charge, had to tell her mother that the child was dying. The priest was called and he administered the Anointing and the Viaticum. Josie could not eat but she steadily repeated that if she could only see the Shroud she knew she would get well again.

On May 9, Mrs. Woollam wrote to Capt. Cheshire:

I am writing to ask you if my daughter Josephine could be blessed with a relic of the Holy Shroud. She is ten years old, and is in hospital with osteomyelitis in hip and leg. Also a lung abscess. Her doctor has told me that there is no hope of her getting better. She has been in and out of hospitals for the last five years. On Friday she received

the Last Rites of the Church. Josephine has asked me to write to you, and she said that if only she could see the Relic she will get better and walk again. Everyone at the hospital has been very good to her. She is always in great pain, but she has always got a smile ... I know I am asking for great things but I do hope and pray that my prayers will be answered for my daughter to get better.

I remain,
Mrs. Veronica Woollam

It is obvious from that simple statement of faith and hope, with its perceptible undertones, that she did not hold out any great expectations of success; but she is steady and solid and firm, and she prays wholeheartedly.

The Captain was away when the letter arrived, but someone from his office sent a beautiful photograph of the Shroud Face, with a letter explaining that there were no relics of the Shroud; that the Shroud was 2000 miles away in Turin; it was rarely brought out for public exposition, and even then only under the strictest security conditions, etc.

When Cheshire returned, he was told about the letter; he says he could not get the request out of his mind.

Then came two letters in quick succession. Josephine was no longer on her deathbed, but was whizzing about the ward in a wheelchair. "The doctor could hardly believe his eyes when he saw her in a wheelchair on Friday." The second letter, a few days afterwards, reported that Josie had been sent home from the hospital, better than she had been for a long time.

I spent some hours with Mrs. Woollam in October 1984, and I asked her to be specific about what had happened. Josie's sister, Pauline, was also present and confirmed the facts. "When the photograph of the Holy Face from the Shroud arrived in the early morning postal delivery, I placed it up there on the mantel above the fireplace where I could see it as I went about my work ... and every time I passed in front of it I prayed and prayed..." That afternoon, as usual, she went to see Josie in the hospital. She remembers that some of the staff called to her, "You will see a great change in Josie," which she sadly acknowledged ... and when she opened the cubicle door she was confronted with an empty bed and feared the worst. Then she heard a giggle from behind the door and found Josephine sitting up in a wheelchair, laughing at the surprise and bewilderment on her mother's face. The staff nurse recounted that at breakfast time Josie had asked if she could get up, and the nurses made her wait, thinking that they were dealing with the whims of a dying child; but she was so emphatic that she felt quite well that they carefully placed her in a wheelchair, and to their amazement not only could she sit up without help, not only was she chattering away like a magpie, but she began motoring around the ward under her own steam. A fortnight later she was discharged from the hospital.

I thought to myself that the placing of the photograph of the Holy

Face on the mantelpiece and the sudden and simultaneous recovery of the child was only "mere coincidence!", fortunately unspoken because Mrs. Woollam continued: "The most extraordinary thing was that not only did she get well so quickly and at exactly the time when I placed the picture in a place of honor at home, but from that day onwards no ulcer on her body suppurated. The eight ulcers on her leg never suppurated again." Pauline added that the wounds remained open and deep, but there was never any suppuration after that day.

Josie continued to be confined to the wheelchair, since her left foot was one problem but also her legs would not have supported even her slight weight. On June 17, G.C. Leonard Cheshire arrived on the doorstep with a large picture of the Shroud and a life-sized one of the Holy Face. He sat down with Josie and explained in detail and at length all the many significant things which have been discovered about the Linen, and some of its problems, and what it tells us about Our Lord's sufferings. As to her request that she should be blessed with the Shroud—that simply "was not on" ... *No way* could that be done ... *No way at all*. Josie listened to the first part of his speech with rapt attention. Of the last part she took not the slightest notice. So again the good Captain patiently explained that the Shroud was kept locked away behind three great steel grills, each locked with a different key; it was contained in a large fireproof safe in an enclosure above the altar in the Cathedral in Turin. The owner of the Shroud was the King of Italy, exiled in Portugal, whose permission would have to be obtained, then the permission of the Cardinal Archbishop Maurilio Fossati of Turin would have to be sought, because he was the guardian of the Shroud; as well as the Canon Lawyers, the Italian State authorities and (desperately searching for an ultimate argument) even the Pope himself would have to be consulted ... she was asking for the impossible! Josie watched his mouth saying these things, nodded her agreement, and smiled ... but not with her eyes.

During World War II, Group Captain Cheshire gained the highest award for bravery which England can bestow, the Victoria Cross. One event was the bombing of an important railway bridge in the Bay of Antheor, which failed. "I will remember that an opportunity missed is missed forever, and come what may I'll never hesitate again, at least not once I have caught sight of the target," Cheshire wrote afterwards. Here he was faced with someone who practiced what he preached; she saw her target, nor was she going to be deflected. Describing that day in Gloucester, Cheshire said that he looked at the scrap of a child, the deformed foot, the leg mutilated and bound up in a splint, and he listened to the steady declaration that if she saw the Shroud she would walk again. "There seemed nothing else to do except take her to Turin."

Easily said, not so easily done. At the time, Cheshire was recovering from major chest surgery, so flying was forbidden to him. The occupant

of the wheelchair was a sick child. The nurse who was engaged to accompany them had to call off at the last minute. So Cheshire would have to be navigator, nurse, pilot and engine, pushing, pulling, manoeuvring and planning for them both. There was also the question of funds. He had little and she had none. One might call this whole affair a venture of faith. Archbishop Grimshaw of Birmingham came to their rescue on the money problem, sending them on their way to Lisbon where lived Humbert II of the House of Savoy, which had owned and protected the Shroud for the past 500 years. The exiled King not only willingly gave them all the permissions they requested, but also provided the funds necessary for the remainder of their trip. Unknown to them, he also phoned his representatives in Italy to do everything they could to help. At the same time he warned Cheshire that the difficulties would be many in both the ecclesiastical and the civil administrations, especially the summoning of important and busy persons who lived at a distance, particularly on such short notice.

Our travellers started across Spain and France and down to Italy. On the railway platform in Turin, they found a small group awaiting them; their accommodation had been arranged, the Cardinal would see them next morning. King Humbert had indeed smoothed the way.

When Cardinal Fossati heard that they wanted the Altar Safe to be opened, the Shroud removed from its sealed reliquary, with all the prescribed attendance of legal, civil and ecclesiastical witnesses, with all the security arrangements to be considered, he shook his head slowly and with regret. It simply could not be done in time ... too many people would be inconvenienced and the Shroud endangered. It was deadlock. It was deadlock until Josie pulled out a small parcel from the back of her wheelchair, and showed him a new pair of shoes which she was going to wear in walking home; and a long white lace dress, her pride and joy. Josie explained to the Cardinal that this was a "wedding dress which my aunt made specially for the blessing." At that, His Eminence was seen to walk rather quickly to a corner of the room, where he gave himself to worried thought for some minutes before going into his study, where he was heard phoning several people. Returning to them, he said that they were to come back at 4 p.m. and, if all the arrangements could be made by then, perhaps the blessing could take place.

At the appointed hour, all the arrangements had indeed been made; the various authorities were present; and Josie was there, dressed in her wedding frock and veil, with the new shoes tucked handily into the back of the wheelchair. There was a period of prayer, private and fervent, until the Cardinal rose from his knees. Two priests went up the ladder-steps, began breaking the seals and opening up the steel grills. The big reliquary, over four feet long, was withdrawn from the enclosure, brought down and placed, first, on a table in front of the altar. Then it was placed across the arms of the wheelchair so that Josie



Josie and Capt. Cheshire on their first arrival to the Cathedral.

could rest her hands on it; but nothing happened. The Cardinal was asked if the outer seals could be broken and the Shroud lifted out. He examined the seals, then agreed that they should be broken. Wrapped in its red silk covering, the Shroud was lifted out, still tied about with its many authenticity tapes and seals, and placed on Josie's lap. Nothing happened. Josie asked if the Shroud could be placed along the splinted left leg, and for that also the Cardinal gave permission. Nothing happened. Josie was allowed to slip her little hand inside the red silk covering; then the heavy roll was reverently replaced in the reliquary, the locks were sealed and stamped once more. The proceedings were registered and recorded and witnessed in the official documents, and the Shroud was returned to its resting place.

Josephine did not get up and walk, as she had imagined and wanted. She was very quiet. In the sacristy, she kissed the Cardinal's ring and thanked him for his many kindnesses; she folded away her wedding dress and packed away her shoes. Apparently nothing had happened, nothing changed. Leonard Cheshire, the witness of those first few days, says, "At first she was obviously disappointed, but in a curious way she seemed to understand a purpose, a direction. She talked very little about herself and the expected cure, but a great deal about other people and the honor which the Holy Shroud would bring to Our Lord if only the whole world could see it."

Her mother came to meet them at Victoria Station in London, and in reply to her question about what Josie had received in Turin, Josie replied: "More than I went to ask for" ... a curious reply for a child. She added later that if she had known how much trouble it was going to cause, she would not have asked to go!

Josephine never at any time in her life made the claim that she was cured, but it was noticed on her return that the deep, open and intractable ulcers, including those on her leg, were beginning to heal over. From that time until the end of her life, she had no further trouble from the bone myelitis there or elsewhere, with the exception of a small operation, at the end of 1955, to drain one ulcer. She was still confined to the wheelchair, since neither of her legs would have supported her.

What is the evidence for the above statements. The orthopaedic surgeon who had looked after her from the onset of her illness in 1949 was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. In his notes for the beginning of 1956, Dr. Stallman records with some fascination: "*It does seem that the sinuses are healed.*" In that same year, Dr. Merryweather, also a member of the Royal College of Surgeons, took over the duties of orthopaedic surgeon and he reports: "The osteomyelitis appears to be quiescent, and there is *nothing after that to suggest any recurrence of the bone infection*, though she was left with a ghastly disability. I eventually took the (left) leg off because it was useless to her and she got on with an artificial leg very well afterwards" (private letter dated 8 Oct. 1984). The amputation was

performed in 1966. Up to that time, her deformed left foot had been gripped in a sort of "shoe" with steel calipers on each side, extending down to a false foot and a shoe. She could only move about on crutches. It was a useless and clumsy prosthesis and the calipers caused painful sores. With the artificial leg, at first with crutches, then with a walking stick and finally without either, she walked! Dr. Merryweather writes: "Looking at her history as a whole, I must confess that one is struck by the fact that the end of 1955 did coincide with a long period of quiescent osteomyelitis. Was this just coincidence or was it something more?"

Josephine began to grow strong and was able at first to take on a part-time job and then a full-time occupation as a telephone switchboard operator. In 1968 she met Roy Jones. They were married, had their first child in 1970. Unfortunately he died before his first birthday, but Richard, the second child, born in 1973, lives today with his father not far from Stroud in Gloucestershire. Josie returned to Turin on the occasion of the Exposition of 1978 and expressed her happiness that her childhood desire had been fulfilled; that thousands of people from all over the world could now see the Shroud.

My reasons for writing this account are basically three: 1) there has been an incorrect emphasis placed on the events; 2) no investigation has, up to the present, taken place in consultation of the primary witnesses; and 3) the characteristics for the consideration of a miracle cure, as laid down by Pope St. Pius X, have not as yet been applied to Josephine's situation. *The crucial day of the whole episode was when the photograph of the Holy Face arrived in the Woollam household and was placed in a position of honor. It was on that day and at that precise time that Josephine suddenly felt well.* The trip to Turin, although it has received all the publicity, is secondary to that. The primary witnesses are Mrs. Woollam and the younger sister, Pauline; and, most importantly, the two orthopaedic surgeons, Dr. Stallman and Dr. Merryweather.

The papal rules of consideration for a miraculous cure are as follows:

1. The illness is gravely serious and the condition is not improving. The child was dying from a mortal disease and beyond medical help.

2. The cure must be instantaneous with no period of convalescence. The child had been ill for five years. She recovered at the precise time when, unknown to her, her mother placed the picture of the Holy Face on the mantelpiece. Josie got up from her bed, felt well. The disease did not merely ameliorate; there was no longer any suppuration from any ulcer then or during the rest of her life. In other words, the osteomyelitis was cured.

3. The recovery cannot be explained naturally. The progressive malady was arrested, and the child passed from a state of most serious illness to a state of promise and health amply fulfilled.

4. There must be no relapse nor mere amelioration at any time. During the remaining 26 years of her life, there was no recurrence of the osteomyelitis. The surgical reports are set down by the surgeons over their own signatures.

It should be noted that an instantaneous or even very rapid cure of osteomyelitis by natural causes is impossible. The disease attacks not merely an organ, but also the surrounding tissues and bone marrow. The disease spreads by reason of the toxin invasion of the bloodstream and the lymphatic system, including the bone marrow. It penetrates the entire organism. To restore cells destroyed (in the skin, the muscles, the bones) requires new cells, and such physiological operations require time. The instant cure of the whole body is medically and biologically impossible. Yet that is what happened to Josie Woollam. The multiple ulcers ceased to produce pus. The wounds remained open until she went to Turin; after the Holy Shroud was laid along her leg, those began to close over and heal, leaving a cicatrix to mark their going.

Not only did she walk again but, as I have heard her happily say, she drove her own car, she had her husband, her child and her home and was given the strength to look after them with pride. I have a tape recording which Josie made of the events of her Turin pilgrimage. She talks quietly and evenly, without any exaggerations, never claiming anything out of the ordinary. It is most moving to listen to her as she tries, without success, to put into words what happened in Turin; she hesitates, falters and halts. Three times she tries to describe, to explain, and ends by saying, "It is difficult to put into words ... It was a special grace ... Whatever it was, it changed my whole outlook, my whole state of mind." My own reaction in listening to her and thinking over what she spoke about, is that she became wise.

Leonard Cheshire says of her that she became selfless, quiet in mind, that she had that peace which the world cannot give. Her sister Pauline worries that she cannot describe her own reactions at this time, much less Josie's, but she uses the word 'happy' a number of times. That is something which Josephine herself stresses, that she received a calm in the depths of her mind. All the things which had vexed her in the past seemed to fade, such as her being a burden to others, having to rely on others for help, and that it would always be so ... After Turin, she realized that there was going to be pain and suffering; she was even able to accept the loss of her first baby, though her voice always drops a tone or two when she mentions that. "Something changed for me in Turin. I cannot describe it but it has enabled me to accept my life just as it is ... I felt then very close to Jesus, not emotionally or sentimentally, but I can walk after Him now. Something was given to me that day, a grace to face the daily troubles of living. I am happy and content, and that has stayed with me every day ever since." The deep and quiet truth of such words can be heard in her voice.

Josie Woollam died 31 May 1981. God rest her lovely soul.

This account would be incomplete without a special mention of two people: Josie's mother and her surgeon. Mrs. Veronica Woollam is aptly named. She is tiny and soft spoken, and she talks as if she met Our Lord last week in the supermarket. With affection, I compare her with the mother St. Matthew writes about (15:21-28). One can easily imagine Our Lord nodding and smiling at this mother also. "*O woman, great is your faith! Be it done to you as you desire*"; and her daughter was healed in the same hour.

Secondly, Dr. Merryweather. Among the tiresome questions that I directed to him, one was the fact that Josephine died of bronchiectasis (i.e., dilation of the bronchial tubes, commonly due to the formation of fibrous tissue in the lungs). I remembered that Josephine had distinguished between the osteomyelitis and the lung trouble which, she said, was due to her having had pneumonia when she was young. The doctor's thought-provoking reply summarizes these events: "The basic infection was a septicaemia (the presence in the bloodstream of bacteria and their toxins). The bone abscesses were a result of this, as was the bronchiectasis, though I believe that the bronchiectasis did not arise until after the osteomyelitis, so one could say that it was secondary to that." He continues: "*There are certainly things in this remarkable story which cannot be explained scientifically. We all know the power of mind over body. It seems to me that even a totally non-religious person would have to admit that something happened to Josephine which changed her mental attitude, with a consequent effect on her illness. That, I think, is the least that could be said, and many would put a much more spiritual interpretation on it.*"