

Re-*leprosy*

By JOHN REDDY

A Few True Friends

THE 160-POUND, 5-foot-11 high-school halfback went inside the defensive back, then cut toward the sideline. The pass arched over the onrushing linemen and landed on his outstretched fingertips. But he couldn't hang onto the ball; it tumbled to the turf for an incomplete pass. This was the third time that day he had dropped a pass, and he had fumbled a couple of hand-offs from the quarterback, too.

After practice, the puzzled youngster, flexing his fingers, noticed that his right hand was unusually sensitive. But he was back at practice the next day as usual.

The halfback, Paul Scott, an 18-year-old student with a shock of curly auburn hair, was a popular member of the senior class at a suburban New York high school. He was interested in sports, girls and dances. In the spring he would be graduating and going on to college.

All that fall he continued to drop

the football in practice. His hands got worse: the left one also became extremely sensitive, then both hands began *losing* sensitivity. His doctor thought that he might have a touch of polio and put his hands in splints. But the trouble grew worse. Paul began losing muscle control. He had difficulty doing the simplest things—tying his shoelaces, buttoning his shirt or cutting his meat at meals. Then, mysteriously, his face began swelling.

His parents, now thoroughly alarmed, took him to New York's Hospital for Joint Diseases for extensive tests. Specialists examined the husky youngster, trying to diagnose his baffling symptoms. A woman doctor finally made the diagnosis: "I'm afraid, Paul, that you have leprosy."

A Shadow World. With those few words, the carefree world of Paul Scott collapsed. *It couldn't be,* the boy thought. Leprosy was some-

thing that happened in Asia or Africa, not in New York—and not to him!

Yet it was true. Arrangements were made for Paul to go to the National Hospital at Carville, La., the only hospital in the United States for leprosy patients. Paul and his family retreated into the shadow world in which those touched by the ancient scourge of leprosy take refuge. The board of health telephoned his school to report that he was dropping out because of illness. No further explanation. His parents explained to friends that Paul was anemic and had gone to live with relatives in another state.

He traveled to Louisiana in a private Pullman car with only a doctor as a companion. At the hospital, in a bend of the Mississippi River, the frightened youngster was admitted into what Albert Schweitzer called "the fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain." Registering under an assumed name, as virtually all patients there did, young Scott began undergoing treatment. His condition deteriorated rapidly. He lost all feeling in his hands, and the affliction began drawing the fingers inward in claw-like shape. His face swelled enormously, and he developed ugly welts on his face and legs. He began losing the sight of one eye. Kidney trouble set in.

Just as his condition was becoming desperate, doctors discovered the sulfone drugs that cure leprosy. Paul responded favorably to treatment by

Promin, and finally after six tortured years, he was discharged from the hospital. However, the disease had left its mark: he was crippled and disfigured.

Lonely Wanderer. Paul hoped to return to a normal life. But back in New York, wherever he went, people stared at his disfigurement. In subways and restaurants they would whisper and move away. He couldn't get a job. His old friends seemed ill at ease with him and gradually drifted away. The drastic change in his appearance was difficult even for his parents. They discouraged him from going outdoors, where neighbors could see him. Finally they moved to another town, while Paul stayed in New York City.

He was in and out of hospitals trying to repair the ravages of the disease. He underwent 16 operations on his hands—without anesthesia, since they had no sensation—in an effort to restore their usefulness.

Eventually, a kindly man gave him a job as a clerk in a small office, and he took a room at the YMCA. He avoided going out in public, but would wander along deserted beaches on weekends, or around the empty streets of New York late at night when few people were about. One wet, blustery Halloween night he encountered a group of children in "trick or treat" costumes under a streetlamp. "Look at him," one exclaimed, pointing. "He doesn't need a mask."

At those cruel words spoken in

childish innocence, Scott walked away blindly into the darkness, numb with rage and bitterness. All the hurt and humiliation seemed to well up in a wave of fury and despair. Chance brought him to St. Patrick's Cathedral. Though not a Catholic, he went in, seeking a sanctuary. Kneeling there and trying to gain control of himself, he remembered that he had read of Bishop Fulton Sheen's work with leprosy sufferers.* When a priest passed by in the dim nave, the young man said, "I want to see Bishop Sheen."

The priest explained that the bishop was not connected with the cathedral. "If you'll leave your name and address I'll try to reach him," he said.

Not long afterward, Scott received a message inviting him to come to Bishop Sheen's office. As the young man limped in, he said, "I have come to you because I have no one else to turn to. I haven't a friend in the world."

"Well, you now have one." Bishop Sheen smiled. "Would you have dinner with me tomorrow night?"

The Way Out. Over dinner, Scott told the bishop of his ordeal of loneliness. He told of the grim years at Carville, and the almost greater suffering from rejection by his friends and family after he was cured. He told how, not long after his release, he almost got a job with an airline—

only to be turned down at the last minute because "it would be bad for employe morale."

Bishop Sheen waited until Scott had talked himself out. Then, "Dante begins one of his finest poems by telling of coming 'to the dark wood,'" the bishop said. "You have been in the dark wood of despair, Paul. You must find your way out. God must have a purpose for your life. It is up to us to find it." Patiently, and with gentleness, he told Scott that the way out of his dark wood was to endure his misfortune with courage. "Do not reject the burden," he counseled. "Pick it up, Paul, and you will find it sweet."

When Scott spoke of how hard it was to bear the humiliation of disfigurement, Bishop Sheen said, "Physical beauty is the most transitory of God's gifts," and told him this story. "Once I was flying to Chicago and talked for a time with the stewardess, an extraordinarily beautiful girl. I remarked, 'The gift that God gives and gets back least often is beauty.' She seemed puzzled by my words, or perhaps troubled.

"Two years later, that stewardess called on me. 'I've always remembered what you told me,' she said, '—that the gift that God gives and gets back least often is beauty. I'm ready to do what I can to serve God.' I told her I would call her when I found a place for her. Today that beautiful girl is serving in a colony for leprosy patients in Vietnam."

No Self-Pity. Although he urged Scott to face his problem with forti-

*As director of the U.S. Office of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, Bishop Sheen supervises 400 leprosaria around the world.

tude, the bishop did not minimize the difficulty. "You will never have many friends," he said, "but those you do have will be true friends."

The first of those true friends was Bishop Sheen. About once a week he invited Scott to his residence to dinner. Because it was difficult for Paul to use his hands, the bishop cut his meat for him. He helped him find and furnish a small apartment. Whenever the bishop appeared on television he invited Scott to sit in the audience.

Constantly the bishop sought to strengthen the young man's spirits. He quoted André Maurois: "Even if we must suffer misfortune we can overcome it by our manner of enduring it." "Suffering can make the sufferer curse God, as Job's wife asked him to do," he warned. "Yet adversity borne with fortitude makes the sufferer a nobler person."

For all his sympathy, the bishop would not allow Scott to indulge in self-pity. "There are ten million leprosy patients in the world," the bishop once told him. "And *you* are *cured*." He reminded him of the Biblical account of the ten lepers cured by Christ, and only one came back to thank Him. "Have you ever thanked God that you have been cured?"

That set Scott to thinking. He remembered the nuns at Carville, uncomplainingly devoting their lives to the patients. He recalled Dr. Daniel Riordan, who had performed the 16 operations on his crippled hands, trying again and again with a new

surgical technique to restore their usefulness. He thought of his friend Stanley Stein at Carville, waging an unrelenting campaign to strip the veil of superstition and fear from leprosy—even though he himself was blind from it. Above all, he had the example of Bishop Sheen, taking time and trouble to bring cheer into his life. Paul Scott gradually began to make his way out of the dark wood of despair.

"A Long, Long Time." Slowly, Paul Scott's spirits toughened and his bitterness disappeared. Yet at times he still suffered from loneliness. "Friendship is like most things of value," the bishop told him. "It is not easily found. But there is value even in loneliness. It will help you to appreciate the importance of friendship when it comes to you. And it will come."

Then, as the bishop had predicted, Paul found new friends. A woman in the office where he worked said to him, "I would like to be your friend." Another suggested that she thought his appearance could be improved by plastic surgery.

"But plastic surgery is expensive," Scott said.

"Don't worry about that," the woman said. She sent him to see two of New York's top plastic surgeons. Over a two-year period four operations were performed, bringing about a marked improvement in Scott's appearance. All of the operations and hospitalization were provided free by the two doctors. As Scott tried to thank them, Bishop

Sheen's words came back to him: "You will never have many friends. But those you do have will be true friends."

Soon there were other friends. A prominent society woman heard about Scott and befriended him. Her husband, a widely known architect, used to come by subway to visit him at his little apartment. Then a woman television producer asked Scott to assist her with a film on leprosy she was making. When the film was completed, she invited him to her home in Baltimore to see it. After the preview there was a party with champagne and dancing. At one point, a lovely-looking girl, in conversation with Scott, discovered that his birthday was the same as hers, and spontaneously kissed him.

"You'd better wipe off the lipstick," she said.

"No," Scott said wistfully. "It's been a long, long time since I've been kissed by a pretty girl."

Today Scott sometimes visits the TV producer and her husband, or baby-sits for them when they go on trips. There are a few other friends. And he still sees Bishop Sheen fre-

HANSEN's disease (the correct medical name for leprosy) is now completely curable by sulfone drugs. With early diagnosis and prompt treatment, it no longer need result in disfigurement or crippling. Moreover, Hansen's disease is probably the least communicable of diseases: in the 71 years of the government hospital at Carville, La., not a single member of the medical or nursing staff has ever contracted it. Today 11 states have no requirements governing the disease except that patients report it.

quently. He feels alive again. He realizes that his life will never be completely normal, but he has found the strength to meet the problems he faces. Friendships now seem as precious as rubies. The simplest act of companionship—a date for lunch, an afternoon at the beach with a friend, an hour of conversation—these are moments to be cherished.

He has indeed found his way out of the "dark wood."

Paul Scott's spirits got their greatest lift not long ago when he tried to thank Bishop Sheen again for all he had done for him. "You have given me your friendship, your time, everything I have," Scott said, "and I have nothing to give you."

"That's not so, Paul," the bishop said. "You give *me* strength."



Short Tempered

When his lawyer told one divorce-seeking husband of the cooling-off period, the reconciliation efforts and the child-custody investigations that are part of a Wisconsin divorce, the would-be divorcé sighed, "For what it can't stay mad that long."

—The Eagle