

## THE CHESHIRE CAT

THE problem of the Cheshire Cat is always likely to raise some interesting and imaginative speculations and suggestions. Mr. Oakes, in the last number, brought forward the idea that it originated from the heraldic bearing of the Norman Earls of Chester through the medium of the inn sign. It is true that lions and leopards often degenerate into cats but this is by no means peculiar to Cheshire. There is a "Red Cat" as far away as the Hague in Holland, while in England there are, or were, several similar creatures such as "The Cat" at Egremont, Cumberland, "The Black Cat" at Lancaster, and the famous "Cat and Lion" at Stockport. (Larboard and Hotten "*History of the Signboard*," 3rd ed., p. 197). One must seek an explanation more closely related to the county.

The simile of the grinning cat can be traced back to the late Middle Ages where the adjective was used in a more horrific sense than it is today and there was the implication that the person or creature referred to was showing his teeth rather than demonstrating a broad humorous appreciation. Shakespeare illustrates this point in Richard II (Act II, Scene II).—

" . . . . , for within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps Death his count and there the antic sits  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp."

It would be interesting and helpful to know just when the phrase was applied to the cats of Cheshire. The earliest reference noted by the writer is by Wolcott, (1770-1819) (*A New English Dictionary*)—

"Lo! like a Cheshire Cat our court will grin."

Perhaps readers can supply other and earlier examples.

The question concerning the origin of the phrase has been asked several times (*N & Q 1850, ii, 377 and Cheshire N & Q 1884, iv, 172*) but no satisfactory explanation has been forthcoming. It was stated in 1850, presumably by an inhabitant of Chester that—"some years since, Cheshire cheeses were sold in this town moulded into the shape of a cat, bristles being inserted to represent the whiskers." (*N & Q 1850, ii, 412*). This was suggested as the origin of the saying but it seems more likely that these cheeses were made, as a novelty, to represent the already notorious Cheshire Cat.

Curiously enough, another explanation based on cheeses has been made to the writer by an old inhabitant of Chester. He says that about fifty years ago there was a small cheese known as a "cat" and its size caused a shrinkage greater in proportion to surface area than in the larger cheeses. In consequence the cheese cloth became very wrinkled and gave the appearance of a grinning cat. This might have been possible if the cheese were round in shape like those still made in Holland. Unfortunately, inquiries in the cheese trade have so far failed to produce support for this interesting suggestion — it is now up to our readers. G W.