

MEMOIR OF JESSIE ALICE STUART RITCH

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PREFACE

This small book has been compiled as a loving tribute to Jessie Alice Stuart Ritch, in the belief that many who knew and loved her may like to have some of her writings in permanent form with a short memoir. It has been a difficult task to give in a few words a picture of Jessie for as one friend has said "no words can convey the colour, the drama, the humour, the warm-heartedness and all the other attributes of heart, mind and spirit which went to the make-up of Jessie."

MILLIE PETERSEN, Dunster, Somerset.

JESSIE RITCH was born on January 22nd, 1896. Her father was an Orcadian and her mother the daughter of an Orkney shipmaster. Jessie was very attached to the Orkney Islands and during the latter half of her life she made many visits to the old home in the far bleak North.

From early childhood she lived in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. During this period she gained a first-hand knowledge of life and conditions in an industrial area. This eventually led to her desire for social work among children and young people, which was in one way or another to occupy so great a place in her life.

At the age of twenty-four she began her training at the Rachel MacMillan Nursery School in Deptford. Here working under Margaret McMillan, the founder of the School, she studied for her Nursery School Diploma. Margaret McMillan later wrote of her great aptitude for the work and spoke highly both of her gifts and character. She shewed an especial gift for plastic art, while her joyous outlook on life and her concern for the welfare of the children created a happy atmosphere and won for her the affection of all.

Quite apart from her work at the School itself, Jessie Ritch interested herself in the parents and in the home-life of the children, entering understandingly into their problems in a way which made her a friend whose advice was sought on many occasions.

Even at this early stage of her career, her powers of organisation and the influence she exercised on the lives of older children and adolescents clearly indicated her fitness for responsible educational and social work.

After four years at Deptford Jessie Ritch entered Salisbury Training College, where she took an advanced course in English and Geography, and also developed her natural gift for drawing. She became at this time much interested

in Divinity and for her work in this subject she was presented with the Archbishop's Certificate. Her Principal said that her religious care for the subject, her power over language and her strong influence would single her out as a possible specialist in religious teaching. She was head student of her year with a strong and far-reaching influence for good. When she left college the Principal wrote to her a very warm and affectionate letter congratulating her on her brilliance as head student. At Salisbury as at Deptford many friendships were made which lasted throughout life.

On leaving College Jessie Ritch took an appointment at a London County Council Open Air School for physically defective children. She entered into the work with enthusiasm. As a result of her teaching, art and drama were developed with excellent results, outdoor plays becoming quite a feature of the School life. Many of these children she entertained in her own home at week-ends and holidays. The change from timid, under-nourished children to happy carefree youngsters as the result of the school facilities and her loving care and interest was most marked. When she left the Head Master said that much of the School's success and its happy atmosphere were due to her influence.

Jessie Ritch next took an appointment as teacher at Queen Mary's Hospital at Carshalton. Tribute has been paid to "her exceptional power of getting into intimate and friendly contact with her pupils and extending her interest to their general welfare, taking on the voluntary responsibility for several girl's training and equipping them for posts and launching them in life." She had a natural gift for obtaining the maximum response from adolescents. This with her genius for smoothing out difficulties and establishing friendly relations between people, made a combination of efficiency, human kindness and gaiety which are only too seldom found.

After a good many years at Queen Mary's Hospital Jessie Ritch was called to undertake work among delinquent and maladjusted girls. This became the supreme work of her life. During these turbulent and difficult years, with the untiring help and companionship of those who worked with her, she cared unceasingly for these deprived and often unloved children. She gave so lovingly and generously the whole of herself, her time and her creative gifts. This was stressed in the many loving and heart-broken tributes that were given after her death. These last years of her life were not easy. The war and the resulting increase in crime and delinquency among the girls she worked for brought much pain and sadness. In spite of all the many setbacks, with all the forces of her dynamic creative and magnetic personality she brought into their starved broken lives a security and significance that was vital and necessary to their spiritual and physical well-being. Though there were many of the

children who found the odds too great and failed to make normal contacts with life, there were others who settled down as happy human beings. Many there were who in spite of short or long lapses into delinquent ways never ceased to love and revere her. This was borne out by the fact that she often received letters from them after they had passed through her hands, telling of the good and bad, the trials and errors that beset them. Some sought her out in her home for comfort and help.

In 1947 having recovered from a serious illness, Jessie Ritch returned for a time to Nursery School service, lecturing and training students for the work. Later there followed a time as Headmistress of the School at the Country Branch of the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children. It was a joy to her to be once again among little children. How she loved and talked about each one as if it held a great place in her heart as indeed it did. Her understanding of the individual psychology and need of each sick child was as always the outcome of her deep love for them.

The last appointment Jessie Ritch held was that of Headmistress of the School at Queen Mary's Hospital, where she had spent many of her earlier years. It was a triumphant climax to her career and as far as could be foreseen promised many years of steady, happy work. Her time there, however, proved to be short, for while cycling one day to school, she met with an accident, and after some weeks died without regaining consciousness.

That death should come in this way to one who possessed in so great a degree just those qualities of which the world stands so much in need is something quite beyond our understanding, but she herself, with sublime faith in the Divine ordering, would no doubt have said, "it is all part of the pattern in the web of time".

These lines written in her devotional diary on the very morning of her accident, fitly express the utter and child-like Trust and Joy in God whence she drew strength for each day as it came.

Lying quietly in my weariness;
Lying quietly in the Blessedness of the Father's love;
Lying silently in the stillness;
Lying silently without carefulness in the Sacred Heart;
So my body rests, and my mind sleeps,
So my soul returns to the Peace of God.

Jessie Ritch died in 1951

**MINUTE OF SUTTON MEETING OF THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY
OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)
REGARDING JESSIE RITCH**

ALTHOUGH the strong and serene face of our dear Friend, Jessie Ritch, with the gentle eyes, through which a deep compassion looked out on suffering, bewildered and sinning humanity, will be seen amongst us no more, her spirit remains with us as a living reality.

We are moved to record in our Minutes our gratitude to God for the inestimable privilege we have enjoyed of knowing and loving one in whom the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ was so signally manifested, and for all the blessing that has come to us, as a Meeting, through her life and service.

Jessie Ritch was among those who, in 1932, met together to consider, a proposal to start a new Meeting for Worship in Sutton, and a deep impression was made on the meeting as she solemnly charged us to give earnest thought to the seriousness of the step we had in mind. Once the decision was made, Jessie Ritch gave herself whole-heartedly to the service of the Meeting, and throughout its early years it was largely her earnest and moving ministry which knit the group together, and laid the foundations of the fellowship in Christ which we now so richly enjoy.

Although gifted with exceptional fluency and facility in expressing her thought, Jessie Ritch's ministry was the very reverse of superficial. Simple and free from intellectual subtleties, it reached down to the deep springs of spiritual life. Her voice was full, soft and melodious, and although free from trace of her northern origin, her speech had a richness and clarity which was in itself a delight to hear.

Jessie Ritch was strongly attached to her distant home in the Orkney Islands, and loved to return there when possible. In her home at Banstead, she treasured many mementoes of her native isles; things of beauty, which she loved not only for themselves, but because they embodied the patient care, skill and toil of men and women she had known and loved, and in whose lives she had shared. Especially she valued things which expressed individuality or character, or that were linked in her mind with some human story which had touched her own life at some point. Equally intense were her love of and interest in plants and flowers. She sat lightly, however, to her possessions, and in response to any manifestation of interest, a picture from her walls, a book from her shelves, or an ornament from her mantelpiece, would be taken down and handed to one, with some such words as "You have it".

We recall too, how in discussion, after giving expression to her thoughts, the lilting voice would ask, "Don't you feel that?", or "What do you think about it?", so that one felt that one's opinion really did matter.

Some of us have happy memories of her joining in excursions to Jordans, the

Blue Idol or elsewhere in the earlier days of the Meeting, and at her home there was always a warm welcome for the Meeting as a Group or for individuals. She was an ideal hostess, with a keen sense of humour and zest for fun, and more often than not someone who was lonely, homeless or convalescent or in some other difficulty, would be found sharing the shelter of her home. Many can bear witness to the healing of body and spirit which came to them through her companionship and her self-identification with their perplexities, weakness and distresses. For many years she was unselfishly aided in this service of help and hospitality by her cousin, Millie Petersen.

The fountains of the abundant life which Jessie Ritch lived were of course to be found in an inner prayer-life. Those who have shared her daily life know that it was rich in meditation, devotional reading and prayer. We saw the fruits, but the roots reached down to hidden springs. Prayer to her was something so sacred and intimate that she was never able to share it vocally in the Meeting for Worship; her sensitive spirit shrank from any exposure of the secret depths of her communion with God.

Jessie Ritch placed little value on theological orthodoxy and the conventional forms of the religious life, except in so far as they were living expressions of her fundamental conviction of the all-embracing love of God. Although her intellectual integrity would probably have precluded her alliance with any other branch of the Christian Church, it would seem that she was attracted by the symbolism which finds expression in the Catholic type of religion. This sometimes led her into ways which were somewhat at variance with traditional Quaker practices, as instanced by the little "Chapel" in her garden, with its lighted candles, but which, because it was her place of prayer, we must feel to have been a hallowed spot.

Over the years, Jessie Ritch was a true missionary; she brought many into touch with our Society, not a few of whom have found their spiritual home with us. Her life was spent helping the unfortunate, the handicapped, the helpless, the weak. She was the friend of all, old or young, but the children were always especially the object of her solicitude. She undertook the responsibility of the upbringing of more than one physically or emotionally handicapped child, and she was never tired of stressing the importance of the right training of children and young people, both in the Society and generally. The words of Scripture most often on her lips, and from which she spoke many times were "Feed my sheep; feed my lambs".

Those who have been privileged to see her surrounded by children at Hospital were impressed by the tenderness and joy which radiated from her and which called forth the love and trust of her little pupils. In the difficult task she undertook for some time as Superintendent of the Girls' Remand Home at Hammersmith, many whose lives had been spoiled and who were resentful or rebellious were unable to withhold the respect and affection which were inspired by her devotion and freedom from censorious judgment or assumption of superiority. Completely selfless, she was in truth one of the "self-spending children of the dawn and of Christ's ampler day".

In all that has been said we do not forget that our Friend was not without her human foibles; these indeed endeared her to us all the more, as we realised that she was no "plaster-saint" but compounded of the same elements as ourselves. Her enthusiasms were sometimes short-lived, but even when, as sometimes happened, she asked to be relieved of some piece of service taken up under concern, the result was often that others were drawn to share in what had been of her originating. Her life was a very full one, dedicated in all its moments to her Heavenly Father's business.

The fact is clear, we think, that underneath her unfailing serenity and abiding faith, there were strong tensions at work, and she would at intervals stay away from the Meeting for long periods, apparently somewhat out of unity with us, or perhaps (who knows?) disappointed in us. The burden of the world's suffering had been laid upon her, and one feels that she was not infrequently called on to wrestle in prayer in her own Gethsemane. So far as we know, she faced these times of inner conflict alone, and never burdened others with her deepest problems, but would wait patiently until the struggle was resolved, and then come back to us, completely united in love and fellowship.

As we think of her, we recall the great cloud of witnesses of whom she is one, and of whom it is said:

"These are they which follow the Lamb, whithersoever He goeth".

Poems thought to be written by Jessie Ritch

MEETING

Hold us close to Thee
Fold us in thy peace
Still our murmuring
Let our questions cease
Shine into our souls,
Burn our false delight,
Call us once again
"Children of the Light".

O thou following Love
Gather us to Thee
Let the silences
Of eternity
Lie around our hearts,
Till within this place
Once again we see
Vision of Thy face.

Thou that vision be
Not till we have trod
Right to Calvary
Following our God.
Set our lives on fire
Drive us through the night
Torches of Thy love,
"Children of the Light".

IN MEETING

In stillness we wait.
Sometimes we pray,
thanking God
and praising Him
"Bless the Lord, O my soul
And all that is within me
Bless His Holy Name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul
And forget not all His benefits,
Who forgiveth all thine iniquities
Who healeth all thy diseases
Who crowneth thee
With loving kindness and tender mercy."

So into our minds the thought of God flows.
And the thought of God
Is interwoven with the awareness
Of God in the minds and hearts
Of those who are sharing the silence with us.
When we remember their loving
Their loving which has blessed our lives
And their love of God,
We know God again in them
And gradually in the stillness
We realise the moving
Of a mighty power,
A blessing and a glory
That cleanses our hearts
And strengthens our souls
And flows through our being
like a great tide, vital and
Full of love and joy and peace.
So God can be met
In the gathering of Friends.

It is not always easy
To open the gates
Of ones being and feel
the Holy Spirit of God entering.
There are times when it is hard,
Sometimes we fail utterly.
All down the ages
Men have groped for that which opens
The gates of being to the awareness of
The presence of God.
Some have found sore need
of silence and solitude
wherein they could be still
enough to hear the inner voice
of God within the soul.
All those who have revealed
the ways of God to men,
all those who have passed the torch
of living spiritual experience,
have found this need of seeking
times of solitude and silence.
Jesus himself went up into the hills
alone at night to pray,

Unfinished)

ORCADIAN WINTER

Man, there's a challenge to your soul!
Where the windswept hills lie stark,
 And the winter sea,
 Sweeping high and free
Crashes onward through the dark.

The gales are blowing from the north;
There is ice on Saint Magnus' height;
 There's a roaring din,
 But the boat's crowd in
To the harbour's welcome light.
If you come from your soft southern land
To these islands blown and torn,
 You will face the night
 With a wild delight
As you feel your soul re-born!

SONNET

That stillest, deepest and most lovely joy
Which on the other side of silence lies,
Is happiness complete, without alloy;
All longings of the soul it satisfies,
The heart's desire, the body's urgent need
Are met and sanctified to inward peace;
The spirit from all fear and hunger freed—
Feels its old fetters fall—its question cease,
And tides of silence softly surge around,
Filling eternity with golden light—
Until the spirit swinging through has found
That heaven of inconceivable delight—
That utmost living joy that man may know,
The glory that set Jesus' face aglow.