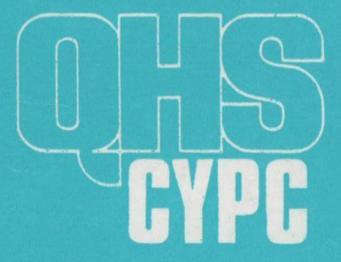
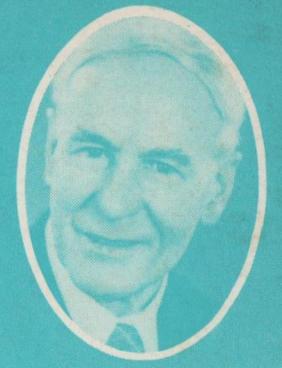


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# ORDER CATCHPOOL



QUAKER HOME SERVICE  
CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE



QHS  
70P

# **CORDER CATCHPOOL**

**A hero  
who never made  
heroic gestures**

**The Story of Corder Catchpool  
1883–1952**

by  
**Alex Bryan**

Quaker Home Service. London.



CORDER AND GWEN CATCHPOOL  
AND THEIR CHILDREN.  
*(Photograph: Friends House Library)*

**Introduction**

Ask anyone, who has ever heard of the Quakers, what it is that they stand for and it is pretty certain that some mention will be made of peace. For, the Quaker “peace testimony”, as it is called nowadays, or “our testimony against wars and fightings”, or “our testimony against all war”, as earlier Friends used to say, is well known today. It is, of course, long standing, though some of the first Quakers did serve in Oliver Cromwell’s army and some also in the royalist army of Charles I, king of England at that time.

By 1661, however, when the famous Declaration was issued to Charles II “from the harmless and innocent people of God called Quakers” there was a clear understanding by the followers of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, that it was a contradiction in terms to profess the Quaker religion and serve in the army as well. This is made clear in the statement, which reads in part as follows:

“We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world. The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.”

Since the seventeenth century Quakers have consistently said no to service in the armed forces, and many in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were fined or imprisoned for not joining up. But, of course, it has been in the present century that Friends, and many others not in membership of the Society, have made their strongest witness against taking part in war through their refusal to be compulsorily drafted into the fighting forces. Conscription was introduced during World War I in 1916 and again in World War II, which was waged between 1939 and 1945.

Many Friends were among the conscientious objectors in both those wars who, because they resisted conscription, were sent to prison for long periods in some cases. In fact, some of the World War I COs died as a result of the hardship they had to endure, while others suffered ill-health or some other form of disability for the rest of their lives due to the conditions in which they lived while serving their sentences. One of these was Corder Catchpool: he grew up in Quaker circles and remained a Quaker all his life, many years of which he devoted to the service of the Society of Friends.

## Early Life

**Thomas Corder Pettifor Catchpool**, the second of a family of seven children, was born in Leicestershire in 1883. When he was twelve years old he moved with the rest of his family to Guernsey, where he and his brothers learnt to enjoy being close to the sea. They used to go out on it in their own boat, which they became adept at painting and repairing, and they also went fishing with the local fishermen. This was a period of his life that Corder always looked back on with joy. Of course, it included going to school as well as these activities, and for three years Corder attended the Guernsey High School at St Peter's Port. Then at fifteen he went to the Quaker co-educational school at Sidcot in Somerset where he spent two years before finally going to Bootham School in York. This was a school for boys only, also run by the Quakers. There he worked hard at his lessons, but he made a name for himself in particular as a footballer – he became captain of the school team as he had also been at Sidcot. When he left Bootham at the age of nineteen he was already a convinced pacifist and anxious to take up the kind of work that would enable him to be really helpful to the people around him. To this end he would have liked to become a doctor, but unfortunately the course was too expensive, and so he trained to be an engineer.

He started his apprenticeship in 1902 in London with James Holden, a Quaker who was Locomotive Superintendent of the Great Eastern Railway, and six years later he was fully qualified. But somehow, as time went on he was not satisfied that the work he was doing on the railway was sufficiently worth while. He had found out from living in London's East End that many people were suffering from bad housing; he was friendly with many families hit by unemployment or very low pay, and he longed to be in the kind of work where he would be of personal assistance to them. Again he thought of studying medicine. By living frugally, he decided, he could now meet the fees, and so he gave up his railway job and in January 1912 he began his studies at the Medical College of the London Hospital. Alas, he soon found that he was in such a poor state of health that he could not continue them. He had not realised earlier the toll that working all day and studying in the evening over several years had taken of him. He needed a period of rest and a change of scene. Reluctantly and very disappointed, he discarded for good the idea of training to be a doctor.

Thanks to the generosity of his mother – she gave him enough money to go abroad for several weeks – he was able to go to Mürren, a winter sports resort in Switzerland, for a period of convalescence. There, for the first time, he saw the Alps and fell in love with them immediately, with the result that he returned to them again and again in the years ahead. Soon he began to feel restored in

health. Before long he had mastered the art of skiing and he quickly learnt the delights of climbing the mountain slopes. At the end of this holiday Corder went for a term to Woodbrooke, the Quaker College in Birmingham, where he studied social subjects and religion. After that he went immediately with a party of Young Friends on a visit to the United States to exchange views with Quakers there.

## Outbreak of War

On his return to England Corder, healthy and strong again, soon found a job as an engineer that enabled him to do social work among the employees of the firm he worked for and eventually led him to undertake the task of planning a garden village of a hundred cottages. Before this was completed, however, World War I broke out, and Corder felt that he had to resign from this post in order to train for voluntary ambulance work at the front.

When war was declared he was on holiday in Switzerland and therefore he experienced delays in getting back home, but this gave him plenty of time to reach a decision about his future, and by the time he found himself in England again his mind was made up. He had no doubt that it was against the will of God that he should take part in war, but he felt that it was not enough just to stay clear of military service, which since it was not yet compulsory, he could do quite easily. As a Christian he believed it was his duty to find a way of relieving some of the suffering caused by war. This he could do by training for voluntary ambulance work at the front. So he took a course of stretcher drill, first aid instruction and dressing practice, and in a matter of weeks, having donned the khaki uniform of the First Anglo-Belgian Field Ambulance, afterwards known as the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU), he was at work among the wounded at Dunkirk, where voluntary dressers were urgently needed.

Describing the situation on his arrival in France, Corder wrote:

"I shall never in my life forget the sight and sounds that met us. Figure two huge goods sheds, semi-dark, every inch of floor-space – quais, rails, everywhere – covered with the flimsy French stretchers, and on each stretcher a wounded man, desperately wounded nearly every one. The air heavy with the stench of putrid flesh, and thick with groans and cries. Four hundred wounded, and one French medical student to attend to them, two English officers helping voluntarily. Half dead as we were with fatigue, we flung ourselves into this work throughout the night, the need was so great . . . We are only able to touch a fringe. The priests touch more than we, hurrying through the solemn rite – men are dying on all sides. At dawn we began loading the hospital ships. We worked most of the day loading, for when the sheds had emptied, trains began to run through to the Quay, cattle wagons and box vans, filthy dirty, twelve stretchers apiece, packed like tinned fish. At 7 p.m. we paraded on the quay and marched to Malo, where quarters had been got for us. All dog-tired, you may guess, but after a meal I implored the O.C. to let some of us go

down to the sheds again for the night. The thought of that groaning sea of tortured men was almost more than I could stand. The O.C. was adamant – we must take rest. Perhaps he was right: he had responsibility. I thought him heartless.”

When a base hospital had been established in Dunkirk soon after Corder arrived there, he worked in it part time, often on night duty, striving always to show sympathy and love for the wounded, as the following extract from one of his many letters, later reprinted in *On Two Fronts*, shows:

“In the long night watches, when sleep is denied by suffering, and pain gnaws at the steadiest nerve, I have knelt by their bedsides, holding their hands, giving the drink incessantly demanded, doing the other little offices constantly needed, answering the repeated questions, speaking soothingly. Sometimes I have thought that the influence of a quiet personality, with a pure purpose of love and goodwill to all men, did seem to carry help and quietness.”

Sometimes he made trips risking life and limb from falling shells, to the battle front to collect wounded French soldiers. Sometimes he came across wounded Germans. These he had to help by stealth, for being enemy soldiers, they were prisoners of war, and as such he was not supposed to treat them.

In the second battle of Ypres the Germans used poisonous gas. Along with the rest of the FAU men Corder dashed to the scene of emergency and for nine days and nights they hardly slept at all. The casualties were heavy: in his own words:

“The poor, choking, gasping, dying, asphyxiated beggars were already beginning to pour in. We could do nothing but transport them with the utmost speed to safety and proper attention. All through the night our buses beat it back and forth to the railhead. That night the Germans were within one and a half miles of our ambulance post, which stood unprotected in the middle of a great rent. The battle raged for five days and five nights before it began to abate. We had the soup kitchen sent down, and every second of the twenty-four hours we were serving out hot Oxo and cocoa. Periodically they shelled the village. We ran the gauntlet until one driver was wounded and two cars put *hors de combat*: then we made a detour. The wounded followed the asphyxiated . . . Still we worked and flung ourselves down now and then for a brief sleep . . .”

In 1915 Corder was made adjutant of the FAU, a post he accepted because he felt it his duty to do so. He would have preferred to have continued in close contact with the wounded, and the doctors and nurses in the danger zones, instead of working in the comparative comfort of an office in Poperinghe, but there, it seemed, he was needed even more than at the front. So he put on one side his own wishes and got on with the job to the best of his ability. No doubt he would have continued this service as long as it was needed, but when military service seemed likely to become compulsory for certain groups in Britain he began to think that perhaps he ought to “return to ordinary civilian work, and take my stand with those who are resisting pressure for military service.” Thus, when in 1916 the Military Service (No. 2) Act was introduced by Parliament, he resigned from the FAU and returned home. As a member of

the Unit he would have been exempt from military service, but he was convinced that he ought to join the ranks of those Friends and others who were witnessing against conscription on grounds of conscience by refusing to accept conditions of exemption. To do otherwise, he believed, would have been to compromise – to take the easy way out – and he was not willing to do that. He wanted to make a public witness against conscription and warfare in general, and to this end he was prepared, if necessary, to endure personal suffering and hardship.

### Imprisonment

So, when the War Office withdrew his certificate of exemption on his giving up his work with the FAU and he was required to register for military service, Corder applied for absolute exemption. In due course he was called before a tribunal and given the chance to state his case. He explained that he found “the sinfulness of war” so appalling that he could take no part in it; nor could he just accept some alternative service. That would be like drifting with the tide instead of actively resisting it, he explained. But the tribunal failed to agree with the stand he was making. They did not dispute his sincerity; they understood that he could not undertake service with the fighting forces, but they could not see why he should object to non-combatant service in the RAMC, for example. So he was given exemption from combatant service only. He appealed against this decision and again asked for complete exemption, but the Appeal Tribunal only granted him exemption on condition that he took up some approved work of national importance. Corder was not prepared to do this, for the reasons given above, and so, technically, he was a soldier turned deserter and therefore liable for arrest.

In January 1917 he was taken with seven others to await court martial which resulted in a sentence of 112 days imprisonment with hard labour. This was the first of several prison sentences served by Corder in several different prisons. By the time he was finally released on April 8, 1919, he had done 2¼ years’ hard labour, most of it in solitary confinement under hard physical conditions.

In *Letters of a Prisoner* – a collection of letters written by Corder while “inside” and published later – there are some vivid accounts of prison life as he experienced it. For example:

“In prison one does not get an excess of food (I often feel as though I could confront and deal with a week’s dinners at a sitting without inconvenience!) and I know how soon one experiences loss of usual vigour, mental and bodily. At Norton Barracks I ran several miles at a stretch, and when I got to Scrubs I was inclined to look down on the large number of men who fell out on the command to ‘double’ at exercise. A fortnight later I was one of them. I could no more run above a couple of rounds than I could fly. Gradually one establishes an equilibrium on a lower level.”

He had a daily amount of work to do – usually stitching mail bags. Exercise was taken in the prison yard surrounded by high walls. Silence was the watchword; talk with fellow prisoners was forbidden. Because the cells were badly lit the many letters Corder wrote from prison had to be written close to the cell window. Kneeling on the floor he used his stool as a table. In the winter months he suffered from cold. Added to these discomforts was frequent toothache which he suffered through lack of adequate dental treatment. In addition he had difficulty in sleeping at night.

But the worst of Corder's troubles were mental – “the cruelty of absolute silence”, being cut off from other people, the thought of the war going on and on, and of the dead and the wounded and their suffering families. He missed the sight of the hills and of fields and gardens which he loved so much. At times he suffered bouts of depression. Who would not in similar circumstances? He once wrote:

“During a continuous spell of some sixty hours' rain, the perpetual twilight in the cell, the incessant trickling day and night of a water pipe just outside the windows quite got on my nerves . . . If you could see our exercise ground these days, with pools of mud and water enhancing its other attractions – the only scenery we get – you would think it the dimmest place on earth, as I do, squelching around in leaky shoes, damp socks and black feet . . .”

However, he took comfort in little things. When he was locked away in Exeter prison he delighted in the sound of the cathedral bells. At times, while he was in Ipswich prison, he was cheered by the sparrows that came to his window ledge and he found them really funny. He could hardly see them from his stool. “But sometimes,” he wrote, “I've seen a row of half a dozen wee heads looking curiously in at me. *Die Kleinen* (the little ones) I call them.” Imagine his delight, too, when he noticed that a big spider had built a web outside his window. He felt that he had a companion at last in those grim surroundings.

After some time in prison Corder was allowed to have books sent in to him and he took advantage of this to obtain the kind that would help him prepare for work outside after the war was over. He had come to realise that to be a peacemaker it was not enough simply to object to taking part in military service during a war. He decided that it called for a life devoted to positive work of reconciliation – to strengthening the desire for peace and brotherhood among ordinary people here and abroad. He began to think how it might be possible for him to help break down the barriers of hatred created by the war. His thoughts turned to the possibility of going to live in Berlin where he might be able to establish a Quaker centre – an oasis of friendship and fellowship. To this end he began to study German.

### Freedom Again

Eventually the war ended on November 11, 1918, but, along with a large number of COs, Corder had to remain in prison for a further five months before he was finally released. As soon as he was free he applied to join the parties of Friends going out to Germany to do relief work where starvation was taking a heavy toll on the lives of children in particular. But once there he soon fell ill – his resistance to infection was low, he had not recovered his usual good health after being so long in prison, and he was perhaps suffering from under-nourishment through sharing some of his food rations with hungry women and children.

There is surely a good side to everything. Seriously ill though he was, through the nursing care he received from one of his fellow relief workers, Gwen Southall, he made a good recovery and the friendship that developed between them led to their marriage. Together they continued to work in Berlin, helping to run a large-scale feeding scheme for children and students managed by Friends. Corder was keen to feed minds as well as bodies. In an effort to build an atmosphere of trust between the Germans and their former enemies he distributed appropriate books and pamphlets and wrote a booklet on Quakerism which was published in several languages.

In the autumn of 1921 Corder and Gwen went on a belated honeymoon for an alpine holiday and then back to England, where it was necessary for Corder to find paid employment. He returned to the job he had left at the beginning of the war at the cotton-mill in Darwen, Lancashire, where he had started building a garden village. He took up residence with his young wife in one of the houses there and went on to supervise the building of thirty more and to found a community centre for social and educational activities. He held classes in French and German and helped with drama. Nor did the Catchpools forget Germany either. There was always a stream of German visitors to their home, and each year Corder led a party of about thirty work people from the mill on holidays abroad. In this way local prejudice against the Germans was worn down.

It was while they lived at Darwen that the Catchpool family grew from two to six with the arrival, over six years, of three girls and a boy, and they were all happy there. Yet when in 1930 the Friends Service Council invited Corder and Gwen to undertake a further term of service in Berlin, the temptation was too great. Corder had always longed to get back there, so when this opportunity arose the family moved, after careful consideration, to Germany. Once again Corder was to be able to encourage understanding between people of different nations. To this end he worked all day in the office of the Quaker Centre in Berlin and on Sundays he and Gwen often entertained twenty to thirty guests

for tea so that they could learn to know and understand one another in a safe and friendly environment.

### Hitler Comes to Power

On January 31, 1933, Adolf Hitler, leader of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party in Germany, became Reich Chancellor and in the following year, Führer – the most powerful position in the land. Under his regime democracy was thrown overboard and he ruled the country as a dictator. Anyone who refused to toe the Party line was in danger of losing his life. Minority groups such as the Jews were eventually almost exterminated in concentration camps.

The first organised assault on the Jews followed shortly after Hitler's rise to power. Of this Corder wrote:

“One morning there came into the Quaker office from all over Germany letters describing the smashing of Jewish shop-windows, defacement of professional nameplates, disfigurement of monuments, and imploring the Quakers to use their restraining influence – an influence always slight, and now, alas, rapidly waning. It was the day of the long-heralded ‘Boycott’. We walked round the city, observing the shop-picketing by SA men at Jewish doorways, and entered them as a sign of sympathy – far easier for foreigners to do than Germans; we saw the same brownshirts grimly patrolling the streets of the poorer Jewish populace in threes and fours.”

Before Corder was able to do anything in reply to the appeals to intervene against the persecution of the Jews his home was raided by five Gestapo (Secret Police) and a Nazi officer, and the house was searched. Then Corder was taken off to Gestapo headquarters for questioning. After thirty-six hours' detention he was finally released “on the word of a Quaker” that he would not run away, but he was never brought to trial, although he had been charged with subversive action against the government. The important thing for him was that he could continue his humanitarian work from the Quaker office, though he had to be careful not to give any help that could be interpreted as anti-government political action.

One lesson that Corder Catchpool learnt from his brief imprisonment was that so far he had avoided making contact with Nazis because he disliked their ideas. He had therefore been false to his role of ambassador for peace and to the Quaker belief that there is some goodness to be found in all people. He decided from then on to make more intimate contacts with Nazis in order to understand them better. For this he was sometimes criticised by his friends, who thought he must be pro-Nazi. But this was not so. He called himself a reconciler. “To be a reconciler,” he said, “does not mean that we try to reconcile ourselves, or others, to evil, or to say that evil is not evil and try to reconcile it with good. It means trying to *understand* how the evil came about and to attain a right attitude to the evil-doer – pity, or perhaps repentance for our own evil towards him.”

He believed that many of his friends went wrong by feeling bitter towards the Nazis. “Where there is bitterness there cannot be understanding,” he used to say. Through his contact with Nazi supporters he was able to get across a message that probably caused some of them seriously to question some of the methods adopted by the Party members – their inculcation of hatred for the Jews, their cruel treatment of political enemies in concentration camps.

Alongside this work Corder assisted many Jews to leave the country. He tried to persuade the government to close the concentration camps. He even tried to meet Hitler face to face to press his point, but here he failed. He never met the Führer.

One of his main objects was “to keep open bridges”, as he said, so that there could be two-way contacts between Germans and people from other countries. He made it possible for politicians, writers, religious and social workers – even holidaymakers – from abroad to have contact with suitable German people. He made similar introductions for Germans who wanted to visit England. He arranged exchanges for students, schoolchildren, work campers, youth hostellers and others. In all this work he was inspired by his over-riding belief that at heart all humans have a spark of goodness in them which needs to be nurtured so that it can overcome the evil in them.

When the Catchpools went to Berlin in 1931 it was for three years, but there was so much to be done that they stayed on until finally in 1936 lack of money and worry about keeping their children in Berlin in such troubled times persuaded them to return to England. There they settled down in London's Hampstead, where they acquired 49 Parliament Hill, a largish house which became Corder's home for the rest of his life. From this base, where he had his office, he carried out his self-assumed role as an ambassador for peace. He made many journeys to Berlin and to areas of special tension in central Europe in an effort to influence people there in a position of power to adopt policies that would prevent another war. He shared his home also with many refugees from Hitlerism, giving them time to readjust, listening to their sad stories, and offering them his personal help. But the situation in Europe continued to grow worse and worse as Nazi aggression increased and first Austria then Czechoslovakia were annexed by Hitler to become part of the German Reich.

In 1938 came the most concerted Nazi attack on the Jews in Germany. Early in the morning of November 11 almost every Jewish home was invaded, the menfolk were taken off to concentration camps, their property was damaged and their wives and families were left among the ruins, terrified at what might be their fate.

## War Again

In the spring of 1939 Hitler threatened an attack on Poland. The outbreak of World War Two was getting closer, in spite of the efforts of Corder and many other pacifists to prevent it. It was no good: hostilities commenced on September 3 of that year. A month later Corder wrote to a friend about the efforts he and others had been making for several years to preserve the peace:

“We have failed, not, I think, because it was inherently impossible in the given situation, but primarily because there were too few working for the same end, and too many acting in an exactly opposite spirit.”

Even so he did not consider that the work had been in vain and he certainly did not give up hope of being able to influence the course of events towards the cessation of hostilities and the restoration of peace. In the late autumn of 1939 he went on a mission to Holland and Belgium to talk to politicians about the possibility of forming a group of mediators. Early in 1940 he wrote to the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, pleading for an attempt to halt the war, but without avail. He carried on an incessant correspondence with many important people for, as he once explained, he found himself “still dedicated life and soul to work for mutual understanding, even though, amid the rising tides of hatred and hostility which make cruel the minds of naturally kindhearted folk, such efforts may be limited to removing misconceptions, based on bias, half-truth, selected or distorted fact, that thrive in a wartime atmosphere. And what a need there is, when press and propaganda with their multiplied and megaphoned voices are working overtime to produce or aggravate the diseases of mistrust. That is my own particular war effort.”

So he continued to be busy: he travelled up and down the country speaking at meetings; he spoke on behalf of COs at tribunals; he visited those in Brixton Prison where he went as a Quaker chaplain. Seeing the need for stretcher-bearers when the air-raids on London started towards the autumn of 1940, he offered his services to the local hospital and continued for the rest of the war to give this help on two nights a week almost without fail. He also assisted in East End shelters.

One of the worst features of World War Two was the suffering of the civilian population here and in Germany as a result of the night bombing attacks on the large towns. In 1941 there was widespread destruction of shops and homes and in Britain many people were killed and injured. In retaliation the Royal Air Force devastated towns in Germany, causing untold hardship to women and children in particular. In Britain protest was raised against the growing practice of indiscriminate bombing by both Germany and the Allies. The Committee for the Abolition of Nightbombing was formed of which Corder Catchpool became the honorary secretary, devoting much of his time to its work. He

helped to organise a petition calling for the abolition of nightbombing by mutual consent of the warring governments. But the appeal fell on deaf ears. In 1942 its name was changed to the Bombing Restriction Committee and its activities were greatly increased but, apparently, to no effect. The longer the war continued the more most people here thought in terms of merciless destruction of the enemy and the imposition of “unconditional surrender”. So by 1944 Corder realised that the war could not be halted in mid-stream. Yet he did not give up trying to persuade others to recognise the futility and the inhumanity of all war. Not even when his own home was bombed and set on fire did he express hatred and resentment for the enemy.

Instead, he continued to address meetings and to write articles to remind people of what he called the “forgotten Germany”, the Germany not of Adolf Hitler, but of better days. He wanted, as far as he could, to influence the people he met to think of the Germans not with anger and hate, but with sorrow and understanding. He knew that to treat the vanquished enemy with retribution, subjecting men, women and children to harsh peace terms, would only sow the seeds of future war.

When the end of the war came Corder was keen to go to Germany to renew old friendships and restart constructive and reconciling work there, but it was nearly a year before the opportunity came. Meanwhile, he helped from his home to organise the collection of food and to send parcels to the hungry countries of Europe. Then in 1946 he went for a brief visit to Germany, and a year later he and his wife, Gwen, gladly accepted an invitation to act as house father and mother at the Quaker Rest House in Bad Pyrmont for six months. This had been started by British Friends in 1933 as a place where men and women who had suffered from Nazi persecution in prison or concentration camp could recuperate mentally and physically. Now it was a place for a dozen or so guests at a time to spend at least two weeks: half would be Germans in need of a rest from their hard labours as social workers perhaps, while the rest would be displaced persons – Russians, Poles, Letts, Latvians and Estonians mostly.

Over the next few years Corder made several visits to Germany. In between he remained as busy as ever at home: correspondence with his friends abroad occupied much of his time; he had guests to entertain, committee meetings to attend – he was in touch with all the main peace organisations in Britain and Germany – and conferences to address.

## The Last Climb

In September 1952 his busy life came to unexpected end. At the age of sixty-nine he died as the result of a climbing accident. Corder had enjoyed

mountaineering for many years, especially in the Alps. For him the ideal holiday was in the mountains climbing with his wife and his children. Indeed, it has been said that "there was something Alpine in Corder's character. He turned to the mountains for inspiration and comfort, running into their embrace like a child to its mother's arms, finding spiritual peace even while the body was using its last powers. And in the same way people turned to Corder for inspiration and comfort, for a sense of eternal sureness, peace and purity such as he found among the snow-covered heights."\*

In all those years he climbed many summits, but Monte Rosa had so far defeated him. Corder was not a man to accept defeat, as this account of his life has shown. On September 8, 1952, he and Gwen set out to try again to scale this peak and realise his ambition. "I have dreamed of it," said Corder, "day and night; it is the one thing I long to do. I have even studied maps when I ought to have been doing something else." The weather was good at the start. He reached the first of the twin peaks of Monte Rosa, the 15,000 foot Zumsteinspitze, and had just started off towards the second when he suddenly slipped on the rocks. Gwen managed to arrest his fall with the rope and he was helped up the eighteen feet he had fallen. Undaunted he insisted on going on.

The pace was slow, but eventually the second peak, the Dufourspitze, was reached – the long desired goal achieved. The descent began, but it soon became clear that in falling Corder must have fractured his skull, for before he had gone far he found that he had become blind. Suddenly he slipped again, and Gwen and the mountain guide who was with them, shot down over the ice to land in soft snow. There they all stayed in worsening weather until daylight, when Corder could see a little again and felt ready to go on. They continued for seven hours over the ice in a blizzard, but Corder's strength finally failed and Gwen and the guide had to leave him to go for help. By the time his rescuers reached him, it was too late. They found Corder's body lying in the snow. He had fallen over and died; his cap and scarf had blown away. He was buried in a mountain village in Switzerland.

At a memorial meeting in London when Corder was remembered with thankfulness for the life he had lived by a large gathering of his friends, the words of a Swiss Quaker spoke for all who had known him well:

"We know how he loved our high mountains because he felt the presence of God in the pure and refreshing atmosphere of their lofty summits, but we felt that presence in the life of that brave, humble, good and wise friend."

By another of his friends he was remembered as a hero who never made heroic gestures, and as a great man, who would have none think him so.

\* *Indomitable Friend* by William R. Hughes

The world still has great need of people like Corder Catchpool – ready to take Jesus as their model and to try to follow in his footsteps at all times, regardless of the personal cost. Thirty years after his death his example of untiring devotion to the cause of peace and the relief of human suffering caused by war continues as a source of inspiration to all of us.

#### Suggestions for further reading:

"Indomitable Friend: Corder Catchpool 1883–1952" by William R. Hughes (George Allen & Unwin). Reprinted Housmans 1964, 25p.

"Corder Catchpool" by Jean C. Greaves (QHS).

"On Two Fronts" by Corder Catchpool (George Allen & Unwin).

"Letters of a Prisoner" by Corder Catchpool (George Allen & Unwin).

"Quaker Pioneers" by Stephen Allott (Bannisdale Press) chapter II, "Corder Catchpool: In the Friends Ambulance Unit".

#### Follow up work

Some questions for discussion for ten-year olds and upwards after reading the story of Corder Catchpool.

1. What would you say were the outstanding qualities of Corder Catchpool as a man?
2. There can be no doubt that the life he led and the beliefs he held had their roots in Quakerism. What are the basic beliefs of the Quakers?
3. Why did Corder Catchpool decide to leave the Friends Ambulance Unit? If you had been in his place what would you have done? Have you thought about whether you would be a conscientious objector to military service? Would you be willing to accept conditional exemption? Would you be prepared to go to prison for your beliefs?
4. Have you any views about Corder Catchpool's attempts to get to know and understand Nazis? Which group of people here and abroad should we be trying to know better in the interest of the peace of the world?
5. Corder Catchpool used to say, "Where there is bitterness there cannot be understanding." Can you think of examples of bitter feeling on your part which have made it impossible for you to be reconciled with someone who has offended or hurt you?
6. Corder Catchpool was not a man to accept defeat easily. How does this story of his life bear this out? Find examples.

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