

SIGNALS

OF the hero of this story I know little, but as that little is known perhaps only to me, I record it.

It must have been some time in 1915 that I first met him. At a dismal 'depôt' in the Midlands, I was sharing a leaky tent with a fellow Second Lieutenant known to his friends as 'Jimbo.' As we were endeavouring, by means of a Primus stove, to dry some clothes faster than the leakage of the tent wetted them, we were nowise pleased to hear that a newcomer was allotted to our tent, and to have to make room for the baggage that his batman dropped squelching in the entrance. Its owner soon followed, muttering frightful things about the climate and the Kaiser.

He would have been tall if he had not stooped. He had thick black eyebrows that almost met, and that gave him a scowling expression belied by the genial smile of his thick lips. We soon learned that he was our senior as an officer, and that he was some kind of engineer by profession. It was some hours later that I found he was a Catholic. Though naturally silent, he was by no means unsociable, and he dropped into his place in that tent as though he had known us for years.

There is a conflict between openness and shyness in the English nature, which showed itself, in the intimacies of tent-sharing, by the fact that only very unpleasant characters were given the dignity of their surnames; and yet no one would so intrude upon the privacy of a comrade as to address him by his Christian name. A nickname was always forthcoming, which solved the difficulty. Any name would do, a mispronunciation of the surname, or sometimes a Christian name, provided it were not the real one.

The labels on the newcomer's luggage showed an undistinguishable surname preceded by the abbreviation 'Wm.'

The next morning I was awakened by the voice of Jimbo shouting: 'Guglielmo! About turn! One, two, three, four! About turn! Guglielmo! One, two,' etc., until Wm. acknowledged his indebtedness to Jimbo for waking him in a phrase which I am unable to submit to the editor. 'Guglielmo' he remained for a while, but our increasing respect for him led us to anglicise it as 'Guggly' before many days had passed.

As I say, I soon found he was a Catholic—or he found that I was one. As I had been a Catholic for two months, and had hardly spoken to a fellow-Catholic since my reception, I suggested an immediate visit to the Mess to celebrate this happy meeting. On the way there he told me that he had been received, with hardly any instruction, less than a fortnight ago, and while we drank what claimed to be old ale, he showed his respect for my seniority by asking me theological conundrums to which I could give him no answer whatever.

Guggly was at that depôt for about three weeks, and was then sent to join a division doing its final training on Salisbury Plain. I will tell how I met him again, but first I will record my impression of him at this period.

I have said that he was by nature a silent man, and as all this happened in the Army in 1915, it will be understood that we had little conversation. I learned nothing of his past or parentage, but I gathered that he had taken his B.Sc. at Cambridge.

I have said that he stooped. It was not a stoop of weakness, but rather of pensiveness, and it was emphasised by his habit of keeping his right hand in his jacket pocket. To explain this I must tell that the

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pocket contained two things dear to him. One was his pipe, along with tobacco-pouch and matches, the other was a small slide-rule. This slide-rule was usually in his grasp, and showed why he entered so little into conversation. He would appear to be listening to what others said, and then, instead of joining in, he would produce the slide-rule and verify the calculation that he had been making in his head.

This mathematical preoccupation kept him from conversation, but it did not make him absent-minded. He must have had a very well controlled brain, for he compelled it to learn whatever was needed. From the procedure of Courts Martial to the technicalities of sanitation he was a reliable authority, and the Quartermaster lived in fear of his knowledge of 'expendable stores.'

Of his intellectual make-up, I only know that he loved Chaucer; that, like most mathematicians, he was keenly sensitive to good music; and that in cramming for some examination he had once tackled the Greek of one of the Gospels, and learned a good deal of it by heart.

Of his conversion I know nothing, except that he had previously been an agnostic, with a tendency to pantheism. Faith came to him when he was hourly awaiting orders for the front. He found a priest, explained the situation, and begged that he might be received at once. The priest must have seen the reality of his faith behind his ignorance of detail, for he received him after a rapid canter through the Penny Catechism, and trusted him to fill the gaps in his knowledge at the earliest opportunity. To this end, Guggly brought away 'one of each' of the C.T.S. pamphlets that he found in the church. I fancy that stall cannot have been one of the 'Forward' ones, for the dozen or so pamphlets were just

the ones that droop and get dusty—lives of foundresses and missionaries, and exposures of various heresies of which Guggly had not previously heard. Guggly read these again and again, and they were tattered before he had an opportunity to fill his pockets with a fresh supply. He learnt much from them, but it was his delight in the new-found Catholic atmosphere that gave him such an appetite for them. No matter what the subject, the writer spoke for the Church—he stood upon the rock, and it was this feeling of standing, with all the others, on the rock, that was Guggly's most thrilling experience at this time. After his journey over the shifting sands of agnosticism, deluded by the mirages of scientific speculation, he felt the rock to be a thing almost unbelievably good. He would advance wild theories in order to provoke me, as a senior Catholic, to contradict them. One might say that he was stamping on the rock to enjoy the new sensation of its resistance.

Guggly's knowledge of things Catholic was restricted to certain dogmas that he savoured almost to the point of intoxication, the others he had swallowed without tasting them. Of a Catholic's intellectual heritage he knew nothing. He knew nothing of the liturgy, and he had heard no plain-chant recognisable as such. The few Catholic churches he had entered had disgusted him by their tawdryness and tortured him by their harmonium-led howlings. He had never spoken to a monk or nun, nor had he read anything about contemplation, except such references as he found in the C.T.S. pamphlets. What he had seized upon—or what had seized on him—was the essential Christian dogma of the Divinity of Christ, with its corollaries—His Omnipotence and His Accessibility. An accident, if one may call anything such, led him to concentrate his attention on this last fact, and that is the whole point of this story.

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Guggly's job in the Army was Signals. Signals meant not only flag-wagging, but every means of communication, from wireless to despatch-riders. A Signal Officer had to know all about telephones, heliographs, signalling lamps, semaphore, and all the organisation involved. It was a very difficult job, and it entailed an appalling amount of responsibility. It is little wonder that, as the time approached when messages would become literally matters of life and death, a Signal Officer became saturated with 'Signals' and thought of everything in terms of communications.

Our days were mostly spent in an imaginary campaign in which we had to establish communication between imaginary units and imaginary headquarters that were always being moved about. To this game, the officers in command would add realistic touches by cutting our telephone-wires, taking our despatch-riders prisoners, announcing that transmitting stations were destroyed, and so on. When all seemed to be going like clockwork, an operator would shout that he was 'Dis.,' which meant that he was disconnected. Then was the rush to find the break in the line, and meanwhile to get messages through by some other means.

Lines of communication radiate from Headquarters downwards—Army to Divisions, Division to Brigades, Brigade to Battalions, and so on. Always a unit must keep in touch with the headquarters from which it receives its orders, supplies, etc., and also it should be in touch laterally with the units on either side of it.

All this was exacting work for all concerned, and towards evening the signal 'C.I.' was anxiously awaited. This stood for 'Come in,' and how willingly we obeyed! What a rolling up of flags and reeling up of cable. How we scuttled back to camp! Soon we might eat and sleep, but first we must stand around

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the Commanding Officer and hear his criticism. Questions had to be answered. Why was the helio not used at such a moment? Why, was some unit 'dis.' at another? Why did such and such messages take so long on the way?

Back in camp we seemed to eat and drink signals, and sleeping we dreamt signals. Technical slang became part of our language and technical metaphors our most natural means of expression. Let me give an example—

Although I was quite as ignorant as he, Guggly continued to ask me questions on the strength of my seniority as a Catholic. Thus—'If a convert under instruction gets the "C.I." before he is baptised, can he have Catholic burial?'

'To get the "C.I."?' What metaphor could be more exact for Death? It is the cessation of the day's work—the moment after which no mistakes can be put right. It is the return to Headquarters. Those who have signalled from afar will now speak face to face. It is the call to refreshment and rest, but first it is the call to Judgment.

Another example: Being on duty one Sunday, Guggly had to march a body of troops to the local Anglican church. Having marched them back again, he remarked: 'They've got a jolly fine organ down there, but the whole show is absolutely "dis."' There could hardly be a terser summary of the Anglican position.

These things affected our speech, but they affected Guggly's outlook, and ultimately his conduct.

I have said that he realised vividly the accessibility of Our Lord by means of prayer. He might have expressed it by saying that every unit could be through to G.H.Q., and that it was never G.H.Q.'s fault if they were 'dis.' He seemed to take it for granted that all Catholics prayed as he did, and I gathered

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that his method was to pray vigorously when he was vigorous and weariedly when he was weary. When he was merry he prayed merrily, and when he was sad he prayed dolefully. In sober mood he prayed soberly, but if he were drunk he prayed drunkenly. From the first his moods did not stop his prayers, but, before long, I fancy his prayers stopped, or greatly modified, his moods.

It must have been about four months after Guggly's departure that I met him again. I, too, had been sent to Salisbury Plain; and, learning that his Division was still in the neighbourhood, I borrowed a motor-bicycle, and spent a free Sunday evening in trying to find him.

His camp looked like a dirty gridiron of canvas huts, and it was surrounded by incinerators, whose function was to convert stinking refuse into stinking smoke, and distribute it at nose level. Each hut was approached from a cinder track by means of duck boards in a state of disrepair that made them formidable obstacles. The huts themselves were made of the canvas known as 'rot-proof,' which may have meant that that was the only thing against which it *was* proof.

It was supper time when I found Guggly so he led me off at once to his Mess. During the meal conversation was general and genial, but I noticed a change in Guggly. His health had evidently suffered badly from overwork, he looked a good deal older, and he was slower of speech. Between courses his right hand was in his jacket pocket as of old, and yet his slide-rule was not there, for that was sticking out of his breast pocket. After supper, when I offered him tobacco, I found he no longer smoked. I realised then that the only thing in that right pocket was his rosary, and that when he was not telling the beads he was clutching the crucifix.

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Before returning to my camp I accompanied him on a round of inspection that gave us a half-hour of intermittent conversation.

As of old, he asked me questions on faith and morals. Since our last meeting he had had little time for reading, and only once had he been able to go to Confession; and yet I felt he understood so much more than I did that it was absurd that he should consider me as the senior. His questions were all expressed in the metaphor of our occupation, and here are, as well as I can remember them, some typical examples :

‘ It is a first principle, isn’t it? that each unit is responsible for keeping in communication with Headquarters. It must not expect Headquarters to establish a line and ring up.

‘ The only way to be sure you are in touch is to keep sending messages.

‘ Every unit needs its line to Headquarters to ask for supplies, reinforcements, etc., but the primary object of the line is not the sending of these messages, but the receiving of orders from Headquarters. The importance of never being “dis.” for a moment is due to this. A unit is useless unless it is listening all the time for orders.

‘ Intercommunication between units, what we call “lateral” communication, is most helpful and useful; but it is very liable to be cut or tapped by the enemy. Also it is not necessary if all units are through to Headquarters. It is far more important to secure the line to Headquarters, and trust them to plug you through to other units, than to give much attention to lateral lines.

‘ When messages are not acknowledged, it does not always mean that they have not been read at Headquarters. There is the obvious case, in heliograph

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signalling, when one helio is in the sun and the other becomes shadowed by a cloud. If you get no acknowledgment you overhaul your gear, test the alignment of your helio, and then send each message twice over and very carefully. I take it that this is the commonest conditions of our communications with Heaven.'

Only once after that did I see Guggly again, and that was three days before he was killed. I had been moved to a camp near Aldershot, and about a month after the meeting on Salisbury Plain I had to 'take over' some equipment that was a dozen miles away. Not wishing to spend the day on an army waggon, I sent that ahead in charge of a sergeant, and overtook it later on a bicycle. Having received and checked the equipment, and seen it loaded, I again left the waggon, to the sergeant, and set out to try a different road back by way of seeing the country.

Before I had gone far, I came upon a motor lorry that had stopped in order that its high load of baggage might be more securely roped on. As I passed the number on it caught my eye, and it was the number of Guggly's Division.

Enquiry proved that they were off to France, that the Division was then entraining, and that only one more lorry was to come. This was in charge of an officer—it might be Guggly or it might not, no one was sure. Anyway, the lorry would be along in a few minutes. It was coming from the camp not half a mile away.

I turned down a side road, as directed, and soon saw in a field a lorry receiving the last of its load. On the top of the huge pile stood Guggly, shouting instructions in a tired but terrific voice to the men who were adjusting the ropes. The engine started, the men clambered up; and, as I reached the gate, the

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lorry swung out into the road, and Guggly caught sight of me waving my hat. He shouted: 'Hold the line to G.H.Q. for me; I'm afraid I'm "dis."''

'You can't be "dis.," man,' I shouted back.

'I'm still signalling,' he yelled, as the lorry gathered speed, and he waved to me with his left hand, for his right hand was in his jacket pocket.

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