

"S.O.S."

THE TRUE STORY OF THE DISTRESS CALL.

What do the letters S.O.S., used by ships at sea as a distress call, stand for? The answer is given by Jack Binns, in the *New York Tribune*. It is simple, but in view of the general aptitude to assign a catch phrase to any arbitrary group of letters, a simple answer will not suffice the average person. In this case, we are told, the letters are associated with the cry "Save Our Souls!" so far as the public is concerned, while the call C.Q.D., which it superseded, meant "Come Quick, Danger!" to the layman. Says Mr. Binns, as quoted in *The Radio World* (New York):—

"As a matter of cold fact, neither of these two phrases is correct. Unfortunately, it is the truth that both group of letters were adopted as a matter of expediency, and not because of their peculiar susceptibility to dramatic interpretation. The original C.Q.D. was arrived at by the ordinary process of evolution in the detail work of communication, while S.O.S. was an arbitrary adoption of the first international radio telegraph convention.

"The story of the distress call has never been adequately told, and in view of the large number of questions that have been raised on the point, I am going to outline in this article the history of the famous calls.

"When wireless telegraphy was first placed into commercial use the ordinary telegraph and cable system had been in operation several years and had reached a high state of development. The operation of the latter systems was governed by an international convention which periodically laid down rules to meet necessary operating requirements. Among these rules was a series of double letter symbols which were used by operators to facilitate the working of special circuits, and these symbols invariably incorporated the letter Q because it is one of the least used letters in the alphabet, and in the continental code its dots and dashes are distinctive. In these various groups there was the signal C.Q. This was used on telegraph lines where more than one station was on the line, and it meant that the operator sending the call wanted every station along the line to listen in to what he was about to say.

Now, most of these operating symbols were adopted by Marconi's new company when it began commercial operation at sea in the year 1902. The call C.Q. particularly adapted itself to wireless use, because any ship hearing the call would answer and thus establish communication with the ship making the call.

"As the system gradually developed there were a number of minor emergency calls made and it was quickly observed that the call C.Q. was not of sufficient distinction for emergency purposes. As a result of these experiences, the following general order, known as 'Circular No. 57,' was issued by the Marconi Company on January 7, 1904:—

"It has been brought to our notice that the call C.Q. (all stations), while being satisfactory for general purposes, does not sufficiently express the urgency required in a signal of distress.

"Therefore, on and after February 1, 1904, the call to be given by ships in distress or in any other way requiring assistance, shall be "C.Q.D."

"This signal must on no account be used except by order of the captain of the ship in distress or other vessels or stations transmitting the signal on account of the ship in distress.

"All stations must recognise the urgency of this call and make every effort to establish satisfactory communication with the least possible delay.

"Any misuse of the call will result in instant dismissal of the person improperly employing it.

"This is the exact wording of the famous general order as issued. The original is now framed, and exhibited as part of the important archives of the Marconi Company. It was superseded in July, 1908, by the adoption of the call, S.O.S., as a distress signal by the International Radio-Telegraphic Convention.

"The call S.O.S. is purely arbitrary in its grouping of letters, and was chosen because of the unusual combina-

tions of dots and dashes which make it distinctive above all other calls. It consists of three dots, space, three dashes, space and three more dots."

The Gunpowder Plot

An article on "Father Henry Garnet and the Gunpowder Plot" in the *Birmingham Weekly Post* (November 3) may be recommended as a model of understatement and suppression: it succeeds in conveying an entirely false impression with the minimum of direct falsehood. The author briefly describes the evidence against Father Garnet in such a way that one can receive no other idea than that the Jesuit father, after impartial trial, was reluctantly found guilty by a nobly tolerant jury. But note the actual evidence:

"He was a close friend of Robert Catesby, Thomas Winter, and the Greenway before mentioned—three of the most prominent figures in the conspiracy. [Incidentally Father Greenway was not a figure, prominent or otherwise, in the conspiracy.] . . . He was implicated in the mission of Guido Fawkes into Flanders about Easter, 1605."

But as the mission in question had nothing whatever to do with the plot, the mention just here seems scarcely relevant. That, then, is the evidence that Father Garnet was a friend of the criminals, and had previously concurred in the sending of one of them on a quite blameless errand. Add to that that he was a Catholic priest at a time when that was treason, and you have all that could be brought against him.

There are, however, two further points in the article:

"At Father Garnet's trial, Lord Salisbury told him that 'all his defence was simple negation.' . . ."

In other words, he pleaded "not guilty."

It is a principle of British law that the prosecution must prove its charges; here the prosecution with bland barbarity threw the onus of proof on to the accused.

The second point leaves one gasping.

"When the Lords Commissioners were satisfied that no further evidence could be obtained for him, the warrant for his execution was signed." (*Italics ours.*)

This picture of the Commissioners doing their best to find evidence on behalf of the unfortunate priest is neat; but what really took place was torture, the intercepting of letters and the utterly loathsome plan by which were overheard conversations between Father Garnet and another priest, to say nothing of the lies told by the Deans of Westminster and St. Paul's in order to trick admissions from him. All this section of the *Weekly Post* article seems contemptible in the extreme. As a summary comment it need simply be said that all historians agree that though Father Garnet knew of the plot through the confessional, he had done his best to prevent it.

The second part of the article is of less importance partly because the matter treated is less interesting, partly because the author does not show the same skill in avoiding direct untruth. He tells the story of "Father Garnet's Straw"—a piece of straw which had touched the murdered priest's head, and on which his likeness is said to have appeared. With the truth of the story we are not concerned, and it is impossible to attain any certainty about it at this distance of time, but the writer proves nothing by calling it "ridiculous" and "absurd."

Afterwards he goes on to say:

"The Privy Council commissioned Archbishop Bancroft to make an enquiry into the fable, and punish its instigators . . . and the fraud was completely exposed."

That is an untruth. The Archbishop's enquiry (which, by the way, had not the straw before it) proved nothing. All that emerged, even according to our author, was that a certain artist "believed it quite possible for an imposter to have been responsible for it." Surely a very mild form for a "complete exposure" to take! And even more significant is the fact that no one was punished. (*Catholic Truth.*)

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