The First Berlin Broadcast

[Official transcript made by the German Foreign Office]

It is just possible that my listeners may seem to detect in this little talk of mine a slight goofiness, a certain disposition to ramble in my remarks. If so, the matter, as Bertie Wooster would say, is susceptible of a ready explanation. I have just emerged into the outer world after forty-nine weeks of Civil Internment in a German internment camp and the effects have not entirely worn off. I have not yet quite recovered that perfect mental balance for which in the past I was so admired by one and all.

It's coming back, mind you. Look me up a couple of weeks from now, and you'll be surprised. But just at the moment I feel slightly screwy and inclined to pause at intervals in order to cut out paper dolls and stick straws in my hair - or such of my hair as I still have.

This, no doubt, is always the effect of prolonged internment, and since July the twenty-first, 1940, I have been spending my time in a series of Ilags. An Ilag must not be confused with an Offlag or a Stalag. An Offlag is where captured officers go. A Stalag is reserved for the rank and file. The Civil Internee gets the Ilag - and how he loves it!

Since I went into business for myself as an internee, I have been in no fewer than four Ilags - some more Ilaggy than others, others less Ilaggy than some. First, they put us in a prison, then in a barracks, then in a fortress. Then they took a look at me and the rest of the boys on parade one day, and got the right idea at last. They sent us off to the local lunatic asylum at Tost in Upper Silesia, and there I have been for the last forty-two weeks.

It has been in many ways quite an agreeable experience. There is a good deal to be said for internment. It keeps you out of the saloons and gives you time to catch up with your reading. You also get a lot of sleep. The chief drawback is that it means your being away from home a good deal. It is not pleasant to think that by the time I see my Pekinese again, she will have completely forgotten me and will bite me to the bone - her invariable practice with strangers. And I feel that when I rejoin my wife, I had better take along a letter of introduction, just to be on the safe side.

Young men, starting out in life, have often asked me "How can I become an Internee?" Well, there are several methods. My own was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there till the Germans came along. This is probably the best and simplest system. You buy the villa and the Germans do the rest.

At the time of their arrival, I would have been just as pleased if they had not rolled up. But they did not see it that way, and on May the twenty-second along they came - some on motor cycles, some on foot, but all evidently prepared to spend a long weekend.

The whole thing was very peaceful and orderly. Le Touquet has the advantage of being a sort of backwater, off the line of march. Your tendency, if you are an army making for the coast, is to carry on along the main road to Boulogne, and not to take the first turning to the left when you reach Etaples. So the proceedings were not marred by any vulgar brawling. All that happened, as far as I was concerned, was that I was strolling on the lawn with my wife one morning, when she lowered her voice and said "Don't look now, but there comes the German army". And there they were, a fine body of men, rather prettily dressed in green, carrying machine guns.

One's reactions on suddenly finding oneself surrounded by the armed strength of a hostile power are rather interesting. There is a sense of strain. The first time you see a German soldier over your garden fence, your impulse is to jump ten feet straight up into the air, and you do so. About a week later, you find that you are only jumping five feet. And then, after you have been living with him in a small village for two months, you inevitably begin to fraternise and to wish that you had learned German at school instead of Latin and Greek. All the German I know is "Es ist schönes Wetter", I was a spent force, and we used to take out the rest of the interview in beaming at one another.

I had a great opportunity of brushing up my beaming during those two months. My villa stands in the centre of a circle of houses, each of which was occupied by German officers, who would come around at intervals to take a look at things, and the garden next door was full of Labour Corps boys. It was with these that one really got together. There was scarcely an evening when two or three of them did not drop in for a bath at my house and a beaming party on the porch afterwards.

And so, day by day, all through June and July, our quiet, happy life continued, with not a jarring incident to mar the serenity. Well, yes, perhaps one or two. One day, an official-looking gentleman with none of the Labour Corps geniality came along and said he wanted my car. Also my radio. And in addition my bicycle. That was what got under the skin. I could do without the car, and I had never much liked the radio, but I loved that bicycle. I looked him right in the eye and said "Es ist schönes Wetter" - and I said it nastily. I meant it to sting. And what did he say? He didn't say anything. What could we have said? P.S. He got the bicycle.

But these were small things, scarcely causing a ripple on the placid stream of life in the occupied areas. A perfect atmosphere of peace and goodwill continued to prevail. Except for the fact that I was not allowed out of my garden after nine at night, my movements were not restricted. Quite soon I had become sufficiently nonchalant to resume the writing of the novel which the arrival of the soldiery had interrupted. And then the order went out that all British subjects had got to report each morning at twelve o'clock at the Kommandantur down in Paris Plage.

As Paris Plage was three miles away, and they had pinched my bicycle, this was a nuisance. But I should have had nothing to complain of, if the thing had stopped there. But unfortunately it didn't. One lovely Sunday morning, as I was rounding into the straight and heading for the door of the Kommandantur, I saw one of our little group coming along with a suitcase in his hand.

This didn't look so good. I was conscious of a nameless fear. Wodehouse, old sport, I said to myself this begins to look like a sticky day. And a few moments later my apprehensions were fulfilled. Arriving at the Kommandantur, I found everything in a state of bustle and excitement. I said "Es ist schönes Wetter" once or twice, but nobody took any notice. And presently the interpreter stepped forward and announced that we were all going to be interned.

It was a pretty nasty shock, coming without warning out of a blue sky like that, and it is not too much to say that for an instant the old maestro shook like a badly set blancmange. Many years ago, at a party, which had started to get a bit rough, somebody once hit me on the bridge of the nose with an order of planked steak. As I had felt then, so did I feel now. That same sensation of standing in a rocking and disintegrating world.

I didn't realise at the time how much luckier I was than a great many other victims of the drag-net. All over France during that Sunday, British citizens were being picked up and taken away without being given time to pack, and for a week those in Boulogne had been living in what they stood up in at the Petite Vitesse railroad station. For some reason, Le Touquet was given a substantial break. We were allowed to go home and put a few things together, and as my home was three miles away, I was actually sent there in a car.

The soldier who escorted me was unfortunately not one of those leisurely souls who believe in taking time over one's packing. My idea had been to have a cold bath and a change and a bite to eat, and then to light a pipe and sit down and muse for a while, making notes of what to take with me and what could be left behind. His seemed to be that five minutes was ample. Eventually we compromised on ten.

I would like my biographers to make careful note of the fact that the first thing that occurred to me was that here at last was my chance to buckle down and read the complete works of William Shakespeare. It was a thing I had been meaning to do any time these last forty years, but somehow, as soon as I had got - say, Hamlet and Macbeth under my belt and was preparing to read the stuffing out of Henry the Sixth, parts one, two and three, something like the Murglow Manor Mystery would catch my eye and I would weaken.

I didn't know what internment implied - it might be for years or it might be for ever - or it might be a mere matter of weeks - but the whole situation seemed to point to the

complete works of William Shakespeare, so in they went. I am happy to say that I am now crammed with Shakespeare to the brim, so, whatever else internment has done for me, I am at any rate that much ahead of the game.

It was a pang to leave my novel behind, I had only five more chapters of it to do. But space, as Jeeves would have pointed out, was of the essence, and it had to go, and is now somewhere in France. I am hoping to run into it again one of these days, for it was a nice little novel and we had some great times together.

I wonder what my listeners would have packed in my place - always remembering that there was a German soldier standing behind me all the time, shouting "Schnell" or words to that effect. I had to think quick. Eventually what I crammed in were tobacco, pencils, scribbling blocks, chocolate, biscuits, a pair of trousers, a pair of shoes, some shirts and a sock or two. My wife wanted to add a pound of butter, but I fought her off. There are practically no limits to what a pound of butter can do in warm weather in a small suitcase. If I was going to read the complete works of William Shakespeare, I preferred them unbuttered.

In the end, the only thing of importance I left behind was my passport, which was the thing I ought to have packed first. The young internee is always being asked for his passport, and if he hasn't got it, the authorities tend to look squiggle-eyes and to ask nasty questions. I had never fully realised what class distinctions were till I became an internee without a passport, thus achieving a social position somewhere in between a minor gangster and a wharf rat.

Having closed the suitcase and said goodbye to my wife and the junior dog, and foiled the attempt of the senior dog to muscle into the car and accompany me into captivity, I returned to the Kommandantur. And presently, with the rest of the gang, numbering twelve in all, I drove in a motor omnibus for an unknown destination.

That is one of the drawbacks to travelling, when you are an internee. Your destination always is unknown. It is unsettling, when you start out, not to be sure whether you are going halfway across Europe or just to the next town. Actually, we were headed for Loos, a suburb of Lille, a distance of about a hundred miles. What with stopping at various points along the road to pick up other foundation members, it took us eight hours.

An internee's enjoyment of such a journey depends very largely on the mental attitude of the sergeant in charge. Ours turned out to be a genial soul, who gave us cigarettes and let us get off and buy red wine at all stops, infusing the whole thing [with] a pleasant atmosphere of the school treat. This was increased by the fact that we all knew each other pretty intimately and had hobnobbed on other occasions. Three of us were from the golf club - Arthur Grant, the Pro., Jeff, the starter, and Max, the caddie master. Algy, of Algy's bar in the Rue St. Jean, was there, and Alfred, of Alfred's bar in the Rue de Paris. And the

rest, like Charlie Webb and Bill Illidge, who ran garages, were all well-known Paris Plage figures. The thing was, therefore, practically a feast of reason and a flow of soul.

Nevertheless as the evening shadows began to fall and the effects of the red wine to wear off, we were conscious of a certain sinking feeling. We felt very far from our snug homes and not at all sure that we liked the shape of things to come.

As to what exactly was the shape of things to come, nobody seemed to know. But the general sentiment that prevailed was one of uneasiness. We feared the worst.

Nor were we greatly encouraged, when, having passed through Lille, we turned down a side lane and came through pleasant fields and under spreading trees to a forbidding-looking building which was only too obviously the local hoose-gow or calaboose. A nasty-looking man in the uniform of the French provincial police flung wide the gates and we rolled through.

Next week: the Rover Boys in Loos Prison.