The Second Berlin Broadcast

[Official transcript made by the German Foreign Office]

I broke off my Odyssey of the internees of Le Touquet last week, if you remember, with our little band of pilgrims entering Loos Prison. Owing to having led a blameless life since infancy, I had never seen the interior of a calaboose before, and directly I set eyes on the official in the front office, I regretted that I was doing so now. There are moments, as we pass through life, when we gaze into a stranger's eye and say to ourselves "I have met a friend". This was not one of those occasions. There is probably nobody in the world less elfin than a French prison official, and the one now twirling a Grover Whalen moustache at me looked like something out of a film about Devil's Island.

Still, an author never quite gives up hope, and I think there was just a faint idea at the back of my mind that mine host, on hearing my name, would start to his feet with a cry of "Quoi? Monsieur Vodeouse? Embrassez-moi, maitre!" and offer me his bed for the night, adding that he had long been one of my warmest admirers and would I give his little daughter my autograph.

Nothing like that happened. He just twirled the moustache again, entered my name in a large book, - or, rather, he put down "Widhorse", the silly son of a bachelor, - and motioned to the bashi-bazouks to lead me to my cell. Or, as it turned out, the communal cell of myself, Algy of Algy's Bar and Mr. Cartmell, our courteous and popular piano-tuner. For in those piping times of war - I don't know how it is on ordinary occasions - Loos Prison was bedding out its guests three to the room.

It was now getting on for ten o'clock at night, and it was this, I discovered later, that saved us a lot of unpleasantness. Round about the hour of ten, the French prison official tends to slacken up a bit. He likes to get into something loose and relax over a good book, and this makes him go through the motions of housing a batch of prisoners quickly and perfunctorily. When I got out into the exercise yard next morning, and met some of the men who had been in the place for a week, I found that they, on arrival, had been stood with their faces to the wall, stripped to their B.V.D.s, deprived of all their belongings and generally made to feel like so many imprisoned pieces of cheese. All they did to us was take away our knives and money and leave us.

Cells in French prisons are built for privacy. Where in the gaols of America there are bars, here you have only a wall with an iron-studded door in it. You go in, and this door is slammed and locked behind you, and you find yourself in a snug little apartment measuring about twelve feet by eight. At the far end is a window and under it a bed. Against the opposite wall to the bed there stands a small table and - chained to it - a chair of the type designed for the use of Singer's Midgets. In the corner by the door is a faucet with a basin beneath it, and beyond this what Chic Sale would call a "family one-holer". The only pictures on the walls, which are of whitewashed stone, are those drawn from time to time by French convicts - boldly executed pencil sketches very much in the vein which you would expect from French convicts.

Cartmell being the senior member of our trio, we gave him the bed, and Algy and I turned in on the floor. It was the first time I had tried dossing on a thin mattress on a granite floor, but we Wodehouses are tough stuff; and it was not long before the tired eyelids

closed in sleep. My last waking thought, I remember, was that, while this was a hell of a thing to have happened to a respectable old gentleman in his declining years, it was all pretty darned interesting and that I could hardly wait to see what the morrow would bring forth.

What the morrow brought forth, at seven sharp, was a rattling of keys and the opening of a small panel in the door, through which were thrust three tin mugs containing a thin and lukewarm soup and three loaves of bread, a dark sepia in colour. This, one gathered, was breakfast, and the problem arose of how to play our part in the festivities. The soup was all right. One could manage that. You just took a swallow, and then another swallow to see if it had really tasted as bad as it had seemed to the first time, and before you knew where you were, it had gone. But how, not having knives, we were to deal with the bread presented a greater test of our ingenuity. Biting bits off it was not a practical proposition for my companions, whose teeth were not of the best: and it was no good hammering it on the edge of the table, because it simply splintered the woodwork. But there is always a way of getting around life's little difficulties, if you give your mind to it. I became bread-biter to the community, and I think I gave satisfaction. At any rate, I got the stuff apart.

At eight-thirty, the key rattled again, and we were let out for air, recreation and exercise. That is to say, we were taken into an enclosure with high brick walls, partially open to the sky, and allowed to stand there for half an hour.

There was nothing much we could do except stand, for the enclosure - constructed, apparently, by an architect who had seen the Black Hole of Calcutta and admired it - was about twelve yards long, six yards wide at the broad end, tapering off to two yards wide at the narrow end, and we had to share it with the occupants of other cells. No chance, I mean, of getting up an informal football game or a truck-meet or anything like that.

Having stood for thirty minutes, we returned to our cells, greatly refreshed, and remained there for the next twenty-three and a half hours. At twelve, we got some soup, and at five some more soup. Different kinds of soup, of course. Into the twelve o'clock ration a cabbage had been dipped hastily, by a cook who didn't like getting his hands wet, and in the other there was a bean, actually floating about, visible to the naked eye.

Next day, the key rattled in the lock at seven, and we got soup, and at eight-thirty our scamper in the great open spaces, followed by soup at twelve and more soup at five. The day after that, the key rattled in the lock at seven, and we ... But you get the idea. What you would call a healthy, regular life, giving a man plenty of leisure for reading the Complete Works of William Shakespeare - as, if you remember, I had resolved to do.

Apart from Shakespeare, who is unquestionably a writer who takes you away from it all, what made existence tolerable was the window. I had always understood that prison cells had small windows of ground glass, placed high up near the ceiling, but ours was a spacious affair of about five feet by four, and you could open it wide and even, by standing on the bed, get a glimpse from it of a vegetable garden and fields beyond. And the air that came through it was invaluable in keeping our cell smell within reasonable bounds.

The cell smell is a great feature of all French prisons. Ours in Number Forty-Four at Loos was one of those fine, broad-shouldered, up-and-coming young smells which stand on both feet and look the world in the eye.

We became very fond and proud of it, championing it hotly against other prisoners who claimed that theirs had more authority and bouquet, and when the first German officer to enter our little sanctum rocked back on his heels and staggered out backwards, we took it as almost a personal compliment. It was like hearing a tribute paid to an old friend.

Nevertheless, in spite of the interest of hobnobbing with our smell, we found time hang a little heavy on our hands. I was all right. I had my Complete Works of William Shakespeare. But Algy had no drinks to mix, and Cartmell no pianos to tune. And a piano-tuner suddenly deprived of pianos is like a tiger whose medical adviser has put it on a vegetarian diet. Cartmell used to talk to us of pianos he had tuned in the past, and sometimes he would speak easily and well of pianos he hoped to tune in the future, but it was not the same. You could see that what the man wanted was a piano now. Either that, or something to take his mind off the thing.

It was on the fourth morning, accordingly, that we addressed a petition to the German Kommandant, pointing out that, as we were civil internees, not convicts, there was surely no need for all this Ballad of Reading Gaol stuff, and asking if it would not be possible to inject a little more variety into our lives.

This appeal to Caesar worked like magic. Apparently the Kommandant had not had a notion that we were being treated as we were - the French had thought it up all by themselves - and he exploded like a bomb. We could hear distant reverberations of his wrath echoing along the corridors, and presently there came the old, familiar rattle of keys, and pallid warders opened the doors and informed us that from now on we were at liberty to roam about the prison at will.

Everything is relative - as somebody once said - probably Shakespeare in his Complete Works - and I cannot remember when I have felt such a glorious sense of freedom as when I strolled out of my cell, leaving the door open behind me, and started to saunter up and down outside.

And, even if it shows a vindictive spirit, I must confess that the pleasure was increased by the sight of the horror and anguish on the faces of the prison personnel. If there is one man who is a stickler for tradition and etiquette, for what is done and what is not done, it is the French prison warder, and here were tradition and etiquette being chucked straight into the ash-can, and nothing to be done about it. I suppose their feelings were rather what those of a golf professional would be, if he had to submit to seeing people dancing on his putting greens in high-heeled shoes.

In the end, we got quite sorry for the poor chaps, and relented to the extent of allowing them to lock us in for the night. It was pathetic to see how they brightened up at this concession. It paved the way to an understanding, and before we left the place we had come to he on quite friendly terms. One of them actually unbent to the extent of showing us the condemned cell - much as the host at a country house takes his guest round the stables.

Our great topic of conversation, as we strolled about the corridors, was, of course, where we were going from here, and when. For we could not believe that Loos Prison was anything but a temporary resting place. And we were right. A week after we had arrived, we were told to line up in the corridor, and presently the Kommandant appeared and

informed us that, after our papers had been examined, we were to pack and be ready to leave.

Men of sixty and over, he added, would be released and sent home, so these lucky stiffs went and stood to one side in a row, looking like a beauty chorus. On the strength of being fifty-eight and three-quarters, I attempted to join them, but was headed back. Fifty-eight and three-quarters was good, I was given to understand, but not good enough.

I did not brood about this much, however, for it had just occurred to me that, having left my passport behind, I might quite easily have to stay on after the others had gone wherever they were going. Fortunately, I had twelve stout fellows from Le Touquet to testify to my identity and respectability, and they all lined up beside me and did their stuff. The Kommandant was plainly staggered by this cloud of witnesses, and in the end I just got under the wire.

This was on the Saturday evening, and far into the night the place buzzed with speculation. I don't know who first started the rumour that we were going to the barracks at Liege, but he turned out to be quite right. That was where we were headed for, and at eleven o'clock next morning we were given our mid-day soup and hustled out and dumped into vans and driven to the station.

One would have supposed from the atmosphere of breathless bustle that the train was scheduled to pull out at about eleven-thirty, but this was not the case. Our Kommandant was a careful man. I think he must once have missed an important train, and it preyed on his mind. At any rate, he got us there at eleven-forty a.m. and the journey actually started at eight o'clock in the evening. I can picture the interview between him and the sergeant when the latter returned. "Did those boys make that train?" ... "Yes, sir, - by eight hours and twenty minutes." ... "Whew! Close thing. Mustn't run it so fine another time."

As a matter of fact, all through my period of internment I noticed this tendency on the part of the Germans to start our little expeditions off with a whoop and a rush and then sort of lose interest. It reminded me of Hollywood. When you are engaged to work at Hollywood, you get a cable saying that it is absolutely vital that you be there by ten o'clock on the morning of June the first. Ten-five will be too late, and as for getting there on June the second, that means ruin to the industry. So you rush about and leap into aeroplanes, and at ten o'clock on June the first you are at the studio, being told that you cannot see your employer now, as he has gone to Palm Springs. Nothing happens after this till October the twentieth, when you are given an assignment and told that every moment is precious.

It is the same with the Germans in this matter of making trains. They like to leave a margin.

Summing up my experience as a gaol-bird, I would say that a prison is all right for a visit, but I wouldn't live there, if you gave me the place. On my part, at any rate, there was no moaning at the bar when I left Loos. I was glad to go. The last I saw of the old Alma Mater was the warder closing the door of the van and standing back with the French equivalent of "Right away".

He said "Au revoir" to me - which I thought a little tactless.