The Third Berlin Broadcast

[Official transcript made by the German Foreign Office]

The last instalment of my serial narrative entitled "How To Be An Internee And Like It" ended, you may remember, with our band of pilgrims catching the train from Lille by the skin of our teeth - that is to say, with a bare eight hours and twenty minutes to spare. The next thing that happened was the journey to Liege.

One drawback to being an internee is that, when you move from spot to spot, you have to do it in company with eight hundred other men. This precludes anything in the nature of travel de luxe. We made the twenty-four hour trip in a train consisting of those "Quarante Hommes, Huit Chevaux" things - in other words, cattle trucks. I had sometimes seen them on sidings on French railroads in times of peace, and had wondered what it would be like to be one of the Quarante Hommes. I now found out, and the answer is that it is pretty darned awful. Eight horses might manage to make themselves fairly comfortable in one of these cross-country loose-boxes, but forty men are cramped. Every time I stretched my legs, I kicked a human soul. This would not have mattered so much, but every time the human souls stretched their legs, they kicked me. The only pleasant recollection I have of that journey is the time when we were let out for ten minutes on the banks of the Meuse.

Arriving at Liege, and climbing the hill to the barracks, we found an atmosphere of unpreparedness. Germany at that time was like the old woman who lived in a shoe. She had so many adopted children that she didn't know what to do with them. As regards our little lot, I had a feeling that she did not really want us, but didn't like to throw us away.

The arrangements for our reception at Liege seemed incomplete. It was as if one had got to a party much too early. Here, for instance, were eight hundred men who were going to live mostly on soup - and though the authorities knew where to lay their hands on some soup all right, nothing had been provided to put it in.

And eight hundred internees can't just go to the cauldron and lap. For one thing, they would burn their tongues, and for another the quick swallowers would get more than their fair share. The situation was one that called for quick thinking, and it was due to our own resourcefulness that the problem was solved. At the back of the barrack yard there was an enormous rubbish heap, into which Belgian soldiers through the ages had been dumping old mess tins, old cans, cups with bits chipped off them, bottles, kettles and containers for motor oil. We dug these out, gave them a wash and brush up, and there we were. I had the good fortune to secure one of the motor oil containers. It added to the taste of the soup just that little something that the others hadn't got.

Liege bore the same resemblance to a regular prison camp, like the one we were eventually to settle down in at Tost, which a rough scenario does to a finished novel. There was a sort of rudimentary organisation - that is to say, we were divided into dormitories, each with a Room Warden - but when I think of Tost, with its Camp Captain, Camp Adjutants, Camp Committees and so on, Liege seems very primitive. It was also extraordinarily dirty, as are most places which have recently been occupied by Belgian soldiers. A Belgian soldier doesn't consider home is home, unless he can write his name in the alluvial deposits on the floor.

We spent a week at Liege, and, looking back, I can hardly believe that our stay there lasted only a mere seven days. This is probably due to the fact that there was practically nothing to do but stand around. We shared the barracks with a number of French military prisoners, and as we were not allowed to mix with them, we had to confine ourselves to a smallish section of the barrack yard. There was not room to do anything much except stand, so we stood. I totted up one day the amount of standing I had done between reveille and lights out - including parades and queuing up for meals - and it amounted to nearly six hours. The only time we were not standing was when we were lying on our beds in the afternoon. For we had beds at Liege, which was about the only improvement on the dear old prison we had left.

Parades took place at eight in the morning and eight in the evening, and as far as they were concerned I did not object to having to stand each time for fifty minutes or so, for they provided solid entertainment for the thoughtful mind. You might think that fifty minutes was a long time for eight hundred men to get themselves counted, but you would have understood, if you had seen us in action. I don't know why it was, but we could never get the knack of parading. We meant well, but we just didn't seem able to click.

The proceedings would start with the Sergeant telling us to form fives. This order having been passed along the line by the linguists who understood German, we would nod intelligently and form fours, then threes, then sixes. And when eventually, just in time to save the Sergeant from having a nervous breakdown, we managed to get into fives, was this the end? No, sir. It was not an end, but a beginning. What happened then was that Old Bill in Row Forty-Two would catch sight of Old George in Row Twenty-Three and shuffle across to have a chat with him, a cigarette hanging from his lower lip.

Time marches on. Presently, Old Bill, having heard all Old George has to say about the European situation, decides to shuffle hack - only to find that his place has been filled up, like a hole by the tide. This puzzles him for a moment, but he soon sees what to do. He forms up as the seventh man of a row, just behind Old Percy, who has been chatting with Old Fred and has just come back and lined up as Number Six.

A Corporal with sheep-dog blood in him now comes into the picture. He cuts Bill and Percy out of the flock and chivvies them around for a while, and after a good deal of shouting the ranks are apparently in order once more.

But is this the end? Again no. The Sergeant, the Corporal, and a French soldier interpreter now walk the length of the ranks, counting. They then step aside and go into a sort of football huddle. A long delay. Something is wrong. The word goes round that we are one short, and the missing man is believed to be Old Joe. We discuss this with growing interest. Has Old Joe escaped? Maybe the jailer's daughter smuggled him in a file in a meat pie.

No. Here comes Old Joe, sauntering along with a pipe in his mouth and eyeing us in an indulgent sort of way, as who should say "Hullo, boys. Playing soldiers, eh? May I join in?" He is thoroughly cursed in German by the Sergeant, in French by the interpreter and in English by us - and takes his place in the parade.

As practically the whole of the personnel has left the ranks to cluster round and listen to the Sergeant talking to Old Joe, it is now necessary to count us again. This is done, and

there is another conference. This time, in some mysterious way, we have become six short, and a discouraged feeling grows among us. It looks as if we were losing ground.

A Priest now steps forward. He is a kind of liaison officer between us and the Germans. He asks "Have the six men who came from Ghent registered at the bureau?" But Lord Peter Wimsey is not going to solve the mystery as easily as that. Apparently they have, and there follows another huddle. Then all Room Wardens are invited to join the conference, and it is announced that we are to return to our dormitories, where the Room Wardens will check up their men and assemble them.

My dormitory - Fifty-Two B - goes to the length of getting a large sheet of cardboard and writing on it in chalk the words "Zwansig Manner, Stimmt" - which our linguist assures us means "Twenty Men, All Present", and when the whistle blows again for the renewal of the parade, I hold this in front of me like a London sandwich-man. It doesn't get a smile from Teacher, which is disappointing, but this is perhaps not [to] be wondered at, for he is very busy trying to count us again in our peculiar formation. For Old Bill has once more strolled off to Old George and has got into an argument with him about whether yesterday's coffee tasted more strongly of gasoline than today's. Bill thinks Yes - George isn't so sure.

They are chased back by the Corporal, now baying like a bloodhound, and there is another conference. We are now five short. The situation seems to be at a deadlock, with no hope of ever finding a formula, when some bright person - Monsieur Poirot, perhaps - says, "How about the men in the hospital?" These prove to be five in number, and we are dismissed. We have spent a pleasant and instructive fifty minutes, and learned much about our fellow men.

Much the same thing happens when we line up at seven a.m. for breakfast, and at eleven-thirty and seven p.m. for lunch and supper - except that here we are in a movement, and so can express ourselves better. For if we are a little weak on keeping the ranks when standing still, we go all haywire when walking, and not many steps are required to turn us into something like a mob charging out of a burning building.

Meals are served from large cauldrons outside the cookhouse door at the far end of the barrack yard, and the Corporal, not with very much hope in his voice, for he has already seen us in action, tells us to form fours. We do so, and for a while it looks as if the thing were really going to be a success this time. Then it suddenly occurs to Old Bill, Old George, Old Joe and Old Percy, together with perhaps a hundred and twenty of their fellow internees, that by leaving their places at the tail of the procession and running round and joining the front row, they will get theirs quicker. They immediately proceed to do this, and are at once followed by about eighty other rapid thinkers, who have divined their thought-processes and have come to the conclusion that the idea is a good one. Twenty minutes later, a white-haired Corporal with deep furrows in his forehead has restored the formation into fours, and we start again.

On a good morning - I mean a morning when Old Bill and his associates were in their best form - it would take three-quarters of an hour for the last in line to reach the cookhouse, and one used to wonder what it would be like on a rainy day.

Fortunately, the rainy day never came. The weather was still fine when, a week from our arrival, we were loaded into vans and driven to the station, our destination being the Citadel of Huy, about twenty-five miles away - another Belgian army centre.

If somebody were to ask me whose quarters I would prefer to take over - those of French convicts or Belgian soldiers, I would find it hard to say. French convicts draw pictures on the walls of their cells which bring the blush of shame to the cheek of modesty, but they are fairly tidy in their habits - whereas Belgian soldiers, as I have mentioned before, make lots of work for their successors. Without wishing to be indelicate, I may say that, until you have helped to clean out a Belgian soldiers' latrine, you ain't seen nuttin'.

It was my stay at Liege, and subsequently at the Citadel of Huy, that gave me that wholesome loathing for Belgians which is the hall-mark of the discriminating man. If I never see anything Belgian again in this world, it will be all right with me.