

Berlin Broadcasts (I)

[Extract from a letter to the Editors by P. G. Wodehouse:—The idea of finally seeing my five Berlin broadcasts in print appeals to me. You would have thought that by this time, taking into consideration the fact that I am on excellent terms with the British, French, and American Governments, and that the B.B.C. and I are like Héloïse and Abélard, people would have realised that there could not have been anything very subversive in them. But not so. There was a review of a recent book of mine in one of the papers over here (i.e., the U.S.A.) which began:—

Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, whom Sinclair Lewis once described as “master of the touchingly inane,” is in midseason form this time. These ten short stories, gathered together under the title of *Nothing Serious*, are just what the doctor ordered for that great multitude of admirers on both sides of the Atlantic who for more than a generation have got the sheerest delight from a Wodehouseian humour that is something apart from any other fun-writing in the literature. [Yes, I know. Fine so far. Couldn't be better. Puts in a nutshell just what I was thinking myself. But get the next paragraph.]

Gone are the memories of the nightmare which was visited upon him in World War II, when his Nazi captors persuaded him to broadcast from his Upper Silesian prison appeals to his British countrymen to surrender to the Madman of Berchtesgaden.

Twelve years ago, when I was a slip of a boy of sixty, a crack like that would have cut me to the quick, but one advantage of being a septuagenarian is that you don't cut easy. When there is so little time left and one may cease ticking over at any moment, it seems silly to worry about anything. Nowadays I'm like the fellow who said he didn't much mind what people wrote about him in the papers, so long as they spelled the name right.

Still, if that is the story that is going the round of the clubs, it might be as well to print the broadcasts just for the record.]

I

IF anyone listening to me seems to detect in my remarks a slight goofiness, the matter, as Bertie Wooster would say, is susceptible of a ready explanation. I have just emerged from a forty-nine weeks' sojourn in a German prison camp for civil internees, what is technically known as an Ilag, and the old bean is not the bean it was.

An Ilag, by the way, must not be confused with an Oflag or a Stalag. An Oflag is where captured officers go. Stalags are reserved for N.C.O.'s and privates. The civil internee gets

the Ilag. But whether you call the Lag an Off, a Sta or an I, it makes no difference. Slice it where you like, it is still a German prison camp.

Young men starting out in life have often asked me, “How can I become an internee?” Well, there are several ways. You can be a grocer at Douai or a farm labourer at Ambri-court or a coal miner at Lille. You can be one of the crew of a liner which has been sunk by enemy destroyers. You can be a War Graves gardener in the War Cemeteries of France. Or, like me, you can settle down in a villa at Le Touquet and get stuck there till the place is

occupied. That is as simple a method as any. You buy the villa, and the Germans do the rest.

One's reactions on finding oneself suddenly surrounded by the armed strength of a hostile power are rather interesting. The first time you see a German soldier in your garden, your impulse is to jump ten feet straight up into the air, and you do so. But this feeling of embarrassment soon passes. A week later you find you are only jumping five feet. And in the end familiarity so breeds indifference that you are able to sustain without a tremor the spectacle of men in steel helmets riding round your lawn on bicycles and even the discovery that two or three of them have dropped in and are taking a bath in your bathroom. The motto of the German army in occupied territory is "What's yours is mine," and any nonsense about an Englishman's home being his castle is soon dispelled.

FROM the moment when the first German soldier appeared in Le Touquet, I had devoted considerable thought to the subject of internment. In the early days of the occupation it had seemed like Today's Safety Bet. Then, as the weeks went by and nothing happened, optimism began to steal back, for it seemed so obvious that if the German head men had any intention of cracking down, they would have done it long before this. And then, one lovely Sunday morning, the morning of June 21st, I went down to the Kommandatur in Paris Plage to report as usual, and as I reached it I saw one of our little company coming along. And instantly the old stomach did a double buck-and-wing and the heart started beating like a trap drum.

He was carrying a suitcase.

Well, there might, I suppose, have been a dozen reasons for a British resident of Paris Plage carrying a suitcase, but I was able to think of only one. What made the spectacle so immediately sinister was that this man ought not to have been there at all. For some reason which I cannot recall, I think because he was working on a job somewhere, he had been allowed to report an hour earlier than the rest of us and until today had not been present at

our gatherings. It struck me instantly, as it would have struck Hercule Poirot, that he must have rolled up at eleven, been informed that the internment order had gone out and been sent home to pack his things and return to the tryst.

Algy, of Algy's Bar, came up and found me gulping.

"Lovely morning," said Algy. "The lark's on the wing, the snail's on the thorn, God's in His Heaven, all's right with the world, don't you think?"

"No, Algy," I replied hollowly, "I do not. Look at Harold."

"Coo! He's got a suitcase!"

"He's got a suitcase," I said. "I fear the worst."

A few moments later my apprehensions were fulfilled. Entering the Kommandatur, I found it in a state of bustle and excitement. I said, "*Es ist schönus wetter*," once or twice, trying to make the party go, but nobody took any notice. And presently the interpreter stepped forward and announced that the curse had come upon us and that we were for it.

It was a pretty nasty shock, even though I had been expecting it, and it is not too much to say that for an instant I shook from base to apex like a jelly in an earthquake. My emotions, I suppose, were very much those of the man in the dock when the Judge, reaching for the black cap, begins, "Well, prisoner at the bar, it's been nice knowing you. . . ." The room swam before my eyes. I seemed to be surrounded by German soldiers, all doing the shimmy.

It was the horrible finality of the thing which was so unnerving. The situation which had arisen was so obviously one that could not be handled by means of a telegram of regret at the last moment.

IT MIGHT have consoled me a little had I been aware that though Fate had dealt me a shrewd buffet I was a good deal luckier than other victims of the drag-net. Why it should have been so I have never been able to understand, but an unusual leniency was shown to the British citizens of Paris Plage, who were picked up a week later than those in other

spots along the coast. In Boulogne, for instance, the British residents had been living for nine days in the Petit Vitesse railway station, about the last place in the world, I gathered from their accounts when I met them, where one would wish to live for even nine hours.

We, for some reason, were allowed to go home and put a few things together. And as my home was three kilometres away and an early start desired, I was actually sent there in a car.

It took a little of the edge off the uplifted mood caused by this luxury to discover on arriving that the soldier who was escorting me expected me to make it snappy. My idea had been to have a cold shower and a change and then light a pipe and sit down and muse for awhile, deciding in a calm and unhurried spirit what to take 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 very first thought that occurred to me was that here was my big chance to buckle down and read the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. Reading the Complete Works of William Shakespeare was a thing I had been meaning to do any time these last forty years, and about three years previously I had bought the Oxford edition for that purpose. But you know how it is. Just as you have got Hamlet and Macbeth under your belt, and are preparing to read the stuffing out of Henry the Sixth, parts one, two, and three, something of Agatha Christie's catches your eye and you weaken.

I did not know what internment implied—it might be for years, 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.

I wonder what my listeners would have packed in my place, always remembering that there was an excitable German soldier with a bayonet behind me all the time, confusing my

thought processes by shouting "*Schnell!*" It is extraordinary how that sort of thing puts you off. One of my fellow internees told me that in similar circumstances all he could think of to put in his valise was a sponge and a Latin Grammar.

I did better than that. I put in tobacco, pencils, scribbling pads, pipes, a pair of shoes, a razor, some soap, some drawers, a sweater, a couple of cardigans, six pairs of socks, Tennyson's poems, half a pound of tea, and, of course, the Complete Works of William Shakespeare. My wife donated a cold mutton chop and a slab of chocolate. She wanted to add a pound of butter, but I rejected this. There are practically no limits to what a pound of butter can do in warm weather in a small suitcase.

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 internee is always being told to show his passport, and if he has not got one, the authorities tend to look squiggle-eyed. I had never really appreciated what class distinctions can be till I became an internee without a passport, thereby achieving a social position somewhere in between a wharf rat and the man the police have detained for questioning in connection with the smash-and-grab raid.

Having closed the suitcase and grabbed a raincoat and said goodbye to my wife, I was driven back to the Kommandatur, where, of course, I found that I could have taken an hour and a half over my packing and still been in time to be Queen of the May. It was not till nearly two o'clock that together with the rest of the gang, numbering twelve in all, I drove off 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. A little more of the spirit of confidence and a frank pooling of information would do much to brighten the internee's lot. It is unsettling when you start out not to have the slightest idea whether you are going half-way across Europe or just to the next town.

Actually, we were headed for Loos, a suburb

of Lille, a distance of about seventy miles. What with stopping at various points along the road to pick up other foundation members, the journey took seven hours.

An internee's enjoyment of the process of being taken for a ride depends very largely on the mental attitude of the sergeant in charge. Ours fortunately turned out to be in holiday mood. He sang a good deal, gave us cigarettes and let us get off and buy red wine at all stops, infusing into the expedition something of the pleasant atmosphere of a school treat.

One thing which helped to keep the pecker up during the journey was the fact that we all knew each other pretty intimately. Three of us were from the golf club: Arthur Grant, the pro, Jeff, the starter, and Max, the caddy-master. Algy of Algy's Bar in the Rue St. Jean was there, and Alfred of Alfred's Bar in the Rue de Paris. So were ex-Regimental Sergeant-Major Moore, and a couple of supplementary Moores, and the rest, like Jock Monaghan, the bank manager, and Charlie Webb and Bill Illidge, who ran garages, were all well-known Paris Plage figures.

So, what with the jolly society and the red wine, we were all in much more buoyant mood than might have been expected. But it would be exaggerating to say that we were absolutely rollicking. As the evening shadows began to fall and the effects of the red wine began to wear off, we gradually became conscious of a certain sinking feeling. It was borne in on us that we were very far from our snug homes and getting farther all the time, and we were not at all sure that we liked the shape of things to come.

What exactly was the shape of things to come nobody seemed to know. This was the first time we had been interned, and we had no data. By and large, there was a good deal of speculation on the point.

Algy, the human sunbeam, refused to be downhearted. He pictured a bright and attractive future. We should, he said, be housed in villas somewhere. . . .

Villas, Algy?

That's right. Villas.

With honeysuckle climbing over the porch?

Well, he was not quite sure about that. There might or might not be honeysuckle. It all depended. But they would put us in villas, and we would be asked to give our parole, and after that we would be allowed to saunter as we pleased about the countryside. We might even get a bit of fishing.

The picture he drew cheered us up enormously, for a time. We felt that villas would be fine. We looked forward to the fishing. Those of us who were not fond of fishing said they would be quite all right just pottering about in the sunshine.

The reaction set in when we suddenly realised, after expanding like watered flowers, that Algy didn't know a thing about it and was almost certainly talking through the back of his neck. Why villas, we began to ask. If the Germans wanted to see us living in villas, why would they go to all the trouble of removing us from the villas we were in, and putting us in a lot of other villas?

After that we definitely sagged. Uneasiness took the place of optimism. And our spirits hit a new low when, having passed through Lille, we turned up a side lane and came to a halt outside a forbidding-looking building which was only too evidently the local hoose-gow or calaboose.

A man in the uniform of the French provincial police flung wide the gates, and we rolled through.

2

I ENDED my previous talk with the Rover Boys entering Loos prison. For the benefit of those who have still to serve their first sentence in the penitentiary, I may begin by saying that it is quite easy to get into these establishments. You just walk up and register at the desk. It is rather like booking a room at a hotel, except that there are no potted palms in the lobby and you carry your own baggage and don't have to tip the bellboy.

Owing to having led a blameless life since infancy, I had never seen the interior of a prison except in the pictures, and directly I set eyes on the official in the reception bureau I regretted that I was doing so now. There are

moments, as we pass through life, when we gaze into a stranger's face and say to ourselves "I have met a friend." This was not one of those moments. There is probably nothing in the world less elfin than a French prison chef, and the one twirling a cavalry moustache at me now 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 VODEHOUSE? Embrassez-moi, maître!*" 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 this happened. He just twirled the moustache again, entered my name in a large book—or rather he put down "Widhorse,"—with the words "*Crime . . . Anglais*" after it, 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 William 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 its guests out three to the room.

They had given us Number 44 on the ground floor, and we went there by way of a long corridor roofed in with blue glass. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say partially roofed in with blue glass. For it was evident at a glance that the Loos Calaboose was not the place it had been. Shrapnel had recently been falling on it in rather large quantities, and the roof was mainly holes. From these glass was still descending at intervals, and it was necessary, if one disliked having broken glass falling on one, to sidle along close to the wall.

It was now nearly ten o'clock, and it was this, I discovered later, that saved us a lot of unpleasantness. Round about the hour of ten the French prison official slackens 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. It also helps to lend speed and zip to his movements

when he knows that if he dallies, a great chunk of glass is liable to drop on his head.

It was clear from the first that the sooner our escort were out of that corridor, the better they would be pleased. Their minds were not on their job. You saw their eyes swivelling up to the roof and every time there was a musical tinkle as another half pound of glass descended they started nervously and fanned themselves with the prison Regulations.

When I got into the exercise yard next morning and met the men who had been in the place a week, I found that they on arrival had been stood with their faces to the wall, stripped to their mesh-knit underclothing, deprived of 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 push us into our cell and leave us.

CELLS in French prisons are built for privacy. Where in the Big House of the motion pictures there are bars, here you have only a wall with an iron-studded door in it. There is a small panel in the middle of this door through which food comes, and in the middle of the panel a tiny peephole covered with a flap of steel. When our meals were brought, we used to push up this flap, so that we could obtain at least a limited view of the great world outside. Little things make one happy in prison. When the warder discovered this, he rebuked us warmly. He said we should get him shot, which for some reason inscrutable to us he seemed to think would be a pity.

When you go through the iron-studded door, it is slammed and locked behind you, and you find yourself in a snug little apartment measuring twelve feet by eight. At the far end is a window and under it a bed. Against the opposite wall 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 tap with a basin the size of a saucer under it, and beyond that what Chic Sale in his famous book, *The Specialist*, calls "a family one-holer." There is also an oak shelf and a wooden hook.

The décor is in the stark modern style. The only pictures on the walls, which are of white-

washed 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, whose mental trend is seldom or never prudish. Most of those in Number 44 had been executed by an artist signing himself "*Simon le Kid de Metz*." His line work was firm and good. The general effect was like finding oneself enclosed in a bound volume of *La Vie Parisienne*.

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 granite floor, but the adventures of the day had left me fatigued 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 I could hardly wait to see what the morrow would bring forth.

WHAT the morrow brought forth, at seven sharp, was the ringing of a bell in the corridor and the rattling of keys in the lock and the opening of the small panel which I mentioned. Through this were thrust three tin mugs containing a thin and lukewarm soup and three loaves of bread, 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 swig, and then another swig to see if it had really tasted as peculiar as it had seemed to be 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 sterner test for our ingenuity. Chewing bits off it was not a practical proposition for my cell mates, whose teeth had gone back on them when they were boys, and it was no good hammering it on the table, because it simply chipped the woodwork.

But there is always a way of getting round 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. The trick is to get your head

tilted at just the right angle and to let the upper canine do the heavy work.

At eight-thirty the key rattled again, and we were let out for air, recreation, and exercise. That is to say, we were taken to 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 feet at the broad end, tapering off to five 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 cross-country run or anything of that sort.

Having stood for thirty minutes, we returned to our cells, greatly invigorated, and remained there for the next twenty-three and a half hours. At twelve we got some soup, and at five some more soup. Into the midday 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, like the corpse of a coolie on the sluggish tide of some Indian river. And I had to do some more bread-biting.

I have sometimes wondered how my obituary will read. If the man who is given the job of writing it has any sense of fairness, he will at least say "He could bite bread." I am prepared to back myself for money, notes, or lima beans to bite bread against any man in Great Britain or the United States of America. And this does not exclude professional sword-swallowers.

AFTER the delivery of the five o'clock banquet—just a black tie, of course, nothing formal—we saw no more of the warders till next morning, and were thrown back for entertainment on our own resources. One of the things we did in Cell 44 was to tap the hours on the wall with a tin mug for the benefit of our next-door neighbours.

Next day the key rattled in the lock at seven and we got soup, and at eight-thirty we had 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 have got the idea. What you would call a healthy, regular life, lacking perhaps some of the fiercer excitements but 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 and the conversation of Bill and Algy, what made existence in Cell 44 tolerable was the fact that we had a splendid window.

I had always understood that prison cells were fitted with small windows of ground glass, placed high up near the ceiling, and ours came as an agreeable surprise. It 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 was invaluable in keeping our cell smell within reasonable bounds.

The cell smell (or stink) is a great feature of all French prisons. Ours in Number 44 at Loos was one of those strapping, broad-shouldered, up-and-coming young stench which stand with both feet on the ground 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, we took it almost as a personal compliment. It was like hearing a tribute paid to an old friend.

NEVERTHELESS, in spite of the fascination of hob-nobbing with our smell and trying to think of all the things it reminded one of, we did find time hang a little heavy on our hands now and then. I was all right, of course—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.

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 of all this Ballad of Reading Gaol stuff. Careful not to hurt his feelings, we said we liked this little cell of his enormously, but that twenty-three and a half hours of it daily was a bit too much. Would it not be possible, we asked, without upsetting anybody's arrangements, to inject a little more variety into our lives?

This appeal to Cæsar worked like magic. It was not long after we had sent it off that there came the old, familiar rattle of keys and the warders opened the doors, and informed us that from now on we were at liberty to roam about the prison at will.

Everything in this world is relative, as somebody once said, probably Shakespeare in his Complete Works, and I cannot remember when I have experienced such a glorious sense of freedom as when I strolled out of Number 44, leaving the door open behind me, and started to saunter up and down outside. I felt like Shelley's skylark. If Shelley had seen me at that moment, he would have said "Hail to thee, blithe spirit," and he would have meant it.

And even if it shows mine to be a vindictive nature, I must confess that the pleasure was enhanced 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 must have been rather like what those of a golf-club secretary would be if he had to submit to watching 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 be on quite friendly terms. One of them actually unbent so far as to show us the condemned cells, much as a host at a country house takes his guests round the stables.

AN added attraction of the new régime was that we were now able to extend our circle of friends—in short, to get around and meet the boys. 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 lined up in the corridor, and presently the Kommandant appeared and we were told that after our papers had been examined we were to pack and be ready to leave.

Men of sixty and over, the Kommandant added, would be released and sent home, so Bill Cartmell and the others of that age went and stood to one side, 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, I was given to understand, was good, but not good enough.

I did not brood about this very much, however, for it had just occurred to me that, having no passport, I might have to stay on after the others had gone, wherever they were going. And the thought of lingering on indefinitely in Loos Prison, possibly till I had grown a long white beard and acquired a tame mouse, was not a pleasant one. Fortunately, I had twelve stout fellows from Paris Plage to testify to my identity and respectability, and they all lined up beside me and testified. The Kommandant was plainly staggered by this cloud of witnesses. The hard, suspicious look faded from his eye, and in the end I just got under the wire.

At eleven o'clock next morning we were given our midday soup and hustled out and dumped into vans and driven to the station.

From the breathless bustle and fevered activity of the proceedings one might have supposed that the train was due to leave 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 had preyed on his mind and created a

complex. At any rate, he got us to the station at 11.40 a.m. and the journey actually started at eight o'clock in the evening.

One can picture the interview between him and the Sergeant when the latter returned.

"Did those boys catch that train all right?"

"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 career as an internee I noticed this tendency on the part of the Germans to start our little expeditions off with a whoop and a holler and then sort of lose interest. It reminded me of Hollywood. When you are engaged to work in Hollywood, you get a cable saying it is absolutely vital that you be at the studio at five minutes to ten on the morning of June the first. Ten o'clock will be too late, and as for five past or getting there on June the second, that means ruin to the film industry.

So you rush about and leap into liners and aeroplanes, and at five minutes to ten on June 1st you are at the studio, being told that you cannot see your employer now, as he has gone to Palm Springs for a month. Nothing happens after that till November the twenty-ninth, when you are given an assignment, and told that every moment is precious.

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

Summing up my experiences 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 we 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.

(Broadcasts 3, 4, and 5 will appear in the next issue of ENCOUNTER.)

Christopher Strachey

The “Thinking” Machine

WHEN people discover that my job is concerned with electronic computers, there are two questions they usually ask. The insecure or politically-minded, and those who have read one of Norbert Wiener's books, usually want to know how long it will be before these machines take over their jobs. The others want to know how far machines can actually think, either because they want to marvel at them or because they need to be reassured that in fact no machine can ever really think in the way a human being does. Before we can discuss either of these questions without being actively misleading, it is essential to get a clear idea of what sort of things these computers can do and the way in which they do them.

Electronic computers by themselves are not capable of doing anything at all. They are merely devices which can carry out a long sequence of instructions very rapidly. These instructions, which are known as the program, must specify exactly what the machine is to do in every possible situation it can encounter, for the machine can do nothing which is not laid down for it in its program. Once the program has been written—and ultimately it must be written by a human being—the machine is able to apply the instructions in the program to the data of the problem in hand, even if the process seems fantastically complicated and laborious. It is rather as if all the thought required to solve the problem is concentrated into the program, while the machine is left to do the donkey work. It behaves as if it were a completely

obedient and accurate slave who works with incredible speed, but wholly unintelligently.

It is important to realise that the machine can exercise no judgement at all on its own initiative, so that it is perfectly happy to put out quite ludicrous answers. If, for example, it is calculating weekly wages and there is a mistake of some sort in the figure it reads for the number of hours worked, the result may be an obviously absurd wage—such as fourpence or four million pounds. A human being getting this sort of answer would immediately suspect an error and would stop to investigate, but the machine will be quite content with any answer at all unless the program specially instructs it to reject answers which are obviously silly. And, moreover, in order to do this the program has to specify in detail what makes an answer obviously silly. In this particular case, the sort of test which might be included would be to verify that the wage lies between certain limits, say one pound to twenty pounds; another possible test for a “reasonable” wage is that it does not differ too much from last week's wage for the same man, but in this case a special provision would have to be made for the first time a man is paid, as there would otherwise be nothing to compare with.

It is impossible to overemphasise the importance of the program; without it a computer is like a typewriter without a typist or a piano without a pianist. With this in mind it becomes clear that all our questions about what a computer can do need to be rephrased. The proper question to ask is not “can a computer do this?”, but “can we write a