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THE LETTERS OF THOMASINA ATKINS

PRIVATE (W. A. A. C.) ON ACTIVE SERVICE

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BY

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WITH A FOREWORD BY

MILDRED ALDRICH

Author of "The Hilltop on the Marne"

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TO THE LOVED ONE

who thought sufficiently well of them to preserve them from the waste-paper basket, I rededicate these "Spur of the moment" letters, with my deepest gratitude and undying love.

THOMASINA

(For all practical purposes)

FOREWORD

THE World's War has been recorded liberally in the books it has inspired.

Apart from the actual histories of the War —its military movements, its strategy, its politics, its diplomacy, its economics, its adventures on sea and land—and underground as well as in the air—there are the personal experiences which will be by no means its least interesting contributions to the students in the future who are to look back and try to understand this "great adventure," the most tragic and, we hope, the most glorious that humanity had yet encountered, for this is a struggle in which all classes and both sexes—civilians as well as soldiers—have played their part, and have had their losses as well as their glory.

The simple soldier in the trenches, the common sailor on the warships and in the merchant service, the noble women wearing the badge of the Red Cross, the journalist, the party leader, the simple traveller, have all told their tales in books of more or less ephemeral nature—but often of a real value—and at last comes Miss Thomasina Atkins, England's special contribution to this

war, and a character absolutely unique in this or any other war.

This first of the British Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, working behind the lines "somewhere in France," to record her experiences happens to be a girl whom I have known since she was a "kiddie" in very short skirts with pigtails down her back, and whose varied career I have watched as it took her through school and out into the world as a worker, little dreaming that the day would come when I should look out from my Hilltop in the War Zone to know that somewhere behind the line this gently bred girl would be doing her bit there as a simple soldier, leading a soldier's life, with all its hardships and privations and hard work, and recording it in letters "written home," letters to prove how easily in this great struggle the young women of England have proved that when the call "The Country is in Danger" was raised, they were not only ready and able to respond, but did respond.

When the true story of Great Britain's mighty and unprecedented effort is finally told, the authentic record in letters like these will be one of the telling factors in the tale.

No one better than we, who for nearly four years have lived inside the War Zone, can bear witness to how nobly the women of Great Britain have done their work over here—work often sordid, often menial, never—or almost never—picturesque. There is no limelight shining on

them. There are neither footlights nor public. There is only hard work and the sense of a duty to be done, and they have done that duty heroically.

When the victorious armies return, no corps will better deserve the uncovered heads and the grateful cheers of the crowd than the Thomasina Atkinses of this Great War as they march in their place in the line.

MILDRED ALDRICH.

THE HILLTOP ON THE MARNE, FRANCE,
March, 1918.

THE LETTERS OF THOMASINA ATKINS

I

Somewhere,
October 30th, 1917.

DEAR PEACHIE,

I am glad you are away from home for a few days, for it gives me the opportunity to write about something that—perhaps—I ought to have discussed with you before I took the plunge. You know how difficult it is for me to keep anything to myself—that is anything which concerns myself—and really the boiler has all but busted this week. To "cut the cackle, and come to the 'osses," I have joined the Women's Army. Why? Well, the idea has been simmering in my brain-pan for some time. A certain poster—"Urgently Wanted, 100,000 Women for Home and Foreign Service"—has been staring at me, and arguing with me like a revivalist parson until I could no longer find an excuse for *not* being one of the units in the required number.

I hate being out of work, and, as you know, touring the Provinces has long since lost its nov-

elty for me, while London theatrical managers, though encouraging as to the future, are not exactly camping on my doorstep this season. I have had a pretty easy time so far, and a little hardship won't make me any less of an actress—(No remarks, please!)—so there you are. Well! to return to the W.A.A.C. My references have been taken up, the Medical Board has passed me A1, and now nothing remains but to get my kit together and to await marching orders to the hostel where I am to be vaccinated, inoculated, and generally prepared for France. Because of my proficiency in languages I was advised to sign for Class A, "Ordinary Clerical Work," which seems to embrace all manner of jobs not strictly associated with clerking.

Au revoir, dear; you will come back to find me putting away all my fancy fribbles, and seriously contemplating practical duds, including the ribbed worsted stockings which my æsthetic soul has always abominated.

Fondly (from now),

THOMASINA.

II

Somewhere on the English Coast,
November 13th, 1917.

DEAR PEACHIE,

Yesterday, after we had said good-bye—it was good of you, in deference to my superstition, to leave the station before the train pulled out—I began to cast affectionate glances at my suit-case, which now represents boudoir and library, and contains the sparse wardrobe that I must accustom myself to for the duration of the war. It seems strange, this carrying all your belongings in your fist, but such are the regulations, and I shall now discover the multitude of superfluous things that I have so long regarded as necessaries.

In the railway carriage with me were six other girls, and their air of pensive expectancy, together with their suit-cases, proclaimed them "W.A.A.C.s" like myself. On arrival at —— we were met by an official of the hostel, and there was a lorry to carry our traps. The hostel is made up of a number of houses, all connecting on the first floor, where the dividing walls have been removed, so one can pass from house to house without going into the street, and the easiest thing in the world is to lose *your own* house.

I was quite bewildered last night from being trotted from place to place, and after we had been fed, I was so tired that I felt I could have slept standing—but when it came to lying down, it was a different matter. It was a night of "cat naps"; the beds are very hard and the pillow is straw. My hot-water bottle was a joy—my weaning from luxury is evidently going to take time. We wash in the basement, in tin basins—cold water. We feed in the mess hall in the house at the corner of the street. It used to be a concert hall. The stage is the officers' mess, and they have a table-cloth. Our tables are bare deal, and the *couvert* is primitive. The food is uninteresting, and the temptation to go out into the town and find some real *hot* tea is great.

There are hundreds of girls here, mostly of the factory and the domestic-servant class. Such priceless accents! And oh! such odd faces—just like a Phil May panorama. There is a draft going out to France to-morrow, and another on Saturday. I am to be inoculated to-morrow, and if I get over it without any trouble, I shall be sent over very soon. Well! the sooner the quicker, as we say. Here there is nothing to do but to "fall in" for meals, and that gives us time to realise that we are distinctly cold, lonely, and a bit hungry.

One blessing, everybody agrees that this is the worst part of the whole job. In France conditions are more comfortable. Don't worry about

me, for I really feel very well, and shall doubtless sleep all right to-night.

I am free to go out any time before five. After I am inoculated I am excused from any duties for forty-eight hours; at the busiest of times I think "duties" only mean being Orderly for the day, or some rotten little job like that. I see by the board that I have to report somewhere at ten, so I must go and find out what they are going to do with me.

This is a distrait sort of a letter, but I am more than a bit "wuzzy" this morning. We get up at 6.45; roll-call at 7.45; then fall in and march to the mess hall. At night we have supper at seven: last night, soup and bread and bread pudding—not at all bad. Nothing to do after supper except to attend roll-call at 8.30; lights out 10.30.

We sleep in rooms, six girls in mine counting me. The other five are quite nice girls, so I am able to manicure my nails and rub cold cream on my face without being made to feel either superior or eccentric.

More to-morrow,
Fondest love,
THOMASINA.

III

Somewhere on the English Coast,
November 14th, 1917.

DEAR PEACHIE,

Feeling much better to-day. We had a short drill before lunch—or dinner, as it is called—soup, then meat and potato stew. I was lucky, and drew a large portion. We have no bread at this meal, but at breakfast, tea, and supper we have one slice. The margarine is served in bowls in the middle of the table, and so one has plenty.

Before drill I went for a sharp walk in the town in order to get warm; our job here is chiefly hanging about, so I have a chance to get ahead with my overdue correspondence. This afternoon I sallied forth again in search of a bath—the baths here are out of commission. I went to the Y.W.C.A. Headquarters, where for threepence I had a glorious soak; then, as I didn't feel like facing tea in the mess room, I treated myself to the real thing—out of a pot—one penny a cup, bread-and-butter one penny, buns one penny. In fact you can be a glutton for sixpence, and delicacy forbids me even to imagine what would happen if you yielded to your carnal appetite to the extent of a "bob."

The doctor is away to-day, so I have to report

to-morrow morning for inoculation. I think I can arrange for the vaccination to be done on my leg when I mention my profession, and the desirability of keeping my arms unscarred. They are very considerate of any real justification for anything, but they won't stand "frills"—and quite right.

The officers are very nice and extremely smart. I have one particularly decent girl in my room; she is a forewoman clerk (gets 37*s*. 6*d*. per week) and quite a jolly sort. When I look at my fellow-workers I feel optimistic about my promotion; but perhaps I underestimate them. The letter you enclosed has bucked me tremendously. As you probably saw by the handwriting, it is from our good old friend Captain G, who is still in Paris. It seems that as soon as he received news of my enlistment, he communicated with his friend and chief—Colonel S——n— who is opening a new department over there, and, to "come to cues," it is more than likely that I shall be offered a really good position, with a salary about four times that of my present pay, not to include living expenses. According to Captain G, I am peculiarly equipped for the job in question, and he tells me I shall probably have a direct communication from the colonel, who is now in London, so please open all letters for me, and if the magical message is among them, telegraph it literally.

Dear old "G" thinks that a transfer will be

merely a matter of formality. Isn't it all noble of him? Imagine the bliss of doing *responsible* war work in Paris where so many of my friends are. Well! sufficient for the day is the excitement thereof,

Your loving
THOMASINA.

IV

Somewhere on the English Coast,
November 15th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

The deed is done; I was inoculated this morning, right arm, and vaccinated left leg. The doctor was very decent, wanted a lot of explanation, but she did it—which is all that matters.

My mental barometer has fallen considerably, but they tell me that inoculation is always followed by depression. We get jabbed again in a week's time; the vaccination is a single offence, thank the powers!

We have forty-eight hours free of drills, etc., and I shall take advantage of it to rest my leg. I don't want to go lame, because that would keep me back, and I imagine there will be little sympathy extended to a crank.

Letters are handed out in the evening after supper, and in the morning about 9.30. I am not going up to mess hall to-night, but I have threatened an amiable little recruit with an early death, and bribed her with a fag and a match, to bring down my letters, if any. I pray there may be a letter from you, if only to tell me you are better.

This army life is all right, but I do realise

"Tommy's" longing for letters. It is really tragic. Golly! but I do feel a beast when I think how I have neglected the poor boys I might have written to—that little Gunner who wrote me to the theatre six months ago, I have his letter in my desk at home, still unanswered, and he may be dead by now. No luck! I fear your eyes are no better. Good night.

Later.

Darling, I did not post my scrap of a letter last night. It is so bald and it just bristles with the personal pronoun, but how is one to keep that wretched "I" in the background? We are so fearfully important to ourselves, and then—it is about me that you really want to know—so here I go again.

Your telegram containing the gist of the colonel's letter arrived an hour ago, and I proceeded, with joy in my heart, to ask for leave to go to Town next Friday. Alas! There is nothing doing. When the Commanding Officer found out why I required leave, she told me it would be useless for me to see the colonel as I *could not transfer.* I have joined the jolly old army, and in the jolly old army I must stick. She did not use those exact words, but that was the implication. I could have howled! But I just grinned instead.

Of course the only thing to do is to "carry on." I signed on of my own accord, and if I was a

little precipitate, I have only myself to blame. Naturally, I can't help calling myself a few appropriate names. The C.O. was really very sweet; she is a charming woman. She explained that she could not possibly let me go, as there is a fresh requisition come through for clerks with a thorough knowledge of French, and I am to be drafted abroad as soon as the doctor has finished with me. I am told that I can easily work up to be an Administrator—which is equivalent to an officer. So that's that!—and I must just forget about the golden opportunity, Paris, friends, and the whole boiling.

Just at the present moment I am more helplessly depressed than I have ever been in my life—just wallowing in misery—and there isn't a single spot where I can go and cry it out in privacy. I know it is beastly of me to write all my funkiness, but I never can keep anything to myself. Don't go worrying about me; remember, it is going to do me a heap of good and to teach me all sorts of valuable lessons. And (be a sport!) don't let any of my friends know that I can't take my medicine better. I should never dare face them again.

Besides, at the back of my brain, I know it is the best thing that could have happened to me. There are big chunks of grit in me really; they only want dragging forward, and pounding for use. As soon as the effect of the inoculation wears off I shall be able to cheer up—and I am

ready to bet that before the week is out—that is, when I have actually settled down—I shall be as happy as the proverbial sand-boy.

Fondest love,

THOMASINA.

V

From the Same Place,
November 16th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

It was such a joy to see your own dear fist this morning.

I am rather ashamed of the letter I wrote yesterday; I fear it will have upset you. Please destroy, and forget it at once. I am beginning to get used to this place, although I am still feeling a bit rocky. I try to blame the inoculation, but that disappointment coming at the same time just dented my heart.

To-day the sun is shining and the front is a joy for walking. I went to the baths this morning and dabbled about (with one leg out) to my heart's content.

The town is most martial, every street is a parade ground, and the whole place rings with "Form Fours" and "Company, 'Shun" from morning till night. The poor civilians must be fed up.

I sent you the local illustrated rag yesterday—thought the pictures might amuse you.

The advance guard is to be sent to —— on Monday; that is to be the new H.Q. for Overseas and this place is to be reserved for Home Service W.A.A.C. We had bacon for breakfast yester-

day morning—"hot." A garrulous little orderly told me that there were over 150 pounds cut up for that one meal. Dinner is usually stew—quite decent. For every meal we have to "Fall In" in ranks or files, then for about fifteen minutes we form fours and get into shape before we are marched off to feed; ditto when we go to hospital for dressings or to lectures. Lectures by the Medical Officer on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at three. We are just drawn up for it now—and I am finishing off my letter while the Roll is being called. It will take quite half an hour, for we are three hundred strong in the room. Such luck—there is not another of my name in the army.

To-day is pay-day, but there was such a herd to settle with that my turn didn't come.

The lectures are eye-openers to some of these girls. The M.O. doesn't mince matters, but goes straight to the point, dealing principally with hygiene and personal cleanliness; it is odd that such advice should be necessary, but so it is. If the W.A.A.C.s do not keep fit, it is their own fault, for every means of doing so is afforded them; even a headache is considered important, and has to be reported.

Oh! such a topping letter from Colonel S——n in answer to my telegram. He promises me every hospitality whenever I can get to Paris on leave, and asks me to keep in touch with him. Wouldn't it be ripping if I were sent up the line near G's

section? I understand we are stationed all over the place. I am just champing to be on the job.

No sign of trouble on my leg yet, but Nurse tells me the vaccination has taken, and that I shall know all about it a little later. I went for a route march this morning—six miles—and before that I drilled on the old thing, so it ought to get up and say things presently. As soon as the inflammation appears we have to report for hot fomentations, and if we do not, there is a pretty howdy do. Well, it shows a nicely developed sense of responsibility, what!

My number has come through from H.Q. The next step will be my name on a draft list for sailing.

I have heaps more to tell you, but we are getting a move on, so,

Bless you, my darling,

THOMASINA.

VI

From the Same Place,
November 18th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

You are a brick to write me so regularly—your letters cheer me immensely. I had five altogether this morning, and feel very happy in consequence. I had to laugh about the canteen, and your amateur attempts at dishwashing. In your case it is sheer waste of effort.

I have been so tossed about, emotionally speaking, that for the last few days I have thought of little save my own small troubles, but now I begin to feel myself again, and life, even here, is quite tolerable.

There is little to do but write letters, and so I am going to inflict all the people to whom I owe a chin-chin.

Physically, army life is very hardening. We live entirely in the open air; windows and doors might just as well be nonexistent. We put on all the clothes we possess when we get up in the morning for "Roll-Call," even to hat and coat, and I keep everything on till I go to bed at night. My bedroom is on the fourth floor, and I can't be bothered to run up continually to leave my cap, and it is too cold to discard anything else. We

have fires in four out of the nine recreation rooms, but, as I think I have already told you, the communciating rooms form a sort of corridor, the windows of which are always open, so that the only chance of thawing oneself is to sit immediately in front of one of the said fires. Now you can guess the opportunity for doing this—a nice little sum for a ready reckoner: 700 girls, 9 rooms, 4 fires; how many chances are there of one girl nearing the blaze in a week?

The answer is a lemon. My plan is to sit on a table, feet and all, and write on my knee. Writing in the recreation rooms is a study in the art of concentration. The din is positively deafening. You may think me some talker. Well! you ought to hear my associates—North-country mill girls, munition workers, farm hands, clerks—every possible grade of society—all out to be heard in every dialect in the Kingdom. Added to which there is a piano in one of the rooms, and, thanks to our liberal national education, there are many who can pick out notes on the d—— thing—so we have all the popular melodies with full-throated chorus. Despite this buoyant recreation, everybody is as ill as possible part of the time, and somebody is ill all the time. It makes no difference; the sick ones endure passively until they revive—when they just let it rip and then get their own back on the other poor little devils. Lordy! What a life!

The girls are allowed to have visitors in the

reception rooms for a while before supper. You ought to see them. The town is full of soldiers, hundreds of R.F.C. Cadets, and it is astonishing to see how many of them have acquaintances here. One of the reception rooms always manages to have a broken gas-mantle—these little things will happen.

Meals no longer fill me with loathing. Porridge for breakfast this morning—and, although I ought not to tell you, since I won't eat it at home, I fairly gobbled it. It struck me that nothing could possibly be over-heating in the present conditions. I try to fall in for meals with the nicest of the girls, but it can't always be managed. Yesterday I had to hurry, and found myself with a munitioner on my right, a charwoman on my left, and two tough little mechanics in front—but I didn't even have indigestion. Perhaps I am a red tie Socialist after all. One thing, whatever the grade or habit of life, all these women are really gold at heart. Some nine carat, I grant you; some twenty-two; but the precious core is there alright—it is simply up to one to tunnel through.

I manage to see a daily paper, and I notice that the British line is extended in Flanders and many British troops transferred to Italy. I begin to understand why they are hurrying our drafts over to France.

When I see you, I will tell you just how far up

the line our girls go; the cooks and bakeresses are in places that would astonish you.

The girl who sleeps next to me is often on duty in the orderly room, and hears all the news; she will be able to tell me when my name is on draft, also where I am going, which will be rather useful, because I shall not be able to mention it in a letter.

If all goes well, I expect to be sailing to-morrow week. In that case I shall apply for twenty-four hours' leave, and spend Saturday and Sunday with you. The day before sailing has to be spent here, as there is a medical and kit inspection, and Lord knows what besides. I will wire you as soon as I know anything definitely.

My face appeared in a London paper to-day and, such is fame, caused quite a sensation in the hostel. Everybody seems to have seen it, with its accompanying paragraph—one advantage! there is no fear now of my letters being lost.

It is time to fall in for dinner—so

My dear love and fond embrace,

THOMASINA.

VII

From the Same Place,
November 20th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Drill this morning ("some" fun!); then a bath (still more fun!).

Another lecture from the M.O. this afternoon, which makes my third, so I have completed the series and shan't have to attend any more.

The weather is quite decent and not frightfully cold, which is good luck, seeing that my uniform is not even in sight. The cause of delay is that the factories were destroyed a couple of weeks ago, and both coat-frocks and overcoats are short for a while—and the bales are only just beginning to come in again. I drew my shoes to-day. Help! Help! They may be fine for the mud of Flanders, but they are truly awful, and, crowning ignominy, they are black. I am going to have my own brown ones soled and take them with me; I must have something presentable for my feet. If ever you see a W.A.A.C. girl in decent shoes, they are her own. The clothes are pretty bad when they are new—fearfully stiff—and take some time to discipline the wearer to their shape. But they are said to be very warm, and are waterproofed.

Did you read the article in the —— this morning about W.A.A.C. life in France? I hope it comes somewhere near the truth—especially as to the spring mattresses. I cannot make friends with iron slats. I know it is ridiculous to grouse about trifles, and I hope I shall soon learn some sense. I am trying hard.

I found a library here and have been reading Hewlett's *Bendish,* but I find it distinctly tiresome—perhaps I am not in the humour for that kind of literature. I am going to hunt for something French to-morrow—however dull, it will be more useful

I am so sorry about your eyes. Of course you must give up all thought of real hard work—war, or other kind. It is not the work that hurts, but the conditions under which it is done that tie the nerve-strings into knots. I realise that more than ever since I have been here. This life would not jar at all were it not for the mob. It is not nearly so rigorous as that of a nun or a hermit. I am convinced that the hermit—the "Homo Sum" kind—has a cushier life than appears at the first glance. He has solitude. I don't think that that same man could be quite so heroic in the army. He talks about loving his fellow-man—but, believe me, universal love is a dead-easy accomplishment when you live alone. My hat is off to the "Gentleman Ranker" every time; I can about gauge his sufferings.

Did I tell you about our little doctor? She is

a gem—and a martinet. Many of the girls slack about going to the hospital for dressings, and have jolly bad arms in consequence. My leg is getting on alright—taking like wild-fire. It has to be dressed every morning; boracic powder, lint, and a fresh bandage every day. If it becomes badly inflamed, it gets a hot fomentation every two hours—simple enough treatment, eh? If ever there should be a shortage of boracic powder, I imagine the entire war will have to call a halt.

Except for the daily visits to the doctor and one drill, time is filled with waiting. The poor souls who have to wait in queues for tea and butter will be in their element when their turn comes to join the W.A.A.C. We wait in files for everything, and the doctor's file is the worst. No wonder the girls funk it.

I fear I was a little over-sanguine about next week-end. My next inoculation will not be till Thursday, so probably I shall not be on draft till next week. It will depend on my leg. I am told that the second jabbing stirs up the vaccination place.

More to-morrow, dear—fondest love,

THOMASINA.

VIII

From the Same Place,
November 22nd, 1917.

PEACHIE DARLING,

All serene, but very little to report! The doctor is still away, so we are not having anything done to us. I am beginning to feel better in the real of me, and shall be downright hilarious soon.

It seems a year since I left town, and I am just waiting from day to day for all this leg and arm business to get well, so that I can get my draft leave. I do hope I shall have luck; that seems to play the principal in this particular drama. I think of you all the time, and "pull thumbs" for your health to return to you.

November 23rd.

Interrupted at this point yesterday. Your lovely long letter came to cheer me this morning, and completely drove out of my head all the snippets of things I was going to add to the above. —Alas! dear, I am not to be included in the next sailing draft (Monday), although my name is on the list. On her return, the doctor examined my leg, and myself generally, and immediately sent somebody over to the Hostel to fetch my kit, and here I am in Hospital. I am really having a glo-

rious time, resting and lying on (whisper it gently) a wire mattress. I was inoculated again this morning, and it is a blessing that I can keep still. Hospital is lots of fun—a dear little ward, ten beds, eight of them full. Heavenly view right out to sea. I feel as if I were in the Ritz Hotel; real milk in the tea, and thin bread and butter. Oh! but I do feel happy. Only one grievance—no smoking allowed.

It is a gorgeous day. I can see the warships on the horizon—it is like being on a big liner except that one is not sea-sick.

Next Morning.

Still feeling jolly except for a bit of a head. The nurses are perfect dears. They tell me the quieter I keep, the sooner I shall be "fit"—so I am only just breathing. My little pal, the forewoman clerk, has come in here to-day, and she has a bed near mine. We both enjoy the quietness, after the boisterous din of the last twelve days. I am really wallowing in tranquillity, and am no longer at all sorry for myself. Still, I may not write much, nor *could I* even if I had anything to say. My "Think Tank" has gone off duty with the rest of me. There was a big storm in the night, and now the sea is decidedly "uppish."

I must finish now, for here comes a hot fomentation—and, "berlieve me," they *are* hot.

Affectionately and more,

THOMASINA.

IX

From the Same Place,
November 28th, 1917.

DEAR PEACH,

Still in bed, and getting awfully bored with my leg; beginning to wonder why I ever had one, or why, like the lobster, I can't discard this useless one and grow another.

I have read a book a day since I have been in hospital—chiefly shelf ornaments of the ward—and I cannot remember one of them, excepting Ian Hay's *A Knight on Wheels.* It is really "top hole," and A1 for night reading. I am crazy to read Mildred Aldrich's new book *On the Edge of the War Zone.* So glad she has sent you a copy, as I think you said it was not yet published in England. I get *The Stage* and *The Referee,* and my blessings on the heads of the senders.

Bless you, darling, for drumming up so many correspondents for me. I keep the letters which I know are going to be amusing to read while the nurse is playing about with my wounds. I will answer them all (the letters, not the wounds) when I am less of a dull dog.

A glorious day. I lie here admiring the wonderful changes in the sky. If only I were an artist instead of a Soldierine, the glimpse I get from

my corner of the ward might help me to earn an honest penny by and by.

My appetite is disgustingly healthy, and I feel I am swelling "wisibly." Perhaps providence is thus preparing me for my uniform—they are invariably too large when they are not impossibly small. Yes, I know I owe A—— several letters, and I must get busy or she will be reminding me that I don't write with my leg, but, to own up, now that the worst is over, I have been feeling a bit rocky for a week past, and *your* letter was about as much as I could manage. It made me sick to get your wire this morning and to learn that two of the said letters have gone astray. That comes of letting other people do your posting.

Our casualty list increases. We have a sprained ankle in the ward now; some poor girl slipped in the dark, on her way from kit inspection, the night before she should have sailed. It is one thing to have your name on draft, but quite another thing to get away, as I know to my cost. We have also three isolation cases upstairs somewhere, one of them a nurse with German measles, so we are short staffed. I send you a little drawing of our hostels, with the various points of interest marked. I thought it might amuse you—you can see how we look out upon the world from the top of the square, you can also imagine how the soft voices of the N.C.O.s get wafted across the gardens. The companies "fall in" outside the hostel when they go up to mess, and for drill they are simply

all over the place. The broad arrows show the short cut to our pet tea-shop, where we get the scones and real butter. You should see the girls pelt back towards five o'clock so as to be in before doors are locked.

If I behave, I am to get up to-morrow. All right, I'll behave. Watch me.

Fondest love,

THOMASINA.

P.S.—I apologise for writing all these letters in pencil, but my fountain-pen is a dud thing. What it really needs is a nurse-maid.

X

From the Same Place,
November 29th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Hoo—jolly—ray! I am out of bed at last! I have even been for a crawl round the houses. It was a lovely day, and I felt glad to be alive. My walk lamed me a great deal, so I suppose it will be bed again to-morrow. . . . But I don't care—the change was worth the risk.

If I were not feeling so cheery I should thoroughly strafe the Army. What do you think has happened now? A new order has just come through that all girls going on to the new Hostel at —— must wait for their uniforms till they get there. Isn't it exasperating? Of course that means Monday before I can get my toggery—and no week-end leave. All the Overseas girls have to move on to the new place on Saturday I hear. Just as soon as I cease to be a cripple I am afraid they will push me across the ripple. When I say "afraid," I mean that I may get no leave at all—owing to this "Whist drive" along the coast.

Really I am aching to get over yonder, and am so fed up with this idle life. It is positively demoralising. You see, I have never grown accustomed to having nothing to do—even when I

was laid up with a sprained ankle I managed to keep my hands busy. Your constant wail during your long illness, "If only I could do something," finds a sympathetic ear these days. I am still in hospital—because of dressings, also because the steep, endless stairs of the Hostel are more than I can manage at present. Excitement runs high concerning our new coast quarters. They must be better than these—for the simple reason that they could hardly be worse. Had a letter from "B" to-day, and the dear thing sent me an air-cushion. I tell you I am "some" spoilt child. Did I tell you that we have to address our officers as "Ma'am"? "No, Ma'am." "Yes, Ma'am." A form which I thought belonged exclusively to Americans, except when speaking to Royalty.

So awfully distressed to hear little man doggie is ill. Precious lamb! Does he have to wear a flannel undercoat like poor "Binkie" did? Will send my new address as soon as I get it. Hope we are not marched off before letter time in the morning.

Fondest love,
THOMASINA.

XI

From Somewhere Else on the Coast,
December 2nd, 1917.

PEACHIE DARLING,

Well! Here we are in our new quarters, and I would give my week's pay (*Quelle opulence!*) could you see the place. It is really a tax on my descriptive powers. Of all the anomalies! Picture to yourself any first-class, large hotel, the Savoy for instance, shorn of its trimmings, but revealing all its handsome decorations. Tapestry panels partly concealed by holland sheets, carpets rolled up and sewn into sacking covers, leaving bare, glistening parquet floors. Handsome electroliers, beautiful ceilings and columns, and whole slabs of veined marble; here and there fixed, upholstered settees covered with oriental rugs. And then, planted everywhere, rough deal tables and common chairs. Imagine the mess hall, which was the dining-room of "effete civilisation," with its giant pillars and gilt decorations, filled with wooden benches and tables, on which are laid masses of common pewter cutlery. In place of the erstwhile gentle, conversational hum is a perfect Bedlam of uncouth sound, and, above, the Musicians' Gallery grins vacantly down at us. The Palm Court and the Lounge are our recreation

rooms—see the army shoes dancing on those once carefully polished floors.

The preparations for transforming the place into a hostel are not quite finished, hence the vivid contrast. Hotel furnishings lie about in bales, looking very sad and sorry. Some small aristocratic gilt chairs have convened an indignation meeting in a corner, and, with their backs turned to the rabble (us), are threshing the whole matter out. I sat on a roll of rugs for a minute this morning, but I distinctly felt it turn, so I arose and apologised. Of course, compared with the place we have left, this is a real hostel, and very comfy. The companies can now be quartered one on each floor. The hospital has a wing to itself. The Quartermaster's stores has the basement. All the elevators are "out of bounds," but the bath-rooms are splendid—and plenty of them. I had a boiling hot tub this morning, got up before réveillé for it, and it was worth the effort.

By this time you will have guessed that I am no longer an invalid. I travelled with the hospital cases, but on reporting here I was promptly discharged. So, once again, I take my place in the ranks, and now have to readjust my viewpoint. It became sadly civilian while I was laid up; that is why the sight of this hotel, so obviously out of tune with the times, poor thing! gave me such a shock. I remember lunching here when I was playing in the town, a year or two ago, and now its present condition, neither civil nor mili-

tary, seems to correspond exactly to my own, for the transition process is still at work.

It is good to be practically well again, and although I am not "fighting fit" yet, I can walk without risking inflammation, so I shall be able to drill once more, and, in my free time, take some walking exercise, for which I pine. This town, always the least objectionable of our seaside places, looks much the same as ever, and the weather is fine. Before I forget it, remember that I am now "Company C." Up to now I am not well known here, as we did not bring all our own officers with us. I shall rush up to town as soon as I have my uniform—shall probably not have time to let you know I am coming, but I promise to convey the awful warning by telephone just as soon as I reach the London terminus.

Fondest love, dearest,

THOMASINA.

XII

From the Same Place,
December 6th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Got back alright from my few hours' draft leave. Trudging from the station to the hostel in the pitch darkness was perilous though uneventful. Perhaps I wasn't dog tired!

Oh! but I am an excited child this morning, and I have only a few moments to dash off my last good-bye to you. We are off to "Furrin" parts this afternoon—we leave here at three—boat sails at four. I had to report to the doctor as late as 9.30 this morning—but, hurray! She has passed me at last.

We had a splendid and unexpected concert last night. I had turned in early intending to get a good night's rest—my sleep has been so choppy lately. Imagine my disgust when, after what seemed five minutes' slumber, I was aroused by a loud voice in the passage (we sleep on the fourth floor), "Fall in with warm clothing outside your doors." I bundled into my shoes and great-coat over my pyjamas—God bless the army coats, they are warm!—and we all filed down to the ground floor. It was 2.30 a.m. when we lined up in the passage of the main building. Pres-

ently we all sat on the floor, and to drown the racket going on outside, popular ballads were started; a piano appeared mysteriously from somewhere, and we had a ripping old time. Of course all the officers were with us, looking very pretty *en deshabille*. Officers have dressing-gowns—their kit is evidently more capacious than ours—and you should have seen the little doctor in a pink *crêpe-de-chine* kimono. She did look saucy. After about an hour word was passed down the line. A.! A.! Doctor wants you!" I scrambled up and presented myself. Thought I—probably she wants to amuse herself by looking at my vaccinated leg. But no—it was, "Now then, A., give us a recitation to cheer us up." So I started in with "Grandma"; that is always a star piece. It was greeted with yells, and then my Company Commander cried out, "Carry on, A." So I let loose, and for one solid hour poured out my prize pieces, including some of the originals that you have written for me.

Well! I have done stunts in many odd places, but never before have I recited in a long narrow corridor in the hall to several hundreds of listeners who could not see me. It was a beautiful experience to me, and they did love it all. The officers were great sports; they sang and told stories with the rest and, by and by, when the enemy merry making outside had slackened down, we had a roll-call. When in doubt, and there are a few minutes to spare, we always have a roll-

call. The noise competition inside and out did not cease till after six, and it was seven before the all-clear came through on the 'phone—then we dressed and went down to breakfast. The officers are awfully bucked about the way the night was passed, and dear old R—— made a speech at brekker, throwing a lot of verbal bouquets at us. Oh! you should have seen her in the night, in her "British Warm" and a foot of nightgown showing below. Most of the officers wear pyjamas, and I begin to see the point—they certainly do look better under a great-coat.

Early closing yesterday, and I could not get my longed-for shampoo, so I determined to try for it this morning. On the doormat I ran against our Second-in-Command. She beamed kindly on me, and told me to go to bed and get some rest; but instead I made a bolt for the town, and had a hair wash and a wave for luck.

The doctor nearly broke me up to-day. She was too sweet; before the whole surgery full she smiled, shook hands with me, thanked me for my entertainment last night, said, "Good-bye and good luck." I wanted to weep on her shoulder. People simply must not be kind to me—I can't bear it.

Now I haven't another second, so I must close.

Good-bye, darling, and God bless you!

THOMASINA.

XIII

From Somewhere in France,
December 7th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Behold me in France at last—still excited.

To follow on from my last. We fell in at the hostel, and Miss R—— came to see us line up—to make sure we were all in order and not eating sweets on the march. Two or three were, and they had to fall out and march at the double before we could start. We had a lovely send-off. It appears we were the first draft to sail from that particular place, and the townfolk cheered us *en route*. Groups of soldiers in the rest camps whistled, "If you were the Only Girl," and the devils have a wicked knack of just getting the beat to come between our steps—so as to throw us out of step if possible. Scores of our girls came down to the quay, and ran after us, cheering, right up to the barricade. Girls I hardly knew by sight screamed after me, much to the amusement of the crowd.

Our crossing was uneventful, smooth, and very quick—of course the ship was full of khaki—and I began to feel a soldier at last when we fell in behind the boys with haversacks on our backs and pay-books in our pockets. I tried to get some

sleep on the boat, but it was no time before I heard that we were there. Coming on deck, I had my doubts. I felt some one had played a trick on us, and turned the boat round, for the first thing that caught my eye on the dock was "Notice Board" and other signs printed in English—English soldiers everywhere and only English being spoken.

The night was a great experience. Peach, have you ever slept on the floor? Mind you! I say *slept*. I bet you haven't, and I am one up on you. We spent the night in a hut—with tables down the centre and army mattresses down the sides. Golly! but we were hungry, and the rations were good. After supper we found the washing-room; then partly undressed and rolled ourselves up in the army blankets. Some of the girls said these were damp—but I am not dead yet. After the previous night's experience I could have slept standing, but I did whisper a prayer that there would be no disturbing raid. I must suddenly have become one of the just, for the prayer was answered.

We had brekker at six this morning, and then dispersed in different directions. I entrained with a few others, and arrived here in a very few hours. Imagine my amazement on being met at the station by two W.A.A.C.s who were quartered at my first hostel. On reaching the camp they all made me very welcome, and I was glad

to be able to bring them the latest news of the home hostels.

We are not allowed to be very explicit in our correspondence, so I cannot tell you my whereabouts. Suffice it that I am in a camp and quite comfy. I share a cubicle in a hut with one other —it is a treat to get away from the crowded rooms I have occupied lately.

To-day I have been taken round the town and shown the points of interest—the canteen, the offices, and the little gem of a cathedral. I am told it is quite an honour to be sent to these quarters. I am full of appreciation.

I think I am going to be very happy as far as the camp is concerned, although it is the simple life with a vengeance. I hope I shall be able to make good in my work, and I intend to try hard. If my King and Country want me, they shall certainly have the best of me.

I am sorry that I was so haughty about the flashlight you offered me. I certainly should like one. You see, we feed in one hut, wash in another, and so on—and creeping from place to place in the dark is perilous to a short-sighted child. So when you bound from your bed into your tub with one stride, think of your wee one, and lighten her darkness, I beseech thee, O Love!

I shall try and send you more to-morrow—of course I am thinking of you all the time as you are of me, but I am not a misery any longer, so

you must just visualise me as a happy little soul. I am very lucky to have fallen amongst ready made friends instead of having to pave my way into people's good graces.

There is to be a house warming on Sunday, and I am in the bill to do stunts, so you see it is up to me to get on—or not; and you know my decision on that point.

My love to everybody who asks after me, and a remembrance even for those who don't.

Kiss the doggie boy for me—I hope he is better.

My very fondest to you—as ever,

THOMASINA.

XIV

From Somewhere in France,
December 8th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

I saw a London newspaper this morning—at least the Continental edition of one—and read about the excitement of the other night. I gather that you had a fierce time; hope there was not much damage done.

Was introduced to the office this morning, and spent several hours being instructed by a most amiable Sergeant-major. I am the only W.A.A.C. in that particular office—there will probably be a few more later on, as soon as they are ready to be sent over. I am told that no comment will be made on my work for a fortnight! So I need not get scared—there are very few things I cannot get a general hang of in that time, working daily, Sundays included, and nothing else to occupy my mind.

Of course I cannot tell you anything about my work—I mean the details—but I think it is going to be quite interesting, and I shall be handling plenty of French stuff. I was first taken to the Major, who looked me over in a "What have we got here" sort of fashion, and then handed me a letter in French, and asked could I

read it. I glanced at it, and said I could, and that moreover I could understand it. He laughed —and proceeded to business.

Weather wet and slushy, but quite bearable. We have fires in our Mess Hut and Recreation Hut, those funny little German stoves, with the long pipe leading up and out through the wall. We burn wood—mostly *green*—but we manage. The camp cooks are excellent, and the food tastes much better than it did in the other places. I have overcome my dislike to sleeping in blankets. I just swathe myself in my rug—mummy fashion —then three army blankets, double, go on top of me.

We have a wee black kitten in the camp, a welcome gift from some soldiers; the Rec. Hut is adorned with mistletoe—from the same source probably.

Everybody is on duty at different hours and in different places, so we do not have any drills. There is an occasional route march for exercise. For the rest, we can take plenty of walks in our free time. I am still a bit hoppity-hop, but I shall enjoy a leg stretch later on.

December 10*th.*

Left off here the day before yesterday to get back to the office—fifteen minutes ahead of time —such is zeal!

Don't be alarmed, it won't last. I shall soon be eligible for an N.C. badge—"No Consience."

I ought to have put another c in that conscience, but my ink is running low, so I am economising.

By the way—have you got an "Ink Card" yet?

I might have written yesterday, but I filled in my free hour in the afternoon giving a hand with the preparations for the Beano in the evening. We had the hut filled; each girl had a pass for one friend (boy o' course), and they all had a great time. The usual turns at the concert—we are rather short of sheet music, so we have to fall back on the old favourites and make up with stories and recitations. I turned on a few with success. It is an odd thing that I am never able to speak the last verse of that recitation "The New House that Jack Built." It is evidently an anti-climax—the applause always comes after the penultimate verse, so I shut up, and let it go at that. When you get a brain wave, do send me something new to learn; I have endless opportunities for digging up my entire repertoire, and we are here "for the Duration."

Fondest love,

THOMASINA.

XV

From Somewhere in France,
December 11th, 1917.

PEACHIE DARLING,

I fear I shall not be able to write you quite so frequently from this time on. You see, I put in seven hours a day at the office, starting at 8.30. I have a couple of hours off at dinner-time, an hour for tea, and I am off for "keeps" at 7.45 p.m. But I have to come back to camp for meals, and those free hours seem like so many minutes. In camp life all the little footling things, such as cleaning shoes, mending clothes, grooming, etc., are all a question of opportunity, and have to be fitted in whenever there is a free moment—and these things are hardly interesting to set down on paper. Also, there is a great deal that may not be mentioned, in fact the answers to all the questions I can imagine you asking are taboo—especially anything concerning my work. At present I am learning the intricacies of clerking, and I have a quantity of French matter to deal with. There seems to be a great demand for French-speaking clerks. The other girls who were to come to the office have not yet arrived. However, I am quite comfortable by my lones. The Sergeant-major under whom I work is a very decent sort,

and the other two are quite alright. The girls here are all clerks, and really very jolly, and, as I said before, we have topping cooks—so "Why row?"

Is doggie boy well enough to go back to his rations?—and are there any rations for him to go back to? Well! shake his paw for me. My love to everybody. I am very fit—eat well, sleep well, and am as happy as any one can be till the war is over.

Fondest love,
THOMASINA.

XVI

From Somewhere in France,
December 13th, 1917.

DEAR PEACHIE,

It did seem strange getting that dictated, typed letter from you, but it was news, and just what I was panting for. I shall be much more happy to see your own fist. I really forget if I did write that Wednesday before sailing. I must in future make a note of all letters despatched—anyhow, that is likely to become a habit with me, because I spend most of my working time registering correspondence.

Much relieved to know that my scribbles from here go off promptly. There was a rumour in the camp that the Administrator was a bit slack in censoring, and that outgoing letters were delayed in consequence, but the dear soul has evidently been maligned. By the way, I suppose you have realised, from the slightly different style of yours truly, that all letters are read by the Camp Administrator? This knowledge gives me a sort of rheumatism of the pen—it works stiffly, and recalls my Continental school-days; but I shall soon forget about it, even as I did in those days, when I was wont to draw caricatures of the scholastic censor herself.

These green envelopes are issued to us—*one per fortnight.* They are never opened by our camp officials, but are liable to be censored at the base. They seem to be greatly prized, and their value, in the swapping line, is very high. One envelope seems to be worth a smoke or a candle, and sometimes it will purchase chocolates—in fact, in the way of demand they come only second to matches. The latter, as barter, top the list. Yesterday I heard some one offer two cascaras for one match. You see, having no money worth mentioning, we perforce must deal in kind.

Excitement for the moment is centred on the Christmas festivities. We are clubbing together (real cash for this) to buy a real Christmas dinner. I think it will include turkeys—they range from 30 francs "up." Ours are sure to be very "uppish." We are also going to make a Christmas pudding of some kind that we can stir. We are trying to think of some "charms" to throw in. These are not known in France. Of course it will only be a "makebelieve" sort of pudding—we receive half a pound of the real kind in our rations. But it is the preparation, and the stirring that we want, just to pretend that we are home in England—and that it is Peace-time.

We are going to have both red and white wine, and I have been detailed off to procure some sherry for the "trifle," and some kind of spirit—probably rum—to light the pudding. I am going to wangle the Sergeant-major in my office

in regard to these little matters. I opened the subject of the spirit for lighting the pudding this morning, and he asked me if *petrol* would do. We are going to follow the feast with a concert and dance among ourselves, and if it is a success, we shall repeat the entertainment before a mixed audience later. I have been elected to the amusement committee. On the whole, we shall make merry as well as place and circumstances permit.

But how fervently I pray—down in heart of me—that next Christmas may see us all out of the wood.

We dance in our recreation hut every night after supper till "lights out," and go to bed nice and warm by candle-light.

"Lights Out" means that the engine stops and the electric light fades, but we may generally burn a candle for a little while longer, especially if our N.C.O. is dancing with us. You will see by the foregoing that I am getting quite accustomed to camp life—but don't think that I omit my nightly dab into the cuticle cream and skin food. Lawks o' Dayses! What a good "Ad" for that particular Cream Co. if they knew where their stuff was being used—it is good and cleansing, and may save my poor skin from splitting later on. We have a rain-water butt, which is pleasing, but I am told it freezes on the least provocation.

I am enjoying the luxury of solitude in my sleeping quarters just now—the girl who was sharing my cubicle has been moved on, as there was a

vacancy for her after all. There is a great demand for girls who have a real knowledge of French—especially typists and short-hand clerks. The trouble is that our English typists, etc., are not, as a rule, very ambitious. They seem to learn just enough to enable them to struggle through their job, but will not go out of their way to acquire extra accomplishments in connection with their work. Of course they were not to know there was going to be a war that would need such work; then, again, these girl clerks can get such good jobs at home in England, that camp life in France, in winter, and army pay do not offer sufficient inducement. It is a pity in a way, for they might learn much that every girl needs to know, and only the girls can release the men.

Well, dear, this is Chin Chin enough for now —and, By my Halidame, methinks it were time I hied me yonder to my task chamber.

Always your affectionate

THOMASINA.

XVII

From Somewhere in France,
December 14th, 1917.

PEACHIE DEAR,

Thanks awfully for the *Stage,* which I devoured at lunch time. (Yes, I had my rations also.) The only outside amusement this town offers are the Moving Pictures, and an occasional concert by the travelling concert parties. I see some mention in the *Referee* of travelling theatrical companies, and I am pulling thumbs that they may wander down our alley one day.

I am collecting W.A.A.C. literature—scraps of verse, parodies on popular poems, airs, etc. Some are quite humorous, though of course very "shoppy"—but worth saving as souvenirs.

Every regiment in the British Army has its own particular lyric to the tune of "Greenland's Icy Mountains." Some are just a trifle off—some are quite unprintable. Ours is very tame:

We are the Women's Army—
  The W.A.A.C.;
We cannot shoot, we cannot fight—
  What earthly use are we?

But when we march to Potsdam,
  The Kaiser he will say,

"Hoch! Hoch! Mein Gott, what a
jolly fine lot
Are the W.A.A.C."

We have an unusually obliging household staff in our camp, which adds considerably to the general comfort. I have already mentioned the excellence of the cooking—did I add that our food is served on piping hot plates? They (the staff) wear the same uniform as myself when off duty, except that their shoulder-straps have a strip of scarlet where mine are solid brown. Our N.C.O.s also have brown straps, but cream-coloured collars and an embroidered badge on the right upper arm. The gardeners have purple shoulder-straps—and they look very smart. Household staff comprises cooks, waitresses, parlourmaids, general laundresses, bakeresses, etc., but when they have their great-coats on, they might be clerks. Officers wear tunics and skirts, with shirt and tie—regular "nuts." Their rank is denoted by a Tudor rose button on the shoulder-strap which is orange or crimson. There seems to be no restriction as to their overcoats or trench coats, and some of them are very swagger. Our officer here is a dear, quite young, and very pretty—such lovely colouring that I am consumed with envy.

I want to trim my hut a bit, so please send me a few of my old prints, and "Art" designs. My æsthetic eye yearns for something to break the dour monotony of these walls. I have paid

a visit to the canteen just to find out how one spends money here, on the rare occasions when one has any. The fashionable investment seems to be a pot of marmalade or jam—to have on the side for breakfast or tea; but I don't fall in with the idea, since we have both served in our rations on several days of the week. We are rationed the same as the soldiers (perhaps a slight percentage less), and really quite enough to keep us healthily alive. Open-air life makes for large appetites, and there would be little use for a vermouth sec even if we W.A.A.C.s were not "Blue Ribbonites." The order of total abstinence does not extend to the Sergeants' Mess, and—break it gently to A.—I am told that both Bass and Guinness are obtainable.

I was surprised at the high rate of exchange here. In the canteen a £1 note is worth 27 fr. 25, and 10*s.* in silver will fetch 13 fr. 60. A certain expensive brand of cigarettes can be bought for seven francs per hundred, so the injunction, "Don't send tobacco to the troops," is easily understood.

This is market day in town, so we have had pigs squealing all the morning, and all the other beasties are making their own pet noises. Prowling round the town, I was reminded of Soho. This is a typical little French town. You went through scores of them on your bicycle tour over here. We have plenty of army traffic in the streets—and some troops.

A couple of days ago a man came into the office to call on his chums. He was straight from the last push, and brought all his mud with him; he used to work here, but left six weeks ago for his probationary term in the trenches before taking his commission. Having returned all in one piece, he now goes to England for a month's leave, then three months in a cadet school, another month's leave, then out here again as an officer and a gentleman.

The man whose desk I occupy is now in the trenches doing the same stunt. I hope he will have the same good luck. So you see, there is no mistake about my taking a man's place; I even know his name, and am progressing fairly well with his job. When I think of this, I begin to laugh at the bare idea of a commission. As an officer in the W.A.A.C.s I should certainly be a little more comfortable (not so much in camp), but I should not be doing a man's work, only looking after the girls who did.

The Sergeant-major under whom I am working is really very lenient, but possibly that is because I am the only W.A.A.C. in the office. The Chief is away on leave, and I hear very noble accounts of him. His son bobbed into the office this morning to "ask the time," much to the amusement of the N.C.O.s They told me he wanted to see what the Governor's W.A.A.C. looked like. Poor boy! I fear he had a shock. I was so little impressed by the entrance of a

baby sub. that I even forgot to stand to attention. Unlike the shorthand clerks, I seldom see an officer, and if I ever meet any of my old friends, it will be an awful moment. Imagine my having to get a permit to speak to boy H. for instance! Possibly he'd swoon before I did.

God bless you, dear,

As ever,

THOMASINA.

P.S.—I am glad I joined the army.

XVIII

From Somewhere in France,
December 16th, 1917.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Having reread your last, I see that I did not answer it fully. You are quite right—that scar under my chin *is* a vaccination mark, and as such is registered on my identification card. I always said I had never been vaccinated, because the assault referred to happened when I was three days old. That is a long time ago, and I have never been mutilated since till recently. By the way, I am just beginning to lose my limp, and to walk with a sense of freedom; it is good to get rid of that old bandage. I feel as if I had been here for ages, and am settling down at a great rate. Both work and camp life follow a pretty even routine, and leave little time or material for gossip.

I had an interesting experience yesterday—visited a sugar factory, went over the whole plant, and saw the beets trundled in and jerked about until they came out as beautiful white granulated sugar. When I saw the men standing in it and shovelling it into sacks with spades, I felt I never wanted to taste sugar again. It was an uncanny spectacle—these millions of white beets (they are

white, you know) being tossed about by the machine, squirming for all the world like huge cheese mites. Oh! Ga-ga! Then the sight of the huge sacks standing in their hundreds immediately sent my thoughts back to Blighty and the queues. There is always plenty of the thing one wants—somewhere.

Do flatter, bribe, or otherwise corrupt that optician in regard to my glasses. I dare not tackle my unaccustomed job without them, and those I have make me look like the pictures of Mother Siegel of Syrup fame. Also they worry me, because I see all round the rims. Well! *C'est la guerre,* I suppose.

Many, many thanks for the parcel—the torch is a beauty, and fills the bill absolutely. The caramels are quite a treat. I am munching them at this moment. Either my flapper days are catching me up, or my second childhood is upon me. Truly I feel like Mrs. Methuselah—by the way, was there a *Mrs.* Methuselah? Probably there were so many of her that she wasn't thought worthy of mention. Well, I feel like the combination of them all when I look round the camp. Most of my comrades in arms are much younger than myself—even in years—and I only just remember the Diamond Jubilee. Which all goes to prove that it isn't time itself that counts on this little Merry-go-round, but the manner in which we occupy it—or, as the coach-driver said, "Lord love yer! 'Tain't the stretch that

tells, but the 'ammer, 'ammer, 'ammer on the 'ard 'igh road."

No, darling, be not afraid, I don't do any 'rithmetic, but a great deal of writing. Also, I have to memorise a few score of numbers. Luckily this is not difficult for me; there are, however, parts of my job which are somewhat stiff, and I have my moments of wuzzyness.

The snow is upon us with a vengeance; it started on Sunday afternoon (I was out for a long walk in the frost), and this morning there were some pretty Christmas-card effects. The camp looked a treat, the huts are of corrugated iron, with little pathways between, grouped round a square of "lawn." This morning a thaw started —and, oh! the slush in the town—"some" mud! Of mud we do not allow ourselves to talk. If we did (such is its quality and its quantity), it would form the only topic of conversation. The huts are still white, and as I came "home" to tea to-night the camp in the distance was a pretty sight—with the evening star and the new moon hovering. I am constantly wondering at the sky; I never realised that there was so much of it. In a city one quite overlooks it; there is so much to attract one's attention.

I am writing under difficulties. There is an awful din going on—I think the Christmas feed is under discussion. I will try to write again to-morrow. If I have luck, I may have a slack moment at the office—it is quiet there. Anyhow,

I shall be leaving work early—the Sergeant-major is going to the pictures. He has even invited me to go with him. Uncommon civil, I call it, so don't laugh.

Bye-bye, Beloved,
Always yours,
THOMASINA.

XIX

From Somewhere in France,
December 20th, 1917.

PEACHIE DARLING,

Yours of the 16th has just rolled in. Courage, dear; don't be downhearted. The whole blame business must come to an end sometime; but I know how hard it is for you to carry on—harder in some respects than for me. I am writing rather against time, but I realise (from the almanac) that Christmas is upon us, that it is also your birthday, and that the mails will be getting delayed. Of course it is not really Christmas, nor birthday, nor anything else, but still, in spite of war, I wish I were with you. Even my little intended surprise has gone agley, and will not be ready till early in the New Year. No, indeed, it is not really Christmas! Never mind, wait till I get my leave.

Meanwhile the only thought I have now is COLD. The frost is upon us, and, following on the recent heavy snowfall, it is indeed winter. I wish I had a thermometer; it would be interesting to see just where the mercury would stand inside the hut. My sponge is a rock, my toothbrush ditto. My fountain-pen was frozen inside my suit-case. As I stood before my mirror to

brush my hair, a sheet of ice formed over it—just my breath. Of course all water has been turned off at the main to prevent the pipes from bursting, so washing, for the time being, is out of the question. The drinking-tank—not yet ready for winter use—had not been encased in straw, and the whole thing is a solid rock. We have had no drinking-water for two days. The poor kitchen staff have to drop a bucket down the well (pumps are frozen) to get enough water for the cooking. I remember reading Shackleton's Diary of his expedition to the Pole; he has my sympathy. The streets are a joke. You see the snow settled between the cobbles, then the whole surface froze, and the only way to get along is to shuffle, and dodge the cart ruts. The moon comes up bright and hard every night, and just looks cruel. I am wearing every garment I possess—and if the kitchen range were portable, we should probably draw lots as to who should steal it for a sort of haversack. My voluble utterance is somewhat familiar to you. Think of the possibility of my spoken words freezing in a long solid, knotty string on their way to my listener's ear. Bed is quite cosy—army blankets are fine. I tuck mine close round my face, and when I wake in the morning there is a fringe of icicles along the ridges—more frozen breath. We have good fires in the Mess and Recreation huts, but the office is the only place

where one can thaw—plenty of coal there. I have discovered that Staff Sergeant-majors insist on being comfortable, and small blame to them. I had a long afternoon off yesterday, but I was too cold to think, let alone write—so I decided to *walk*. It was a wonderful day—of the kind. I just plodded on and on, the roads were not so bad, but I struck across country to return, and on top of the hill I came across the drifts, eight and ten feet deep, and in most places not a trace of a pathway. I tumbled across ploughed fields, like rocks covered with seaweed, until I finally reached the camp wet to the waist, but thoroughly happy.

Work has been a bit slack for a day or two; probably the mails are held up by the elements, and that means a rush later on.

The chief excitement of the week has been the children's treat to-day, organized by the officers for the kiddies of the town—about 550 of them. You know the sort of thing—some films, a juggler, and a few tableaux, "The Three Wise Men," and so on. Some one had a bright idea. Why not introduce a W.A.A.C. into the scheme? So our Administrator entrusted me with the honour of representing the Corps, and I have been rehearsing at odd moments all the week. I was draped in pieces of Oriental stuff, wore a blue and gold veil, and carried a brass vase; then I executed a few stunts, à la Maud Allan, but with many more clothes—*très gracieux!* There was

special music written for this, and it proved a *succès fou!* It is to be repeated at the G.H.Q. ——— Eshelon to-morrow—a short ride from here. After the tableaux the children's gifts were distributed. I made the presentations to the girls, and never have I realised what hard work that easy-looking job really is. There were some tiny mites among the crowd, and oh! but they did enjoy themselves. The presents all came from Paris, and were topping; terrible suspense yesterday when we heard the lorry had left Paris three days ago, and had got stuck *en route*—the blessed thing was snowed in and frozen over!!! How it was got out and hustled along, the Lord only knows, and He isn't telling. But it slid in this morning, and every one turned to the job of unpacking, and wrapping up. It was a great day.

Well, dear, these simple little incidents are all I have to relate just now. They seem very important events to us exiles.

I am not going to wish you Many Happy Returns of this birthday—but, since prayer is "The soul's sincere desire," I am praying that it is the least happy of those to come.

Good night, and God bless you,

THOMASINA.

XX

From Somewhere in France,
December 26th, 1917.

DEAR PEACHIE,

Your lovely long letter greeted me on my return for lunch. It is good news that you are going away for a couple of days. I am very bucked about it, because it assures me that you are feeling a bit more fit. Yes, I received the forwarded letter from E. To any outsider it was a kind and sweet little note, but, the context considered, it did make the fur stand up on my spine. Hypocrisy is the most noxious weed that ever took root in the human mind—it has a way of looking so flowerlike that one goes on plucking and plucking till the poison sting is felt, and then one seizes the only possible antidote—forgetfulness.

Don't let any one say "Auld Lang Syne" to me! Why should we carry about with us, for ever, all the past eruptions of our lives? When a wound heals, a new skin grows (quite as tender, alas!); so I am with the great poet, who said, "Let the dead Past bury its dead." Memory is the one really hurtful thing.

I shall be interested to learn if Mrs. L. follows out her intention—but do remind her that

the W.A.A.C. is the blooming army, and the way *in* is fairly easy, but there is no way out except by "discharge" or buying out. This brings me to a remark in yours of recent date about ambition and the rest of it. Now, do not be misled into thinking I am content to be a ranker. I am not a plodder by nature, and running in a rut does not suit my disposition. I can work up enthusiasm about camp life and experience in the ranks, simply because I am so horribly adaptable and can put up with most things; also I can see the Romance in everything—that is the old dramatic instinct. But as to this army turn—I find there are to be no more forewoman clerks sent out from England, for the simple reason that previous clerical experience is really no use in an army office. The expert and the novice are on equal ground, and promotion is given out here, so it seems to me that my best plan is to strive to earn that same promotion and trust to luck. Morally speaking, it doesn't matter what kind of decoration I carry on my epaulet—whether I am an N.C.O. or a private—I am still replacing a man in the office. To me that seems the important thing. As an officer I should be in charge of a camp and do no office work at all—a sort of school ma'am's job; for which, seeing that self-discipline is not my most noticeable asset, I am not precisely equipped. It was the realisation of all this that made me say I did not aspire to a commission in the W.A.A.C. I am still the only clerk

in the office, and no sign of any more recruits. If a new one does come along, I shall be moved up, and she will have to learn my present job.

No, dear, no fear of my losing my heart hereabouts. Seriously speaking, it is in such a battered condition that extensive repairs would be necessary before it could respond to the most persistent advance. You ask what age is the S.-M. Well, he looks about forty-seven, although his card says thirty-four. He is an old soldier, and army life is evidently not so rejuvenating as is my own profession. He is a smart little man, with a waxed moustache—fearfully proud of his job, his office, his colonel, and his clerks. Quite an ordinary person—as a man—but hard to beat as a soldier.

The Colonel returned from his leave the other day. I am very pleased with him. Hum! wouldn't that gratify him if he knew? He quite fulfils his reputation of being the smartest man at G.H.Q., and he really is rather a lamb. Somewhere about fifty. He blew in the first morning to say Hullo! to his chief clerk, of whom he seems to think a great deal. When he spotted me he came over and shook hands, and asked a few questions—how was I getting on, what experience I had, etc. Then he said he was going to treat all W.A.A.C.s not as ladies, but as soldiers. Of course I replied it was the best compliment he could pay us—and all that—but how else *could* he treat us? If he started to treat me as a lady—

and an actress—it would be a case of flowers and chocolates forward! No, I much prefer the other rôle—even though I have to stand at attention when he enters, and salute him if I have my hat on. I am just dying to meet Colonel S——n or G. one of these days. I want to see the latter's face when I salute. Of course I should do it only for a rag—we do not have to salute officers other than our own colonels in their offices, and our own W.A.A.C. ones if we meet them anywhere.

A little sport with two (rather new) subs yesterday. They were on their way to say "Merry Christmas" to our Administrator, and stopped me and another girl on our way "home": "I say —er—where ah your headquartahs?" I pointed in the direction we were going, then one of them said, "That's topping! We'll fall in behind you," and they did. We marched them up with much swank, and they asked all sorts of questions, What were we before we joined up, Did we like the life out heah, What were we having for our Christmas dinner, and, "Bah Jove! I like your kit—I think it looks fine." I ached to tell them that it might look better if it fitted, but the boys meant well, so I remained polite.

Christmas in camp was really a merry affair. We were mostly off duty after mid-day. Our Administrator dined with us, and we also invited her to tea. We all sat at one long table in our mess hut, kitchen staff and clerks altogether. This is

an army tradition. Now, darling, I couldn't be a snob if I tried, it isn't in me, but the more (what is erroneously called) "democratic" my surroundings become, the more conservative I grow. So whenever you fear that I may be slipping into rank and file-ism, just remember my early letters from the first hostel. Those sentiments still hold good. Naturally the shock of the novelty has worn off, but I often have a return of the feeling that prompted that strain of writing.

On Christmas evening I went to the moving pictures. This is really a useful form of recreation, for I regard it all with a technical eye—and it keeps me in touch, at long distance, but still in touch, with my own legitimate work. If this war does not go on for ever, I may be able to make use of the tips I pick up.

We are snowed up again to-day. Never in my life have I seen such sudden and busy snow except on the stage. Now it is starting to freeze again. Golly! but this is some winter. Thank goodness the shortest day is behind us, and soon we shall have daylight to dress by in the morning. We dance nearly every night before going to bed. It helps to keep us fit, and makes for warmth about the feet, but one of these nights we shall surely go through to the earth, the whole hut rocks. There is a little stove in the middle, and the curved roof gives a funny effect. This is how it is.

In the centre is the stove; in line with the stove is

a trestle table—the pictures, if we have them, have to be pinned on to the ceiling, so nothing framed is any use. In our sleeping-huts we manage like this: You see, partition walls in each hut make four cubicles, each cubicle holds two beds, and a cubicle (inside) is like a wedge of Stilton cheese. A shelf runs along the curved wall, and that is all the fal-lal decoration there is. We live in our suit-cases, as the hut is always liable to military inspection at odd moments, and no sort of clothing may be on view. We occasionally see an odd colonel or major buzzing about, and then are reminded that the W.A.A.C.s are under surveillance.

A nice bunch of letters this morning besides yours, so I am feeling fine and Christmassy.

Fondest love, darling, and,

Good night,

THOMASINA.

XXI

From Somewhere in France,
December 28th, 1917.

MY DEAR PEACHIE,

I am making strenuous efforts to keep up my correspondence with my friends (selfish reason really—if I neglect them, they will neglect me), but really it is hard work to squeeze it all in.

A real tragedy looms on my horizon—the local hairdresser refuses to do any shampooing while the arctic weather lasts, and I foresee having to wash my hair, somehow, in the hut. Just supposing it freezes stiff! My dream of heaven just at present is a place where one could disrobe entirely and wash all over at once. Some of these days, when I have acquired vast wealth, I shall have a steam-heated bath-room and live in it.

December 31st.

Was called away at the above point, and forget all the soul-stirring things I was going to put down.

So sorry your holiday programme was spoilt. Toothache too! Life, *your* life, is most certainly "one d——d thing after another."

It was an odd sort of Christmas for me. The

social side of life out here is rather a pill to swallow, but as long as I am a private it behooves me to fall in line and join the crowd. Certainly the poor boys derive much pleasure from our company, and that is a great compensation. The dear things lay themselves out in all possible ways to make things pleasant, and it is positively wicked to even think a complaint when we remember that many of them have been out here three years, seeing always the same faces, and listening to the same voices—no society save that of each other. It is little wonder if brotherly love has not exactly continued, and if their language is a bit raw.

I have dodged a good many dances and whist drives. I went to one of the latter last night—more out of curiosity than good nature. It might be described as a "small function," but only so far as the place where it was held is concerned. From the outside you would guess the hut capable of accommodating one man—or perhaps two men, supposing them to be careful and tidy persons; but you have another guess coming—forty of us were assembled in this reception hall. There were five tables—army "tables" are six-feet boards on trestles—so eight of you sit at one, and your partner is diagonally opposite you. Your opponent sits next to you, very near. When I said the hut held (somehow) forty, I should have said forty players, but there were several nonplayers pressed closely round a red-hot stove. All the men were smoking, all the windows were

open, so there was only partial asphyxiation. We paid 50 centimes per head entrance fee, and there were prizes—the "ladies' " prize, a large box of chocolates. I played badly, but had luck, and my partner had the skill, so all ended happily. But, oh! I am tired to-day. There is to be a dance to-night, and we have special permission to remain and see the New Year in. I am awfully excited about it. I have seen many curious New Years' *innings*, and this experience will add something worth remembering to my collection. I do hope the men will keep fairly sober. It is only afternoon, and I am yawning for my sleepy-bye—but I shall feel worse to-morrow.

If you're waking very early,
Do not call me, there's a dear,
For I care not for the sunrise
Upon the glad New Year.
That early morning réveillé
Has a mad'ning sound for me,
So up if you must and fall in line,
But kindly let me be.

Whispered in the ear of my nearest comrade this has no effect whatever—callous little wretch!

I had heaps of Christmas letters. All my bestest friends really turned up trumps with lovely long letters which I did not deserve, as I have scarce written to a soul but you since I have been in France.

Mrs. M. is a darling—she asks is there any way of sending me some quince jam! My word! Is there!!! I venture to believe that a certain person—hum!—will see that it is packed and posted. *N'est pas?*

Bye-bye, dearest,
As always,
THOMASINA.

XXII

From Somewhere in France,
January 1st, 1918.

DEAREST PEACH,

The first letter of the New Year comes your way, bringing my dear love, best wishes for good health, and every possible happiness. I hope my *last* letter of this same year will not go out from here—and so say all of us.

We ushered in the New Year at the dance I told you yesterday was in store for us. It was a small gathering, comparatively speaking, because the only place available would hold no more. The lights were turned out at midnight, and some one beat the hour out on the big drum, or was it the cymbals?—probably a dixie and poker for baton. We all linked hands in the approved manner and sang "Auld Lang Syne." Has it ever been explained why people who have met for the first and (possibly) last time sing "Auld Lang Syne"? Shades of many a New Year's Eve came back to me, and I imagined you hanging out of your window to listen for the bells that would, alas! be dumb this year.

We had a march to the dance—about fifteen minutes—and made a most praiseworthy effort to keep our footing on the glassy road. We

all danced every dance of course, and as some of our partners were not dancing men, and the others were out of practice in consequence of having been out here for several years, you can imagine what a strenuous time we had. We marched back somewhere near one o'clock, and made night hideous with our song. Fortunately for the occupants we passed very few human habitations. We are somewhat of a noisy crowd on the march.

Up again this morning at the usual time, and office work piled high on my desk to greet me! My fatigue of yesterday has quite worn off—application of homeopathic principle, I suppose—but I look like the very deuce. Talk about the fag-end of an ill-spent life! Evidently my years are beginning to tell on me! Hard luck to have to carry your birth certificate on your face. I have just made a discovery. After six months' service we get £1 kit allowance credited us. Lord knows what I should do if we were compelled to draw the £1 in kind, for there is little of any value to be had at the army stores here. The shoes are a delusion and a snare, but the stockings are good—although no one would want to buy eight pairs; the only thing would be to buy half a frock! As for collars, I have eight instead of three—the regular issue. I happened to be chummy with two girls at the home hostel who were going to be forewomen, so when they got their clothing they gave me their collars. They had been given to them, although it was quite ob-

vious that they could never be worn. *C'est la guerre.* Forewomen wear cream collars—tussore as a rule—and they have to provide them. Isn't it rather silly? Now, having a good supply of these brown collars on hand, it will be just my luck to have my promotion come along. I don't know how I slipped through kit inspection without comment. It was rather like the Customs' House inspection—very thorough at first, and a bit sloppy towards the end when every one was tired. Then, you see, there was that Embarkation Drill, a beastly tiring stunt, how to carry your bag, and how to drop it on the word of command—quite easy that. From the quay to the boat we had to look after all our own things, and it took some doing, combined with our newly acquired military deportment—which insists, that no matter the weight of your bag, you shall not walk lopsided. But here I am harking back to things that happened centuries ago.

I enclose our regimental Christmas card—just as a souvenir.

I have been writing this in the office where it is warm and quiet (as a rule), but casual visitors are now dropping in, so the din commences.

Ever yours fondly,

THOMASINA.

XXIII

From Somewhere in France,
January 6th, 1918.

DEAR PEACHIKINS,

The parcel "has came," as the Darkie usually says, for which many thanks. Everything was in order, and no casualties—and I feel in clover. So sorry to hear of D.'s bereavement. Poor soul! but, my dear, next year he would have been of calling-up age—so *que voulez vous?*

I have been leaving a long gap between letters this week, but it is this a-way. The Colonel went to Paris for the New Year, and before departing on Monday, he left a little job to be finished by Friday, which brought all hands on deck, and one night I worked very late. It was all figures, and they will dance about so, which makes for wuzziness. Indeed my brain became so groggy that I couldn't think straight; but the beastly job is over, and now I am waiting for a big box of chocolates to appear on my desk. I imagine it will be "some wait."

We have had a concert party *en visite* this week. Very good. One popular song was rearranged for a chorus of men and one girl; the boy who played the girl made a great hit, he was extremely coy. There was much patter intro-

duced, mostly military "shop," and it went with yells. The butt of all jokes and stories is always the Sergeant-major or the Sergeants' Mess, and there was a plentiful supply of this sort of humour. *"Jimmy Green, you have come into school without a pencil; now, what would you say of a soldier who went into battle without a rifle?" "Please, teacher, I should say he was an orficer."* (*Shouts.*) Some fearful chestnuts took on a fresh lease of life. Among the performers was a trick cyclist; he was working on a stage about six by ten feet, and he brought on an attendant with a step-ladder *à la Coliseum.* It was too deliciously absurd for words. The costumes of the party are a scream; they collect them from all sorts of places and cart them and the scenery from town to town. The girl had a priceless wig—with a bun at the nape of the neck. Her dress was pale blue chiffon, to the knees, a low, square neck; black ribbon round the throat; long black suède gloves, and black silk stockings; very slender ankles—in fact, a fine "girl." The second part of the programme opened with a serious selection, so of course you have guessed it was *Faust.* You never saw such a vermilion villain as the "Mephisto." The next night the serious hit was *Faust* again ("Valentine's" death scene), and when poor Valentine, writhing according to tradition, bade his chum "Search in his breast for the key to the secret," one of the audience remarked audibly, "He's looking for his identity

disc!" Well, well! These things look very foolish set down on paper, but they serve to let you know how we beguile ourselves when off duty.

Many thanks for the verses; I like them, but fear they may be a trifle "high brow" for the troops out here. You see, there is absolutely no serious thought of the work in hand, all is nonchalance, and a light kind of cynicism. There is undoubtedly a keen longing for the end of the war, and anything, or any one, that seems to be helping towards that becomes of immediate importance. But there is little, or no thought for the morrow, and none, positively none, for next week. For that one has to go to the heads.

Apropos, have a look in the New Year's number of the ———. There is a page full of the "Heads and Brains of the W.A.A.C.s." Don't be disappointed that my face is not among them. Bear up!

This is Sunday, and I ought to sit down and write piles of letters, but the sun is shining, and I am going for a walk instead. After much crooking at a desk, legs need stretching. This little town nestles in a hole like Bath—surrounding country very pretty, plenty of woods, and, once clear of the town, very good roads. You would just love it.

Bye-bye, dearie,
Alle samey love,
THOMASINA.

XXIV

From Somewhere in France,
January 7th, 1918.

PEACHIE DEAR,

I forgot to mention the prints; they reached me quite undamaged. Thank A. for her careful packing. Just as soon as the mercury crawls up a little higher I will get busy with those same "picters," and I hope to make my hut a vision of delight. At present we are in the throes of another bitter spell; I believe you are sharing it, so there is no sense in dwelling on it. New York must be a cosy spot just now. Imagine it with no steam heat, owing to coal shortage. I have "indented" for a thick sweater from the Quartermaster's Stores, at one of the bases. They have some very good ones, to go under, or over, a coat-frock, and they are only about twelve francs. Also I am buying a new pair of shoes from the canteen. My own browns are not standing the strain of heavy roads, and my "army issue" are already gone up for repairs. I mention these sordid details in order to ward off any facetiousness in regard to saving out of my pay.

January 8th.

Tried to get on with the preceding, yesterday,

but no luck. At this moment I am in the office —in charge. The Colonel has gone to bed with a cold, and the chief clerk has gone down to the mess to see him. All the others are out—on odd jobs—that is how it happens I am by my lones. Goll darn it! there goes the telephone, no peace for the——. All right, I am back again—only one of the officers upstairs rang through to put a thoroughly unnecessary question, probably wanted to find out if I was here, and could answer the "'phone." I gather that the chief clerk is an old type of sergeant-major. He did eight years' service before the war, and joined up again August 1914. Out here ever since, I believe, and he is keenly awaiting his 1914 star.

He is a veritable lambkin to work for. A few days ago he cast an eye down at my shoes (which I had not had time to polish), and offered me brush and polishing cloth. Absent-mindedly I thrust forward my feet, and down he went on his knees and polished for all he was worth—just like any nice little gentleman. Of course I thanked him like a nice little lady—then the quaintness of the situation occurred to me. A Staff Sergeant-major—Warrant Officer, Class I—cleaning the shoes of a five weeks' old private! Well! I nipped a budding smile and went on with my work. You see, they pride themselves on treating us as ordinary soldiers, but, bless their hearts, they can't do it—at least not all the time.

Oh! the army of to-day's all right, but what

about the army of the day after to-morrow, what is it going to be like by the time the W.A.A.C.s have had a real whack at it? The Colonel has the same forgetful habit—I mean in regard to his resolution to treat us merely as private soldiers. He came in the other evening with instructions for the S.-M. concerning something which had been left undone in some department, and he wound up his speech, "And you tell them they are a lot of" blankety, blankety blanks, etc. Then he suddenly caught sight of me, and, covered with confusion and laughter, bolted from the room. He is a dear old thing.

Among the girls I have two chums in particular. The one who shares my hut is a little pet. She has the tiniest face, always on the grin, and our camp wag calls her "Hail, Smiling Morn." She is older than I am, but looks younger. The other is a big girl—only twenty, but taller than I, and rather fat, in fact very solid. Of course she is dubbed "Fairy" by the boys—which is rather mean. She is a great sport, and so doesn't mind. She is a typist at our office, and it is topping for me to have her for company on the daily trots to and fro.

We have one *Enfant Terrible* and general scapegoat—a most amusing kid—never been away from home before—very young—no use whatever for discipline.

She made a great hit one night at drill with an explosive "Dash it all, it's a blinking nuisance!"

There was a yell from the squad, and even the N.C.O. was a bit gassed by it and had to laugh. Of course she (the irrepressible one) has been known as "Dash it all Smith" ever since. On another occasion she made a mistake—the order was "left" and she went "right." When reprimanded, she said, "But, dash it all, I don't see that it makes any difference!" And she doesn't—that's the funny part of her.

Bye-bye, dear, I have heaps more to write, but I no longer have the office to myself, and I must look about for work. I shall not have far to look—a glance over my shoulder to where my "Boss" is ensconced with just the suggestion of a scowl mounting to his baby brow. Something outside has gone wrong. Poor dear, it is hard on him that I am only a girl, and he can't vent his anger in appropriate language—on me.

More to-morrow from

Yours affectionately,

THOMASINA.

XXV

From Somewhere in France,
January 9th, 1918.

DEAR PEACHIE,

We thawed two days ago, and at the sight of a blade of grass my spirits rose, and I shouted, "Hail, Spring!" Rash fool in my folly! This morning we are snowed over again; it is freezing, and now we are slithering about as before. I must be getting inured to the temperature, for I have seldom felt more fit. Have your water-pipes frozen yet?

I have been reading about your meatless days and your butterless weeks and the endless trouble about the food. Luckily we have none of that. What do you think of the German mutiny story? It had a cheering effect on all our boys. I saw a large batch of little "round caps" being trotted into town yesterday, regular "sawed offs"—and very young. A miserable-looking bunch.

Now that the holidays are over, we all think and talk Spring, snow and ice notwithstanding. Spring seems to be only just round the corner—and in the Spring the young girl's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of leave. Two of our girls are going next week—they have been out here six months. I daren't even think about my own turn

for another two or three months, and then I shall begin to mutter things. As far as the office is concerned, it will be easy enough. At the camp it will be more difficult to get my own way. Still I have hopes of gaining the sympathetic ear toward the end of April, if I am very, very good. One of our forewomen is away on leave at present; she was due back to-morrow, but has had extension because she is laid up with bronchitis. Rotten luck to spend one's leave thus. Poor thing! she is verra Scotch—(not poor thing on that account, but bronchitisly speaking), and she loves the sound of her own voice while warbling. She occupies the adjoining cubicle in my hut, and treats me to snatches of melody at all hours of the day and night. When the sentimental ballads are exhausted, she falls back on hymns, and I awoke one morning to the reminder (very loud), that "A few more years shall roll." I nearly threw my frozen sponge at her (and that would have reduced her *few* to a minimum), but I remembered in time that she was a N.C.O. and that I had no redress. The slightest expostulation would have meant a "fatigue," towards which yours truly has no sort of inclination; but I did get back on the girls, and, being lambs, they understood.

Our other N.C.O. is a quaint little Welsh girl —very young for her job, and, "look you," she is about four feet eight inches high. And oh! so tubby. She is a dear, and extremely popular. I call her my little Welsh rabbit, and we get on

splendidly. I introduced her to a nice boy, the chief clerk of our branch office here. He is six feet tall and proportionately broad. They go walking together, and that sight brings joy to the camp. Her head just about reaches his belt. I came across a rather promising youth the other day, really seemed quite interesting—and then I discovered he cleaned his nails, "for all the world to see," with his pocket-knife. My! but it *is* a drawback to be so pertickler.

The hard weather has been a trial to our local laundress, and a tragedy to us. Some of my new undies have come to a violent and sudden end. My woolly spencer came back like a piece of dark grey wood—had to thaw it and wear it, because I have only the two. Try and get me some more (Scotch wool, if procurable) and send at once. My beautiful brown shoes have finally rebelled against snow and ice, and have split from toe to heel. You see, nothing will prevent them from freezing at night—and to save my new goloshes I am wrapping them in newspaper and taking them to bed with me. I shall do this with my new shoes when I get them. Oh! I do hope they will behave—shoes are so dear. This weather does spell disaster to one's clothes—the roads are so rough and the wind is not much tempered to us poor lambs. The nice tall boy I mentioned has just come into the office with his dog—a darling thing like a young elephant, but with a much more lively disposition. I have just given him a lump

of coal to keep him quiet. He is eating it with apparent relish, so I think I will dodge off to dinner so as to escape the funeral and his young master's wrath. Young master preoccupied—writing. Last morsel of coal about to disappear—so also is

Your loving

THOMASINA.

XXVI

From Somewhere in France,
January 11th, 1918.

DEAR PEACHIE,

Having just pushed my last letter into the "out" box, I went home to lunch to find yours of the 6th waiting for me—which inclined me to sit down and write reams more. But business at the office, and coldness at the camp, made it impossible. I spend more and more of my time at the office. I feel at home there, somehow, and (even when quite alone) much less lonely than when I am in a crowd. This is odd, considering I have spent so much of my life in large communities. Camp life takes me back to my school-days, and, although there are two or three girls whom I like very much, a queer mental loneliness comes over me in waves, and sometimes takes complete possession of me. And then I become introspective, retrospective, and prospective, and find myself trying vainly to see the sense of this topsy-turvy war business; so much energy, so much brain work, so much real vital force being exhausted—on what? The purpose of it is dim at the best of times, but at these times—of which I am writing—it is non-existent. There is a lot of talk about the ultimate good to the human race—but where

and when does this good start? I, personally, can see no improvement individually, or *en masse*. Of course I am not speaking of the war itself, and the necessity for making its recurrence impossible —there can be no argument as to that—but army life, with its out-of-date routine, its red tape which binds nothing together, its awe of the letter and indifference to the spirit—I used to believe that, at least, it inculcated willingness and sacrifice, self-control, poise, but oh! I hae ma grave doots. As far as the majority is concerned (and it is the majority that I have in mind), the men and women alike are doing their job because they have to. Pressure comes from without, not from within; their superior in rank of whatever qualification must be blindly obeyed, so that resistance is pent-up, and dissatisfaction has to be vented on each other. You will remember what Harold Chapin says in one of his letters, "Your enemy is not the German, but the man next you in the trench who may steal your helmet." Well, that applies all the time. The golden rule in the army is "each man for himself." When the bitter weather is with us and we feel the pinch, it is curious to watch the devices of each girl to get *the* drop of warm water for her bottle, to edge into the place nearest the fire at meal-times. There is a wealth of good nature and unselfishness to be found, but it is in those people who have *always* been unselfish under any conditions. This kind of life is not going to change anybody; it merely

brings out latent qualities and develops them, both good and bad. Many parents will think their girls have been altered by camp life because so many of them (the offspring) are at the developing age. But, darling love, I hope you won't be disappointed—it is not going to change anything in me. I shall come back with all the old faults, and possibly a few new ones.

The paragraph you enclosed is very interesting, but it leaves me cold. It is a splendid thing to have your mind fixed, and to know exactly what you want, but oh! my dear, is it so splendid to ride rough shod over everything and everybody in the achieving of one's own personal success? Do these people do sufficient good when they get there to justify the harm they cause all along the road? Well, life is given to do with as we like, and is exclusively our own show, so all my moralising avails but little. Talking of people making or marring their lives reminds me of T. I am rather worried about him. Now, don't say I am a fool to waste a thought on him—because I know that already. But pals are pals—and I don't like to see mine, even the derelicts, drop away. Try and find out what has become of him if you can. I know you hate to butt in when people evince such a marked disposition to be left alone, but still—a little diplomacy—might—eh?

Do send me a song that we can use on the march; we are awfully hard up for melody. Observe! I am bucking up already and throwing off

the cobwebs of pessimism. The letter you forwarded from the States is the first from that quarter since I signed on. They "feel worried about me." Oh! dearie me! what a funny world it really is after all, and we miss the humour half the time—because we intern our intelligence, and become absorbed in trivialities. I was shaken out of them for a minute last night by falling "kerplunk" in the mud outside the camp in the dark—raining hard! Now that was a real thing, and oh! so beautifully sudden. Alas! my only pair of gloves! I was all dressed up—yes, I had somewhere to go. Being splashed up to the eyes has no terrors after the bitter frost. It is such a treat to be able to relax a muscle.

Good-bye. Don't ask me where I get all my green envelopes—have always known it was better to be born lucky than rich.

Fondest love,

THOMASINA.

XXVII

From Somewhere in France,
January 18th, 1918.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Ever so many thanks for the parcel. The woolly which A. calls the "Worthy" will do splendidly. It is certainly not depending on its appearance for its popularity, but on its intrinsic worth—like its owner. The other two will serve for those warmer days of which we are dreaming. I know how scarce all these things are now in London, but here they are unknown, so I shall be as careful as poss. to make them last. The gloves are just right. The mittens I brought with me are useless, and I am tempted to send them back to have fingers stuck on them. The quince preserve made a great hit. We had an orgy in my hut, and you may tell Mrs. M. that she is a white lamb. So sorry to have missed my mid-week letter, but work has been awfully stiff lately, and I have been going back to the office nearly every night and remain till ten. The one night off I went to a dance—quite the jolliest I have attended. Met there a nice young sub. (brother of M. T.), who was delighted to talk "shop"—my shop—and was otherwise rather a dear.

I enclose a little light literature (programmes

of our Amateur Theatricals, arranged by the Troops' Literary and Debating Society), just to show you how spare evenings are passed in the army. This "Breach of Promise Case" or "Mock Trial" was really a bit of a lark, but wasn't it just my luck to be cast for the Plaintiff? We were terribly serious and professional—real stage—and the scratch costumes were alone worth the price of admission. There was tremendous excitement among the men at the opportunity of getting into "civies" and make-up. They just love to slab the grease paint on. My clothes (I won't describe them) were borrowed from a civilian friend of the Administrator, and we had a group photograph taken, if you please. I tell you, Irving, Benson, etc., must look to their laurels. My Counsel—the Major—is by way of being a poet; he kindly brings me yards of stuff to spout. He made a very good speech to open the case, and got plenty of laughs. I had a trying time under cross-examination by the opposing Counsel, but eventually swam through, and the jury (mixed) gave me the verdict—but only £5 damages instead of £2,000. The defence accused me of having a flirtatious disposition and otherwise tried to blacken my character. One of the witnesses was asked had he ever given me anything of value, "Oh, yes," was the prompt reply, "I gave her two green envelopes." Laughter! All this nonsense has taken up my spare mid-day hours for several days. As soon as I sat down to

my letters, or any other important job, I would hear my name shouted, and be told that Major —— was waiting in the office to go over his part. Finally I took to hiding in despair, but was generally dug out. It was the Major who got up the dance for us early in the week. He has some jolly little subs. in his bunch, and they did things very well—even to sending a lorry to fetch us. This was almost a necessity, as the mud was ankle deep in the middle of the roads. Nobody ever tried the sides.

Hold your breath! I have been promoted.

This deserves a fresh paragraph. Our N.C.O. being away on leave, four temporary corporals have been nominated to carry on—two from the household staff and two clerks. We are made conspicuous by a strip of brown bootlace across the shoulder strap—neat, not gaudy—and we are responsible for everything that goes, or may go wrong. So my camp life now is a matter of roll calls, lights out, and passes, plus taking care of the youngsters in camp, and, as our song says, "It makes no difference to our pay." I have in the office a new recruit, placed under my wing to learn my job from me. I have been here only six weeks, but no matter, and I am learning the job of the man next higher up! So all my hands are full. In a couple of months I ought to have my cream collar, badges, *and* pay. That interesting stage reached, it should be an easy matter for me to get a commission, if I can bring myself to bear

the idea of an officer's job. In the *Gazette* yesterday there were three inches of space all W.A.A.C. commissions.

Of all dull letters, commend me to this one, but the figures on which I am engaged at the office are dancing a tango in front of my eyes. Be good, darling, and remember always—

Your loving

THOMASINA.

XXVIII

From Somewhere in France,
January 23rd, 1918.

HOW NOW, DEAR PEACHIE?

I hope to find a letter from you at the camp when I tramp thither for dinner. I usually do on Wednesday. I hope you are sharing our spell of warm weather. Although it is treacherous and horribly wet, still it is better than the bitter, cruel frost.

I saw a copy of a London paper yesterday, and in it a notice of the Concert Party now playing at one of the theatres. It is the same company of which I wrote you, and they seem to be giving the same programme. Do go to see them, if you can, and let me know how the entertainment strikes you. My judgment is probably all topsy-turvy by now, and totally unreliable. You see, I have reached the stage when anything, however puerile and drivelling, appears funny. I so rarely hear a clever phrase or an apt remark. There must be plenty of brain *somewhere* hereabouts, but in my immediate surroundings it is not discernible. Nothing but the reiteration of the obvious, indecision, contradiction, and confusion of thought. Perhaps it is merely an instance of that

"familiarity which breeds, etc.," but I do long for a note of originality.

The break in the weather here has brought the football enthusiasts out again, after a rest of six weeks (which was not doing them any good), and last Sunday there was a thrilling match. I had to go with one of the typists from our office (a very nice girl, by the way), or life would not have been worth living for either of us, because one of our boys was playing and our Sergeant-major, he of the whiskers, was the referee! They play Association, which is not nearly so exciting to watch as Rugger—still it was very good play. There was only one accident—a poor boy was mistaken for the ball, and caught somebody's foot in his chest. Result—casualty—"rib broken—one." He was "dead man" for half an hour, and an ambulance was summoned; rotten luck—especially as he was on our side. However, we won 6–0, and as the boy from our office scored two of the goals, there was much jubilation, and, as I heard afterwards, much "pushing out of boats" when we girls went off duty. *Voilà la guerre!*

We are agitating to form a Hockey Team in our camp—a little violent exercise will do us no harm. Then the fun will be to challenge a he male team who will play with broom-sticks! We are full of the plan—we always are full of *some* plan. Then the enthusiasm wanes, or the impracticability is realised; but 'tis better to have planned and lost heart, than never to have planned at all.

To-day I missed my customary walk on account of the mud. It really is too thick even for me—so I stayed in camp and drummed up courage, soap and water for a head shampoo—my first since I landed here. Great success! clean, but very straight. I am no longer troubled by the candid severity of my appearance. No one could remain in the army and retain a vestige of vanity. There is a struggle for a few days—then all is over—and you face your mirror (when you find one) unflinchingly. Talking of severity, do you notice how stereotyped and clerical my fist is becoming? Much writing in registers! I hope my brain will not follow suit. Haven't you noticed that people with fat, stodgy brains always write this sort of hand? I am *vested* in my "worthy." It is beautifully warm—which is more than can be said of most symbols of respectability; it is a wee bit scratchy, but will probably have its claws drawn by our vigorous laundress.

Please explain to all enquirers why I have neglected them in the matter of letters. Pile it on thick! You cannot possibly exaggerate the case. I really wish the day had forty-eight hours, or that one had no need of sleep. I do sleep—like the dead—and I look very well. Rosy tints still refuse to lodge in my cheeks, but rainwater makes for freshness, and I always use it—it gives one a soft, lissom feeling. When I find myself missing the luxuries of yore, I remind myself of the rain-

water, and I realise that camp life has its compensations for a sybarite such as

Yours affectionately,

THOMASINA.

XXIX

From Somewhere in France,
January 30th, 1918.

DEAR OLD PEACHIE,

A.'s letter just in. So sorry you have been ill again.

I imagine that Monday night's skirmish did not improve matters. Have been reading about it this morning, and it has made me feel rather sick.

Oh! but this horrible war!

We are in a state of suspense and anxiety at the office. It has been going on more or less for three weeks, and is likely to last another two. I cannot be explicit, but certain persons in high places have "got the wind up," and there is some sort of scheme afloat. We may be dispersed, we may be amalgamated, or the whole idea may go up in smoke, and leave us just where and how we are. As it is, we are living from day to day, wondering what is going to happen, where we are to be sent, or if? It reminds me of touring with a dubious success on a tour of small towns. Will the tour continue? Or shall we put in for another job? Well! there is no sense in worrying, but it is unsettling.

Life in camp goes on as usual; we have some new girls over, and our two N.C.O.s (the thistle

and the leek) are both back from leave and going strong. While dressing this morning I had the old hymnal accompaniment from the Scottie in the adjoining cubicle. I did my best to drown it —made all the hideous noises I could with the aid of a bad cold. No use—the programme continued, and "Hark! hark, my soul!" came along in regular order. When the vocalist reached the verse "Rest comes at length," I said, "Some hope," and "Hail, Smiling Morn," nearly rolled out of bed with laughter. Oh! did I tell you that I am supposed to be a wit? If I say "Good morning," it is greeted with laughter. I am wondering if I can get a job in the comic line when the war is over. There might be money in it. For a side partner I might do worse than adopt our office orderly. He's a wild little Irishman. This morning the fire was smoking, so Pat was called in to see to it. He first threw on a rag soaked in paraffin, then another soaked in petrol. This set the chimney on fire—but the stove smoked on. Then he looked wise, and remarked, "Sure, and if I had known the fire was smoking, I wouldn't have lighted it this morning, I would not." I met him in the street this afternoon, and he took his cap off to me! The shock nearly gassed me. I had forgotten that hats ever came off except to hang on a peg.

Have you heard the latest? From one General to another. "What is better than a slap on the back?"

Answer: "A whack (W.A.A.C) on the knee." There's another, but it is less circumspect, so I'll save it.

Young H. writes me that he hopes to make tracks for London about the 12th, and he suggests my wangling for leave to go to Boulogne to see him off. The idea is neat, but it doesn't thrill me. It would probably mean two days' leave for half an hour's chat. The boat would slink off—and there should I be gazing pensively after it from the quay. No, thanks! I don't see myself posing for a picture postcard, thuswise, but oh! "Isn't it like a Man?" If he doesn't come back this way and drop off to see me—well! then he is a black toad.

I hear rumours of the war being over in July, or September, but no year specified! So, cheerio! Do take care of yourself, darling, and hug yourself tight for your own

THOMASINA.

XXX

From Somewhere in France,
February 3rd, 1918.

DEAREST PEACHIE,

Hooray for the sight of your own fist again. I love to see it in pencil especially—that always suggests that you are in your old writing mood. You must keep up these little jaunts out of town. I am sure they help towards your well being.

Thank you so much for all your trouble. Shopping is such an awful business these days. If you have not already packed the parcel, do not include the cold cream—in case I am moved on from here. You see, if I *am* shifted, I shall have to do some bequeathing. No matter how hard we try to reduce our needs, and curtail our possessions, things will accumulate, and the small travelling-receptacle does not expand.

I am particularly distressed at the thought that I shall have to destroy so many letters. I have always kept *yours* from all parts of the world, and these war-time letters will be interesting reading in the years to come. Talking of letters, that open theatrical letter you enclosed is very good and sound advice. Perhaps I think so because it is what I have all along made bold to suggest. It is only those who have reached the top who can

do anything for those on the way up. The A.A. is a splendid organisation—*l'union fait la force,* and all that, I know—but I am a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, and the "Vox Populi" is not harmonious to my ears. I adore caste, I cling to class distinction, and I solemnly believe in the real aristocracy as rulers and directors. They have gained the necessary experience by centuries of service, and to them power means responsibility and naught else. After all, "Aristocracy" only means "Nobility" combined with "Potency." Well, these essences take a long time in the brewing, and me for the finished product every time. I find myself very positive on this head since I joined the army of *to-day*. Whenever you find rebellion to the front and law and order going by the board, have a look at those in authority. Lordie! you ought to see some of the specimens I have met whose applications for commissions have been "recommended." I often meditate on the "after the war" condition of the Army and the State! Have you ever realised how Gilbertian the situation is going to be? Naturally the universal demand will be, "No more war"; therefore an enlarged army, armies of occupation in all conquered territory and in the Colonies. How are we going to reconcile this with the trend of evolution and advanced thought? Modern socialism preaches specialisation. Let boots be cleaned only by boot cleaners, clothes mended by qualified repairers, food prepared only by experts. The army

says, "Every man his own boot cleaner, his own cook, and his own mender." Question: Is the Army going to be entirely reorganised? If so, on what basis? Communal living leaves no place for the presence of an army! I am extraordinarily curious on these points, and I hope to live to a ripe old age, just to have my curiosity satisfied.

Strange you should have asked me about books. I do want a good Marcus Aurelius. He is the only comrade I have a fancy for at present; he would fill the bill when I really want to read. Anything more modern would be tiresome, unless I have missed the best in up-to-date philosophy. Serious reading is well-nigh impossible out here. It is not so much a question of time as the power of concentration. Interest flags, and one drops into the habit of seizing on to the lightest kind of stuff—"brain dope," I call it. Even the alleged "funny" magazine is devoured by way of recreation. I think it is because each day brings forth such a mass of facts to tax the point of view, and to test one's opinions, that there is no room left for sidelights. In reading philosophy there is such a temptation to adopt it, and make life fit it. Here the great task is to make one's own philosophy fit in with life. It is a confusing game, and when the tired brain can rest, it endeavours to get the contents simmered down and the waste matter skimmed off the top. Oh! my dear, my dear, I wish I had you out here, so that we could talk events over as they happen. There is so

much that is interesting, and that gives one to pause—and that, alas! I cannot mention. Perhaps it is as well, in a way. Your hair would surely stand on end—even *mine* is almost curling. So you will perceive they are "some" happenings.

Good night, love,

Gaw-blessyer,

THOMASINA.

XXXI

From Somewhere in France,
February 6th, 1918.

DARLING PEACHIE,

Just a line to remind you that I love you in case you have forgotten it. So you have had fogs and things! We don't deal in them out here. I feel, somehow, that I am having the best of it by a long way—am uncommonly buoyant, perhaps because the weather is delightful (touch wood!). There is that real country Spring smell everywhere. You would so enjoy it, and I wish you were here. In the ordinary course of affairs you would be bored stiff, but under existing circumstances you would find oodles of things to entertain you!!!

There seems to be a sad dearth of news this week; it is not particularly interesting to record that I get up, work, eat, and go to bed—and then repeat the experiment next day. I am getting fat —isn't it callous of me? Perhaps it is the excellent brand of sleep I indulge in, or is it the chocolates? I rather disdained sweets in my early youth. Well, I am levelling up now. My pal who works in the office has just gone home on leave. I feel doubly envious of her, as she lives in my part of London town. I should have liked

to ask her to call on you, but did not dare encroach on her all too brief holiday. Never mind, the days are flying by, and I have my own leave to look forward to. Dead silence regarding our migration—still there is a feeling that we are to be moved somewhere. "But we know not the day or the hour."

Heaps of thanks for the parcel. I am very much spoilt getting everything I ask for, and so quickly. Yes, I know that is nothing new in my case, but out here one's appreciation is more keen, and perhaps that is where we are all benefiting morally. I have always taken things as a matter of course, and have frequently confused my rights with my privileges.

February 10*th.*

After the foregoing confession I felt I needed to take a few days off. But it's all right, it still goes—and I mean it.

The plot (regarding our being moved on) seems to be weakening, and now I have a "hunch" that it was only a bubble and is busted. I hope so; I was getting horribly strung up and nervy about it. It is strange that one should conceive an attachment to a half of a cubicle, but so it is, and I now understand the feelings of that famous sparrow who built up that equally famous spout, and his sense of injury at the adjective thunderstorm that came and drove him out. No, I haven't written to Colonel S——n. You see, I

cannot transfer from my present job without considerable wire-pulling, so I think it is better to hang on and work for my promotion and that cream collar. That would result in pay almost equal to that of a commission.

I am beginning to realise that I cannot remain in my present position for the "duration." You see, the war will have to come to an end some day, and the stupendous sum of 27*s.* 6*d.* (14*s.* deducted for board) would undoubtedly leave me in the position of Old Mother Hubbard, and without her spirit of enterprise. I think that earning a little more money is quite compatible with playing the game through as I mean to play it.

The usual round of work was broken last week by an invitation to perform at a concert as part of the programme. Three of us went, two girl vocalists and myself. The boys who were getting up the concert had kept our presence a secret—as a surprise for their friends—so when the first girl appeared, the audience did not know that she was the genuine feminine article until she began to sing. We made a great success, but it would have been still greater if our items had been better selected. The boys out here are so very mixed that one never knows what to offer them in the way of entertainment. Sometimes it is a quaint little song or poem that goes home best; at others such a number misses fire most awfully. Many a time, on looking at the faces in front of me, I have

suddenly had a spasm of regret that I was not "Tottie Coughdrops" of the "Levity Co."

We are getting up a concert of our own next week, and to me has been allotted the task of rehearsing a sketch. My hair-raising trouble is to assemble my cast. They all work at different hours, and none of their free times seem to click with mine. We are also forming a hockey team. Practice takes place in a field at the back of the camp, to the delight of the small boys—ditto the big boys who expect to challenge us shortly with broomsticks. I have never played hockey, but I am pining to hit *something,* somehow and sometime, so it will serve.

Bye-bye, dear. Hope on—hope ever,

And love your

THOMASINA.

P.S.—I began by saying "Just a line," so take heed of the day when I inflict you with a real letter.

XXXII

From Somewhere in France,
February 14th, 1918.

DEAREST PEACHIKINS,

I do wish you could find a resting-place somewhere in the country. For one who is just beginning to recover from a long stretch of nervous prostration, town is no place in which to remain. I learn that there has been considerable damage to property in our immediate neighbourhood. You never mention any details—and, of course, I guess the reason—but do let me know if any of the old landmarks have suffered, or disappeared, just to break the shock for me on my return. Newspaper reports are about as much good as a sick headache, and out here I can only sit and wonder and pray.

I had a spasm of homesickness the other night. I went to the cinema—first time for weeks. *Bootle's Baby,* done by a London Film Co., a very good performance, and the sight of dear familiar faces gave me a bad twinge.

We all went to a dance last night—in a lorry. We did not leave the "Halls of dazzling light" till past midnight, and while we had been engaged in "tripping the light fantastic," the rain had

been steadily falling, and the roads were so thick and slithery that the clumsy old lorry ran off the *pavé* into the ditch, and once there, said, *"J'y suis, j'y reste"*—and meant it. We were ages being dug out, lurching to and fro every few minutes with the futile efforts of the pushers and pullers. It seemed as if the whole caboodle *must* turn over. There were thirty of us packed inside. It was quite dark, and as the lorry sank deeper the spirits of some of the passengers rose higher. But nothing remains stationary for ever, not even a lorry in a ditch, and finally we were hauled up, to the disappointment (I imagine) of some of our young merrymakers. Result of all this—a few "fatigues" and "C.B.s" handed out to-day. I haven't learnt the nature of the misdemeanours, but the "fatigues" were scrubbing huts.

I have never laughed so much in my life as at the sight of two of the culprits, one, a wee mite, nicknamed "Giggles," a regular little handful, but fairly popular; the other a tall, lanky girl, "Bean Pole," the rascal of the Corps. They fetched their pails and cleaning stuff in a sober and righteous manner, then they removed their frocks and put on overalls, tied sacks round themselves, and completed their toilette with frilly boudoir caps. All went well until the N.C.O. was out of sight —then the performance began.

They proceeded to give imitations of Wilkie Bard, with original business. Having washed the

piece of board near the door, they jumped over it, and sat in the dry part while they slopped all round them, chanting, "Shall we gather at the river." When they stood up, the overall of the "Bean Pole" barely reached her knees, while that of "Giggles" formed a train all around her. The whole business was accompanied by more or less appropriate song—sacred and secular—with occasional yells of, "Order, please!"; "Silence in the Gallery," etc. The last I saw of "Giggles," she was lying face down on her bed scrubbing the floor beneath with a brush tied to a hockey stick. The "Bean Pole" managed to put her foot into the bucket, and, in order to dry it, climbed on the roof of the hut (the roofs, as you know, are curved) and amused herself sliding off, first one side, then the other. At this point I concluded to rescue her, and took her to the office, before she should be caught and given a new, and still less pleasant, job. She is an irrepressible little monkey, much too young to be out here at all really. She has been put in my office because the power that is thinks I can keep some kind of control over her. At heart she is a nice kid, and I get on well with her, but I wash my hands of all official responsibility till I get my "White Collar" to back me up in authority. After that my troubles will really start, for it will be my fault if she gets into mischief. Did I say "If"?

We are to be moved on after all. Well, no

use grousing, it may be another of those beastly blessings camouflaged, so—cheerio!

Fondest to my dear one, from

THOMASINA.

XXXIII

From Somewhere in France,
February 16th, 1918.

PEACHIE DARLING,

Your budget greeted me at dinner-time, and I had to go to my own hut to finish reading it. I am still a child of very mixed feelings; I have tried all the afternoon to simmer down, but I am still excited and very, very much worried. My dearest, it is your health—you see I can read between the lines. I know you are always thinking of, and planning for my future; but, darling love, don't begin to think of "Not being with me many years longer." I can't contemplate the separation; I can't!—I can't! So you simply must get well and strong. A real change is the thing, and you positively must arrange for it.

I am glad that your new lyric has been accepted; it ought to make a big hit. You have so much good work only waiting to be seen, if only you could get well enough to exploit it.

You can never know what a joy it is to me to share with you all my changing impressions and emotions. I hope you are able to make sense out of my spontaneous and dashed-off epistles. You see, once a letter is despatched, I have no idea what it is all about. I only remember vaguely that

I have written down everything that has occurred to me. I simply had to tell some one my thoughts and feelings in this new life, and to whom could I speak without reserve, if not to the best and only loved one in the world? There have been times when you have seemed so far away, and then I have made a dash for my pen, and it was like holding your hand (while walking in the dark) to make sure you were still there. Oh! my dear, I feel altogether different somehow since I have been out here; all sorts of things have turned upside down inside of me—perhaps in my head, perhaps in my heart.

You need have no fear that I shall ever again lose my mental balance, even temporarily. Life has revealed itself in a new aspect; it has become a game that must be played through, with steadfastness of purpose, to the end. Army work has indeed taught me a great deal even in this short time, and I have a thrilling desire to pass the lesson on, just for the good there is in it.

I am working very hard for my promotion, but it is impossible to say how long I shall have to wait for my white collar. It has been decided that we are to move on from here, and it will depend on the work I go to, or, rather the size of the new office staff, whether I am recommended at once or not. You see, the regulations allow for one clerical forewoman to every six clerks, and in our present office there are only *four* clerks (girls); that is why I have not yet been pushed up.

Now the whole matter will hang fire for a week or two. Meanwhile, I have applied for a *commission.* Yes, I know I have been a long time making up my mind to that step, but now I've been and gone and done it; and my Sergeant-major has ventured a small bet that my application will be accepted within six weeks. I think he is a trifle prejudiced in my favour—things don't move so quickly in the army. However, *nous verrons.*

Some very ugly and absolutely unfounded rumours concerning the W.A.A.C. are being circulated abroad (Hun propaganda!) and they are causing a great deal of indignation out here. Of course we see the English and American newspapers, and, in view of the strict regulations, and the extremely hard work of the girls, it is tough on them that such vile insinuations should find either listeners, printers, or readers. Being out of England, our rules are extra strict. We have, for instance, always to go out in pairs. We are never out after dark without a pass, and never alone. All this sort of thing is necessary, even apart from the reputation of the army, because Continental people are so entirely different from our own in their ideas, ideals, and standards. We, as a nation, think them lax; they think us prudish —and it is all simply a matter of custom and point of view.

There is no doubt whatever about the W.A.A.C. being a big success out here with the army, and it is essential that this success should

not be jeopardised by any foolish conduct on the part of individuals. That, I think, is the reason why such extreme care is being taken of our girls, and why the surveillance is so thorough. I will cite you an instance that occurred only yesterday in the office. One of our little "Feather brains" wandered into the typists' office for something to read (work being slack for a few minutes), and a certain man, not an Englishman, offered her a pamphlet; said it would amuse her. The kiddie grabbed it, and flew back into our office, whereupon our dear, lynx-eyed Sergeant-major asked her to hand over to him the paper which she was reading. She refused for a time, thinking he was fooling, but finally she obeyed. Well, after we had all gone back to camp, there was a large-sized rumpus with the loaner of the booklet. It appears to have been something rather tropical even for France. The man said, "Oh! well, I apologise, but there is nothing in it to shock any woman over twenty, and a Frenchwoman would have just laughed at it. *Voilà!*" He was genuinely amazed to learn that his apology was not sufficient, and that the matter would have to be reported to the head. You see, he simply did not understand, and that was all there was to it. It was my pleasant job to talk to the girl, and explain as well as I could that there *are* things within the experience of some people that cannot be grasped by a decent girl's imagination. Poor kiddie promptly had hysterics, and was

scared out of her wits. Then she became very subdued, and we shall have no more trouble with her for a day or so; for a while she will be an angel.

I have told you this incident only to show you what a really efficient boarding-school the W.A.A.C. really is, and how ill-deserved is all the wretched gossip.

Many thanks for *Marcus Aurelius;* such a lovely edition, and so compact for carrying in my pocket.

I now have to make a dash to catch the night mail. It is a beastly, clear, moonlight night. I hope it won't bring anything unpleasant your way.

The fondest love that ever was, darling,

From your

THOMASINA.

XXXIV

From Somewhere in France,
February 20th, 1918.

DEAR PEACHIE,

I am bursting with energy and conscious virtue this eve. We have a new list of duties in camp, at which each clerk takes her turn and becomes "Camp Orderly" for the day. She has to "Kick off" with the sounding of "Réveillé." Today it has been *my* turn, and I woke myself three times during the night in response to the prodding of my subconscious mind, which reminded me that I had to start the racket at 6.45. I *did* it! Oh yes! I roused the camp all right. Indeed, I imagine some of the slumberers thought the very last trump had sounded. Our gong is made of a strip of rail, the kind of rail that trains run on. It dangles from a crossbar, and when banged with an iron hammer (shaped like a drumstick), it gives out a large-sized sound.

When I approached the outfit this morning, I found that the hammer had fallen from its perch and frozen itself to the ground. Most inconsiderate of it, but inanimates will indulge in these playful tricks, and Mr. Aurelius (whose front names are Marcus Antonius) says: "Do your duty whether shivering, or warm, heavy-eyed, or

with your fill of sleep," etc., etc. So heavy-eyed and shivering I dug out that hammer and then let go with all the muscular force that nestles in my upper arms. People have no right to be asleep anyhow—that is, not when I am awake.

Oh! Lordie, but the frost has got us again. It seems the coldest of all the cold spells. Pipes and boilers have gone wonky again, and it is "dip your bucket through the ice in the rainwater butt" once more. We have a few bad throat cases, and the M.O. is a frequent visitor these days. Not for *this* child though!

We have had a cloud hanging over the camp lately, and now it has spread over the office. Two of the imps have been getting into mischief again —serious enough to bring them within the scope of "disciplinary action." To retail their delinquencies would be too much like telling tales out of school; but, having "called the tune," they are certainly "paying the piper." Poor little monkeys! Three days "C.B." *with* fatigues (jolly hard fatigues), and fines and things besides. Ordinarily, a case of "C.B." means merely having to stay in camp when off-duty, but on this occasion the miscreants have not even been allowed to go to their work at the office, and have been reported to their respective C.O.s. Rather horrid that. They are good kiddies at heart; it was just sheer devilment. They knew perfectly well the risk they were running, and have admitted, in confidence, that the fun was nothing like worth the

price they have had to pay for it, and that going on the "razzle" is not what it is cracked up to be.

Our dear old lamb of a colonel is quite concerned. He has a daughter about the same age as the imps in question, and I fancy his rôle of judge-mentor is not altogether congenial to him. So it is not alone the way of the transgressor that is hard. Speaking of transgressors, did I tell you about the "rascal" dancing at night in her pyjamas on the roof of the wash-houses (the only flat roof in the camp), and the other little reprobates standing round and flashing their torches on her so that she should not fall off and break her back? Wasn't it the limit? I hate to think what might have happened if friendly persuasion had not induced her to descend before she was caught by some one in authority.

If I seem to dwell on our little scandals, it is not for the pleasure of trolling them out, but only just to prove to you how severe our regulations are.

Our Irish orderly at the office went to ask about his leave the other day, and his officer told him that as he had been a bad boy he had seriously interfered with his leave. "Yes, sir," says Pat, "but I haven't been a bad boy since I was bad, so I'd like to be getting home in March." The officer had no reply ready, and simply waved Pat away. And that is what I must do with this letter. I am, as usual, writing in the office, between spasms of work, and Don Whiskerandos

(otherwise my blessed Sergeant-major) has just dumped a heap of files down beside me—a gentle reminder that the army is not paying me the whole of my *stupendous* wages in order that I may attend to my private correspondence.

Bestest of all things, darling,

Your THOMASINA.

XXXV

From Somewhere in France,
February 25th, 1918.

PEACHIE DARLING,

I am thrilled by your out-of-town excursions in search of a healthful resting-place. The old Georgian Mansion, now a hotel, sounds fascinating, and should be an ideal spot for you, if it is not too near the river. Our town abode is indeed a White Elephant, and has long outgrown its use as far as we are concerned. Can't you invite the War Office to take over the house? I don't know for what purpose, that is none of a civilian's business. The billiard-table might come in handy if beds were short. Privates at the top, and an officer in balk. And they could have target practice in the garden—and "taters" all round the sides.

Talk about an Englishman's home being his castle—it is nothing but a jolly old jail these days; and the jailers—sometimes called "domestic servants"! There is only one remedy—send them all out here, where they would have to pump up the water for the day at 6 a.m. It is a healthy sport, especially when the pump is frozen, and one has to lie on one's tummy at the edge of the pond and hack at the ice, then, having obtained water, carry it up to the camp in one's frozen fist.

We hear all about the food difficulty from the soldiers back on leave, but we experience little of it here. Of course we are rationed, and there are certain things we never have. For instance, I have not tasted green vegetables, fish, or eggs since I left England. Sometimes I dream of spinach and turnip-tops, and I have a morbid fear that I may one morn awake to find a "Brussels Sprout" somewhere on my body—like a birth-mark. But, after all, I don't really mind. Nobody does. If there is one thing the army inculcates more than any other, that thing is adaptability, and the fact that one never knows exactly what quantity or kind of food one is going to get for dinner stimulates the imagination, and adds zest to the dull routine of eating.

Some days we draw no meat, other days plenty of meat and no "spuds"; sometimes neither meat nor "spuds," but dumplings and onions. We never have bread served with dinner, and some days the bread ration is smaller than others. The point is that we always have *enough* food—and it is good. We are just now rioting on fig and date puddings—raisins are out of fashion. Last week we had jam; this is marmalade week.

In some sections of the community it is thought that the army is "hogging" all the food, but that is untrue; it is simply carrying on with what there happens to be most of at the moment. To return to your kitchen staff. Well! I am not usually spiteful, or vindictive, but insubordination among

women who have been as well cared for and pampered as they calls for swift measures. They would find their level in the army—but they are not of the volunteering kind. So why are they not conscripted?

I enclose you a couple of photographs—efforts of a local photographer. The one with the grin is supposed to be most like me, and to represent my habitual expression. I hope it won't irritate you when you have seen it a few times—grins usually have that effect.

Bless you, my love,

THOMASINA.

XXXVI

From Somewhere in France,
February 27th, 1918.

PEACH DARLING,

I hope the rough sketches I sometimes enclose explain themselves—they refer to incidents I have mentioned from time to time. Of course I can't really draw, more's the pity, for such a wonderful picture-book could be made of our everyday life.

We gave a party in camp last week—gigantic success. I send herewith a copy of the invitation sheet. We did things in great style—beaucoup flowers, and crinkly paper for lamp-shades, caps and aprons for the waitresses. The latter looked very smart, all different colours.

We had three prizes for the whist drive—a tobacco pouch, fifty cigarettes, and a "booby." This was really sweet—a little rubber doll, dressed as a girl in khaki. Her uniform was perfect, and complete to her haversack. After the whist there was a short concert, and, as usual, we had quite a difficulty to turn the boys out. They do enjoy themselves so much in the camp, and appreciate every item that is got up for their amusement.

I have just picked up a paper containing an offensive paragraph regarding the W.A.A.C. Oh!

my dear, it does make one boil to read these foul stories and infamous lies. The dainty suggestion in question is—that we are actually sent out here for immoral purposes. What is the meaning of it all? Is it a cowardly attempt to stop recruiting among decent girls? And by whose permission is all this slime circulated? The girls in our camp have been very much upset about these ever-recurring rumours. And so we had a sort of mass meeting in the recreation hut one night recently. You see, they take these things to heart—not so much on their own account as on account of those belonging to them at home. Of one thing I am certain, however, the false accusations will be lived down.

There are in England more spirited, patriotic women than there are cowards, and if there were a chance of the W.A.A.C. reputation being seriously in jeopardy, I am sure our home girls would rise to the occasion, and realise that it was *their job* to join our corps at once, and so put a stop to all this evil report. We have all seen the posters—"Every kind of work for every kind of woman"—and we know that, just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, so the reputation of any community is no better than that of its worst member. That is why we have such strict rules, and disciplinary action for any breach of those rules. We are out here to work, and we do work. Whew! I had better stop. I am not on the stump for the corps, but I can't help getting

hot when I see "the truth you've spoken twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools."

Well, dear, it seems that I am to get my special desire in, and *with* my promotion, for I am to be a clerical forewoman, not a hostel forewoman. I am very glad, because the latter has never interested me, as I have so often told you. My white collar should come along in three to four weeks from now. I am moving with the service in about ten days. The place of our destination has a more important office with a large number of girls. There will have to be a forewoman—and that forewoman is to be yours devotedly. My three months' work with this service, good report, etc., is to work it. I hear that I am to be "recommended" just as soon as we arrive in our new place; the appointment may take a week or two to confirm, but it is actually going to happen. I am assured of this.

As the office grows, and the number of girl clerks increases, I shall be able to get my commission as a "Technical Administrator" and remain with the service. Having gone thus far in this kind of work, I am rather keen on promotion in the same service, instead of changing over. It is just as important and useful as going into that job for which I pined three months ago, that is, from the war-work point of view, and the sacrifice from the financial end must be made—and made willingly—more especially in consideration of the

scandalous stories about the W.A.A.C. It seems to me that now is the time for every girl who cares at all for the status of women to "Stand by"—to do her level best, and to behave herself. And thousands are doing all this gladly, not perhaps with any hope of here and now, but rather to hasten those happy days which are at present in the making. Sacrifice means much more to the very young. Girls of twenty and under naturally consider themselves entitled to a few more years of pleasant adventure, and this would be their right and their portion if the world were at peace. But as the world is really in the throes of a new birth, it behoves every one to think of the whole and not of the part, and to see to it that the new life which is to replace the old shall be worthy of those who have already paid the supreme price in the greatest struggle humanity has ever known.

Oh! dearie! Here I be, preaching again, but I really *feel* what I so inadequately express, and I must let off steam sometimes, somehow, and *you* know what I *mean,* however crudely I put it.

Just imagine, darling, the camp, *our* camp, as I see it—a dead-and-alive hole. Numbers of girls carrying on from day to day—little comfort, no luxury, and no complaints, all honestly trying to live up to their uniform. Truly they are wonderful, and something big, and worth while must come out of it all.

It is a mercy for you that here my paper has

run out. I'll write again in a couple of days. This is more in the nature of a threat than a promise.

Always and ever your own,

THOMASINA.

XXXVII

From Somewhere in France,
March 7th, 1918.

PEACHIE MINE,

It is ages and ages since I wrote you, but, as the "Grape Nuts" advertisement says, "There's a reason." Fact is, I have been at my very lowest ebb for over a week. I think the wind began it, and then I somehow got fed up with everything in general. I had horrible yearnings for real civilisation, quiet voices, and gentle manners. And oh! for the physical balm of a pair of linen sheets! I would have bartered what remains of my soul for one hour's home comforts.

Why not vent it all on paper? you will ask. Darling, I tried, and I just couldn't. A helpless sort of "What's the good of anything—nothing!" enveloped me. I have been steeped in the doldrums. It sounds a little like malaria, doesn't it? Well, this place is a bit relaxing—something like Bath (without the admirable sanitation)—and perhaps that accounts for my feeling so awfully, awfully tired. I am very glad we are going to the seaside. We are supposed to be moving from here on the 16th—I say "supposed," for one never can be sure how long Army orders hold good. I know very little about our new quarters

except that there is a W.A.A.C. camp there already, and attached thereto some girls whom I have met. My office job will be somewhat different from that here, and the hours will be better. It will be a great relief to cease work for the day at 6.30, and have a decent long evening to myself. Here, all the time not occupied by work is spent in running to and fro—office—camp—camp—office—and recently the work has been much harder. No time or opportunity these days to write my letters at the office. The camp has been more than a bit irky lately, especially in the evenings. There is a concert in preparation, and the rehearsals are unceasing, endless choruses, popular ditties and jingles, and, unfortunately, an entire absence of anything like talent. The numbers are being "executed" in the stern sense of the word.

Happening to be off duty the other night, I wanted very much to write to you, but where could I go away from the sound of that terrible piano? A brain wave! I would soak out my lethargy in a warm bath, roll into my blankets, and write my letter *there* in bed. Alas for my hopes! The piano sounded as near as before, and was giving out rag-time is response to a violent assault. I tried in vain to collect my scattered senses, and to concentrate on the letter I intended to write, and all that resulted was this crazy doggerel that jumped into my brain, suggested, I suppose, by the tum, tum, tum in the recreation hut.

"We've entered the Army,
We're here for the War,
We're soldiers of sorts
With our A.B.64."

(A.B.64 is the familiar term for our pay-book.)

"Oh, our beef that is 'bully,'
And our fine Tickler's jam,
We work and we drill,
And we never say d——n."

I stifled this drivel only to hear this other playing leap-frog among my upper works.

"They say a heap of rotten things about us,
Which every one out here well knows are lies,
For only cowards, freaks, and Huns would flout us,
The courage of the army never dies.

"We have joined the women's army for duration,
And we mean to keep our promise to the end,
And we'll build ourselves a splendid reputation,
That will make our foe to-day to-morrow's friend."

Yes, my dear, I'm just a blithering idiot, and the worst part of it is—I know it. Is it the springtime that is responsible, think you? Honestly, I think I may be just a trifle overworked. I really love work, but I am not a hog about it, especially when it cuts out my letters to you.

I have wads to say—but it is all blurry just now.

So, God bless you. Just squeeze my hand in thought—and I may feel it. Who knows?

Lovingly,

THOMASINA.

XXXVIII

From Somewhere in France,
March 12th, 1918.

PEACHIE LOVE,

Your letters arrive with splendid regularity, and in between I seem to get your wireless messages, so that I never feel alone. Thanks for the magazine; the parcel has not yet arrived, but there is time enough. We leave here on Saturday the 16th, and my new address will be ————. In a way I shall be sorry to leave G.H.Q., and shall miss the camp that has been my home these three months and more. She "wos very good to me, she wos." You will smile as you recall the number of times I have kicked at the camp, and all that have dwelt therein, but "Blessings do brighten as they take their flight," for a very cert. A "Bromide?" Yes!

I have mentioned that we are to go to the seaside, and I find we are to live in billets. That sounds like "a bit of alright"—but doubtless I shall find an al-wrong in good time.

The Chief Controller, accompanied by the C.C. from Home, paid us a visit yesterday. Beaucoup excitement and tidying up of huts and personal belongings. I just caught sight of the visitors, and that was all. My application for an Administra-

tor's job has not gone through yet because, rough luck, the official form which I have to fill in is "out of stock.'" I shall have to ask for another from my new boss. I shall then be a forewoman however, and the application may carry more weight! So perhaps the few days' postponement will hasten rather than *retard* my chances. You see, it is a *technical* administrator's job that I am after, that will keep me in the service. It is bound to come off, because I was born lucky!

I hear the raids have been busy in your neighbourhood, and that some very dirty work has been done. I hope it is only rumour. Oh! I do wish you were out of town. The constant racket is too much of a strain for any one who is not quite fit. One blessing—you are not so ill as you were at this time last year.

March 14th.

The above didn't get posted. Obvious, you will say—and now yours with the real account of the skirmish has just come in. What a brutal experience! It makes me feel something of a Cuthbert. Not that I yearn to be transferred to a noisier spot—it would interfere with my work, which I take the liberty of pronouncing good, such as it is—but I feel that instead of running into the battle I have run away from it. We have plenty of the "Birdies" passing over head, but they haven't paused to leave their cards. The only excitement we get is a view of the prisoners who

have been brought down and are being conveyed into X.Y. Barracks. This happens pretty frequently.

God bless you, dear,

Your own THOMASINA.

XXXIX

From a New Somewhere in France,
March 18th, 1918.

PEACHIE MINE,

There is a popular ditty, I believe, that says, "I *do* like to linger at the seaside, I do like to be beside the sea," and I feel rather that way inclined myself. I have never been at this place before, and you have never seen it, but it is quite nice, and after life in a camp the wee touch of civilisation is very welcome. The air is clear and bracing, and there is a sort of "Very good for you" sensation.

My first impression of my new surroundings was, as usual, bad. I hated everything, and everybody, but luckily that fit has passed, and on the whole I am glad of the transfer.

We had great excitement moving from the old stand—a bonfire going in the yard for two or three days—"the papers."

We came here by road, men and luggage in lorries, and the first arrangement was that the girls were to travel on these same lorries, occupying the front seats. I foresaw more "Adventures," for a lorry is a clumsy, shaky sort of conveyance for a joy-ride. You can imagine our feeling of importance when we discovered a nice little "Daimler" waiting to take us over.

At the hostel here I found several girls whom I met in England, and others who were with me originally at G.H.Q., but what think you of running up against old soldiers whose numbers are seventeen and fifty-two? *My* number runs into five figures, as you know. I was filled with awe! There are twenty here who will soon have completed twelve months' service and will be wearing two blue chevrons!

I gather from A.'s letter that you are really closing up the house at last. I am awfully glad to think of you being out of it for a while. You will be so much better away from town. Golly! but I do wish you were here. Before the seal is set on all the rooms, do fish out some of my woollen vests, and if they are not moth eaten, I will carry on with them presently. No use attempting to wear cotton even in summer, as there is no chance of changing clothing in the daytime, and, if you get wet, well! you just remain wet till bedtime. Apropos! I have caught a beastly cold —swallowed a few million germs, relics of bygone colds, while we were turning out the old office.

March 21st.

Waited for yours before posting the above. Now it has come and is not very reassuring. These relapses are most discouraging, but try to remember this time last year, when things were so much worse. We are going to have a fine spring and summer. So cheer up! It is bad luck that you

cannot find any quiet, healthy spot to retire to—worse luck that quiet spots, when they are found, are generally so deadly dull that one whose upper story is normal gets bored stiff!

Isn't that sort of detached feeling awful? *I* get it in waves—more so here than at G.H.Q. I find myself gazing at the crowd, and wondering if they are real, or if I shall just blink and find them all disappeared. As a matter of fact the girls here are quite nice, select and proper, and all that, and yet I have to make such heroic efforts to be interested. Rather bad that, eh? I suppose good behaviour, as laid down in regulations, is a bit dull, so you see, once again, I find myself wanting to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare. And I pull up short and kick myself just as a reminder that I have thrown in my lot with the hounds and the freedom of the hare is not to be mine till war is over. All this will tell you that I am not yet *"settled"* in my new quarters. I was moved into another house yesterday. Our colony consists of three houses more or less close together, and I share my billet room with four others. This is something entirely new to me—I am excepting the few weeks at the hostel on the English coast. Even our dormitories at the Convent were divided off into cubicles. Well! the lack of privacy may be compensated by interesting revelations. The girls are so extremely young that I feel like their Grandma.

You ask about my "White Collar." Alas! the

Army, like Providence, works in a mysterious way its wonders to perform, and this visible sign of promotion will not encircle my neck just yet. Nothing to do with me. Two or three other things have to take place first—things that do not concern me at all—then I fall into line. These important happenings are being held up, so automatically *I* am being held up too. I am horribly annoyed about it, but it can't be helped. It is this moving stunt that has knocked everything, temporarily, sky high. There are moments when I am tempted to flee the whole bag o' tricks. Fortunately I can't do it with any decency. I say "fortunately," for of course I should have no use for myself ever afterwards, but oh! I do wish I were not so restless. The real truth is, that I have not yet found my own particular niche. Even in the W.A.A.C. there *should* be a job for me and for *me only*—and I shall keep hustling till I find it. Good-bye, darling. You have the fidgets, but if it helps you at all,

So also has yours lovingly,

THOMASINA.

XL

From the Same New Place in France,
March 26th, 1918.

This, dear Peachie, is a little letter to you, about you. Your last upset me not a little. I read so much more than you wrote. Oh! my dearest, don't lose heart. Everything is looking critical just now; the nerves of the whole world are stretched to the snapping point, and in consequence of this we are all more or less dazed, and unequal to mastering our own comparatively unimportant affairs. There is a tidal wave of emotion threatening to sweep us off our feet; I, who am well and strong, am being affected by it, and for the past five days have suffered acutely an indescribable, indefinable disturbance.

We grow accustomed to calling it "nerves," and we lay the responsibility to the high wind or any trivial thing that comes our way; but I have become convinced since I have been out here that it is something much bigger, something soul scourging, universal, and profoundly significant; and that there *is* an *end* which will justify the *means*. If we do not compel ourselves to grasp this view of it, we must succumb to the violence of the storm, and be carried away—whither? Perhaps to encounter another storm with fewer straws

to clutch at. I am sending you a straw, dear, and, believe me, a straw *has,* ere now, renewed hope in the drowning, and helped him gain the shore.

Of course I may not be making myself quite clear, but I want to tell you how things *feel to* me, in the hope that the knowledge may help you. It needs so much effort to keep sane and level in our views, because we are so very weak while we work alone; but every attempt to conquer the personal difficulty makes it easier for the whole, and thus easier in the long run for each individual, including ourselves.

Out here the effect of psychic disturbance is so startlingly visible to those who can detect it at all. I watch the girls—their fits of fed-upness, irritability, home-sickness. I know it all so well, for, alas! I am not immune. I am, however, blessed with the gift of seeing, and understanding, and when the spell passes, and I "come to," I have a good laugh at myself—and make resolutions against the next wave. It shall not engulf me.

You will now understand why I have not been writing so frequently of late. I was in no condition to write normally, so I stayed my hand for a few days. I am hoping that things have been going better with you. Do keep up your courage, and don't give way to the temptation to lay down the work which your love inspired for so many months.

We never know how much unexpected labour

and trouble will fall to us at the undertaking of a new job. Do you suppose I knew what this clerking business was going to mean? But to give up in the midst of it all makes us so unhappy, and puts us miles back in the great Scheme of Things. So I beg you to carry through the task you have so nobly undertaken. Think of the work you have started, and left unfinished within the past five years!—all lying on the shelf—because there was no incentive strong enough to compel you to go on. Oh! I understand so perfectly. You had mistaken the sand for rock, and had built your house thereon. You perceived the hideous mistake of it all—and so nothing more was worth while. But this other job was different. You had the most beautiful, and only real motive in the world for taking up your pen—and after so much devotion it would be very sad to give up when your labour of love is so near fruition. Keep that aspect of it in your mind, and don't let anything or person disturb the real inner you. Besides all this, darling, you musn't lose sight of the fact that you are all I have in the world, the one being on whom I can rely for sympathy, courage, and real companionship in this weird struggle. If I hadn't you, it would be, oh! so much harder to tackle my job, which is sometimes very much of a trial. I wish I were with you to put my arms round you and just whisper a word of love.

Heigho! Never mind—I am doing the best

I can from a distance, all my highest and powerfulest thoughts go out to you.

Bye-bye for a day or two,

God bless you, Fondest as ever,

THOMASINA.

XLI

From Somewhere in France,
March 31st, 1918.

YES, PEACHIE DEAR,

I know there has been a long gap, but really I am so tired of writing—I mean tired of the mechanical act—that I could pitch every pen and pencil into the sea.

Before I came here I had quite an absorbing job, but the work I am now engaged on is a bit tedious.

So, you see, Army and Theatrical life do not differ very much after all; in the latter a really "fat" part is usually followed by a regular "dud." Talking of the old life, what or whom do you suppose I collided with on entering the hostel here? A girl with whom I was associated during my very last engagement!!

No! I scorn to make use of the usual platitude; you can imagine the buzz, buzz that ensued.

This place is a feeble imitation of the Sahara Desert. Such persevering sand, it steals into your shoes and into every seam of your clothing, not to mention eyes, hair, and food—in fact it gets into every old where.

We have started summer-time at the office, and

I manage to leave work in time for a walk by daylight.

This sitting at a desk all day makes one very soft, lazy, and round shouldered. Never mind, if I have any luck (translate luck into progeny), I shall have some answer ready in the days to come when I am faced with the classic, "Mummy, what did you do in the Great War?"

I have started to read again; there was really no time at the other camp, and inclination died down. Now, however, I am in a nice little town, with some good bookshops, boasting a fine selection of books in that nice Conrad edition which has superseded the Tauchnitz. We haven't a library in the camp, so three or four of us who have similar tastes club together, take turns at the reading, and if any one has a keen desire to "have and to hold," she buys the others out.

The semi-civilisation we are now enjoying makes it more difficult to realise that we are on Active Service, and we actually begin to "prink" up. While living in huts we grew accustomed to inconveniences, and, owing to the dearth of supplies, we ceased to pay any attention to our personal appearance. *Here* we have large mirrors in the houses. I approached mine very cautiously at first—I wanted to break myself to myself gently. And those of us who have always had an element of refinement in our lives *do* revel in the extra comfort.

Being a summer resort in France, I don't need

to tell you that nearly every house which is not an estaminet or café, is a hairdresser's. Well! fill in the next line for yourself, and don't forget that neatness is the second duty of a soldier.

There are a *few* lingerie shops to break the monotony, and they ought to be compelled to keep their shutters up while the war is on.

The sight of pretty pretties to us who have only coarse worsted undies, and *one* frock, leaves the tortures of Tantalus far behind. Apropos, my breeks have gone on strike, so I have "indented" for some at our clothing canteen. You would laugh at the colour of our stockings—the "issue" kind, after many washings—anything from pink to yellow.

Oh! but it is a treat to have one's head neat and tidy (if only on the *outside*), and all for two francs.

How does our doggie boy bear the partial breaking-up of the one-time tranquil household? Dear little man! I miss him so much. We have three dogs here—darlings. At our last camp we had only one pet, a pig. Did I tell you about him? His name was "Bubble," and we were just on the point of buying him a wife, by name "Squeak," when we had to strike camp.

Dearest, don't think me frivolous. All this tattle is just an attempt to forget for awhile the appalling carnage going on up the line. One's feelings about the war remain the same as ever, quite confident, and cheerful, but the terrible story,

as we receive it almost hourly, leaves us numb with horror. Nearly every girl in the camp has a relative in the thick of the fight and all have friends galore. Nevertheless they are carrying on as usual and keeping splendidly brave and hopeful; but you should see their dear faces at mail time! Three of the girls who share my bedroom have lost their sweethearts in this war, and, alas! these girls are not of the easily consoled kind. Still they go on and on like thousands of other women—no outward sign of grief, but sometimes, in the quiet evening, one of them will tell her story, and then we all cry together.

Later.

Just paused to read your latest. Don't be anxious, dearest; I blush to say it, but I am in no more actual danger than are you while living in London town, so set your mind at rest.

This last ghastly week has been full of local, as well as general excitement. A few days ago the remainder of our old camp was suddenly sent on here. When I came, with the few, we travelled in style, as I told you, but this second and larger contingent was transferred in lorries, and the girls had a hustling time. They brought their bedding and furniture, as well as their personal belongings, and tragedy!—the hut they were to occupy temporarily lay about 300 yards beyond the end of the road, so they had to carry all the stuff over that stretch of loose sand, in drenching

rain. Poor dears! I do wish I had been with them.

Their blankets are still drying. The hut in question being too small, we have taken in part of the overflow; consequently we are too crowded to move, but it is only for a day or so, and meanwhile everybody is in high spirits and thoroughly enjoying the muddle.

The place where these newcomers are to be quartered is three miles from here, in a beautiful spot. I have been out to see it. I walked through lovely pinewoods, and over the golf links—simply gorgeous! I was reminded that the dear old land is worth taking care of, and that, despite all, the world is a beautiful place.

I do appreciate the fact that I can see the London papers the day they are published. Also we get details that are not always in the papers. There is a mighty bulge in the line, there may even be a break soon, but it will be mended.

It is curious, but even here, with news coming through red-hot, and rumours rife, I do not feel the least bit anxious. As we say, I haven't "got the wind up." I marvel myself at the absolute confidence I have. It is unlike me to be *sure* of things, but I *know* this *one* thing, and that is, *We shall win.*

It overwhelms the finite imagination, and dazzles the brain to think of thousands of lives being mown down as they are being mown down now. Imagine the enemy still advancing—and advanc-

ing in *massed* formation! That is how they were wiped out, only on a smaller scale, in '15 and '16. There *must* be, and there *is*, a reason behind it all —they have got to be exterminated.

Heavens above! but Peace and Liberty are precious things indeed, when humanity can, and will pay such a price to secure them.

With all this upheaval I have had but little opportunity of attending to my personal affairs, by which I mean reminding the powers that be of my promised promotion. But it is coming on all right, and if I am the least bit impatient, it is only because I think that it would help me to do a bit more than I am now doing. I feel I should be of more *use* in a more responsible position. My next letter may tell the tale—but, whether it does or not, doesn't really matter.

I am only one of many thousands who are all doing their best to hasten the end; and that end is, as I said before, that we shall win.

We shall Win! We shall Win!

Good-bye, sweetheart, I have you always in mind, and am trying to be

Worthy to remain

Your own

THOMASINA.

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