

Edith Elizabeth Appleton Diaries - Volume 4 (21 June to 27 December 1918)

December 1918

Dec. 6th Boulogne – What a life! I was just starting dressings in the ward this morning when Matron came in & told me to go at once to 42 Ambulance Train for temporary duty so I had to take off my rubber gloves & fly to my room to pack up all my worldly belongings (that were not astray) & join this train taking with me hand luggage only. The longer one lives in this war - one learns to take less about. I brought no blankets & very few clothes with me – wrapped in a ground sheet – my hold all being anywhere in France.

This is the top dog of Ambulance Trains – the very latest out from England.

The Sister-in-Charge had a telegram from home & has gone on a fortnight's leave & I feel like a fish out of water who doesn't know his job but it is a fine train & of course it is A. 1. having a compartment quite to myself instead of half a beastly little hutch where you could hear every word spoken in the beastly little hutches both sides of you – they are beastly little hutches or at least not very good for beasts.

Alongside of us is a Bosche train – one of those he has to surrender according to the Armistice terms. The O.C of this train has taken off on enamel notice from the train as a souvenir. It is just like the train we used to go to Berlin by from Sudende.

So help me God – I am in charge. We were supposed to leave here at 2:30 p.m. but have not yet got our engine on. 6:30 p.m.

Major Martyn came to tea on Tuesday. It was nice to see him again. He was coming over again tomorrow but I have sent him word that I shall not be there.

Now I think I will have a game of Patience to wile away the hours. I hear we are to go to Etaples to take a load to Calais.

Dec 7th We got to Etaples at 11 last night & loaded at 3 this morning – 291 patients – chiefly stretchers – 90 repatriated prisoners of war – one of whom was taken prisoner in 1914 in the Battle of the Marne. They do not seem in a bad state. We can order special diet for them – bacon for breakfast – milk pudding & fruit for dinner, sardines for tea. Also they are given an extra ration of cigarettes & matches. We unloaded at Calais straight on to the boat at 10 a.m. I dashed out & did a little shopping & we started back to Fontainette near Calais before lunch. Some of the prisoners looked quaint enough in civilian overcoats & odd woolen tammies – odd in colouring – some half brown & half red & so forth. Where we are now – *[crossed out: I don't know]* *[added:]* we are at Fontainette but our tanks are being filled which takes about 2 hours.

Major Martyn came on the train to see me. His hut is right by the ambulance train siding & how he gets any sleep at all I do not know.

There was a very large & most weird vessel in Calais harbour called “War Emu” I only wish I could remember her well enough to draw but she must have been for some special work. There were lots of German trains there - & guns! Hundreds of them - our own & captured German ones. Gun carriages by the hundreds! I suppose all that War materiel is being collected at the different Ports to be returned to Angleterre. One man died on the trip last night. Gun shot wound of neck. His carotid artery had been tied & broke down. The M.O. did his best but it was a very quick & quiet ending. Wounded exactly a month ago, poor fellow!

I love my little bunk. “G coach” is for the Staff & is like this.



Mine is like a first class carriage one side & the other has a wardrobe & dressing table. Of course there is precious little room – you almost stand on your other foot when you walk – but it is very comfortable.

The French have been very busy all afternoon mending steam pipes etc – they say we are to go a long run to fetch P.O.W.s.

At Calais this morning it was interesting to see the mixture of nations working – French – Belgian – German – Chinese - & at other parts British.

It is quite funny to do nothing but listen to the engine whistles & the hooters of the men guarding the line. You could not stick a pin between the hoots & shrieks.

No 9 - & No 38 A.T.s [*Ambulance Trains*] are lying beside us.

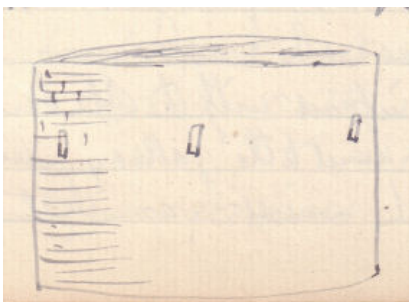
Sunday 8th This morning reminded me of 1914 the morning we arrived at Ostend. I woke – found the train still – not a sound of any kind to be heard – then soon the clang of Church bells! & I knew we were at a big town. We are lying in a siding & our engine has left us. So perhaps we shall be able to get out & look at the place – Tournai. It looks a very big important place & from the number of railing lines & telegraph lines must be a big junction. Days when there are no patients on we live like millionaires – stay in bed until our batman calls us with tea – breakfast not soon than 9 o’c. – breakfast leisurely - & then go out to see the place!

This morning was glorious – Sunny & clear.

Church bells sounded joyful - a train load of Tommies past us - on their way to Blighty & everything seemed happy. I felt inclined for church so out the two of us went to see about service & after a bit heard a band & guessed it was church parade - they came our way & we followed them to the Garrison Church which is the Cinema at the other times.

The church was packed - there must have been nearly 1,000 men. The music was a good brass band - the Padre a fine fellow. Everything went with a swing as services up the line usually do. One thing impressed me - done I think, more by accident than intention. In the responses before the Venite the music & congregation could not get together in “As it was in the beginning is now and” etc. (& only a few sang it) - but when it came to the last one “The Lord’s name be praised” the clarionettes & all the band were full blast & the men sang it at the tops of their voices. It fitted the day & the sunshine & the war being over well. They wanted us to sit in front with the officers but we couldn’t face it & went to the gallery - we were the only two women there. The result was that many of the men screwing their heads round to have a look at us. After service the troops all assembled in the Square in front of the Cathedral & marched off headed by a fine band. They looked splendid.

Next we did a little sight seeing. Climbed to the top of the Belfry tower - I will send you a picture of it - from where we had a fine view for miles around. Tournai is gay with flags - chiefly huge Belgian national flag. The King & the Prince of Wales & Prince Albert were here yesterday & had a great welcome & acclamation from the people. An R.E. officer showed us all we saw - the Belfry & all the bridges that had been blown up by the Bosche a few days before he left, & King Henry VIII tower - I will also show you a picture of that. The Germans had machine guns on the roof when they were here.



It is a round tower with a flat roof - a wonderfully strongly built affair - about twice as big as a gasometer - same shape. We went on to the top of it.

Too tired to write more tonight. E.

Dec. 10th. We have stayed at Tournai all night, so have had a lovely undisturbed sleep. In the afternoon yesterday, Mr Lowry our American M.O. took us out again. We visited the Cathedral & stayed to a service - as onlookers. The music was glorious, & the pageant very magnificent, but we didn’t understand it. Then to tea - at a hotel - tea without milk - & biscuits. Then to the evening performance of the Cinema - quite amusing. Packed with Tommies & Officers. A few of the men had brought French children, or women with them - they seemed highly amused at it all.

The piano was being played all the time, & every time a well known tune came the whole house whistled or sang to it - it was fine. Home 9.15 p.m. dinner, bed. The Cinema hall is wonderful place - huge - & I really don't know how to explain it. It represents old Tournai & some of the buildings are painted on the walls & others are really built of brick & stone. So where you buy your tickets inside the hall is a small round grey stone tower that is an exact model of the one that was in old Tournai. There are about 8 or 10 - buildings in brick or stone, making the walls & the buildings - which would be back down the streets are painted on the wall.

The Cathedral - I thought quite the most beautiful I have seen in France. No tawdry decorations & the stone work & sculpture are very good. The windows - beautiful old stained glass - & the organ a great joy. It is a huge place.

You remember that America sent flour to feed the Belgians? The women here have been amusing themselves during the German occupation in embroidering the bags it was sent over in. Tournai is called the town of Art in Belgium. You know the ordinary small flour sacks - something like this.



They have embroidered the words & picture in the middle & made them into all sorts of things. The large coarse bags - they have made into floor mats.

The shop where we bought those cough lozenges - the woman told us what greedy brutes the Germans were, they swarmed into her shop in large numbers & while she was serving one the rest would take all they could find. She had sham packets of chocolate made - piles of them - & no real sweets at all - so when they stole they were only the better off of so much paper & firewood.

All honour to our airmen - they did their bombing here most scientifically & kindly. There is hardly a house touched. The beautiful cathedral is not minus as much as one pane of glass but by the station & the bridges! God help those who were near - they are blown to blazes. You would have laughed yesterday morning to see sister & me crossing a temporary railway bridge. We had to go over it as our train is this side in a siding. Just beams & planks & rails, with huge gaps looking down to the road beneath, & big enough to fall through. We had gone a little way & then suddenly both took stage fright & could not budge another inch. Then a Tommy came along & said "It's all right, 'ere, I'll take you." He took my hand & I had sisters & we got over safely.

Altogether we had a very full very happy day here. I forgot to tell you some time ago that in the Belgian tower at Calais a Belgian spy used to hide & signal to the invading German aeroplanes. We had our suspicions, so had a sham raid - discovered it was true - & put a French 75 shell right into the tower - to close the incident. It saved a Court Martial.

Later. We got orders to load here & then to go to Asque(?) [*Villeneuve d'Ascq*] to finish. Pulled in to the Main Station at 11 o'clock. Soon after an R.E. came on the train & told us to open all our windows as they were going to blow up a bridge - just behind us. We had hardly got them all open when the explosion went off & the bridge & a mountain of smoke & muck flew up into the air. Twice they blew it up & as we had to have our windows open the whole train was filthy with ash - sort of stuff.

We took on at Tournai, & then stopped at Ascq for about 120 more. One or two seem rather poorly but on the whole they are a very convalescent load. We have 56 P.O.W.s on board - some have been in Germany over 4 years & some only a few months. Most complain of ill treatment, & of being shockingly badly fed. The officers in charge of Camps used to take most of the food out of their parcels from home & send it to their families.

Our load tonight consists of 3 Chinks - 12 Frenchmen - 2 Germans - 56 P.O.W.s - & the rest up to nearly 600 ordinary hospital cases. The C.O. says he expects quite soon trains will be running right into Germany.

The P.O.W.s tell endless tales. They (the Germans) complain that it was the English who caused all Revolutionary Riots in Germany - that an English Dreadnought sailed into Kiel Harbour flying a red flag & that was a signal that there was Revolution in the British Navy & that they were to do the same. I asked our boys if they believed that of the Navy - they said "No! we knew it wasn't true." One of them had been working in a bakery & he said they put a large quantity of saw dust in the bread. He had a bit to show me & true enough there was sawdust & quite visible sized flecks of wood too.

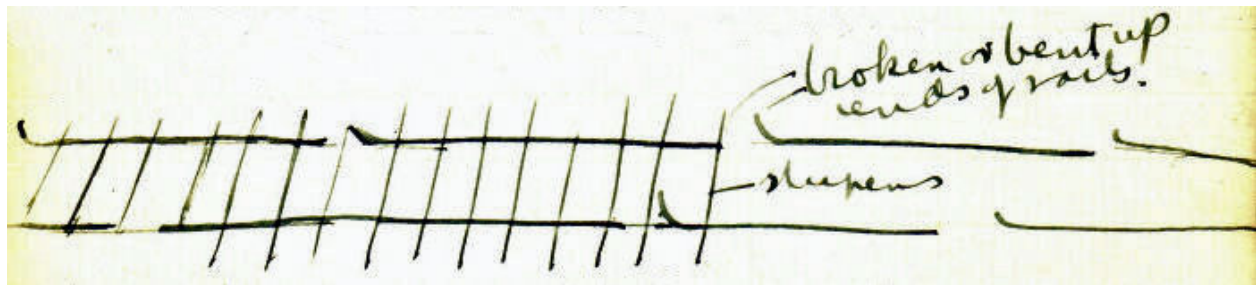
When the armistice was signed, the people flew flags & decorated the place - they would not have stood another winter of war.

11th. We left Turlington [*Could well be Terlincthun, which is near Boulogne. Ed*] at about tea time yesterday - were not able to leave the train all day as they told us we might be off at any moment. Came to Lille making short stays at St. Omer & Hazebrouck.

We are supposed to be leaving at any minute for Ath [*near Mons*] - a place a fair way beyond Tournai. Expect to load & return straightaway.

Can't see much of Lille from here but it looks a big place & not at all smashed. We are just outside at a place called St André [*St André-lez-Lille*].

Dec 12th. We did not go out last night - left Ascq at 9.30 this morning & are now on our way to Tournai - not Ath - for a load. You may look out of the window at the myriads of lines & wonder why they hold us up every 1/2 hour or so to let some train pass - why can't they send it along one of the other lines? they all look all right. They look all right, but as a matter of fact they are all wrong. The Bosche has rendered them all useless by taking out all bolts at the junctions & breaking off about 6 inches at the end of each length of rail. So if you look you see the rails are like this.



These Belgians are thieves - There were many coal trucks standing alongside of us this morning and I was simply amazed to see an army of Belgian women & children arrive with sacks barrows & perambulators. They climbed into the trucks, filled their sacks & cleared off with any amount of our coal. Two Tommies were helping them too. Our O.C. says in some places it is so bad that they keep armed guards by the coal trucks. What else of our transport do they thieve I wonder.

We went for a bit of a walk around Ascq yesterday afternoon but it was drizzling with rain & not very enjoyable. It is a small place - sort of half village, half town - one or two good houses but chiefly cottages. The church was a nice clean ungaudy - un-striking one. There have been 2 C.C.S.s at Ascq but one is closing down. Not enough work for two. They are tent hospitals - not very comfortable in this weather.

Dec 13th. 3.30 a.m. I am taking the second half of the night this trip & we are nearing Calais which means we shall reach Boulogne somewhere about 7 a.m.

I have just made my round of the train - quite a walk from one end to the other. There are 16 coaches in all of which 12 are wards - 36 beds in each - although we carry more than 432 patients. In wards where we keep the stretcher patients, we sometimes have all the beds full & a dozen stretchers on the floor & where the wards are used for "sitters" the beds are put back & they pack over 60 in a coach - 72 - 80 - any number.

Tonight we have a light load - only a little over 300. It is an interesting study to go along & see them all asleep - I only wish I could draw one vision of beauty there was in the Sitters ward tonight:



There they all lie looking perfectly happy - most fast asleep. About 8 Frenchmen - 8 Moroccans - 1 Indian - 5 Germans - Australians many - & of course the vast majority British. You see such lots of feet sticking out everywhere & they are lying about on the floor quite as comfortable as if they were in a good bed.

While we were loading at Tournai No 35 A.T. passed us also with a light load. She had been to a place on 20 miles from the German frontier.

Later We unloaded at Wimmereux & started off again a few hours later on a different run. This time we are bound for Montigny - a place beyond Douai. We were not allowed to leave the train this morning so spent the time waiting for her to "leave at any minute" playing ball on the railway lines. It was a change from sitting still.

There was a good Bosche train just alongside of us. A first class compartment had been broken into and wantonly torn to bits, seats & doors - racks - & glasses all smashed. The stuffing pulled out of the seats!

The night is fair & Etaples was a wonderful sight as we came through - the vast expanse of hut & tent encampments all brightly lit looked like a vast town.

The moon is shining brightly & the sandhills & trees looked lovely.

Very dull post indeed today - & still no news of my kit or laundry! I hate the French railway people.

A trainload of Yanks passed us outside Wimereux - either a Medical or flying corps unit - with truck loads of stuff all packed for transport - it was a whole unit on its way back to America. Several of their hospitals have already gone.

Five Ambulance trains have been demobilized already & more are to be.

I shouldn't mind being on a train for a bit - I think.

Dec. 14th We were at St. Pol when we went to bed last night & expected to wake up at our destination Montigny. To our surprise we were still moving & looking out found ourselves passing through a vast coal mining district. Sister said "It looks like Valenciennes" - still we looked. The first name we read was "Jemappes" & looking it up on the map we found we were nearing Mons.

Mons we badly wanted to see so we dressed in double quick time & watched our way through that ever famous place. It is a huge place & the station is a very big one with myriads of platforms. All morning we spent glued to the windows, leaning out - dashing across & looking out of the other side windows. It was one long pageant of intense interest to us all. They have not had many A.Ts through & passing the villages the inhabitants line up and wave & bow to us and shout "les Anglais". We waited quite a long time in Charleroi & we two sisters got off the train & had a good brisk walk up & down.

We passed a newly made line of trenches this side of Mons. The last the Bosche made in preparation for retreat.

At Charleroi our orders were changed & we are now on our way via Namur & Liege to a Herbesthal - just across the German border. By that I should imagine we are to bring back repatriated prisoners.

We took on a fresh engine & crew at Charleroi & are now going at a fine swing.

Several times on our journey we have met German trains - both passenger & goods laden with refugees from Germany.

In some of the Vans women were cooking & men & children were huddled around eating. Lots of civilians - women - men - children - French & British soldiers too. Such long train loads & such quaint luggage - chiefly huge bundles like washing.

Bosche trains! Our eyes nearly ache with looking at them. We have seen hundreds today - one quite new was brought into Charleroi while we were there. It was clean & empty - the Belgians cheered as it came in. One thing is very striking. Every new place we come to the first thing we notice - British Tommies - British lorries - British R.E.s - mending the damage everywhere.

Twice we have been assailed by a Belgian – first an Officer then a well dressed lady – asking us to take them with us. Not Much! – in any case it is not allowed.

At one stop of the train Sister & I hopped out & were grubbing over the debris of Bosche aeroplanes & a destroyed ammunition train intending to pick up a souvenir. All the shell cases were badly scorched & not much use & we were still busily culling when Mr. Lowery our M.O. yelled to us that the train was off. It takes a little time to get up speed & we chased & caught her quite easily but it was just a bit thrilling.

Beyond Mons – also beyond Charleroi – there are large areas of hundreds upon hundreds of ammunition trucks all blown up! Never was such a scene of desolation – there had been supply trains – ammunition trains – empty trains all standing there & when the Bosche found the game was up he destroyed them. It is the only part of the district that shows devastation, but there is past description & complete. For instance one supply – a very very long one of over 100 trucks, was burnt right out – the only thing even showing what it had been was a truck laden with steel helmets & they were all burnt & twisted.

There are shells by the 1000 – some lying about unexploded – whole tracks are blown up sleepers, rails & all standing on end.

At three different stations it was the same & must have been a very wonderful sight while they were burning. Our O.C. says they must have destroyed about a million pounds worth of materiel. There is still some good ammunition lying about.

We are through Namur now - another big place & fine station - from the train these places all look much the same style but the scenery was beautiful just through Namur – on one side high beautifully overgrown rocks – on the other the river gay with barges.

Some way further back we were much interested in the barges. Some very heavily laden being towed by a man wearing a sort of harness across his chest & straining all he could & then managing about half a mile an hour.

Some were drawn by 2 women – some by 2 boys. All were decorated with flags & looked gay.

At Charleroi we saw any number of destroyed German aeroplanes.

At the moment we are passing an orchard with a large number of German field guns in. At Namur there were lots of German guns – big ones – festooned with moss & stuff that looked like green seaweed – minnewerfen – trench mortars – all sorts.

All round Douai, the line was very dicky, every bridge blown to bits & the train had to go over

* /// Boulogne, St Omer, St Pol, Arras, Douai, Valenciennes, Mons,
Charleroi, Namur, Liège /// *

temporary plank bridges. The train seemed to be going dead slow & very gently all through that part & it was very bumpy – that was the worst knocked about part of all.

Those places named a few lines above are the way we have come. Sister was reading them off the map & I quickly jotted them down as she read. We are waiting at Liège now. An official has been along & taken the number & letter of each coach & the number of the train as this is the last big station before we cross the frontier. I think – at least the O.C. thinks we are the first A.T. to do this trip & all along the people wave & shout Vive l'Angleterre etc.

There is a N.Z. Division stationed along this line & I have gazed & gazed – not to miss seeing dear old Taff – but no luck & no French grey stars on a black back ground on the back of the coat so far.

I must say the Germans have not spoiled these places – they all look in perfect order – the people look well fed & in good health & the shops all we could see from the train seem to be well stocked & the gardens are full of vegetables. Even the refugees from Germany did not look at all bad & were neatly dressed – our Tommies & the French soldiers looked the hungriest.

At Charleroi there was one poor old Belgian man who made me feel very sad. He was so polite to us & looked frightfully thin & ill. I do hope to goodness he has enough to eat. The line along here is strewn with Bosche refuse – tin hats & tins that have held food stuffs. The scenery has been very beautiful this side of Charleroi & today altogether has been a great joy ride to us all. We are 40 kilometres from our destination Herbesthal.

We have just been told that we are the first A.T. this side of Mons & there is a whole lot of red tape to be arranged. We go on two stations further then are handed over to the Germans – either take a German engine & crew or they take on a German pilot. I thought from the

excitement of the people we must be the first Ambulance train.

It was very interesting to look out at Liège & to remember that it was the guns of her Forts that first held the Germans up in 1914. Held them up for nearly a week & so gave time for the French to mobilize & our men to come out.

It was interesting at Mons to remember that in this war it was the first place we lost & the last we won. Of course Mons has been the site of a great deal of fighting in other wars too – hasn't it?

For miles & miles & miles we seem to have been passing through coal & iron mining districts & there are wonderful overhead railways & all sorts of clever machinery things – a bit like it was at Jaegersfontein [*in South Africa where Edie's brothers Guy and Taff had lived in the early 1900s before going on to New Zealand. Ed*] – where we saw over the diamond mine there.

[Dec] 17th It has been a long & weary journey for the poor patients – 2 whole days – but with luck we should be at Boulogne in an hour now.

They took us across the border – just into Germany – left us there half the night then took us back to Pepinster where we loaded & have since been trying to get back.

At Mons we were diverted owing to a smash on the line & the way we came was a single line – so we were constantly held up & at one place we had to wait while they repaired the lines and at another we waited & waited until at last Mr. Lowery walked along to the signal control to ask what was in front of us – found 2 Jocks having a nice little tea party with two French girls & we were quickly on our way again.

At Lillers we stopped 2 hrs for coal & we have come by Ath – Tournai – La Bassée – Bovaise [*Ed*] – Lillers – Hazebrouck – St O – etc – can't remember the order. The La Bassée canal is beautiful – the place is no more absolutely every building is to the ground – station too. I thought of the little tailor at Tréport who altered my coat who had a large business in La Basée & hoped his house had escaped – no luck.

We are carrying lots of P.O.W.s from German hospitals – poor things! they look like raisins – skin & bone – their thighs are not so big round nearly as my arm. Their wounds are foul & their backs in a horrible state of bed sores.

Their digestions, so upset by starvation they can only take little drinks & tiny little bits of bread & butter or jam. They can't digest meat. Their foreheads & noses look huge – the rest of the face & neck are sunk right in. They had their dressings done once in four days.

We have several frac.*[tured]* femurs – all the extension they had was a couple of bricks tied on the leg – no splint at all & consequently their legs are in very bad shape & short.

Thank Goodness we are stopping – Boulogne at last!

We have a suicide officer on board. Poor thing as he went so far it is a pity he did not finish it. His brain is oozing & he is paralysed all down one side.

We are bringing a sister down from a C.C.S. – she has orders for the base & this seemed the only way to get here there.

Sir Douglas Haig's train passed us at Pepinster [*in Belgium, west of Verviers, on the confluency of the rivers Vesdre and Hoëgne.*] yesterday. It is a fine train indeed. We heard he had been off the rails the day before.

I noticed many N. Zealanders at Huy [*in the Belgian province of Liège, along the river Meuse*] – & asked a chance one if he knew Taff. He did not but has promised to find him & give him a message from me – they are all together there. The Sgt Major who came over from N.Z. is a patient on the train. Pierce. I was talking to a New Zealand boy through the window – & when I came in the S.M. said – Excuse me – were you asking for a machine gunner? I said I was – he said "I trace a likeness is it – Appleton?" then he told me what a fine set of men they were – said Taff was thin but hard as nails – he thought very highly of Taff. It was very tantalizing to be so near the boy & yet so far. We didn't know we were calling there or that his Division was there. They are supposed to leave for Germany today.

When our prisoners asked for more food they were told it was England's fault – that there was a complete blockade. Bravo the Navy – they did their job – very thoroughly.

I asked one man what he knew of the war news – he said when there was talk of an armistice being signed he thought we must be winning because one day the German orderlies were talking about it & ended by taking down a big calendar with the Kaiser's picture on & tore it to bits & trampled on it.

You should see the Prisoners who are up & dressed. They are not so underfed looking – but

their dress! Russian trousers! Belgian coats & waistcoats - French - German - civilian - any old cap! They look like so many Bill Sykes.

They say the soup they had was only cabbage water & they thought themselves very lucky if they found any little bits of anything floating in it. The German civilians - they say - look absolutely starved & wretched - are wearing clothes made of paper & wooden shoes.

This trip has been very interesting but very long - Friday to Tuesday.

The night has been brilliantly moonlight - good as day.

Our R.E.s have an endless task - it looks - in repairing miles & miles & miles of broken railways.

At Ath - Jerry had evidently meant to spoil the whole system - the line was blown up by mines every 20 yds in one place. There were about 20 lines abreast & every one was blown up - great deep mine craters - & the rails all twisted & broken. The one we were on was the only repaired one & we had to go dead slow - just on plank bridges over the mine craters.

The bridge they were blowing up at Tournai is quite down & looks a ponderous wreck. I can't tell you the number of big roadway bridges that are reduced to vast heaps of wreckage on each bank & the number of iron bridges that we see over the canal like this



We are busy in odd moments making paper roses for the Orderlies' Christmas decorations. We may be where we can't buy flowers, & anyway that cost nearly a franc apiece.

Dec. 18th We are being punished today for our sins of yesterday. Our O.C. had a bit of a row with the R.T.O. [*Railway Transport Officer. Ed*] at Boulogne & our train was not ready to start at its appointed time. Consequently we lost our "marche" in the traffic and are being constantly held up. Yesterday Sister & I went into Boulogne & I did a few necessary shoppings - lunched at the Hotel Meurice & were back at 2 p.m.

We are taking 6 Canadian Sisters to Nos 1 & 2 Canadian C.C.S.s. One is at Huy & where the other is we none of us knows. At the moment we are waiting in Tournai station - at this rate we shall be about 3 days on the outward journey.

The day is bitterly cold & raining a little. Had a nice mail yesterday - parcel & letters from Mother - dozens of other letters & word of the gramophone - it is on its way to Boulogne from Tréport.

19th 9 a.m. Waiting for breakfast. At 3 this morning we stopped at Charleroi & took on a fresh engine & a vastly better driver & after that we made good pace. The country a little past that looked lovely in the moonlight - the canal or river (River Sempre [*added later. Ed*]) - I don't know which - very full to overflowing. What a blessing there is no fighting for our fellows to suffer from the drenched & flooded country! Through Trooz - La Brouck - along the winding road for miles. We saw the New Zealand artillery on its way to Germany. There were infantry men standing about & in the houses as if they were billeted there & not yet underweigh for Germany. I waved hard on the chance of brother Taff being anywhere near & reading our large "42 A.T."

They looked fine men, & made a good show.

The last we saw were within a few kilometres.

Later Here we are across the border again! & everywhere are the square heads. Some wearing white armlets - a sign that they are in favour of the Revolution I believe.

There are girl engine cleaners - dressed in ordinary mens clothes - dirty old trousers & boots & coats & caps - none of them look the least bit hungry.

A troop train has just passed us - a German train & engine & a German driver - crew & guard. All the vans & coaches are packed with laughing - irresponsible British officers & Tommies enjoying themselves.

Later We have spent the whole day at Herbesthal waiting for an engine to take us to Cologne. We have not been dull. In the morning I wrote then we went for a short walk along the lines - not daring to go too far in case the engine came on. After lunch we turned out our 6 Canadian visitors & took them for a brisk walk up & down the line. One of them had a camera - one film left - & we had great fun having a snapshot taken. After that Sister Sumner & I set to work in earnest to make paper flowers for Christmas then we changed & made ourselves smart & went to tea with the Canadians. Mr. Lowery came too - the O.C. went for a long sleep. The Can[adian] Sisters are a cheery crew & we had a gay tea party. There is word now that we are to be taken on at 7-7 tonight. It annoyed me, the other day to see the Belgians bold facedly stealing sacks & sacks of coal from our trucks. I suppose really one is as bad as another. Tonight I see our own Tommies are out pilfering lovely big cabbages from 2 trucks of them - German property. Fraser the O.C.s batman even brought one in to show me & told me they had not nearly finished yet - they had only taken 4 so far!

Another troop train went past while we were at tea. As each coach passed our coach - which was brightly lighted & the blinds not down - they shouted to us & cheered loudly.

Bosches rushed out of some of the houses & stood gaping. Some of the N.Z. Artillery that we saw at Trooz this morning has entered Germany. We saw some of them this evening.

[Dec] 20 We lay at Herbesthal until 4 p.m. & then were taken back to Pepinster again to load - starting loading at 6 p.m. We had a great time at Herbesthal & I think the Germans working in offices round about have done very little work - they have been too deeply interested in all the happenings.

We could not leave the train as we were liable to leave anytime. Every hour or two a troop train has passed on its way to Cologne.

The trains are just trucks for the Tommies & coaches for the officers. The Tommies all seemed in high feather. We always stand at our window & wave to them & as each truck passes they cheer like mad & sing & wave. Some of them were waving Union Jacks - one was ringing a big bell. Some were cooking. Lots were eating. No. 33 A.T. came alongside us this morning & she has turned us down & is doing the trip to Cologne instead of us - bad luck. Taff is due at Cologne tomorrow & we might have met but I have left lots of messages for him & have asked the Sister I/C of 33 to Mother him for me - she is an old & good friend of mine.

I called to a New Zealander this morning before I was dressed & asked him news of Taff. He shared beds with him at Grantham & saw him yesterday & says he is very fit & well. It is provokingly tantalising to miss him each time. I was talking to an officer - the N.Z.E.O. [*NZ Evacuation Officer? Ed*]. He is going to try to see that Taff gets leave whenever A.T. 42 comes up to Cologne. He was a very charming officer & stands no nonsense from the Bosche.

He was sleeping on the floor of a hut here last night & this morning told some people here he wanted a decent room. They said "By the terms of the Armistice - no claim can be made on private property". He answered "Give me the key & a room instantly" & he said the key was not long in being handed to him. He loathes the Hun. So do I - they don't look a bit repentant, or even becomingly thin or poor.

We all had tea with our 6 Canadians yesterday & today we were to have had a tea party of 15 - that was including 3 Sisters & 2 M.O.s from No 33 but we moved out too soon - we had to transfer our Canadian sisters to No 33. They were sad to go - nice cheery folk they have been. We had great fun this afternoon. An R. Op. D. engine came to take an Ambulance Train to Namur. First he hitched on to us then the Germans - for some unknown reason - put him on to 33. Then all the staffs of both trains came out & had battle royal - each said they were to go to Cologne. Of course orders are orders & in the end it was we who were ordered back to Pepinster. Whether they will go on or not is a matter of conjecture - things are in such a muddle there.

No cooperation between Germans & this side the border.

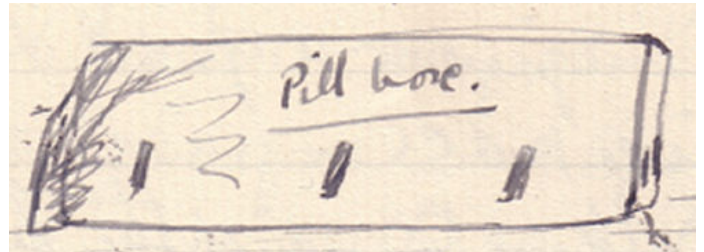
Taff is due to entrain at 1 p.m. tomorrow at Herbesthal for Cologne.

Later. I am on night duty tonight. We have about 400 odd on board & are to fill up at Huy in about 1/2 an hour.

Our O.C. is a deaf - old - rather inclined to the strong minded batchelor. One fad is to visit each man - ill or well - In the sitting wards they are thick on the ground & it is nothing to see him take one man's card & ask the questions of quite a different one. Like tonight - with a card in his hand he went to a fellow & said "Any diarrhea?" "No Sir" said the man angrily. "Any sickness?" "No Sir" - "Any pains in the stomach?" "Put out the tongue." "That ain't my complaint Sir - I got a 'ammer toe." Then he finds he has been reading the card belonging to the next man. We have got a good engine & a good driver & are going along at a nice pace. That N.Z. Major I was talking to, said the Boschies had so spoiled a huge iron foundry outside Liège that it would take 4 years to get it ready for use again. The Hun idea - that the Belgians should be handicapped for long enough for them to work up a big trade - the Belgians think otherwise & have arranged to take over a large German foundry to work for themselves until the Boschies have repaired the Liège one.

[Dec] 21st. I was up until 3 a.m. We made a good run & were well through Namur when I went to bed. We stopped at Huy for a load & to our surprise found no patients. The C.C.S. had moved the day before & another A.T. had taken all their patients. We are nearly at Douai - well through Valenciennes. All the country round about is terribly disfigured & broken.

Pill boxes are wonderful things. Shells burst all round & about them & they stay intact. About 1 1/2 or 2 yds high.



The way we are going today we go through Douai, Arras & St. Pol. The last time I was in Arras & St Pol they didn't look badly hurt. I expect there will be a big difference. So - not taking that second load - we have a fairly light convoy. One man is very ill indeed with pleurisy which he says he caught lying so long - cold - on his stretcher at the C.C.S. yesterday. It was a cold day. Now I must work. Write letters - do the pay sheet - etc. We have met 6 trains on their way up the line! The R.T.O. at Namur yesterday told us a tragedy happened there in the morning. A supply train was standing in a siding & a troop train came in - reinforcements on their way up to Cologne. The troops raided the supply train & the R.T.O. saw a long line of them proceeding back to their train - each with a sack of something - Bread - bully - biscuits - anything that could be eaten - they took. That of course meant short rations for lots of people. The R.T.O. had an inspiration & walked along the troop train shouting "All change." & he held the train back - out tumbled all the men - sacks & all - & he rescued a good many of them but even so lots of them got off with pockets bulging.

[Dec] 23rd. That last run was the slowest I have known. The French had taken control of the line the day before & were not quite used to it. We were about 12 hours late & the patients overtired of their long journey. We off loaded at Wimereux - waited there an hour or two - just time for us to scuttle off & do a little shopping - then came to Étaples where we still are. We have just got orders to go to Tréport to take an evacuation load either to Havre or Boulogne.

Sister & I have been for a good walk & blow this afternoon - such a treat after being cooped up so long.

We looked at 24 Gen & saw Maj. Martyn's little hut - a dreary awful place to live.

I went to bed early with a sore throat last night - it is living this shut up existence not a daily walk.

[Dec]24th 4 a.m. We are taking our load to Calais which should suit us rather well if all be well! Off load about 11 a.m. – be free for the rest of the day – have our Christmas dinner tonight. As I was walking through the train tonight I was greeted with “hullo sister” & behold – two of my old patients! At last on their way to Blighty! I am soon going to call Sister & shall then turn in.

I saw my old No 3 – perched away on the cliff top. It looked very peaceful in the moonlight.

Christmas Day. A happy Christmas to all.

3.30 p.m. I am enjoying myself immensely – in a comfortable chair in the kitchen. Windows wide open & glorious sunshine making even this wrecked desolate uninhabited area beautiful. We are creeping – slowly – over some of the most fought ground in France – that between Armentieres & Lille.

Everywhere is trenches – now kindly covered in soft green grass – dugouts – gun – emplacements – barbed wire entanglements – all of Bosche construction. The poor trees are all standing – split & dead & over towards the town is one sad chaos of bricks & mortar – walls – even skeletons of houses – but I don’t see a roof on a single one. Nobody lives here now & the ground will have to be cleared of all sorts of war hamper before it can be cultivated.

We are having a very happy Christmastide. Yesterday was our day. Today is for the men. We had a very moving dinner party last night – only 4 of us – the O.C., Mr. Lowery, Sister Summers, & I. Would you like to know the menu? Soup Julienne – Fish Fried plaice – Roast porc – Fowl Roast chicken – Sweets Xmas pudding – mince pies – jelly & blanc mange. Dessert Coffee. Drinks Champagne, the gift of the O.C.

After a long & cheery meal we played bridge & ended the evening – 11-45 – by dancing in the kitchen to the music of the gramophone.

We were at Fontainette – just outside Calais – & expected to be left there over Christmas Day. Sister & I got up early & went out in search of a Church service – 8 o’c – this morning. We found a very nice one in the Church Army Hut held by a fighting man – Parson in China in peacetime but he is in an infantry Regiment fighting in wartime – a very nice man. Going back to the train Sister said “She’s not there & sure enough she was not where we had left her & we thought she had gone & left us behind. Then we saw an engine & train higher up the line – Cheers! No 42! But between us & her was a goods train about a mile long. We were going to climb under it, but it began to move so we hopped on to it & jumped out the other side & flew to our own train & found that the engine had come on a few minutes after we started out & that she was ordered to leave at 8 a.m.

(I thought myself I felt a little bump – like an engine coming on – just as we were leaving but didn’t think they would take us out on Christmas Day).

After breakfast we dismissed our staff – 2 cooks & 2 batmen – for the whole day & we are running our own mess – hence am able to sit in the kitchen & enjoy myself this afternoon. Now that lunch is cleared & washed up.

Sister & I helped decorate the men’s tables this morning & their coach looks really fine. When they sat down to dinner we went in a procession – O.C. me Mr. Lowery Sister Summers – along to see them. The O.C. made a most kind & appropriate address to them & the senior man responded then three hearty cheers & we left them to it. We are halting now at a place that sounds like Berenges [?? Ed.] – (Tommies’ pronounciation). You can see quite well where the Station buildings & platforms use to be but there is not a soul in sight nor a sound. I suppose we are waiting for some other train to get out of our way ahead of us.

We are bound for Tournai.

[Dec] 26th Christmas was a great success with our men. They had a splendid dinner followed by a whist drive in the afternoon.

In the evening they gave a concert to which we were all invited. Really it is wonderful what can be done in a train.

All their festivities were held in “P” coach which is at other times a ward of 36 beds. Some of the beds had been unhinged & made into a long table down the centre. The other beds were folded up – (like our table outside the drawing room at Sea Valley [*the name of the name of the Appleton family home in Deal, Kent*] – only up instead of down). For the concert a stage had been erected at one end of the coach & draw curtains borrowed from the ward where they are used to divide the half used for Officers from the other half used for other ranks.

The rule of the concert was that every one had to do something. Some say well – some very badly – some did card tricks. “The thing that to me was quite funniest was the Minstrel troop called “Cpl. Fox & his lunies”. They were dressed anyhow - pyjamas - cooks - white drills - anyhow - faces well blacked. One - our cook - played the big drum - a muffled coal hammer on a large round tea tray. Another the symbols - had a couple of metal ash trays which he banged together. The small drum a 7 lb. biscuit tin & a couple of pieces of fire wood. Another beat a huge poker which was hung up with a small iron used for lifting the round off the stove. Another beat a gong & Cpl. Fox conducted. Behind the scenes the gramophone played some gooey piece & the band played to the tune of it. Cpl Fox was funny & the whole thing had every one weak with laughter. At the end some one seized a big bunch of paper roses on prickly stalks which we had made for their decoration & presented them to the conductor. Cpl Fox is really clever & later recited a poem made up by himself on “42 A.T.”. Hits at everyone - Q.M.S. - all the N.C.Os & of course the officers & Sisters did not escape. Beer lemonade & sandwiches 1/2 inch thick were handed round but we had dined too recently & well to be able to join in. At the end we had a speech by the Chairman - Cpl. Hunt - one by the O.C. - & finished up with “The Soldiers farewell” - 2 Christmas Carols - Auld Lang Syne - (all holding hands - crossways) - & God Save the King.

As good luck would have it the train was still during the whole concert & only moved on at 11.45 just when we were singing God save the King.

We woke at Tournai at 9 a.m. & still not called. I got up - cleaned my own boots - & risked a brisk walk along the canal - came back at 10 & found breakfast nearly ready. We were told we should be in garage all day so we went for a lovely walk in glorious sunshine in the morning. In the afternoon it came up wet & we slept well. In the evening we went to the Cinema - you know in that fine hall I told you about where we went to Service first time we were here.

[Dec] 27th Still no orders so we are still here. It is a filthy rainy day. I have ironed all my clothes & written all my letters, & propose to do a little shopping later if there is anything cheap enough to buy. Fancy! eggs – 1 franc 20 centimes each.

Do you remember reading about a very famous German Spy who in 1916 lived in America & used to send knowledge through from Germany to England & England to Germany? Our American M.O. was telling me how he was finally caught.

He always sent his papers a different way - one time in a box of cigars - next in a case of fruit - & so on.

After much searching & trouble the American secret service men suspected him & explained to his girl clerk all about it. At last one time she found that he packed a tin of documents in a case of tins of fruit - the case was one of a hundred all looking the same. She kept her eyes on it & wondered how she was to mark it without being suspected. She was sitting on it - eating her lunch & thinking hard - when Van Pepin came in. He was a great man for flirting & came & sat by her & she encouraged him. During their little flirtation she took an indelible pencil & drew a heart on the case she was sitting on. He took the pencil from her & drew a Cupids arrow through the heart. Lunch over each went their own way. The girl went straight to the secret service men & told them the case with the documents was being shipped to Liverpool that afternoon. It was one of a hundred & was marked with a heart & Cupid’s arrow. The cables were soon busy & the boat was met by Secret Service men who helped unload - the box was found & Van Pepin trapped.

The Fourth and final Volume ends abruptly here and it is clear that some pages are missing after the incomplete entry above for 27 December 1918.

We believe that Edie remained in France well into 1919 where she was responsible for repatriating Canadian nurses.

If anyone reading this website knows the location of the missing pages or any later volumes - perhaps in a secondhand bookshop or even in a museum collection - we would dearly love to hear from you; please contact Dick Robinson at dick@gardencottage.org.uk