

After graduating from Princeton in June 1916, Wilson spent the summer at a military preparedness camp in Plattsburgh, New York. The results did not suggest that he had the makings of an officer. In the fall he started to work as a reporter for the *Evening Sun*, without much sense that this day-to-day journalism—the covering of local news—was his vocation. On enlistment in the army, Wilson began a soldier’s itinerary—rough passage from Detroit to Halifax to Southampton, England, to various parts of France. He immediately came in contact with old friends and Ivy Leaguers as well as with many men and women from outside his sheltered world of privilege. The letters in this section introduce a cast of characters—shadowy fellow soldiers, vividly depicted comrades, new friends, and glancing looks at the officers. Wilson’s reactions range from standoffishness and snobbery to sympathetic fellow feeling. They suggest that he did not become a seasoned, tolerant citizen of the world overnight. Wilson’s socialist convictions, especially his growing contempt for the American power drive, began to reveal themselves in this period; yet his complexity and ambivalence keep him from ignoring Woodrow Wilson’s idealism. He could write the two scathing indictments of army life—“Lieutenant Franklin” and “The Death of a Soldier” in *A Prelude*—and also a protest manifesto for an army paper that aroused the anger of the officers; yet he maintained his stance as a humanistic critic of war rather than an E. E. Cummings radical.

TO MOTHER / FATHER

August 26, 1917 / Detroit, Mich.

Dear Mother:

The second day of camp David¹ and I were detailed to help in the mess-shack—one of the most unpleasant jobs in the whole set of unpleasant jobs. We had to help get the food ready, set the tables, wait on the men, and finally wash and dry the dishes (with the same dish cloths which we had been using to kill and drive out the flies a little while before). It is an endless performance: by the time the breakfast things have been finished, it is nearly time for lunch, etc.—and the regular men who work in the mess are a fairly tough bunch, of course. David, not having ever had to do any sort of army work before, minded it. He minded much more than I did, although, I assure you, it was the worst drudgery I have ever had to do. We fell victims to one of the

mistakes of mismanagement which is bound to occur before a [blank spaces here] affair like this has been fully organized, and at one time it looked as if we might have to wait on table indefinitely: but David appealed to Dr. McGraw, the captain, and we were relieved of mess duty the morning after, in spite of the fact that the messmen made an attempt to keep us.

In the evenings we have been going to the Hamiltons, who sent the automobile for us, and of course we enjoy it intensely for having had to put up with the camp life in the daytime. It is cold sleeping in tents these days: your sweater will be useful. We have such fun when we come back in the evenings telling about working in the mess, etc. Elizabeth's husband has warmed up a little and although I do think he is a snob, I admit that he is amusing. (He is at present rummaging for his army overcoat, which he is going to offer to sell me if they will allow me to wear it. He had it at Fort Sheridan, where he was training before they discharged him on account of his eyes.) The Hamilton family are really great fun when they are all together;² and, in contrast to the stupid routine of the day, evening here is hilarious entertainment.

We got off yesterday afternoon for all Sunday till twelve tonight (except an hour, when we had to report and go to mess at noon). This morning we slept until about ten, and in the afternoon, Shorty³ slept some more, while I finished typewriting one of my manuscripts. Mary⁴ offered to dictate it to me, after I had started, and did, while I sat on the grass and worked the typewriter, Mary is so unsophisticated for an American girl of her age and intelligence; it is one of the anomalies of the family.—But I will say they are about the most wonderfully dressed girls I have ever seen and they always look perfectly fresh and neat. I like Mrs. Hamilton better than I did. There is something rather fine about her, in spite of the way she has run the children, and she has certainly gone out of her way to do things for me.

The personnel of the unit is distinctly mediocre on the whole; there are a few nice fellows, but they haven't been sifted out from the others yet. Mess is usually a riot. The climax comes when somebody breaks a plate; then everybody else screams with laughter. I have an intimate knowledge of mess now and can never again have the same simple trust in the food and knives and forks that I used to have. All the kitchen hands dreaded the washing of the knives, forks, and spoons. We would collect them in a basket, throw them into a kind of lobster pot, dowse them a couple of times in the dishwater which had been used for all the plates and then dry them with lightning rapidity on the dishtowels which I have already mentioned. Of course, mess duty is something which is done by turns, so I suppose we are just as fortunate to

have had it over with at once. I think that David will recover after he gets a little more used to military life. Capt. McGraw is planning to make him the photographer for the unit, in which capacity he will take official pictures of the camp, assist the X-ray man in France, etc. I hope he can make me his assistant or something. Nothing is very well managed as yet. Men are made to do guard duty two nights running sometimes and similar accidents occur.

I am glad you wrote me about Earl Osborn; I hadn't seen it, of course, in the Detroit papers. Bill told me that Earl was about to go into the French artillery. I'm told that the ambulance drivers are having a harder time of it now that the United States has entered the war, and that the French officers no longer spare them any risks, but send them everywhere. Shorty has a friend in the ambulance [corps] who wrote him this.

Shorty, as I have mentioned before, has charge of a tent and has had to pretend to be an oracle on all military matters, although he has never had anything to do with them before. Thursday night a gang of mess men came into his tent when the regular occupants were away. They were a rough bunch, with tattooed arms, and they kept him up all night with conversation⁵ which he would rather not have listened to under any circumstances. He had not then realized his authority sufficiently to get rid of them.

Give my best love to Aunt Laura⁶ and tell her that her mirror is a perfect success and a great improvement upon the little shaving mirror with which the Government supplies us.

We are going back to camp very soon now, so good-bye for the present.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund

[Postscript] Will you give the Kimballs' New York number in your next letter. I always forget the street number. I sent Esther a check and am now afraid it may have gone wrong.

¹David Hamilton, Yale-educated friend with whom Wilson spent the summer of 1914 in England.

²In *Edmund Wilson: A Biography* by Jeffrey Meyers, Meyers points out that when Wilson wrote of the Hamiltons to his friend Stanley Dell he is less complimentary, confessing that he found them boring as well as pleasant and refined.

³Shorty: an unidentified Army buddy of Wilson's and David Hamilton's.

⁴Mary: presumably, one of David Hamilton's sisters.

⁵conversation: see *A Prelude: Landscapes, Characters, and Conversations from the Earlier Years of My Life* (1967). "I had here my first experience of how maddeningly monotonous the profanity and obscenity of the army can be."

⁶Laura Kimball, one of Mrs. Wilson's sisters: "She was by far the most literary of the Kimball children and one of my favorite relatives," Wilson writes of her in *A Prelude*.

Oct. 29, 1917, / Off Halifax.

Dear Mother:

I was unable to send the note I wrote in New York and will add this and send it from [blank spaces here] if they let us mail things from there. We didn't get our quarters changed, because it appeared that, although our commanding officer [out]ranks all the other commanding officers, the commander of the ship has orders from Washington not to change the troops once the boat has sailed. Consequently, while those other organizations are well taken care of in second-class quarters and while there are a number of first- and second-class staterooms unoccupied, we are supposed to sleep in the steerage, half in little staterooms (four to a room) and half (including myself) in an unventilated hold infested with rats and bedding so filthy that it makes you seasick ever to go down there. I have, therefore, refused to sleep in it and spent the first night on the benches on deck and last night in David's berth with him, lying sardine-fashion, with our feet in each other's faces, so tight that, once settled, we can scarcely move. Everybody is very sore—especially since we have learned that the “bug-pen” was never intended for even steerage-passengers to sleep in, but was simply a storeroom for baggage, before this steamer was made into a troopship. And one of the worst features of all is the absence of any place where we can sit and read or write. There is nothing but a little smoking room, which doesn't hold very many and, in the meantime, the whole interior of the ship is given over to the officers and nurses, so that the men have either to spend their time on deck, which is extremely cold, or down in their bunks, which, for most of them, is impossible.

David has been sick nearly all the time, but I have had barely a qualm so far. I have wisely refrained from going to meals and have been subsisting entirely on crackers and fruit bought of the canteen. Our voyage has been very smooth. Yesterday, Major Phillips explained to us that he had done everything possible about our quarters, but that it was impossible to change them. It seems we are to have life-boat drill. [. . .] A man comes and fastens down all the portholes, late in the afternoon, which doesn't help the ventilation much, although all the doors are left open here below and there is more air than you might expect.

I have at last received an overcoat, but it is only a short one made of inferior material (they never got the ones they expected in New York and had to do with a makeshift at the last moment), so Father had better send me a

good one from Eisner's in France—full-length if possible, and of heavy material.

As for the [blank spaces here] which are with us, it was said by somebody that, beside them, the worst of our bunch looked like gentlemen, which is probably true, in the main, although I have seen some nice faces among them. The [blank spaces here] are only privates or helpers—not genuine [blank spaces here]

This, I am afraid, is the last you will hear from me until we land on the other side.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund

Oct. 30, 1917

Dear Mother:

This is just a note to tell you that David, two Harvard men, and some others and I have been organized by the Chaplain, Dr. Mason, for a Dramatic Association and a weekly magazine, to be called "Reveille," of which I am to be editorial writer. David is at the head of the Dramatic Association. For this we have permanent passes to the second-class salon, and are consequently much more comfortable with something to do and somewhere to go.

We have been for a day now off a city of which I am not allowed to tell you the name; my references to it in other letters have probably been censored. I think we are soon to leave. Each man has been assigned to a lifeboat and occasionally we have life-boat drill.

I am very happy at starting this magazine. It is so long since I have had anything intelligent to do.

Yours lovingly, / and in great haste / Edmund.

On board ship / Nov. 4, 1917

Dear Mother:

The censorship forbids me to tell so many things that I will not even try to describe how we left America or what ships are with us. I am afraid that much of the letters I mailed from the last port where we stopped will have been suppressed before they reach you. Life on board this ship is about as unpleasant as possible and yet I don't mind it particularly—partly, I think, because I have never yet had anything worse than the first qualm of seasickness. David, on the other hand, spends most of his time sitting on the deck,

pale and silent. The food is vile and consequently he and I never go to mess but live on stuff bought at the canteen. We have been keeping ourselves alive on surprisingly little: chiefly fruit and chocolate. The crackers have given out.

For a time, we got tea at four, when we were working in the second-class cabin: but the commanding officer of the boat, who is only a lieutenant, apparently, the product of an officers' training camp, and has enraged our unit from first to last, drove all the officers out of the second-class rooms and not only was our magazine expelled but even Captain McGraw's office was compelled to move into staterooms. Just now we are working in one of the men's dining-rooms, which smells like the deuce, and overcomes David so that he can't stay there. There is no place to sit except a little smoking-room on deck, filled with men, tobacco smoke, and spittoons, and you were always being driven out of that so that they can sweep it. There are a few steamer-chairs and sometimes you can sit in them, when the guard has happened not to receive orders to keep people out—I am told that complaints upon the character of our quarters, food, etc. are not to be passed by the censor, so I dare say that my letters from shipboard may arrive with all the most vital portions removed.

I sleep in an upper berth with David. It is very close quarters and we are both cramped but it is infinitely better than trying to sleep in the "rat-hole" to which I was assigned and in which hardly any of the men ever sleep; (they go on deck or double up with somebody as I've done). I like the three men in David's stateroom. They are really three of the most decent men in the unit and have taken me in with great generosity, considering that it crowds them badly with five men in a room that is not as large as an ordinary clothes closet.

Nov. 7

Since writing the above we have had a spell of very rough weather. The ship is quite a small one and rocked terribly, so that the decks were lashed across with waves from either side. I don't remember ever to have been out in such a sea; at any rate, if I have, it was in a large boat. David was sick and spent the day in bed. I was also a little sick until I lay down in a bunk.

The paper has gone to press now and is being set up by a master printer named Madcalfe from our unit, formerly of the Detroit papers. It appears that he has had a printing-press and outfit sent to France with our supplies and that this paper is really largely indebted to him for its existence. He may be a master printer, but he is no journalist, and our meetings are much broken

into by his arguments to persuade us to do impossible things. I'll send you copies as we print it. It has to be strictly censored and so won't tell you much that is particularly interesting. Rabette, a Harvard man, is managing editor: he and I and a man named Roy Gamble¹ do most of the work on it. I like Gamble especially. He is an artist and a very simple sort of fellow, with little education except artistic education. He hates the military life and spends a good deal of time sketching the gulls and the men. They put him on fatigue duty the other day (sweeping decks and other disagreeable work) for being late to some formation and it put him out so that we had to cajole him into making us a woodcut for the title of the paper ("Reveille"). Today is the first day in the danger zone and we have to carry our life preservers with us wherever we go. British destroyers are expected to turn up any moment for the purpose of convoying us. They say that we should sight land tomorrow. If we have a few days' "Liberty," when we get to the city where we are said to be going first (after we leave port) and which I am not supposed to mention to you, the first thing I shall do will be to look up the Kemp Smith² family. I feel a need for seeing somebody I know under civilized conditions. [. . .]

The talk is beginning to consist almost entirely of remarks about the good dinners we expect to have when we get ashore. The food is absolutely vile that they have been giving us and is, they tell me, beginning to give out. I am tired of living on oranges and peanut brittle, which, however, has not yet had any injurious effect upon my health. [. . .]

¹Roy Gamble: Wilson army comrade, the painter in his unit. Notable for witticisms quoted in *A Prelude*.

²Norman Kemp Smith (1872–1958): head of the philosophy department at Princeton in Wilson's undergraduate years.

Nov. 9

We have had land in sight all morning, and the submarine-destroyers are with us now. They are little bits of things that lie very low in the water. I hope we may land tonight.

November 12, 1917

Dear Mother:

We were put on trains immediately at the western port.¹ [. . .] In the afternoon they let us go into the town, where David and two other men and

I got an excellent English tea of [blank spaces here] salad, oysters, cold veal, tea, and bread and butter and marmalade. It came to 1[pound] 8s. and some pence, but it was worth it, the first decent meal we had had since leaving America. And I got my shoes dry, for the first time in many days, over the fire in the tea-room. The town is delightful and life is extremely interesting with the mixture of every kind of English and American soldier. At night we walked in the darkened streets, which are doubly curious with all the shops screened in front, so that you don't know what is in them till you are right on top of them. On the other hand, the streets are full of pickpockets and the amount of prostitution is appalling. I mention this last, because it seems to be one of the worst and most serious results of war times among the civilian towns and cities. We have been warned of the conditions over here every time our Major has talked to us, since we started. On the way back from town, in the tram, we fell in with an English soldier who gave us the most amusing line of talk about the war. He had been to the front and came back slightly wounded and said he never wanted to go again. His cockney description of the way things were done beats anything I have ever seen in Kipling, possibly because he had none of the gusto for war which Kipling always attributes to his Tommies, and which, at least at this stage of the game, few Tommies ever really feel. In fact, all the soldiers I have talked to were strikingly frank about things, and had none of the rhetoric of civilians.

There is a German prison camp very near here, and today they brought some of them out to our camp to dig a ditch. They are nice-looking men, apparently well cared for, dressed in the remains of their German uniforms, with long patches of red and blue sewed on the back of the coat and on one of the knees, apparently so that if they shall escape, the bright spot would make an easy mark to shoot at. They are guarded by British soldiers with bayonets and a German sergeant, a nice-looking young man, evidently a better-class German, oversees the work. They have been nearly three years in England and work amiably but listlessly.

I just ran into Charley Jones, who was in my class at school, and is now in the aviation business. He is not particularly interesting in himself, but tells me that there are several Princeton men in his organization. I shall drop around later and find out who they are. As you probably know, the women are running the trams and doing almost every other kind of work over here. The YMCA building in which I am writing this letter is managed entirely by women.

I have just begun to enjoy life again since we have got to England, and

would be content to spend some time here if it were not for the fact that, because they didn't warn us, not knowing themselves, that we would have to stay here, we have with us neither tooth brushes, clothes, nor anything else (we have been here since early (very early) Saturday morning) and are obliged to sleep on hard boards. We will, however, probably be moved out tonight or tomorrow, and sail from here for France. I may mention that I have not had a bath since one of the first days on the boat; but perhaps, if they let us leave camp again, I can get one in town. Our food is good, course stuff, almost entirely unseasoned and eaten out of doors, which I much prefer to eating in mess shacks—a great relief altogether from the stale scraps they gave us coming over.

I shall write to Father soon and when I get a chance. Thank the various people who have sent me things.

Lovingly, / Edmund

¹Western port: Southampton—see *A Prelude*.

Nov. 19, 1917 / France

Dear Mother:

Very soon after I wrote to you from the French port where we landed, we received orders that we were to move at three o'clock the next morning. So most of us went to bed at once in the dirty old bunks, which had evidently been in use since the beginning of the war, to try for a little sleep. But the men were coughing like consumptives and swearing like pirates and nobody got much rest. I found when they waked us up to go that the irregularities of my recent diet had finally begun to tell on me, because I had a splitting headache and could only stagger along with my blanket roll. (On the channel steamer, they had given us nothing but hardtack, exactly like dog biscuits in flavor and appearance, but a little softer, though several men broke their teeth on them, and "bully beef," which is a kind of coarse canned corned beef.) They marched us a considerable distance along the railroad tracks. And while we were on the way, the lights of the camp suddenly went out, and we could hear the sound of guns and see the searchlights feeling among the clouds for Zeppelins. There seemed to be an air raid taking place, but we never heard anything further about it. [. . .] They pulled us up at a waiting train in the dark at about 5 and packed us into box cars from 35 to 40 men in each. We were supposed to sit on rough seats that were fitted in the cars lengthwise. The

officers and nurses had regular day coaches on the same train. I was feeling so miserable and was in with such a terrible bunch of men that I hardly took the trouble to look out the door at first, but sat in the dark corner in a kind of stupor. [. . .]

I went to sleep on blanket rolls under one of the seats, a narrow space, but the only one where it was possible to stretch one's self at all. But finally had to give it up when people began kicking me with their heels and occasionally stepping on my face. All night the train would proceed a little way and then back up for about the same distance. The next day we alternately spent the time looking out the door and dozing in our seats. It was terribly cold and whenever the train stopped, which was often, we got out and pranced up and down to warm our feet. We were going all the way across France and didn't know when we would be able to get away from those confounded box cars, which, by this time, were strewn with fragments of food, "bully beef," tins, and empty wine bottles. At last, late in the afternoon of the second day, we found ourselves in the most beautiful country along the Marne, where we could look down on the green river and narrow canals planted with lines of the tallest poplars I have ever seen; and about midnight we pulled up at our destination and were put to bed in a great garage, once the adjunct of a hotel, where clean beds and blankets had been provided for us. We were dirty beyond belief and more or less wrecks for want of sleep and raised a great cry of joy at the sight of real mattresses. We had had no decent place to sleep since we left Detroit nearly a month ago. [. . .]

I haven't written to you before, because I have had absolutely no chance. I started this letter last night, but had to go back to camp (at nine) and am finishing it tonight. In time I hope we shall have somewhere to read and write. The cafes are delightful, but not ideal homes. We are, however, enjoying life in spite of the fact that the weariness of the war is evident everywhere. We can hear very clearly the sound of the guns at the front.

Your loving / Edmund

Dec. 5, 1917 / France.

Dear Mother:

Our mail has just begun to arrive and I have had five letters from you (almost in the order inverse to that in which you evidently wrote them, beginning with the latest and ending with a note written just after you left Detroit), and other letters from Father, Ralph, Stan, Larry and Robert Jackson,¹ who is only a few miles away from us with the Roosevelt Hospital Unit and spent the

summer in Vittel. Twenty-five of our men were sent to help temporarily with their (the other unit's) work, but I was not among them and am just as glad. You mustn't be afraid of my not getting your letters; judging by the latest, I think that I have had all you have written up to the last-dated.

I have lately been doing regular detail work. An order has been received to put two hospitals in shape at once and, for a while, we worked day and night putting the beds in. The French shoes they issued are a little too large for me and, when I climb upstairs, with a bed on my back, every now and then slipping on the steps, I think I must look exactly like Charlie Chaplin. Today, however, I am on guard at the barracks and have a pretty easy time of it. It occurred to me the other day that there was no reason why several men who don't know as much French as I do should be interpreters, which I am not, so I spoke to one of the men in the office about it and was today notified that, for the time, I should be a regular interpreter at Headquarters and am going to begin my duties there tomorrow morning at nine-o'clock. I think that this will be a great improvement on anything I have hitherto done. Later I hope to be an X-ray assistant with David, who is still making plans of the hospitals with Roy Gamble. Roy finds it necessary about every other day to walk to a neighboring town and buy thumb tacks; and he hopes in time to get to Paris, avowedly for the purpose of buying the proper apparatus for the surgical dressing which he is supposed to do later. The secret of the army seems to be that, if you are clever enough, you can usually do as you please; but after a while, other people find out how these things are done, and before long, everybody is doing it: then the Commanding Officer finds out about it and puts a stop to it by very severe measures, which are, in turn, first evaded and then generally disregarded until another set of rules becomes necessary. And we have the most cautious Commanding Officer and Adjutant in the world. I have told you how the only accessible cafes have been closed to us one by one (though they have provided a recreation room now and we have our own mess, instead of the French mess, which as I think I told you, was convalescence rations; our breakfast was supposed to consist of black bread and a mixture of cognac and coffee). And they tell me that Roy's request to go to Paris created a panic at Headquarters.

We have been paid, at last, for the last two months and, the night after, three-fourths of the unit was drunk, including the sergeants, the military police, and some of the officers. I have taken a Liberty Bond, and hereafter will not get as much of my pay as I otherwise would.

Last Sunday, David and I hired bicycles and rode to a large town about fifteen miles away, an older place than this, and not a summer resort. Our

prime purpose was to buy for Christmas presents some of the lace for which this part of France is famous and much of which is made in that particular town, but we found the shops were closed on Sunday afternoon, and so will have to go again. [. . .]

Tonight, because I have to go on guard at 7, David and I are going to give up dinner at the Hôtel de France, which has become our regular place, and have a quicker meal at a café, which has a unique attraction in the daughter of the proprietor, a very pretty girl, very young, who goes to school in the south of France (or used to) and is obviously educated very much above the majority of her class.

She speaks English, for instance, with an excellent accent and is able to explain to us the meaning of the French words we don't know in the books we are reading—except when they turn out to be improper for “une jeune fille” to explain, in which case, she shakes her head and hides her face in her hands. The high tone of the proprietor's family appears also in the prices: it seems that we have to pay extra for Ninette's education and aristocratic complexion (which is beautifully white and clear and unlike that of most of the country girls). At any rate, it is the most expensive place in town, although we continue stupidly to go there, regardless of the fact that the prices amount to robbery, so powerful a fascination does Ninette exercise. We—that is, we four—usually call it “Ninette's place.”

I am making rapid progress in speaking French and go every night to the station where the woman who keeps the book and paper stand holds a sort of salon for the French soldiers and the ladies in the town. They congregate there to get the papers, which arrive on the 8:30 train, but, as the train is always from half an hour to an hour late, the station takes on some of the character of the general store at Talcottville,² I engage in the conversation with some success, although there is one old rustic who is always making puns that have to be explained to me. All the soldiers—officers and all—are very genial, and, of course, a thousand times politer and more intelligent in conversation than American ones.

The damp and fog have disappeared and, since Sunday, the weather has been fine, very cold, with snow and ice. This morning in barracks, the bugle froze during the night and, having nothing to wake us up, we all overslept. It was finally thawed out in time to call us to breakfast. I must go to my guard.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund

¹Robert Jackson: friend from Princeton; Wilson looked him up.

²Talcottville: location of the family's summer home in upstate New York.

February 1, 1918 / France

Dear Mother:

I am still night orderly at the Central. Many of the patients are gone from my floor now and those that are left are not sick enough to be confined to their beds, for the most part, so I have nothing to do except keep two stoves going and sit up all night in the office. So, you see, my life is pretty uneventful, though it has, at least, the advantages of relieving me from the society of everyone else except the two or three nurses with whom I am associated and giving me a great deal of time to myself, during which I read, write letters, or carry on long conversations with the little Dane¹ I have told you about. He has told me recently something about his life. It seems that he has been fairly poor and obligated to spend most of his life in America (he is 37) working on farms and in factories, when all his real interests are intellectual. He tells me that he has at last saved up quite a little money and is now thinking of going to a university and studying to teach history, a subject that he has spent all his spare time reading up. He is handicapped for this, because he has never been even to school, he says, for much more than a year and it is difficult for a man without any sort of degree to get very far at a university. I asked Lieutenant Crandall, however, what a man could do in his circumstances, and he recommended Columbia and told me how Andersen ought to go about persuading them to give him a degree. I am anxious to see more of him and find out what he does when we get back to America.² Altogether, he is a most unusual, most intelligent man. In the course of the discharge of his function of coal carrier, he visits us in here every night, and, sitting on the edge of the coal box, like a gnome, he argues with me on every subject under the sun. The nurse listens and occasionally joins the conversation. I don't think that I have had a chance before to talk in a leisurely fashion since I first went into camp with this Unit.

Lieutenant Crandall has left. I didn't know he was going and didn't get a chance to say good-bye to him; but I suppose he will let me know if anything comes of his letter to his friend in the Adjutant General's office. (Please excuse all this spilt ink; there is so much junk on this table that I usually upset something every night.) Crandall has returned to his company, they tell me; but apparently he is disqualified by his rheumatism for active line service. Ninette has gone too. She started for Cannes yesterday, and I miss her very much. She may be back in April. Before she went, I found her here in the hospital late one afternoon, calling to be treated by Major Shurley, and offered to walk home with her. She said she wanted to say good-bye to one of the nurses, so

I went with her to the villa where the nurse lived and waited outside, while she went in. I continued to wait for the best part of an hour and was finally driven to make inquiries at the villa, when I learned that Ninette had gone. When I got to the café I found the old man scolding her for having stayed out so late. It appeared that two of the nurses had offered to walk home with her and that she, supposing that it was considered improper by Americans, as it is by the French, for girls and men to walk together after dark, had been afraid to tell the nurses I was waiting, and, in great embarrassment and confusion, had allowed them to take her back by another way than the one where I was posted. I explained to her that the nurses would probably not have been shocked if she had told them that I was walking home with her and, with apologies, she explained that, among respectable people in France, girls and young men were not supposed to be out alone together. I think she is glad to go back to Cannes. All her friends are there, with whom she went to school; she says she has no friends here, where the people are “low,” and indeed they are.

Your original Christmas box arrived a few days ago. Made myself sick on the contents and am only just recovering. The socks and handkerchiefs are particularly welcome: all articles of clothing have a way of disappearing when you live as I have been doing, first in one place and then in another, with your belongings scattered around in several different places. I gave David his little packet of handkerchiefs with the chocolate cat inside. We amused ourselves here—the nurses, Andersen, and I—by toasting the marshmallows over the coals in the stove.

If the war bids fair to last, I should be glad to see you over here, as you suggest, though I don't like to have you run the danger involved in coming; besides, I couldn't see you for more than ten days, which is what we are supposed to get every four months. Presumably we should get our first furlough in March and another along in July or August. But the truth is, I am beginning to think the war will end soon and am waiting to see what Wilson will have to say to Czernin and Hertling with more anxiety than I have waited for any other diplomatic move since America declared war. I hope that we may be able to buy our discharges over here, when the war is over. In that case, Dave and I, with Alfred³ or any other friend we could happen to get hold of over here, would take perhaps a month's trip in France and Italy, if possible, and then go home to America.

We are trying to get out another copy of the “Reveille” at the urgent instigation of the Chaplain, and, as soon as I finish this letter, I shall endeavor to

produce an editorial, though I don't know what I can say without exposing myself to arrest, imprisonment, and court-martial. The truth is, it seems to me, that we have neither the spirit, the material, nor the public for a really good paper here, but, goodness knows, if anything can be done to make life a little more genial, it ought to be done as well as possible. [. . .]

Yours lovingly, / Edmund

¹The little Dane: John Andersen (John Andersen Udmark), "one of my closest friends in the unit" (*A Prelude*, p. 211).

²Andersen did not fare well in the job market in New York, even with Wilson's help. After the war he lived in Canada. A voracious reader, he later became a writer of "idea books."

³Alfred Bellinger, friend of Wilson's adolescent years from Hill School.

Feb. 9, 1918 / France.

Dear Mother:

I am still night orderly and rather enjoying it, in spite of the fact that it is hardly a very soul-satisfying occupation. I am great friends with the nurses on my floor. Every morning at about 4 the two nurses, Andersen, the Danish fire tender, and I have a convivial breakfast of chocolate, toast, jam and eggs; we can poach, fry, or boil the eggs on the little stove that heats the room. I am not sure, however, that, if the night superintendent were to walk in on us, we might not all be reprovved because the nurses are not supposed to have any association at all with the enlisted men. It is said that a sergeant who was found visiting a sick nurse is going to have his sergeancy taken away from him. This atmosphere of spying and petty graft rather gets on my nerves sometimes; though nobody has anything on me, the feeling in the Unit can hardly be called one of mutual confidence and good-fellowship. The nurses, especially, seem to hate the officers, perhaps more than they deserve, though, I admit, there is a pretty poor assortment in this hospital. Fortunately, as a night orderly, I don't have to see much of them. The nurses, on the other hand, with whom I have to do are exceedingly attractive and nice. The one whose shift is from 12 o'clock to 9 in the morning is intelligent, also, and she and Andersen and I have long profound discussions during the small hours.

My chief duty is to see that the men are all in bed by 8. I think I was too gentle with them at first and have now adopted a method of "Blood and iron", threatening to report them if they don't behave. When they get word that they are going to be discharged the next morning they usually go out and get drunk and come back late, because they know that they haven't time to

be punished for it. I hate to report them and get them into trouble because I know from experience how hard military regulations are and how hopelessly dull the life in a military hospital is; but it is the way things have to be done in the army. Goodness knows that that is not the way any humane person wants to do them.

Of course, you don't see a very cheerful side of the war in hospital work; (I doubt if there is any cheerful side); one of our principal excitements, for example, is one of the insane men—(the worries and hardships of the trenches make quite a number hysterical or mad)—who eludes his guard every now and then and goes wandering all over the building. Part of the time he is sane and a very nice boy, they tell me, but after midnight he begins to hear voices calling him and becomes irrational and speechless. One morning about 2 I went out of the office here into the hall and found the man who has charge of the whole place at night going his rounds with a lantern. He pointed to a rigid figure in a bathrobe which had just glided by us and asked me who that was. I supposed it was simply somebody who had got up to go the bathroom, but as we watched the figure we realized that there was something wrong about it and Backus went up and put his hand on his shoulder. Then the man turned around and we saw that it was the crazy man, who stared at us with the glazed eyes and fixed stare of insanity. Backus, with great presence of mind, told me not to let the nurse know and asked me to help him get the man downstairs. He had come up four flights and clear to the other end of the building from the one where his room was. Backus cajoled him back, while I followed with the lantern. Occasionally he would shy at a shadow or stop short and refuse to go any further. It was lucky that Miss Gano, who was just on the other side of the door all the time, never knew what had happened, because she is very timid and has been afraid of the lunatics all along. [. . .]

The 25 men who were sent to help the Roosevelt Hospital unit came back last night and Christensen, my other Danish friend, brought me a note from Robert Jackson, which was almost as full of anguish as some of the ones I have written. [. . .]

I have lately received your original Christmas box, a razor with blades from Father, a box containing pajamas and socks, a copy of the *Christmas Life*, a pair of socks from Esther, and a huge box of Mirror candy from Aunt Caroline,¹ I suppose; there is no card with it. I have never had so much candy at one time before in my life and fed the nurses and patients for a whole week on it; and finally got sick and had to go to bed about five o'clock one morning. We toasted the marshmallows over the stove. Although candy is an excellent thing, there is no particular scarcity of it over here and, though some of

it is more expensive than in America, it is perhaps hardly worth while to send me so much such a long distance. I liked the Dean's box best of all, because we really don't get a great deal of cake and the cake in the box was surprisingly fresh. Also, I have enough socks now and am really well outfitted, though the overcoat has never come. The letter you forwarded was from Tom Shoemaker in China; he is doing YMCA work over there and wants me to tell him how he can get into the hospital service. He is the first person I have heard from in a long time who actually wanted to get in; everybody else wants to get out. I have also heard from Carolyn Wilson,² who says that she is on the point of going to Washington to work under the auspices of the President of Vassar upon some publicity commission, whose precise character is not clear. Father's letter has arrived with the exemption board questionnaire in it. We simply turn them in at the Adjutant's office and they attend to them. Remember me with love to Aunt Laura and Aunt Addie,³ if I don't write to people it is not because I don't think of them or appreciate their letters, but because I have limited time and a great many correspondents. They'll all hear from me in time.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund

¹Caroline Kimball, née Knox, wife of Wilson's Uncle Reuel, traveled in Europe in family party of 1908.

²Carolyn Wilson: a cousin on his father's side.

³Aunt Laura: see above. Aunt Addie: Adelaide Kimball, another of Mrs. Wilson's sisters.

Feb. 24, 1918 / France

Dear Mother:

We have just received an enormous mail after several weeks of none; I have had letters from Larry,¹ Morris Belknap, John Bishop (now a Lieutenant of Infantry!), Aunt Laura, Dorothy,² the Follow the Boys League, and two from you. I greatly enjoyed your description of the entertainment at Shrewsbury. It had nothing on some of the entertainments which are given here under the auspices the YMCA. At the last one a young artilleryman with a plaintive voice recited the whole of "The Raven," rendering the "Nevermore" in a kind of tenor chant like Hamlet's Father's ghost impersonated by George Stilwell. This made such an impression that the popular slogan everywhere now is: "What did the Raven say?" I have also had a letter from Ninette at Cannes written in courageous but not wholly successful English. She says, "I

write in English to make you laugh with my poor capacity.” Dave has had letters from his family telling him that Elizabeth’s baby died almost immediately after it was born, and he is quite depressed, I’m afraid.

I am still putting in my time at the hospital waiting for the French patients to arrive, doing odd jobs around the place such as coal-carrying, sweeping, making the beds, and washing windows, none of it very exhausting or exacting. [. . .]

In short, I am enjoying life well enough nowadays, but am still pretty anxious to get out, just the same. The German capture of Russia makes the outlook for peace pretty gloomy.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund

¹Laurence Noyes, friend from Hill School; with Morris Belknap and David Hamilton shared a Greenwich Village apartment with Wilson after the war.

²Dorothy Reed Mendenhall, Wilson’s much-admired cousin (her grandfather was the brother of Wilson’s great-great-grandfather Reuel Kimball). See *Upstate: Records and Recollections of Northern New York* (1969), pp. 59–71.

March 6th, 1918 / France.

Dear Mother:

I have now been permanently assigned to the Parc Hotel, which is in process of being turned into a hospital to be run by Major—late Captain—McGraw. It is the best building we have and will be the smallest hospital with only 500 beds. So far we have done nothing but move out the hotel furniture, move in the hospital beds, and get the place ready for occupancy. I have done so much strong-arm work that I have become capable of carrying mattresses, beds, night tables, rugs, wardrobes, marble top toilet tables, and detached doors up five flights of stairs without turning a hair. The men—Christensen among them—are pleasant to work with and the Sergeant, a private a little while ago, is competent and easy to get on with. Major McGraw, who is giving up his adjutancy to be at the head of this hospital, called us all together this morning and gave us a long lecture on co-operation, etc. He evidently wants to establish friendly relations with us from the start, and I think that in spite of the fact that his nervousness makes him difficult to approach, he really has the right idea in attempting to get into touch with his men and make things as harmonious as possible. [. . .]

Last Sunday, which they gave us as a holiday at the Parc, Dave, John Andersen, Roy Gamble, and I walked out to the little town on the hill where the

old church and convent are and then, in spite of violent protestations on my part, because I had a cold, and didn't have much faith in the idea of getting dinner anywhere except here, wandered across the hills in search of food, and when at last we reached a town, found the only café full of French soldiers, and had to get back as best we could in the snow and slush and water that the countryside is just now. Climbing slippery hills and ploughing through fields of soft mud, John Andersen was the only man who had any idea how we ought to go to get home, and finally landed us here too late to take supper in a café (they are forbidden after eight). We bought, however, at a grocery store two bottles of wine, some Swiss cheese, a can of jellied chicken, a can of lobster, a fruit cake, and some bread, to which were added by the Hungarian night cook with whom Roy has a great pull, pin money pickles, marmalade, and preserved peaches, and ate it all in Roy's room with our wet feet on the stove. It reminded me of Sundays at Princeton.

Monday morning I was allotted to the receiving squad and had to get up at half past four to help unload a trainful of patients and carry them upstairs in the Towers hospital. They were the first real French wounded I had had to do with and exhibited among them the results of most of the more famous features of modern warfare: shell wounds, barb wire wounds, trench feet, and gassing, which last, as you probably know, makes the man's face swell up horribly and gives him a severe infection of the throat and eyes. I interpreted most of the time for the lieutenant in charge and was even able to understand and make myself understood in Italian among the Italian patients (victims of the pacifist propaganda which was partially responsible for the Italian defeat who had been transferred after their defection to French regiments at Verdun—a poor-looking lot). [. . .] None of the wounds was dangerous, and I think the men have only been sent here on their way somewhere else. The gassed men and the ones who had wounds in the eyes and other parts of the head were the worst.

The chaplain has stopped censoring the mail now and the other officers apparently take turns doing it: but they issue special envelopes now to be sent for censoring to the Base Censor, and, both because there are officers here whom I don't want reading my mail, and because they are stricter than the chaplain was, I am sending most of my letters now the other way, which may account for some delay in your receiving them. I have had from you several lots of magazines: the Christmas *Harper's*, which I was glad to get on account of Mrs. G[askell]'s story and the thing by Henry James, the theatrical section of the *World*, and any number of Hill School magazines. The *Alumni Weekly*

comes regularly, and the Sunday *Times* shows up from time to time. I shall be very glad indeed to get Mrs. G[askell]'s new book of short stories. Please mail me anything you see in the papers or magazines by Mrs. G[askell], Mrs. Wharton, E. A. Robinson (the poet), Bernard Shaw, or Max Beerbohm. I haven't much time now to read anything but papers and magazines at the noon hour, at nights, and on Sunday, and when I do get a chance, I read French books, so although I see by the advertisements that lots of English and American books are appearing that I want to read, there is no point in getting you to send them all the way from America. I have obtained a few English books and magazines through the Paris Branch of Brentano's. If it weren't for these, the *Times*, and the *New Republic* (to which I have subscribed) I'd know little enough about what is going on, because the papers we get here, French and English alike, are mostly single-sheet affairs, badly edited and anything but exhaustive, so that important things are happening all the time which we hear about only indirectly.

Speaking of badly edited papers, I am sending you the second copy of "The Reveille," which again turns out to be dull and entirely different from what I had expected it to be. I wrote the "Editorial" which, as you see, is not printed precisely as I wrote it. The only amusing stuff we had was crowded out because the sheet had to be so small and the results are before you—together with the results of the censorship.—I have heard lately from Dorothy, Aunt Addie, and Aunt Laura, and will answer them all later. I am sorry about your eye, but no doubt you are all right by now.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund.

March 13, 1918 / France

Dear Mother:

Mr. Kemp Smith is now in Paris and has written asking me to meet him, which I want very much to do, although I am chained down as usual and probably the best I can do will be to go as far as the town where Robert Jackson's Unit is in a motor truck. Unless he is going to be in the vicinity, I can hardly ask him to come so far from Paris, and the chances are that I shall never see him. The Assistant Adjutant says he will do what he can for me and last night telephoned the Paris hotel where Kemp is staying, but they said he was out and couldn't use the telephone anyhow because he was a civilian, though he is really in the government service and ought, I think, to be able to telephone or telegraph. We are going to call him up again tonight. (There is

such a violent argument raging behind me on politics that I have had to stop writing—)

A day has passed since I began this letter. John Andersen, David, and Roy (in the latter's basement studio) got so stormy over votes for women and other matters that it became impossible to write and I had to turn around and expose their fallacies to them. Just then the Hungarian night cook came in and we put the questions up to him: whether women had as good minds as men, to which he replied—I cannot write his reply—in the negative; and whether politics was as high a human activity as any other. He apologized here and said that he didn't really have brains for anything but whiskey but, if we wanted to know what he thought, why he thought that when one guy got into office the other guy said that the guy who was in office was a robber and called him all kinds of names and said he'd be square if he was there and then when he got in he was a worse robber than the other guy. [. . .]

Last Sunday, David, Roy, and I hired wheels to ride to that city to which David and I bicycled once before, last December. The woman couldn't supply the wheels at the last moment, so Dave and I decided to walk it (14 miles) although Roy scoffed at us, refused to take our challenge, and went to a nearer town to paint a picture. (His pictures, by the way, are excellent. He's done a lot of French peasant houses and street scenes.) We had a wonderful walk, one of the few very pleasant days we have spent since we got here. [. . .]

At five we started back in an open cart. [. . .] On the way, after refusing to give lifts to various parties of French soldiers with women which would have killed the poor old wreck of a horse that pulled us, we picked up a single French soldier. It seemed that he was off on leave from the front and had been walking for two days without much to eat—he said “without eating at all” and it may have been so—on his way to a little town near here where his wife and two little children were. They didn't know he was coming and he would surprise them. He had served for three years as infantryman and his ideas on the war seemed to me to represent pretty well the attitude of the so-called *poilu* [blank spaces here], the ordinary man who had to leave his home and work to be a soldier. He kept imitating the noise of the guns, which, he said, was terrible and gave him a headache which lasted even then, when they were out of earshot. “You have a nice time back here,” he said, “where you can hardly hear them.” [. . .] He kept repeating: “Death! Death! Death! two million men! Men that you've never seen! Who never did you any harm! But what to do?” Then he went on to tell us things which, if I should put them in

a letter, could certainly expose me to court martial. I have at least the advantage in being a private that I can find out what the privates really think. I asked him whether, if it was only a question of Alsace-Lorraine, he'd be willing to have the war go on. "No," he said, "they were all Boches, anyhow, in Alsace-Lorraine."

And I do think myself, that the [blank spaces here] are handing out a good deal of bunk about Alsace-Lorraine. Even if they aren't quite all boches, the restoration of the provinces should hardly be a *sine qua non* of Allied policy (which, if I understand the President, it is not). It is only the journalists and politicians who won't stop fighting till Alsace-Lorraine is given back. [. . .] But our friend kept coming back to "Bom! Bom! Bom!" (his imitation of the cannon's pounding). "All day and all night! You don't hear anything but that. Death! Death! Death! You have to kill men that you've never seen! But what can you do?" He was not in any great consternation, having had three years to get used to it, but the continuous beat of the cannon and the continual sight of the dead had apparently got on his brain; and there was something weak about even his sensible "Tant pis!" or "Ce n'est pas d'amusement, ça!" as if something vital in him had been broken.

This is just the way many of the French soldiers have impressed me. They have preserved both gaiety and gentle manners, but after you have talked with them awhile, you see that it is just a little mechanical and that four years of life at the front has destroyed something inside them. I think you may take all this as pretty typical.

Everything I have seen corroborates what Stan Dell¹ told me from his experience; you will almost never find truthful accounts of these things in newspapers, books, or magazines. For one thing, the perfectly well-known fact that, before clearing out on every trench, the soldiers are filled full of a crude and violent form of alcohol (*le pinard*) was denied by everybody when Jane Addams² commented on it, I think, a couple of years ago, and she herself had to suffer a lot of abuse for having calumniated the brave soldiers, etc. etc. You can easily see that this is one of the worst humiliations of the war: to be obliged to do work which you have to be drunk to do properly. If a man comes through this without his having his moral balance and his self-respect vitally hurt he would be an idiot. The wounds inflicted on the enemy are not the only ones. This is not a tract in pacifism but an attempt to adjust any impression you may have gathered from the comic papers of the gay and undaunted *poilu* "carrying on" through four years of modern warfare. I'll tell you some more about what war does to the soldiers when I get back to

America, where, I earnestly hope, you may not, by that time, be able to see the results for yourself.

In the meantime, we are waxing Major McGraw's floors for him at the Parc—a very tedious and uncomfortable job; but the weather is wonderful and we take long rests looking down at the town from the French windows, which open on little balconies.

By the way, John Peale Bishop³ has published a book of poems called "Green Fruit" (Sherman, French & Co., Price \$.80), and I wish you would get Brentano's to send copies to Dave, to Mrs. Hamilton, to Aunt Laura, and to Sandy.⁴ I think John has "got it" and I want to advertise him. Put the price to the account which includes the storage bills and the other things I owe you for. If there are any of my cards at home you might put them in the copies for Sandy and Mrs. Hamilton.

Yours lovingly, / Edmund.

¹Stanley Dell, Hill School friend.

²Jane Addams (1860–1935): social reformer of Chicago, founder of Hull House. Wilson wrote of her in *The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Twenties and Thirties* (1958).

³John Peale Bishop (1892–1944): Princeton friend, poet, aesthete, and associate on the *Nassau Lit*. Later worked with Wilson on *Vanity Fair* and became Wilson's rival in paying court to Edna St. Vincent Millay.

⁴Sandy: cousin Alexander Kimball, son of Uncle Reuel. Graduated from St. Paul's and Princeton and thereafter had severe mental problems.

January 19, 1918 / France

Dear Father:

I am pretty well discouraged with the hospital business, having just been removed from my job of dental orderly and made night orderly in the same hospital, while the man who previously had the night orderly job has been transferred to the X-ray, a job which, by every right and promise, I should have. Not that there is such a great deal of difference between jobs here. It is chiefly a matter of whether or not you get good doctors to work under. There seems to be a vast amount of petty graft in the assignment of the men to their work.

Do you think that you could do anything to get me transferred into some other branch of the service? Lieutenant Crandall, a friend of Walter Hall's, who is sick in the hospital, tells me that it is possible, through pull, to get an order for transfer from the War Department, and I think this would be safer

than broaching the matter to our commanding officer, who, I know, feels himself in need of men and would certainly be unwilling to recommend me simply at my request. The life here is really very sickening and not much better than Detroit; and I am sure that, in most ways, it would be much better for me and that I should be rendering better service if I got a commission in the artillery or the signal corps. It would involve for me the renunciation of everything else until after the war; but I should probably be both happier and more valuable. The chief thing that makes me reluctant is the fact that Mother would worry about me and I, for that reason, about her. The other thing which makes me reluctant is the fact that I had always intended to devote my life to literature and do not want to be easily cheated out of doing so; although, when I see my friends who certainly have as much gift as I for the various lines of work to which they intended to devote themselves, putting it all away in order to make efficient officers in the army and navy, I feel that I probably cannot always be justified in preserving myself for the sake of work which I haven't yet done. Furthermore, I have come to sympathize more completely with America's part in the war. Wilson, I am now convinced, is as much in the right as it is possible for the leader of a nation to be and is shrewd and idealistic enough not to lose any diplomatic opportunity for ending the war on terms less drastic than those which he enumerated in his last message to Congress; and I certainly owe him all the service of a man intelligent enough to understand what the real justice of the President's case is.¹ Also, as the war goes on and the draft comes again and again, I shall find myself in the position of evading it through Hospital work, without even the plea of achieving thereby a part for which I may be better fitted than for that of a regular soldier, and, in the meantime, may fall victim, anyhow, to a special order pressing hospital men of draft age into more active service.

I wish you would give me your advice on this at once, together with your opinions on the international situation, and on the possibility of your getting me transferred from America. I should not be anxious to go back there to train for a commission, which would hardly, I think, be necessary, but, if there were no other way, would be willing to do it. I mention this because I have heard a rumor to the effect that men are being sent back from France to train in America, the camps here being overcrowded. I am very anxious to hear from you, though I have sent you only one letter and a postcard. The single letter I have had from you was evidently written before you received mine. I hate to think of you and Mother alone another winter at Red Bank, though Mother writes me fairly cheerful letters. She gives me good reports of your

health, anyhow. One advantage of this night duty (8 to 8) is the fact that you get a lot of time to write letters and I hope now, at last, with this room to myself to write in, to be able to pay off all my arrears of correspondence.

Yours always, / Edmund

[Postscript] I forgot to say that Lieutenant Crandall has written to a friend of his, a former Princeton preceptor now in the Adjutant General's office over here, asking if he can suggest any place where I might fit in and where my qualifications, few as they are, would be of use.

¹Wilson on Woodrow Wilson and the war: compare a more considered post-armistice statement in *A Prelude*, p. 268: "At GHQ I prepared a statement. . . ."

November 8, 1918 / General Headquarters /
G-2b, Intelligence Section / American E.F., France

Dear Father:

I am very well fixed here now and am only waiting till another interpreter gets out of the hospital to change from this translation work to the department that deals with European politics.

My transfer has been arranged. I spend most of the time now not translating but reading all sorts of books and documents on Poland. They are getting out a report on Poland in the course of a series which is supposed to be designed for the instruction of the Headquarters Staff and the Lieutenant tells me that I shall probably write it, which would be a very welcome piece of work, although rather difficult, because I have never before studied much about the East of Europe. I shall send you copies of these reports, if they will let me.

From the latest news that has come, it looks as if we should have a Republican Congress—a fact which I cannot but regret in view of the fact that Lodge, Taft, and Roosevelt have recently taken it upon themselves to try to discredit Wilson before the world.¹ News on home politics over here is very incomplete, but it seems to me that, under the circumstances, Wilson's appeal for a Democratic Congress was entirely justified. I was very much stirred up by Roosevelt's assertion that the President meant [blank spaces here] Allies and the Republican contention that the League of Nations was an illusion and the fourteen points too vague, though they are the only specific peace terms which four years of war have been able to produce. But now that Wilson's program has been accepted by the Allies, I conclude that Congress doesn't make much difference. One thing I am pretty sure of: all Europe is looking to

America now to get them out of the mess which centuries of Imperialistic politics got them into. And from the “inside dope” which trickles through the Headquarters from the Allied Conferences, it would appear that Wilson is pretty much master of the situation and that not even the “bitter enders” of Europe—let alone the “bitter enders” at home—will ever be able to prevent him from doing what he thinks just. Still, unless something more radical happens in Germany than the recent alleged democratization, there will no doubt be a certain amount of difficulty in admitting Germany to equal membership in such a League of Nations as it seems that the world must have. I should like to hear what you think of all this and if you still support the Republican leaders at this most mischievous hour of their career.

Life is rather pleasant here at Headquarters and consequently everybody always apologizes for being here. I have been entirely free from the kind of nagging that used to drive me crazy in 36.² In fact, no one, since I have been here, has given me any orders of any kind, and the officers I know invite me to their messes. I am going tonight to eat with the Lieutenant under whom I soon hope to be, a man named Harding, formerly a journalist and author of a book on China. I have had a very entertaining time with a man I knew a little when I was on the *Sun*.³ At that time, his real abilities and intelligence were partially paralyzed by alcohol and the New York press, but now that he has had a year of the army he is an exceedingly pleasant companion. Being perfectly free now to speak his mind, he has given me an account of some of the private dealings of the *Sun* which makes me think even worse of it than I did before.

He swears he will never work for a New York paper of that kind again, and I am sure I never want to either, though what I shall do for a living when I get back to America is more than I can tell. It is just possible that this new work I am going to do might lead to something, and I intend to go into it for all it is worth. In any case, I am greatly indebted to you for having got me to Headquarters.⁴

The news that the German delegation has come to receive Marshal Foch's terms⁵ just arrived and already an atmosphere has been created like the night before Christmas. By the time you get this letter the War may have ceased forever.

I am glad to hear that you got well quickly at Talcottville. The last letters I have had from either you or Mother were, I think, written from there. I have had none since I have been here, because the mail has to be forwarded and takes forever to arrive.—Please remember me sometime to the people in your

office: Miss Parmenteer might see from this letter what an expert typist I have become. I have had to use a typewriter so much lately and have got so accustomed to it that I think I shall use one hereafter for everything.⁶

Yours always, / Edmund

¹See *A Piece of My Mind: Reflections at Sixty* (1956). Writing of his political conflicts with his father, Wilson mentions the November 1918 Republican Congress and grants Wilson Sr., in spite of his Republican views, flexibility of mind and sound judgment.

²Base Hospital 36; Wilson's unit from Detroit went over to France in November 1917 and was assigned to duty there.

³*New York Evening Sun*; Wilson was briefly employed rewriting and reporting for the paper from the fall of 1916 to August 1917.

⁴Refers to Wilson's transfer.

⁵The terms that led to the armistice three days later, on November 11.

⁶This resolve faded with the end of the war.

Oct. 9, 1950

Dear Mother: My note is due Nov. 4, and I will attend to it then. I'll also leave till then the question of a further loan, in the hope that I won't have to make one.—*The Case of the Careless Kitten* has not reached Brentano's yet, but I am sending you a dozen of the same writer's books in that series—there ought to be some that you haven't read.¹

The other book you wanted I think I have already sent you in the package I told you about. Let me know if you find it among them.

Lovingly, / Edmund

¹It must have been galling to Wilson, author of a famous putdown of detective novels, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" to have to supply them by the dozen to Mrs. Wilson Sr.—who never read his own books. More than thirty years later, Wilson is still humoring his mother. He was also, according to Rosalind Wilson, to some extent financially dependent on her. *Near the Magician: A Memoir of My Father, Edmund Wilson* (1989), p. 49.