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J.M.J.

### **Coloma during the war of 1914!**

1914 A memorable year indeed which will be inscribed in gold in the history of our beloved Belgium. It was also a year of darkness, etched in blood and tears, in the hearts of mothers, women and children. History will tell of how: faced with the proposition of the cowardly betrayal of his honour and duty, our noble King conducted himself proudly and uprightly; how the government gave him swift and speedy support. It will relate how our Sovereign said in his address to the nation that , "Eight million times 'NO' was pronounced as if by one voice; that the whole of the Belgian Nation shuddered and sprang to mount an heroic resistance at the border against the invader. History will say that, conqueror or conquered, Belgium emerged with honour from this struggle because she fought on the side of honour and right. Perhaps, history will also say that, in this unequal fight, 'little' Belgium rediscovered all the bravery and heroism so characteristic of her ancestors. But what history does not recount is the manner in which our revered Institute, in the 'House of the Angels', received this sombre and alarming news. For sure, none of us realised the profound well of true and pure patriotism which dwelt peacefully in the depths of our hearts. All of us had sacrifices to make: of brothers, of those close to us who would find themselves in imminent danger; but each kept quiet about her personal concerns in order not to arouse those of her sisters. Proud of the noble conduct of their Sovereign, driven by the heroic valour of their brave defenders, calm, courageous and resigned, the daughters of Mary and Joseph grouped themselves tightly about their Mothers and formed themselves into a holy battalion fighting for God, for their homeland and for Love.

From the beginning of hostilities, throughout our dear Institute, there was a veritable campaign of prayer and penance. From all the houses, our dear Reverend Mother General received letters requesting approval of the pious exercises that the nuns wanted to do; of the mortifications that they wanted to impose on themselves. All were protesting their desire to make themselves useful, to suffer and draw down on

themselves, by their edifying conduct, the mercy and blessing of God on their dear, threatened Homeland.

The Reverend Mothers of England assured us of the warm welcome which awaited us, if the sad events should prove harmful to our houses in Belgium. It was the closest union in the common danger! The Reverend Mother General soon responded to the requests that she had foreseen and also planned for in our own dear House. On 15 August, she sent all the houses a letter indicating the particular exercises she authorised us to practise in order to placate Heaven.

In each House preparations were made to receive and relieve the wounded. Providence had arranged in previous years that several religious, from different houses, had followed Red Cross and nursing courses. The various places were therefore ready for action. At Coloma from August 4, two days after mobilisation of the troops, the Primary School classrooms were occupied, not by the wounded but by the soldiers, whose hunger and hopes of good accommodation had led them here. What could we do? A depot had been established in Malines, the town was crowded with soldiers that the Government, with this unexpected surge, could neither accommodate, nor feed. The first day, two of them arrived here; they were given a hearty supper and assigned a bed in the primary school building, after having given them the necessary means to write to their families. (One of these brave men had answered the call without going to see his wife and three children first and could scarcely hide his tears.) One of our workers spent the night with them and brought them all the next day to the Chapel to hear Holy Mass. They were the first to whom we offered the bread of charity, but they were not the last. Every day the numbers increased. Many volunteers received training in Malines and several times a day, numerous groups arrived at our house for a meal.

On 21 August, the figure escalated to 2,114. How could we describe the devotion of our good Madam Eugénie, the bursar and the person among all the sisters during this period of additional work whose nights were often disturbed. It was a time of self-denial, of self-forgetfulness, several times the soup was put on the table, when it was announced that the number of soldiers had again increased. The R.M.G. asked if anyone wanted some soup. On a unanimous 'No' being pronounced, the soup was sent to the improvised barracks. Not all was sacrifice, nevertheless, alongside such troubling scenes, one was often very moved.

One evening, two young men expressed their wish to go to confession; it was late; the curate was called and he received them in one of the classrooms in the old pavilion; the next day at 4 o'clock the good priest sought them out in order to give them Holy Communion in the Church. At 5 o'clock our brave volunteers were at the barracks.

In the town, processions were organised; at Our Lady of Hanswyck, when the statue of the Virgin Mary left the church, the soldiers lifted her on to their shoulders and amid general emotion carried her triumphantly through the city streets. Similar scenes occurred at the cathedral where they undertook a penitential procession. The relic of St Rombaut was carried solemnly in procession, preceded by representatives from different parishes, followed by the choir of Canons escorting the Blessed Sacrament. A recollected and suppliant crowd implored the protection of both God and Mary for the town of our Archbishop. At the parish of Coloma, several days of processions took place with the statue of St Joseph preceded by the flags of Belgium, England and France. Our worthy volunteers, after a rough day of exercises carried out abbreviated ablutions. Then in an orderly fashion and on command went to meet the procession. They seized hold of the statue and joined in the devotions. One evening, the parish priest halted the procession at the steps; he addressed the crowd in religious and patriotic terms that moved his audience and then intoned a vigorous brabanconne. How we must honour those brave souls who offered themselves so generously to defend the Motherland. They asked for and accepted the scapulars and medals of the Sacred Heart and of the Holy Virgin more avidly than ordinary bread. God only knows how often ravenous hunger weighed upon them and with what respect they behaved at table. Our dear Reverend M.G, seeing a university student take his meal without distraction, said in passing: "I would like to pray that way".

It was a mix of people of all sorts of conditions, and opinions: waiters helping both to serve and wash the dishes; coachmen, teachers, students, priests and religious; Catholics and socialists; all were driven by the most fervent patriotism, all were deeply grateful for the generous hospitality that we gave them.

On the 18th August, while we were at our 9 o'clock meeting, Sister Portress announced that several hundred men had gathered in front of the house; they were exhausted and famished; they were from the column of ambulances from the division that had supported the heroic resistance at Liège. At least momentarily set free, these brave

souls had returned towards Anvers in lengthy stages, despite their fatigue and the pain from their bruised feet.

Everyone set about making bread and butter plus a little meat and cheese and serving coffee; when all supplies had run out and the last men arrived, all we had to give was warm bread straight from the baker's oven. One religious expressed her regret at not being able to do better, a brave Walloon, who probably only knew the Canonesses as the cartoon characters (*les nonnettes*) replied: "That's fine, Sister, when it is given with such a kind heart and a smiling face, it provides great pleasure."

Another splendid gentleman summoned a Sister and inquired the name of our order. He added, "You have done a very good job by receiving us in such a pleasant fashion. There are people here of all persuasions to whom it will do much good to see Religious Sisters as they really are." A third, appreciating our devotion, said, "I have several daughters, would that they might all become Religious." After having been made comfortable, washed, and after the good Sister Suzanne in her capacity as a nurse had tended to a great number of wounded feet, the 386 stretcher bearers made themselves scarce in order to make way for others. These were the unfortunate ones who had endured several hours of the attack on Tirlemont. There were about thirty of them, leaderless, battered, filthy and almost poisoned by the gunpowder. They had kept vigil, throughout the afternoon. Hidden in their trenches, they had waited, without flinching, for an enemy, many times more numerous than themselves. A plane had flown overhead and moments later an attack was launched on their position from various directions, masterminded from an overlooking hill. Nevertheless, they fought for a long time, many fell and, in the end, crushed by the weight of numbers, they dispersed, fleeing from the enemy fire for more than an hour. It was heart-rending, their eyes blazing though haggard; their bearing had something indefinable, retaining a manly energy despite being physically spent. One of them had his mess tin pierced right through from side to side by a bullet; another had a button partly torn off; a third, had his clothing covered in blood. He had led a wounded comrade out of enemy reach; all had escaped death as if by a miracle. When one of us asked which Angel had watched over them in such a special way, a young man answered "St Benedict maybe, I have his medal". Then, recollecting himself, he clutched the scapular on his chest on which was firmly sewn a crucifix and added, ": "Because of this. See, hold it Sister! There is no way to pull it off." May God bless them and sustain their trust in him!

The same night, another group of two hundred presented themselves for food and shelter. They thought they were the only survivors of a thousand infantry surprised by an enemy artillery brigade. What could these men with their short range guns achieve against a hail of shells? They retreated as rapidly as possible, with their ranks miserably decimated. They arrived dismayed and silent. At every step, their knees buckled. And to have to say they must be sent back without help, that we had no more bread for so great a crowd. It was the first time that help had been refused. Their leader accepted it, saying: "If there is nothing available, then there is no way." And all withdrew without saying a word. That evening was the darker for us and more disturbing. However, some who followed the group from further away received the little bread that was left to us. We passed the dish round, but not all were served. A brave lad tore his slice of bread in two and gave the larger piece to his neighbour, saying, " There, my friend you are indeed hungry." Another gave 20 cents to one of the Sisters begging her to put this small donation in a collection box. He had, he said, promised to give it before going into the firing line but had not had the opportunity. The good Lord, he added, had kept him safe in a special way; everyone fell all around him and he did not understand how he had escaped.

Thursday, 20th, all were recalled to the barracks. The order came as some were having their meal here; they did not even finish it. It was over, at least momentarily, for us to dedicate ourselves to this sphere of activity; but, we will not easily forget the lessons of courage, generosity, self-sacrifice and recognition that these brave souls exemplified for us as they passed through here. After they left, we received the thanks of many.

From that moment on, our main preoccupation was above all the presence of the enemy in the neighbourhood of Malines. The German troops camped in the villages of Perck, Elewytt and Hofstade. Their panic-stricken inhabitants, left their houses and taking in their haste only their most precious items, fled towards the town. It was a sad procession of people (including some religious), of carts, wheelbarrows, dogs... Anxiety had overtaken the town, where many families had left for the coast. Despite all the false alerts, Coloma remained relatively calm, under the protection of the Queen of the angels. We remained steadfast with an unshakeable trust that "What God watches over is well taken care of."

24 August.. This pious maxim was to receive a touching confirmation from the good Master. The act of faith was scarcely written on the paper when we heard at the

front of the house a terrifying fusillade. It was during the holiday visit which took place before dinner. Some of them rushed to our dear R.M.G's room. She had been a little unwell for a few days. Others went to reassure our dear Sister Beatrix, whose age and weakness required special attention. A few minutes later, we were summoned to take care of three German wounded, who had dragged themselves from the bridge to the door. What a sad spectacle, what fear among these unfortunates! At such a sight any feeling of aversion immediately turns to pity, even sympathy. We welcomed them, we cared for them; One had a broken foot, the other a sprain and a bullet had grazed his shoulder; the third had been much more badly hit..

One of the other two was Polish, as soon as he had dragged himself to the marchioness, he drew from his pocket a miraculous medal of the Blessed Virgin, and pressed it into his hands; We consoled him with the prospect of being well cared for and treated well until the end of the war. All three were labouring under the most dreadful fear. Was it an indication of the ill-treatment promised to the German soldiers when they fall into the hands of the Belgians, or was it proof of the atrocities committed against our wounded prisoners? That is not for us to decide here.. Many revolting stories are undoubtedly invented by overexcited imaginations. Would to God they were all false.

What is certain is that a quarter of an hour after the event, one of our four little soldiers, who had scattered the patrol of the twelve Uhlans<sup>1</sup>, presented himself to the wounded, saying: "Give me your hand, comrade, you have done your duty, I have done mine; After that, be not afraid, you will be well cared for, the Belgians are good people! Then, after making an effort to restrain his anger, he added: "They (the Germans) do not do so, they took my two best friends prisoner and shot them. After which he abruptly withdrew. Soon a Red Cross car came to fetch the wounded and they were led away, suitably escorted. Already. At this outpost, throughout this small struggle, we have experienced the special protection of a beneficent Providence, which would watch over us with such fatherly care during the sad days which were to follow.

Six bullets had penetrated the windows without striking anyone. One of them, in the kitchen, brushed the sister cook, crossed a door, the outside wall and stopped against the opposite wall of the refectory.

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<sup>1</sup> translator's note: a type of light cavalry unit with a distinctive 4-cornered hat.

Tuesday 25. A day of horror and anxiety! We were awakened by the sound of an intense and rapid fusillade from the direction of Hofstade, soon followed by an uninterrupted cannonade directed towards the town of Mechelen. We were in the chapel, we stayed there, praying as one prays under the pressure of grave danger. All the shells whistled above our heads, one of the first went right through the tower of St Rombaut from one side to the other and severely damaged the neighboring houses plus one of the most beautiful stained-glass windows in the church; Another fell on the station, a few people in town were wounded. As soon as the chaplain arrived at the chapel, he announced that he would say mass immediately. We had scarcely received communion when they came to fetch us for the first of the wounded, brought from Hofstade, where a serious struggle had broken out between Belgians and Germans. Our ambulance was the first emergency station and during the whole day until midnight, two doctors, sometimes three, gave assistance, with the help of our nuns, to a considerable number of wounded whom the paramedics of the region brought in by stretcher, car, wheelbarrow or being supported. How many did we have? Nobody could say exactly. We estimate that during the two days of carnage that followed, the number was more than 300. In any case, we have witnessed the saddest, most moving, and sometimes the most noble spectacle one could imagine. Our poor brothers! How they were battered. These devices of war, the so called products of civilization, are much more an invention of the most shameful barbarism. We had to look at the horrible wounds produced by the bursts of shrapnel, the limbs, the bodies torn right through by murderous bullets, in order to formulate even a vague idea of the horrors of war. Despite their cruel wounds, our brave fighters were calm and courageous. They endured the most painful dressings without saying a word. When one or other asked a question to inquire about the gravity of his condition, he added almost immediately: "When will I be able to return to battle?" A badly wounded commander was writhing on his bed of pain, Someone asked him, "It is very painful, Commander?" "And he replied:" It is so appalling to be struck down thus at the beginning of the war. What has become of my men? A lieutenant came in with a bruised wrist. We wanted to treat him right away. But he said in a decisive voice: "Forgive me, Doctor, for the moment I want first to see my men. He walked through the three rooms, stopped at each one's bed, gave them an encouraging word, and then returned for the sole purpose of receiving the doctor's attention before setting off again for the battlefield. The faith of these heroes equaled their energy: many asked for help from the priest before that of the doctor. Several were administered here. A young man from Minderhout, near the Dutch frontier, afflicted with internal haemorrhages, died after a several hours of

expressing truly Christian sentiments. Another of Wichelen near Dendermonde, who probably would not survive his illness, and who was the only son of a 72-year-old widow, repeated from time to time: "Ach myn moeder, myn moeder! Then, overwhelmed by grief, he asked the good God to come and fetch him, that he would be near his father, and added at once: "What will my mother do without me? She will have to beg for her bread! We asked his name, he said, adding: "Do not write to my mother that I am wounded, she would die."

In the evening, one of the doctors had the idea of returning to the abandoned battlefield, several stretcher-bearers accompanied him. They explored a little wood and to their joy discovered an unfortunate creature who had dragged himself up there; they brought him in on a wheelbarrow; His wounds were serious, but his nervous agitation even more so. The terrible prospect of being abandoned there, near the encampment of the enemy had put him in this state. All those who arrived in the evening were less calm than those of the morning. Two of them were mentally deranged. One was seeing Germans everywhere, the other on the contrary, wanted to go to them, to meet them, to measure himself against them. A physician of the town, who had devoted himself generously throughout the day, left us in the evening, went to the clinic, where he helped all night to carry out operations. He told us the next day that on his return home he had wept like a child. He had, nevertheless, shown himself a courageous man; nor was he unaware of the dangers we were running here.

On several occasions he had, like other doctors besides, insisted that we display the flag of the Red Cross. Unfortunately, it had been sent to the town to be stamped and had not been returned to us. We hastily made new ones which did not, however, give much reassurance considering the proximity of the battlefield. So, the doctors did not cease to repeat: " The wounded must be carried away as quickly as possible. As for us, in spite of the danger, we must remain at our posts." This movement of all the wounded took place throughout the entire army, which, since the preceding night, had made its way down the causeway of Tervueren towards Hofstade. From the afternoon, the movement became twofold: some went back while others continued to descend. The King himself, around 4 p.m., had made his way along the road by car. On the way back, he stopped near the bridge, talked to the soldiers and left them in the midst of the general enthusiasm saying : " Courage, my brave lads, if necessary, I will take up arms beside you. In fact, our sovereign did not spare himself. The next day, one of the first wounded brought to us entered, exclaiming : " He is a real man,

our King! Since half past one, he has been in the line of fire ! His car did not return until ten-thirty".

On the night of Tuesday to Wednesday, the majority of the nuns got no rest at all. After midnight, when most of the wounded had been removed, four doctors and a military chaplain arrived to request hospitality ; two others who came but left later, inquired as to the number of injured that we cared for and added : " You have done a good job today, our general has taken note. " Our guests had supper, took two hours of rest, breakfasted after 2.30a.m. and set out again for the battlefield.

Early in the morning, the Chaplain celebrated Holy Mass, we were able to receive communion, and as before, immediately resumed our role as nurses of our cherished wounded. They brought us less, however, as all those who could withstand the journey were directed immediately to the city and to Antwerp. The authorities no doubt sensed the possibility of the retreat of our troops, for early in the morning two more bridges were built in front of our house. Around 11 a.m. came a bombardment more terrible even than the day before! After dinner, we received more of those injured and while we were with them, out of the blue, came the hasty retreat of our troops. Many people had already left the hamlet; many had slept here, in the corridor of the kitchen and in the small kitchen. All the others were now rushing towards Coloma. Almost immediately, the newly constructed bridges were bombarded. Most of the windows of the facade of our building fell out. Everyone made a dash for the vaulted cellars; and there, all the unfortunate refugees joined with us imploring the protection of Heaven ! Our fervour undoubtedly resembled that with which the first Christians prayed in the catacombs. Our confidence, the confidence of the professed Sisters especially, exerted an all powerful effect on the heart of our good Master. The troops continued to ascend more gently now; we took advantage of this moment of calm to go and attend to our wounded whom we had been forced to abandon for a moment, assuring them that if the Germans came, they would not hurt them, since they were wounded. They were nevertheless clearly concerned; and when we were able to carry them away, they demonstrated superhuman strength to assist in their escape.

At the time of this precipitous departure, it was suggested we make use of a ramshackle cart with only a single stretcher which was hauled by men severely winded but on which lay the badly wounded. One of them was dying, all were urgently in need of help and yet the soldiers shouted : "Go further into the town ! Having hastily been given something to drink, these unfortunate souls pursued their painful journey with the victims. Meanwhile, the soldiers shouted at us : " Flee, sisters, you have the Prussians at your back. "

In the evening the second bridge was bombarded but this time we were prepared. Many other windows fell out, in all, 286. The main bridge was opened but was also

mined. Its destruction, if it had occurred, would have been far worse for us. It was under this apprehension, plus fear of the possible arrival of the Germans, whose scouts were gathering all the time at the front of the bridge, that we set about going to bed. To cap it all, on reaching the dormitory, we perceived flashes of fire from four different directions, all occupied by Germans. Most of us took up residence in the cellar; almost no one with the exception of our two Reverend Mothers, whose confidence was in all probability stretched to the limit, got undressed. This state of affairs endured well into the night. It was a picture certainly, scarcely poetic but in some sense picturesque, with its mixture of nuns, women, men and children. The scenes were so original that, despite the pain and the fear, laughter was not entirely absent.

The next morning, Thursday 27th, everything was relatively quiet. Our brave parishioners and ourselves attended the Holy Mass in thanksgiving for the protection with which God had favoured us because, despite all the possible dangers which threatened, none had actually touched us. Therefore, I say, that the good Lord showed such concern for us as to force us to say: " You are not only, Lord, a good Father, but you are also a tender Mother." The following event is proof: the milkman was here with his family; they had not dared go home to look after their cows and milk them ; there was not a drop in the house and then, behold, a frightened cow, ambled in to walk around in our 'pastures'. Gratefully, we tied it up and milked it. It produced 8 litres of excellent quality milk. The rest of the day alternated with periods of calm and fear caused by repeated bombings of the town of Mechelen.

In the afternoon, during a moment of respite, we had Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, after which, the Chaplain Van Cutsem, who had shown an unparalleled devotion for us and who had employed every means to calm the situation went to the town in order to reassure our good RMG about our sisters in the Rue St Jean. We had not heard from them for several days. When he arrived at the '*Bailles de Fer*<sup>2</sup>', the shells began to rain down on the town. He made a speedy return, escaping via an alternative route and arrived safe and sound.

The night, like the previous one, was calm, but as our good RMG left to each the choice of where to bed for the night, many still remained below ground in the cellars.

Friday 28, we still had the good fortune to have the Holy Mass and receive the 'Bread of the Strong'. The Holy Sacrifice was offered this time so that you dear Lord would not permit the Great Bridge to be blown up, an event which would cause us immense anxiety. Already our dinner was disrupted by a new bombardment; in the morning

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<sup>2</sup>Translator's note: a long market square, named after the wrought iron balustrades that protected the 16th C. canal.

there was a little calm, which we took advantage of to have a good meeting in the pupils' refectory. The chaplain constantly surprised us, either by giving us news, or boosting our confidence.

That day, he suggested that we go and see from the tower the damage done to the town; a few of us were carrying telescopes. We were only there a few minutes when the guns started up again. Shells whistled over our heads. With one bound we leapt down into the arms of our mothers and sisters, who were oblivious of the danger they were in let alone the greater one to which we were exposed. From then on, ascents of the tower were forbidden. The whole afternoon was calm; the chaplain took advantage of this to hear the confessions of those sisters who wished (faced with the impossibility of asking permission, he was confident of being allowed to assume this jurisdiction). He also heard the confessions of the parishioners and the little ones who were staying with us.

At 3.30 p.m. just as we were going to the chapel for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, a sister came to inform the RM .G. that a fugitive had just announced that the next day the whole town would be set ablaze. A new panic! The first and the only (hopefully), which made us lose one of our religious exercises. The noise spread like wildfire. The courage of some was inspiring ; if our good Mothers had not been so strong in their faith and confidence, two or three of our nuns would have sought to leave the house to seek shelter elsewhere. It was then that one of us, knowing that the sister in charge of dusting the chapel was deeply affected, offered to replace her. She received the tragic reply: "No, thank you, tomorrow will be the day of great bloodshed."

That day, Saturday the 29th, dawned. We were reunited at the Holy Table, in a general communion, men, women, old men and children. After this, the chaplain left for the town without saying a word. Shortly after, during our meeting, the door opened, and our dear sisters of Rue de St Jean came in. Then indeed emotion engulfed all our hearts. The chaplain had found them sheltering in their cellars, in the abandoned town. Their house had been hit in several places. They had not had Mass or Communion for two days. Without waiting for the decisions of our RMG, he divined her wishes and told them to come quickly with us, carrying all they could in the way of food, as there were many mouths to feed in the Mother House. All the suppliers had departed and provisions had been devoured during the month just in meeting all the daily needs without thought of the future. The Religious arrived in small groups, agitated, worn out from the night vigils and anxieties. The Chaplain arrived, one of the last, bringing the Blessed Sacrament. When he reached the community room where he found us all together, he too was moved ; most probably by the thought of the dangers that had been run by our dear sisters, moved too by the notion of the relief that must have been felt by our dear Reverend Mothers as they saw their daughters reunited around them. We were affected by the true and solid devotion of this good priest, a

devotion which showed itself in all ways. Our worthy and dear Chaplain was truly prodigal in his devotion during these days of distress. We all retain the most poignant memory of this time. In this enlarged family circle, the day passed without any major event, but as if God wished our main suffering during this period of universal atonement to be fear, the evening necessitated alarming news. A messenger came from the town to inform us that, though the mayor would not oblige anyone to leave, it was public knowledge that the bombing of Mechelen would continue for two consecutive days.

Despite this concern, we all went to the dormitory to sleep. ; one gets used to bad news such as bombs, especially when one has experienced, for several days, the strength which only the good Lord offers.

To give us the opportunity to fight this new danger by a fresh act of charity, the Divine Master sent us in the evening two old women who clung in terror to the main door. Our Mothers welcomed them as striking examples. Here are their stories: one was from Elewyt; she had been held prisoner by the Germans for four days in the church, with many others; they had nothing to eat or drink; the men were taken out to work, and at the slightest movement that inspired distrust, they were blacklisted and designated to be shot. That was how it was, said the woman.

After 4 days in prison, the women and children had been taken by soldiers to the bridge of Hofstade and released but obliged to take the path to Mechelen. They made it as far as Wavre St Augustine; from there, the woman returned on Saturday hoping to find her cow which had not had anything to eat for 5 days. Arriving at the Church of Coloma, the Belgian soldiers had prevented her from going further but only in order to ask what they should do for the unfortunate creature with only one arm who was lying there on the ground. It was the sister of fugitive! Both were fed and slept in the cellar; the next day, one of them left early; the unhappy invalid remained among us ; and increased the number of guests.

We were at the end of the week allocated for our Retreat. Never had we had one like it; never had we had such eloquent sermons. The Good Lord spoke through the voice of the gun. We touched death so closely in those poor victims of war. We were ourselves frequently in imminent danger; we prayed, we suffered with and for God ; we walked constantly under the gaze of the Master, whose justice purifies and whose goodness upholds one. We may have the sweet confidence that we will survive this week's trials more attached to God and our dear vocation. As for those who on this day of 29 August were due to make their sacrifice to their divine Spouse<sup>3</sup>, there is no

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<sup>3</sup> translator's note: probable meaning is the making of their religious profession (possibly final vows)

doubt that the suffering so courageously endured constitutes the best holocaust, until the good Lord wills the acceptance of their religious consecration.

Sunday 30. As on the day before there was general communion at the prescribed Mass. A touching detail, all the little ones were there, a little disturbing, perhaps, but honouring the Good Master in their own fashion. At Communion, the father held the child while the mother approached the Holy Table and on return, the father handed her the child so as to receive communion in his turn. It was in the course of that Sunday morning that the brave fathers of the families decided to leave us in order to find a more secure shelter in areas not visited by the enemy. Their presence here, if the Germans invaded our home, would certainly not have been good for us, and it would have been extremely disastrous for themselves. That day, there was no cannonade: only some shots exchanged between the German scouts and the guards at the bridge.

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In the course of the afternoon, the curate who had left the parish on 26th, returned to recount all his adventures in highly graphic language. At the time of the general exodus, he had been in his room upstairs. By the time he came down, the parish priest and his servant had left; he rushed round to the Chaplain who told him he was staying. From there he came to Coloma, where it was made clear to him that he would be much better off at the home of the Chaplain. After which, the soldiers told him that the bridge was going to be blown up and he must leave in a hurry. He went down to the station where there was a crowd of fugitives, together with a great number of wounded. He went as far as Duffel, and from there on to Turnhout. In his native village, he told the priest the ominous details of what he had witnessed during the past two days. The good priest moved by this story gathered his parishioners, as he did every day, to pray. While seated, he recounted to them the tragic events and instead of one rosary, these good people recited six consecutive rosaries to be spared such abominations.

The curate then went to Antwerp to the house of the brother of the curate, Fr Moeremans. He was introduced only to hear that in the neighbouring location they were arguing and were suspicious of him. Finally a small gentleman, wearing a jacket came up to him: it was his parish priest who at the time of danger, went to Wavre-Notre-Dame with his sister and where he had been transformed into a civilian; it was from there that he had gone to Antwerp. The Parish Priest had left the Parish a quarter of an hour before his curate; he returned a few days after him.

Monday 31, we had the pleasure of attending three Masses. RM .G. asked that they be said for the protection of the house of the Queen of Angels from any incident. Our good Mother was visibly inspired; not an hour after the last Mass, our enraged enemies set about no longer the bombardment of the town, but of the hamlet, aiming

especially for the gas plant located a few minutes from here ; it is there that our gunners were stationed. This attack lasted two hours, during which the shells were bursting all around us. The house shook, the remaining windows were vibrating, our hearts were thudding and our cellars resounded to our repeated supplications. Thus it was that when a little girl, a daily communicant with us, was asked to pray to the Holy Virgin, she replied in the most naive way: " I've already done that, and she said nothing will happen to Coloma!". Indeed, shrapnel was found in the courtyard, close to the house, in the Chaplain's garden, on a street that leads to the main road and four houses were damaged. Neither Coloma, nor the new nor the old churches nor the homes of the

Chaplain or the parish Priest were touched. The latter, who had gone to the city, promising to bring us meat, never reappeared. The curate on the contrary, never deserted camp. As a reward, God sent him as he had sent us a few days earlier "a cow " ! ... Which is not to be sniffed at in these times of threatened famine. Later in the afternoon, our soldiers came to put machine guns at the gates, in abandoned houses, everywhere in fact! Once again in our vicinity! We had always feared an invasion from that side! Our good RMG resolved to erect an insurmountable barrier by arranging Holy Mass the next day for the good Lord to save us from the scourge of Germans who disturbed our peace.

Tuesday 1 September. After our two Masses, we had indeed a very peaceful day. Sporadic gunfire in the morning but only mildly disturbing. We were hoping for our nine days of fear to come to an end. Alas it was not to be ! On Tuesday evening, one of our brilliant officers came to say : " Don't be scared if you see soldiers on your property, they are my men. We need to install a telephone in the tower of the church of St Joseph. " . This new development impressed us. We realised that if the enemy spotted the presence of this observation post, their artillery would make the focus of their fire.

The Chaplain, who until now had always encouraged us, observed to those who communicated this new detail to him "Indeed, but it is not possible! Now we cannot stay any longer"! Suddenly he took the RM .G. on one side. He expressed all his fears without mincing matters: the dangers to which we and he were all exposed. He declared it was absolutely impossible to continue to live thus in the centre of a military operation, isolated, as it were, from the rest of humanity. He said many other things, including those matters our dear RMG kept secret. If our good Mother had yielded, at that time, to the fear that sought to invade her soul, she would have awakened her religious to try to flee again that night. She said nothing to anyone except a few words to the Reverend Sister Anne Marie, General Treasurer, and went to bed She told us the next day that the night was the scariest she had ever passed.

Wednesday, September 2, before we rose, the Chaplain was already in the courtyard, and the Sister Treasurer in her office. Immediately after the Morning Prayer, we attended two consecutive Masses followed immediately by lunch.

We began that day a novena of Masses for the war dead. Our dear Reverend Mothers were visibly concerned. Everyone was worried and silent. At the end of lunch, the Council members retired and had a long discussion with the Chaplain who, probably under the influence of grace and of the Holy Mass he had just celebrated, had become quite confident. Our dear Reverend Mother General intended that as many as possible of her religious should flee to Mouscron and England. She would remain to look after the elderly who were unable to travel. What a perspective! No Mass, no Eucharist ! The good God how could he accept such a sacrifice? Could he make us abandon our Mother, through whom we had received such an abundance of grace and strength! Without knowing how cruel an ordeal threatened, we had the feeling it would be grim.

Fortunately, the Chaplain had said in the morning that he was determined to stay. Our dear Reverend Mother Emilienne and the council members protested against the proposals of our good RMG.

It was decided that we would stay all together in Coloma. Besides, flight at that time was an impossibility, all traffic in the area was prohibited. When our dear RMG arrived at the 9 o'clock meeting she told us that we needed more than ever, to surrender ourselves to Divine Providence. We had no certainty of bad news, but our situation was very worrying; she also told us that the Blessed Sacrament would be taken to the cellar. Our catacombs were complete! ... The God on whom we called so ardently and under the various names of "God Almighty," "God of strength," "God of peace" became more than ever the "God with us"!

All those who know a little of the cellars at Coloma can easily imagine under the stairs in front of the refectory of the nuns, a dark corner. This is where, on a small table, was placed the golden tabernacle from the oratory of St. John Berchmans. We were permitted, to go in groups of three, for a half hour's adoration.

How sweet that time of intimate dialogue with the Divine Master. We expressed to him our fears and desires, no doubt, but much more the outpouring of our tender recognition of the fatherly solicitude with which he watched over his children. The reduced circumstances were very poor in which to establish the residence of the King of kings, but our hearts were burning with love. O that in this new Bethlehem, the Divine Host would direct on us on his welcoming regard, as he did on the shepherds in the stable, with the angels singing their glorious song. That evening at 8 pm. the Blessed Sacrament was taken back to the chapel ; it had been lit only by a few candles for the last few days as we were without gas, and mostly no electricity. After an

impressive *Tantum Ergo* , in the silence and obscurity of the night, we received the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament before going to bed.

Did the good Lord expect from the Chaplain and our beloved Reverend Mothers such a supreme act of abandonment into his divine hands before sending us a period of calm? We have to believe it as that day and the following were very good, sprinkled with minor events that made us feel that we were not God's servants, but his friends.

No doubt one is tempted to ask how we could possibly feed such a large community comprising those of Rue St Jean and all fugitives that we had taken in. In fact, we never had such a variety of food ; one day there were two kinds of fish and four kinds of meat, in this way the words of the Gospel were fulfilled to the letter : The heavenly Father who feeds the birds of the air would not allow his children to go without bread. We were subjected to a series of small miracles some material may be, but still very real.

At times when the traffic was possible, people returned to their homes to bring back to us all their store of provisions; they searched the homes of absentee neighbours for anything perishable. The Chaplain proved plenty skilful enough for such expeditions; he found yeast to bake bread. He entered the shop of one of our workers via a ladder and procured sugar for us ... He met people looking for potatoes in the fields and commandeered some for us. He discovered some rabbits in an abandoned house who been left to die of hunger and brought them to us..

Our sisters of Rue de St Jean returned occasionally to gather up the freshest food. The journey through the city became an abundant mine of resources. Some shops had reopened so our sisters were able to purchase items. Others remained abandoned but their window display of perishable food was made available by the town officials. There, if you please, you could buy for nothing!

The first Friday of September our good Sisters arrived, laden like mules. They even had the good fortune to order half a pig for us that was delivered that evening. We put it by as insurance for the next day ; we also did not need to worry because even dogs brought us food!

The baker and his dog had been here during the early days. Taken unawares by a bombardment while he was in town, the baker failed to return. Some days later, we released the dog, hoping he would go and join his master and that we would be exempt from feeding it. The good beast left but returned a few minutes later with a hen that she had killed in the neighbourhood. From that moment, we kept the dog, reserving its services for extreme situations.

On Saturday, our dear Sisters of Rue St Jean even went to the market (which was nothing like the regular market). They had the most extraordinary series of adventures that would have amused us a lot if times had not been so distressing.

Thus we finished this new week in relative peace, calling with the most ardent fervour of our souls, for peace for the entire world that is so precious and yet so universally troubled; a peace which only God can bring to the Earth !

September 5th. Alas ! The happy moment of being fully relaxed was again put on hold. The Good Master, without any doubt, took pleasure in our filial abandonment that we so obviously laid in his divine hands and on his paternal heart and he seemed to enjoy leaving the dangers in place to give us the opportunity to run back to him in absolute trust ! It was becoming daily more evident that the Elewyt position where the Germans were strongly entrenched was perfectly chosen by the enemy. From there he could cover the retreat of all the armies of France and those throughout Belgium. At the same time this entrenchment immobilised, so to speak, the strong Belgian - Antwerp side and prevented them co-operating with the action of the Allies. The most they could do, by making frequent sorties, was to hold back the considerable forces to the North, which already for the Anglo-French hosts constituted a considerable help. It was necessary, therefore, to make the sacrifice and accept the likelihood that Elewyt would be the last place in Belgium that the Germans would choose to leave. In the face of that continuing disquiet, it was neither worse nor as persistent nor such a matter of anguish.

Sunday, September 6, there were a few shots, just enough to make us take the precaution of carrying the Blessed Sacrament, which had been exposed in the chapel, to the cellar. After two days of calm, a new period opened, a period of concentration on another sphere of activity.

On Tuesday night, in complete darkness, a battalion of 300 men with 200 horses led by Commander Nyssens (uncle of a former student) arrived. They were returning from Aerschoot town which they had re-taken from the Germans. They requested shelter for the men and animals; we began by installing them in the facilities at the primary school, in the yard; but they had scarcely been here quarter of an hour, when a shell burst close to the house. The commander declared that the enemy must be aware of their camp, they could, by their presence, put us in danger of further bombardment and that it would be better to go further on. In an instant, all disappeared. Worried by the bombardment, almost all the religious remained down below. Our dear Reverend Mothers plus a few brave souls went upstairs. No sooner were we in bed than a terrible explosion shook the whole house. Everyone came down in a hurry ... it's the only time we were able to install our dear Mother the ground floor ... and yet again! After an hour of calm they bravely went back upstairs with a small escort. As

always, our dear house was spared. The next morning we found small piece of shrapnel in front of the steps; a large piece 33 cm long was picked up later in the garden.

On Wednesday 9, the group came back to be billeted here, we had to serve those in charge and make soup and coffee for the soldiers.

Later in the afternoon, the fort at Waelhem began shelling the town of Hofstade. It was the beginning of a new attack led by our troops against the enemy camped at Elewyt; this engagement lasted four days, during which the sound of cannon fire, machine guns, shootings, troops coming and going with heavy artillery, the Red Cross ambulances, caused us all, but especially the most impressionable, further suffering and upset.

During these days also we received the most unexpected visits: sometimes it was a leader who just bought some eggs, he would ask for a bottle of wine, then having beaten the eggs and mixed them in said: I have men there who are exhausted, when they have downed this they will sleep well and will soon be new men. Then there were two young men of good family who for several weeks had met with the privations of all sorts. They just asked timidly if they might have a small glass of port, they so greatly desired it. Our good Mother General concluding that, in wartime one granted many extraordinary things, said: " They seemed so good and were so proper, we could not refuse them ".

On Thursday 10 during our meeting in the afternoon, someone called the RM was summoned to the living room to meet Mr Woeste, Minister of State, accompanied by Mr Gibson, Secretary of the Legation of the United States and a Spanish marquis You may well ask how surprised we were and what assumptions about this visit were suggested by our imagination.

In reality, it had absolutely no political significance, at least from our perspective. These gentlemen communicated very little of their impressions of the war and seemed to be interested in the events that had occurred and were happening on our doorstep. They intended to travel to Brussels in a car that read in large letters: 'This car belongs to the Legation of the United States in Brussels.' Having arrived near Hofstade, they had to wait until the end of the battle before they could proceed, and the commander had assigned them to our house as a pleasant and hospitable " waiting room ". The presence of the Secretary of the Legation of the United States made us suppose that this visit was to see the effects of the bombing of Mechelen, which, according to the authorities, was quite contrary to the conventions of war.

The same evening we had a visit from General Scheer who simply came to ask: " A small supper, without inconvenience, as a simple soldier ". Commander Nyssens returned to the camp, there were horses tied at the gate to the house, and the whole length of the courtyard. But, before nine-thirty, everything suddenly disappeared.

On Friday 11, it seemed we were going to be left to sleep in peace. At bedtime, as no one had appeared, everyone went to bed, but as the front doorbell had been destroyed by the bullets of the day before, the Sister Portress, was too worried to get undressed. A great deal of noise persisted in the streets, troops continued to pass, the weather was terrible. Suddenly we heard a noise in the house of doors being forced open, footsteps, men's voices ... we got up. First, Sister Vincent bravely descended alone, the others dressed and ran to catch up with her. This time, we thought we were facing the Germans! It was a regiment of Belgians who had been ordered to billet themselves here. Confronted by a closed door, a bell which was not working, they had believed the house abandoned and had come to settle themselves here. They had destroyed the doors with bayonets, entered through the unpacking area, had visited the rooms on the ground floor and were ready to go up stairs to the boarding school when the Sister found herself face to face with them .

It was then that we understood better than ever how well advised we were in not abandoning our dear Coloma. In what condition would we have found it on our return? Our guests were in a bad mood having rung for half an hour without anyone opening up for them, but once we had explained that the bell was not working, that we were not warned of their arrival, that we had available for the officers the rooms for the ambulance personnel and that soldiers could use the classrooms in the primary school; and when they were offered dinner and presented with coffee the next day, they were full of excuses and were quite overcome. The next morning, before leaving, the captain offered a 20 francs note. As the Sister Treasurer refused saying that these little services were our tribute to the Fatherland , he insisted, saying, accept it for your work, you will do me great pleasure. We invaded you by night, committed burglary, it is only right that we reimburse you a little for the damage we have caused.

Saturday 12 brought a fresh visit from the Secretary of the Legation. This time he was accompanied by two English colonels and a Belgian. They were returning from the battlefield, where they had gone to explain the operation of new large calibre guns who continued to function all round us and deafen us. The new group requested permission to have a picnic in the front garden. They had brought all that was necessary for a "comfortable meal" and asked only from our charity the beauty of the site, the table, chairs and a tablecloth. However, we also added a few fruits from the garden.

On Sunday 13, in the morning they brought in a wounded horse along with a promise to send a vet. As this did not materialise, an officer dispatched the animal with a revolver and soldiers made themselves a feast and distributed the rest to the poor.

By noon, we now included among our guests a brave soldier on a motorbike who had captured a German cooker, the keys of which he displayed with pride to anyone that wanted to see them. In the evening a major and a captain came to re-examine the plans we had. They brought hay in carts for housing the soldiers and our primary school classrooms, from the ground floor to the attic, became a real barracks for soldiers of all ranks.

From that day onwards a night shift was organized in the community! That is to say, two ladies, two sisters and a workman devoted themselves to the house-keeping duties: preparing coffee and sandwiches for priests, religious, officers, soldiers any of whom could receive their marching orders at any time. The first night the call came at 1 a.m.; on the second day of billeting, a new group was added, it was the group of the delegates who had to be separated from others and for whom we rearranged the Orangery. Newly set out pallets and mattress: every day we had to try and multiply bedding and blankets, especially as the weather was getting bad. That night was very hectic; we received a visit from Colonel of the regiment led by the mayor Mr Dessain. He put in a plea for Major Mahieu and the mayor took advantage of this visit to give us a little praise: He said he congratulated the Mother Superiors, indeed he congratulated all of us for remaining on duty. After the war, he says, we will write an inscription on your house "Some brave people live here". After this visit, there was a continual stream, back-and-forth, of delegates carrying messages.

Tuesday, September 15, one regiment was replaced by another. The Colonel (the one with a moustache like Bismarck's) told the Sister who arrived in front of him: " We need a room with a table, a desk, a lamp and accommodation for four; a room for the officers; a third for the delegates of the General Staff; a fourth for the delegates of the regiment, and accommodation for 200 soldiers". As the Sister seemed flabbergasted at the totality of all these requests, he completed his sentence with : " Army Orders, Sister ". We prepared, we set about moving the furniture, because every day the number of occupants of the various rooms changed and the mixture of classes was impossible. Finally they were satisfied. The day before leaving, the colonel asked for the Mother Superior and thanked her in a brief but polite way. After spending 24 hours in the barracks in Mechelen, he returned to establish himself here and was already becoming almost amiable. He followed with interest the catch of fish netted in the large pool; went and threw bread to the geese and swans and even uttered phrases like, "You are very kind," and the like. The good man had perhaps learned from 48 hours among the Daughters of Mary and Joseph, that obedience is military but the power of authority is not!

Meanwhile, telegraphic and telephonic communications continued to increase. : a whole system was now in the new orangery, establishing connections with the forts and all

the surrounding areas occupied by our troops. The park was furrowed everywhere by cables the first of which had caused us great consternation!

Once again a new group arrived to house and feed. Happily, thanks to the expertise of our dear Bursar in whose favour, several times, the miracle of the widow of Zarephath was accomplished. At each departure, the officers left a small contribution to our work and the government paid a small amount (21 cents per man) daily for the accommodation of troops.

This allowed us to continue to 'give without counting the cost' because every day a large number of priests, ambulance personnel, messengers and telephone operators provided us with the opportunity to exercise charity. All our guests were literally charmed by the warm welcome they were given and, perhaps, even benefitted enormously from it. The change of the forces occurred daily around 11 am the one group had dinner together before leaving, the other dinner upon arrival. We had thus every day, two tables with a dozen places each, in the room of the trades-people; two tables of 15 to 20 in the kitchen itself. Almost always there were many people in the corridor leading to the kitchen, to the school of housewifery, to the orangery, sometimes even in the cellar. Needless to say, what a vast field was open to our dedication, and that of our dear sisters especially! But the zeal of all was as big as the task in hand; we like to believe that God and our dear Mothers rejoiced many times to see how, despite all the movement and extraordinary activity, an atmosphere of calm, recollection, peace and charity prevailed throughout the house.

Wednesday 16, the curate of St John's parish made a visit to the Reverend Mother Louise and her 'Daughters'. He engaged them to restart the school lessons arranged for the children of the working class as they were almost the only ones in town and it would be better that they were not out on the street. Our dear RMG would have given a free choice to our dear sisters to stay with us or go back, when the Chaplain, to the general satisfaction of all, intervened and opined that it would be still better to stay. It was decided that several religious would go and make preparations for the resumption of lessons and then return in order to remain here. The dear community of the Sacred Heart of Mary would therefore continue to pray and work with us. Would they otherwise have had Holy Mass and Communion daily, while we largely shared the burden in this respect? It was the Eucharist that gave us strength and courage during these days of great anxiety; it was the presence of the good Master under our roof who had kept us so resolutely in our beloved Coloma! To reward us for this attachment, the good Lord allowed that, from the time the regiments came to stay with us, two and often three Masses would be celebrated every day in our chapel. What examples of consolation and edification were evident during those services; sometimes a high ranking military man served the Holy Mass, sometimes brave soldiers were kneeling in the middle of the religious at the Holy Table. They

were touching in their faith, as they appeared at all times dignified and correct in their conduct.

Monday 21, he came across an extremely sad event. Early in the morning the captain went in search of the Sister in the kitchen and asked her to look for the chaplain of his regiment, adding : " we need his services for a condemned man who will shortly be executed ". It seems we were to be forced to see the full gamut of the horrors of war! Minutes later, the unfortunate man entered the chapel, led by two armed gendarmes and accompanied by the chaplain who made them go up to the front pew.

The priest, visibly moved, gave him Holy Communion, and prayed for him : "O good and most sweet Jesus ...". A few moments later, the victim went amidst 4 policemen, a few paces from here at the side of the church. There he was shot and buried in the field. Consternation reigned among the officers and the soldiers; no one had the courage to find out from the authorities the motive for such a severe penalty. It was evidently very serious. Amongst the soldiers rumour had it that the unfortunate man had deserted three times and that his conduct had not been good. It was indeed a rare exception.

The same day a religious who asked a young man if he was not yet tired of the war, received the reply "O no, Sister, it is good to risk myself even to the point of death for my God, my king and my country." This wonderful reply touched her greatly; without doubt the experience of taking up arms is worth much more than seven weeks in the country. The same Monday a wagon of vegetables came to make a big delivery at Coloma, it had been sent by His Eminence Cardinal Mercier for the poor and the soldiers. His Eminence! What a beautiful page of ardent patriotism, what a huge volume of pure and touching charity his name alone inspires from an eloquent writer. Since the beginning of the war, the Archbishop addressed his clergy by had written a persuasive letter, addressed to his clergy, encouraging them to pray, do penance, and use their influence and their example to inspire the faithful to storm heaven; to rival in their zeal the most ardent patriots, be it in the service of the army., be it in the service of the poor families whom the war had deprived of their support.

Called to Rome in the current month of August for the election of Pius X's successor. He who had said on learning of the declaration of this European catastrophe: "This war will kill me! He succumbed in fact after a few days. The Cardinal left his country, in great anguish of spirit. They warned him that communications would be cut and that he had only two hours to prepare himself. However, he found a way to communicate with his compatriots before his departure. He sent a touching letter, which would be kept in the archives of our beloved Institute, describing his sorrow and fatherly solicitude. It was a beautiful illustration of the most wonderful example of pure patriotism and pastoral devotion. It was in Rome that our poor Prelate learnt of the

worst trials experienced by his country: the destruction of the greater part of the town of Leuven and the burning of the magnificent library of the university. These acts of vandalism were repugnant to his scholarly spirit, not to mention the sufferings of his fatherly heart on learning of the atrocities of which his priests and children of Belgium were the victims. Then came the news of the bombing of Mechelen, the town of his beloved archbishopric, with the announcement of all the damage caused to his beloved Metropolis, the archbishopric, the old temples and ancient monuments of the old city. When we attempt to penetrate the depth of suffering that our beloved Cardinal must have endured during this forced absence, it is not surprising that there was sometimes more bitterness in his words, words which were usually so gentle and caring.

His Eminence returned via way of France, London and Antwerp. Despite endeavours to keep him in the latter, we did not succeed; he needed to be among the most fortunate of his children.

Friday, September 17, he arrived in Mechelen, visited the city, went through the poorest neighbourhoods, talked familiarly with the local people, everywhere from the goodness of his heart. Good father that he was, he was the subject of ovations: most moving and very touching. The next day he came back and this time he combined his helpful words with substantial material donations. In the houses he visited, he left offerings of money, proportionate to the need and number of children, busied himself with the purchase of food in large quantities followed by directives as to how it was to be distributed. Thus it was, with note book in hand, that the envoys of our generous Shepherd came to supervise the unloading.

Wednesday 23, In the morning, a new visit by, without doubt, the most important king of all: the King of Kings. He came to ask our hospitality courtesy of a military chaplain, who, hands clasped on his chest, tossed his hat on a table muttering: "It is the good Lord". He had had the good fortune to get into the chapel of the religious in Hofstade who were being hunted by the Germans. For four weeks he had been unable to get there to save the Sacred Species. Seeing the good reception that the good Master received, he did not hesitate to send us in the more guests during the evening. The soldiers discovered in Hofstade, abandoned by all, an old couple. The woman was bed-bound, the husband literally bent double, walked only with the aid of crutches. They loaded them on a cart and drove them to the hospital but it was not yet open; the hospital was still unoccupied. In the evening, they brought them in front of our porch; the Colonel summoned the RM .G. Coloma was known to all as: "Zoete inval"<sup>4</sup>. The door was opened wide and we settled the dear old couple in the nuns' infirmary. It was moving to hear the story of those poor old dears who had spent four

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<sup>4</sup> translator's note: name of a well known group of hotels.

weeks in the middle of the enemy camp, completely submissive to God's will and who had asked only one thing of God: not to die without receiving the last sacraments. Our Lord performed a miracle rather than let this fervent prayer go unanswered. Tomorrow our little Treesken said, I shall be cleansed of my sins, I shall see the priest, and then I can communicate, truly we had two little saints among us! As one of our religious said : "We received the Holy Family today: Jesus came in the morning and in the evening he brought us Mary and Joseph!"

The regiment came to billet themselves on Thursday 24 including in addition to its regular staff, 12 carts with guns each drawn by two dogs. They offered to show us these machines close up, but during dinner, they suddenly disappeared.

On Friday 25, we had a visit from His Eminence who was making a goodwill tour of the neighbourhood. Our good Prelate chatted for some time with the RMG, taking a keen interest in the account of the life we had led for several weeks. He would have liked to see the nuns for a while, but apologized saying he was visiting the poor and that his time was rationed. His Eminence seemed sad and pensive. He congratulated us on the courage we had shown in braving the dangers we had run. The Cardinal added that they were far from being over, and he would not advise anyone who had already left the town to return there; but he urged us to leave again with much less conviction because our faith had been so well justified up to this very moment. It was to be hoped, he said, that Divine Providence will continue his work in your favour. It was necessary, in fact, that the Divine Aid be more powerful, than the sufferings which were going to envelop us.

On Saturday 26, the soldiers did not come home; they spent the night in the trenches.

Sunday 27, a military chaplain said Mass at 5 a.m. Some of the delegates once more assisted at it. When we went down for breakfast, they had all disappeared. A new more violent struggle than any other, because it was more unequal than ever, had begun at Hofstade. The Germans having received considerable reinforcements returning from Maubeuge had very early on taken the offensive, against a small group of Belgians guarding the captured positions. The Chaplain, who had been counting on saying Mass at 8 a.m., announced that he would say it as soon as possible, but in the meantime he would expose the Blessed Sacrament. After the Holy Mass, we went to the Oratory of the Blessed Virgin for the chapter meeting, when a terrible cannon blast (similar to the strongest) erupted. We tried to stay calm, because we were already somewhat familiar with these sinister noises. A second and third blast brought the surviving windows down. RM .G. gave the signal for departure. The Chaplain took the Blessed Sacrament down into the cellar.

It was the beginning of the most difficult week of the most horrific scenes imaginable! It was really the greatest week of our sufferings; and if God has deigned to agree to all this, we can only hope it has been, for us all a Holy Week. It was during these days that our good RMG suffering so much pain and worry about her own daughters than her own troubles: saying "We suffered this week as no one of us has ever suffered before."

In the course of the morning, they brought us several of the wounded; without a doctor, left to our own strength and knowledge, we treated them to the best of our ability. Fortunately, we were able successfully to procure an ambulance for their transportation, because, in the meantime, shells were bursting all around us. A little girl of 15, the eldest of six children who fled with her family, was struck in the street by a shell that hit her in the head. The father, mad with grief, carried her in his arms, while the mother took refuge with other children in a neighbouring house. The poor girl was fatally wounded, she was in a sort of coma, and the military doctor who finally arrived declared that her skull was fractured. The last rites were administered; she remained lying down still unconscious as evening unfolded.

After dinner, they brought us the freshly wounded, whom they dared not carry away on account of the bombardment being so violent. We had to let these unfortunates sleep where they liked in the school of house management, amid the glass splinters, and exposed to serious dangers. Then came a cart bringing a dead soldier they wanted to bury in the garden. As we asked them to transport the body to the nearest church, the men responsible for this task, decided to wait. Meanwhile, the explosions redoubled and increased, striking the house at various times; large splinters penetrated windows, doors and even walls. Although many religious were constantly moving around inside the house and outside because of taking care of the wounded, no-one, thank God, was hit. Nevertheless, the terror that gripped the hearts of all members of the two communities gathered here and the hundreds of people who had joined us, was indescribable.

Later in the afternoon, the Chaplain, in civvies, small bag in hand, rushed through the garden and said on entering : " Well, what should I do, should I flee? ". Spontaneously, those he asked cried, "Oh no, stay with us". He replied, "So be it". The good priest would pay dearly this new act of devotion, but he never expressed regret for not having fled.

In the evening, as soon as the bombardment diminished somewhat, they set about the task of transporting the wounded who remained. One religious, hearing voices in the street, went to the gate to see what was happening. She heard the commander, at the turn of the road, gathering his men saying: "Now in rank and on command! Show that you are men!" The lines were formed and they marched off in good order.

He was asked, as he passed, to send us some Red Cross vehicles. He promised to see to it himself and added : " Are you still here"? We replied that we were so overwhelmed by numbers; we would be the last to withdraw. He said, "My soldiers will not have a cartridge between them, tomorrow if not tonight, so the enemy will enter the town". RM .G. decided to send to Antwerp that very evening or at least as far as the garrison: Mother Anne Marie, General Treasurer, two postulants and some of the religious whose nervous temperament could no longer support the emotional scenes that we witnessed for several weeks. They carried the valuables that we wanted to put in a more secure place. All the people in the neighbourhood who had spent the day in the cellar also fled. It was a gloomy affair, this departure in the dark, through a destroyed and abandoned town, despite which the shells were falling again, although less numerous. Like everything else, the fate of our dear fugitive town had to be left to Divine Providence and to be dwelt on as little as possible. Also entrusted to God's care were our four sisters who were in the house of Sacred Heart of Mary for several days making preparations for the projected return of the entire community on Tuesday. Surprised by the bombing, they took refuge in the cellars all day Sunday. In the evening they tried to return to Coloma, but arriving at the station, the shells were falling so heavily that they were forced to retrace their steps. The good Lord wanted their services in Rue St Jean, so he arranged matters so as to force the sisters to return there. During the night, there was no let up of the bombardment. There could be no thought of staying in the dormitory. Our Mothers and ourselves all had to resign ourselves to going to the cellar six nights running. What privations and what tiring nights after such sad days.

On Monday 28, the Chaplain came before we had gone upstairs and sent word to the RM .G. that if she wished, he would distribute Holy Communion immediately. A new scene in the 'Catacombs'! We knelt, one after another, before the priest who gave us the Holy Eucharist , but was himself deprived of saying the Holy Mass and consequently of Holy Communion. More than anyone, however, he would need to carry his Lord in his heart. After a few minutes of thanksgiving, we reminded our worthy chaplain that a dead soldier was lying outside on a cart and that we proposed to bury him. He went with three nuns who started digging the pit while the priest recited the prayers. We chose a place in the thickets near the primary school, to distance this sad memory as far away as possible from our house. But the site was badly chosen, being much too visible from the road; after half an hour of hard work, we observed terrified people running towards the town along the side of the road from Tervuren. We urged the Chaplain go back inside at that moment but he answered confidently: "What can we do better than to bury the dead? ". A few minutes later, came two German scouts. Escape was impossible! As soon as the first one saw us, he aimed his gun and motioned us to approach; one of the religious went forward and was questioned.

The Chaplain who was in the pit was not noticed, but a movement of the spade revealed his presence and immediately he was summoned. He was obliged to walk in front of the soldier as far as the railway bridge where there were Belgian soldiers. Mr. Chaplain protested saying he had no right to demand that of a civilian and that he only obeyed out of compulsion. The second soldier remembered the religious and pointing the gun at her exclaimed : "It's time to have some information". They did not learn anything except that the house was a convent, the corner house a brewery and the locality Mechelen. About everything else she assured him of our ignorance, as we had spent the previous day in our cellars, on account of the bombardment. We had only emerged in order to bury the dead. As soon as he looked away, the nuns slowly retreated, and once behind the shrubs, took flight towards the house. Distraught by the forced departure of the Chaplain, they cried out: "Pray they may bring back our Chaplain".

When he got close to the houses, the gunfire recommenced. All alone, he asked by a sign to Belgian sentries whether he should go to them or retrace his steps. They showed him the way to Coloma and returned through the undergrowth. He was very indignant at the treatment that he had been subjected to; we could not have been happier to see him back safe and sound. He left us to put on his civilian attire.

A few minutes later, a regular battle broke out on the road on both sides of the canal front of the house, between Belgians, with machine guns, hidden in houses and the Germans, who had come en masse to seize the town. Nobody left the cellar; we took a semblance of lunch down there. After an hour of prayer and anguish, we heard throughout the house the sound of footsteps and men's voices. There was no doubt, Coloma was being invaded! Was it by soldiers who were trying to hide? Who was pursuing them ? Were they Belgians or Germans ? We heard them everywhere ... they went up into the attic. We had to show ourselves. Some religious advanced. They cried out in all sorts of languages : " Who is there ? ". In answer to the call of our dear Sister Mary Augustine: " Wer ist da?" some German soldiers approached, asking who is in the house and saying they must come out of the cellars. Some went down there but came back quickly. Those who were scattered around the house like lava gathered themselves in the great hall on the ground floor. They entered from all sides, took a few minutes exploring the whole house, and opened some drawers in the room of the portress, where they took an empty wallet! In the RM .G.'s room they scattered a lot of papers but took nothing ... in the recreation room which they entered by removing a door panel, they examined, in great detail, the trunks of two students which had not been shipped. Before our eyes, they calmed down and gave us the confidence that we had nothing to fear; they brought several wounded into the house, whom we tended. They hoisted the Red Cross flag on the top of the tower. At our request, they completed the burial of the Belgian soldier which we had begun in

the morning, but which had been interrupted by their arrival. On the grave they planted a few branches of yew, and a small cross with the inscription : "Here lies buried a Belgian soldier who died for his Homeland " .

The few remaining Belgian soldiers in the city had hastily retreated to the garrison while many German troops entered Mechelen. Fort Waelhem, in its turn, rained down missiles in an attempt to break the enemy lines. To avoid this, groups of Germans dallied in the courtyard pressed against the walls of the house. In order to escape the dangerous corner opposite the bridge that was certainly the focus of the Fort Waelhem battery, several hundred Germans entered the bottom of the garden, where without doubt they made a bridge over the water because later we found a bench there overturned in the ditch. They entered the house through the garden gate, near the office of the RM and went out through the front door.

If it is thought that the presence of Belgian soldiers in the house during the previous days, attracted many German bombs, it must be assumed that the passage of enemy troops through the house, and the presence of their guns placed near Feremans, the brewery, on the line of the railway, and behind the garden, earned us bombs from Fort Waelhem which were not intended for us personally. One of them reached one of the masonry stones of the window of the Oratory of the Blessed Virgin , broke it, propelling it outside, causing a huge opening in the wall and ceiling, but not a single statue was struck; neither the altar nor the sanctuary lamp nor the harmonium were touched ; only a few chairs were damaged. It was the same wherever the bombs and the bullets penetrated; they seemed to choose the best direction to effect minimal damage.

In the wall near the window of the novitiate, there was, from the Sunday evening, an enormous hole, caused by a bomb that could have initiated a fire without the special protection from our patron Saints. The debris, from large pieces of ironstone, was spread throughout the corridor but the small plaster statue of St. John Berchmans was intact and lying on the window sill. Our beautiful chapel, from where the good Master had to flee, had only a few tiny holes (which were barely visible) in the windows. The chapel was the place treated most respectfully in the whole house; it was only right and it's also what afforded us the greatest joy! For, when after 2 days and 2 nights of bombardment of which we seemed to be the centre, we could risk a visit to the house; our first impression was very painful; the building and that of primary school had been hit in various places. Everywhere was littered with pieces of iron, glass, splinters of wood, plaster and bricks. The town, the village, the surrounding fields, garden, everything was devastated! It was impossible, in our entire surroundings, to cross a space of a few metres without encountering a burnt out or collapsed house, a broken down tree or hole in the ground. But when, after a few days,

the house was more or less put in order, we recited many; "Domino Benedicamus!" Noting that the 150 kg of iron collected in or against our house had caused relatively little damage.

Still, on Monday morning, we had the visit of German officers who seemed well-disposed. We took advantage of that to ask for permission to keep our chaplain without his being anxious. They gave us ample assurances in that regard. Alas ! They reneged on their fine promise, and at the beginning of the afternoon, a new regiment arrived, which invaded every floor of every house, kicking down doors and bringing all the inhabitants of the hamlet, except an old man, a sick man, the father of a sick child and some women and children who had sought refuge with the Chaplain. He presented himself at the door before they forced it. He saw immediately that he could not escape them, he heard them say repeatedly: "A priest, a priest!". Nevertheless, he protested, saying he was the director of the convent, and he had that very morning received permission to stay there; also there was also no reason to take unarmed civilians who do not wage war. Nothing worked! He had to go! What a sad procession!, The Chaplain at the head, some men, women and children, followed by soldiers passed in front of the house.

In the evening, we complained to the soldiers who came to ask for coffee. We insisted that they should send us an officer. He arrived rapidly; he said it was another regiment who had spent the afternoon there; he had no power over it. He apologized, saying that it was an action which was deemed necessary to avoid difficulties, and a thousand and one tales to justify their disloyalty. He added that we need not have any concern about our chaplain; he would be very well treated. We understood, in the aftermath, that these military tactics that had been applied to the city of Mechelen and probably wherever the Germans had passed. , They launched their destructive shells from great distances to make the populations flee before them. Then they entered the destroyed and abandoned towns breaking everything in their path, seizing the few people who remained and throwing them in prison. So they had free rein, they could plunder and ravage at their ease They could settle everywhere as supreme masters, empty all the stores, carry away everything from the city and finally release the civilians with the recommendation not steal anything from the abandoned houses, because we would accuse the German soldiers. This last judgment had to be translated by one of our religious for the poor people who were brought before the commander. It was really the application of deep maxim Bismarck: "To subdue a people, we must remove everything from them, and leave them to do nothing but weep! "

However that may be, the catastrophic departure of our Chaplain deprived us of our main support. This good priest had been so often the prudent counsellor of our dear Mothers, during these days of trial. He had made such huge contributions to our

benefit from his common sense, practical, experience and inexhaustible devotion. Above all he was the minister of the Lord in our midst. Now no more Mass, no more Holy Communion! From now on only suffering, increasingly bitter even, and no more visits to the Good Master in the morning to undertake with him the painful journey of the day. Still Calvary but without the Holy Sacrifice that gives the strength to climb it. The Lord asked a lot of our generosity, and many times I heard, despite the submission of our wills, bitter complaints mount up to His Heart. All that was left us was the consolation of the presence of the Blessed Sacrament in a remote corner of the cellar, and the opportunity to go there to entrust to the Eucharistic Jesus our fears and sorrows, our desires to receive Him, and our regrets for not always having appreciated his daily visits enough. Finally, this sad Monday as in the worse days was long but eventually ended.

We settled ourselves again in the cellars. Two Germans had asked for dinner and had just left. Half an hour later they returned. Our dear Sister Mary Augustine, 2 other ladies and I are two students who were not able to return to Germany and Austria, presented themselves again. The men were drunk, they tried to lead our religious and the young girls outside, they tried to resist gently, but seeing that they were not going to escape, they ran in the direction of the cellar. They were followed by one of the men. Imagine the panic that reigned among the religious! Our dear Sister Marie Augustine was pale and trembling; all other religious who were lying on the benches aligned in the long corridors of the cellar did not dare move. A diabolical face lit by a lantern made his appearance. The man crossed the long corridor stumbling from time to time, and using his rifle as a stick which stabbed into the mattresses of the religious and their feet, he thrust the light from time to time into the face of religious shouting: "Keep calm" and "Come here the German Sister! "

But the German sister begged for someone else to get up and accompany her. Finally, the villain pushed in a side door and found himself in a cellar where he could see a row of bottles. He laughed unpleasantly but with happiness! He thought he had unearthed something! Alas! They were empty ink bottles! Suddenly he reappeared radiant with joy ... with 2 bottles of lemonade, and began a long speech to make sure that there was no poison in the house, making threats of shooting, setting fire to things, etc ... he opened the bottles with the butt of his loaded gun, tasting them one after the other, then spat out that which he had taken and began his research for other possible wine cellars. The first time he found himself among the empty bottles. Then, renewed joy! New exclamations! New disappointment! Finally seeing that there was no other way to work this out, and that it was obviously the wine cellar he sought, we led him to it! Meanwhile, the second malefactor, quieter but perhaps more fearsome because he had a revolver, assembled everything to hand. We gave them 7 bottles of wine; calm ensued, and we were successful in putting them outside the door. What a sigh of

relief rose from our hearts, what fervent "Deo Gratias" escaped our lips! Another bad quarter of an hour passed, and passed well! One can easily guess at what kind of sleep we had once we were installed after that hellish scene!

Actually, that was the only bad visit we received from the Germans; all other proved polite and caring.

The next day, Tuesday 29, sunrise, Morning Prayer, meditation near the Blessed Sacrament, then we could lunch on the ground floor and begin to move a little around the house. RM.G wondered to herself whether there was any way to have some milk. An officer gave us a sailor for two hours to accompany us to milk the cows in our dairy. Not finding the cows where we had led him to, he left us, crossed the street, then came back calling us. What was he going to do to us? There were soldiers everywhere, cars, riders, and we were under the impression of a 'nocturne' that we had completely disrupted. Finally, we had to decide that we were moving on and we were brought into the shop of our baker where everything was broken and it was more like a stable. Our soldier began to fill boxes of sugar, coffee, chicory, starch and tinned goods. We took advantage of the generous offer! ... And carried off everything we could to save as much as possible and give to these poor people on their return the little they had left.

While some of us continued this work, the soldier and two sisters went in further search of the dairy cows and had great difficulty in getting hold of the beasts, maddened by the gunfire. We had to find room at Coloma for 4 cows and 1 calf, until our farm was increased by 5 pigs, 11 goats, 10 rabbits, and 53 hens. The Religious transporting the goods from the bakery soon had a new sentry at the door. The soldier watched them and told them : "Sad is not it; we would much rather be at home and not here." And seeing that he looked pleasant and unhappy, we asked if he were married and had children. He had two daughters. When we left, he wanted to help us with our heavy basket; we had barely crossed the plank that brought us back into the garden, when the soldier re-joined us and asked if we did not have a rosary to give him; he had lost his. We offered him one with the promise to pray for him and for his family.

In the course of the morning, we received a visit from an officer; he had learned that there were German Girls here and came to offer them the opportunity to correspond with their families. He reappeared a few hours later, saying he had managed to secure for the girls the means of returning to their country if they so wished. He made the same offer to our dear Sister Marie Augustine who had to undergo at that moment a terrible struggle in which a soul less attached to her vocation would have succumbed. Fortunately, grace triumphed; the love of the divine Master overcame repugnance and ties of nature. Our dear Sister was afterwards interpreter for our dear RMG with

the Germans. The officer wished to take a car, along with the two girls, and two nuns that the RM .G. wanted to send to Brussels. What a picture! Two Ladies of Mary in the open car with German officers!

In the evening, our four sisters from Rue de St Jean arrived. What a relief to see them! The sight of them helped us almost forget the bad news they brought. They had spent Sunday and Monday in the basement; on the Monday afternoon, they had gone together to the chapel to thank God for being so well preserved. Less than an hour later, their house was on fire! Seeing it, they set to work with heroic courage to save whatever they could (especially objects from the chapel) in the primary school building. The brave Cammaert, the carpenter, who had been very devoted to the house from the beginning of the war, helped them in this perilous task. Without thinking about the fire and the bombs continuing to fall, they worked tirelessly through the night. They emptied the whole chapel, and even removed the heavy statues, kneeler, chairs, communion rail, etc. All the rest: classrooms, R. Mother's office, clothing became engulfed in flames. This vast house, the centre of so many works, was completely destroyed with the exception of the free school buildings.

Dear RM Louise and all her daughters were very affected by this new event that we shared with them. But probably for her as for our dear RMG, it was felt less because of the happiness at seeing our dear sisters whose fate had given us such deep concern.

Wednesday 30 September was the real beginning of our life among the Germans. It was for many of us the most painful period. The shock caused by a bomb passes, the panic due to the arrival of a nasty rogue is forgotten; but to see constantly around you those who have come to sow ruin in one's country; death and mourning in the home; to see only enemies, to have to accept their services, receiving from their hands bread for which, without their barbaric invasion, no Belgian would have found it necessary to beg, even resorting to them for the bread of our souls, the Eucharist and the Holy Mass , it was a torture of a new kind.

What bitter consolation to be told : " Tomorrow the guns will make less noise as they advance toward the forts. The Germans won 4 ... 7 ... kilometres, they took all the forts! ... "Could we rejoice to learn that the destructive work, of which we see the sad results around us, continues to eat more and more deeply into the country; that our brave little army was increasingly decimated? Were we not prepared to suffer twice as much if, in this situation, we could see the enemy retrace his steps?

Finally, we had to submit. We needed to live. It was necessary to accept from the hand of the victor (who had misappropriated not only the property of the government, but many private goods as well) what we needed to survive. Indeed, they were most

obliging towards us: the soldiers accompanied those in town who wanted provisions, and helped carry them. They even brought us things we did not need, but we accepted them in order to give them to the poor people whose houses had been emptied from the cellar to the attic, especially the cellar! On Wednesday, a soldier to whom we had spoken of the unjust removal of Mr. Chaplain came to tell us that it was he who was responsible for all the people taken to the Belgian outposts and that the Chaplain seemed calm. We could therefore be at peace about him. It was a nice lie, maybe he had good intentions! It was further announced that on Thursday, we would have a "Stadtscommandant" (Town Commander) and that we could go to him for everything we needed.

On Thursday afternoon, our beloved RMG went, with our dear S.M. Augustine, to submit multiple requests, among others that of having a priest who could help us in the ministry. He promised to do his best, but did not dare to give us any reassurances. He took great care not to tell us that our chaplain was in prison on our very doorstep.

Saturday 3 October was the first <sup>Saturday</sup> of the month, the month of the Holy Rosary during which we carry out recitation of the rosary in common. Our dear RMG encouraged us to continue to seek a special grace that day: the favour of having Mass and Holy Communion on Sunday. That evening a German officer appeared who was a priest (and Jesuit!). He was for us the man of God and the messenger of the Blessed Virgin; he was mature and seemed good. One of the first things he did was to remove the Blessed Sacrament which, due to the absence of a priest had remained eight days in this tiny nook. We moved the priest to the guest room. As he ministered to the wounded in Mechelen, he resided with us for about a week. We learned that evening, accidentally, that our Chaplain was detained at the prison in Mechelen, and we had to fall asleep with the thought that, while we were enjoying the favour of Holy Mass and Communion, the good priest who was so pious, in addition to all the material deprivation he suffered, was suffering that much larger one of being unable to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For his part, he spent the night imagining any way that might allow him to go Coloma, if only for an hour. He had made so many attempts during the week ! He had thought and prayed! Early in the morning, he was up and after a lot of legwork, obtained permission to go and celebrate Holy Mass. A soldier would accompany him!

Indeed, at the beginning of the Mass by the German priest, the chapel door opened and the Chaplain came in, followed by a soldier. When he crossed the chapel to get to the sacristy, we wondered if this was not a dream! Our dear, good chaplain was pale and haggard. When he ascended the altar, he was visibly moved, as were we all. More than ever we united to praise and thank the Lord with one heart. When the two priests met in the sacristy, their encounter was touching. One was deeply compassionate, another moved to tears. A stronger bond than the love of the

Fatherland existed between these two souls; the Church is always one, despite the division of peoples, and the true homeland is in heaven! The German priest promised to do his utmost to obtain the Chaplain's freedom. The latter had lunch here, and we were thus able to spend a few moments with him. New tears! The nuns gave bad example, and our dear chaplain felt the need to follow. He repeated at different times: "Dear me, what is going on? I give courage to everyone when I'm there, and here, among you, I have none left! ". He did not lack courage, that brave priest, the only one in the entire city of Malines, who had remained at his post. Conscious of the very real concern we bore him, of our deep esteem and sincere affection, he was not afraid to let us share a little of his suffering. He did not tell us all that he had suffered during that week of glorified imprisonment. He assured us that the food was sufficient, the soup good. He even recounted this next story to us, presumably, to remove any anxieties we might have in his regard. How a cook, who was from an hotel in the city, a prisoner like himself, had called one particular day to give him a piece of meat and a little brandy.

Bravely then he left us to return to prison. Fortunately, he never saw the prison again! On the way back he chanced to meet the German priest who had obtained written permission for him to stay with us. The German brought him back as happy as if it were his own deliverance he had achieved. We again shed tears but this time they were tears of happiness!

The Chaplain returned to his house, where he found relief in having a good wash. He returned after dinner to sit among us in the community room. He felt the need to share with us the story of the sad week that had just passed.

When they had been led out towards the town on Monday afternoon, they were led to the main square. There they had to wait for a good half an hour in the midst of a terrible shelling and grinning soldiery. The famous scout, who had not had any shame that morning in making this worthy priest walk in front of him to give him cover against the Belgian attack, was there to recognize and affirm that he was the one he sought.

At first, they wanted to lock prisoners up in St Rumbold's church, despite the shells that continued to cause damage. He changed his mind, and then led them into a large room where the soldiers were having a feast. There, especially the Chaplain felt uneasy and uncomfortable. Finally he was taken to the prison in Mechelen. The Chaplain spent the first few nights without lying down. When he could no longer endure it, he leaned against mound of barrels. But the immobility in this cold and damp place caused his feet to swell, he found some shoes and put them on. He felt the need to stretch out; there were about 400 people in the prison: men, women and children. In the room where the men slept, there were 6 mattresses for more than 20

people. The Chaplain put a mat on the floor and positioned his shoes as a pillow. That was his bed! What more mortification than this dump, for however hard a man he was on himself, he was accustomed to order, care, and extreme cleanliness. He said that after a few days there, it was so dirty that he himself had cleaned the toilet, and that diseases would soon manifest themselves. There was also an interrogation of the prisoners. Among other questions to the Chaplain, they asked him why he had not fled. To which he replied: "Because I had no reason; civilians should not flee from soldiers, and I had faith in the loyalty of Germans!" Had nothing happened, he would have remained there until God had set him free. This was a priest after the heart of God, so much better than us and so he had to suffer more.

Our days again resumed their usual course, at least for the important part: our religious exercises. For everything else, they were quite unlike any ordinary days.

Several Ladies and Sisters went daily to the Rue St Jean and brought back some of the supplies stored in the cellars: butter, potatoes and coal. Others went with soldiers to the stores of our suppliers and accounted for as many things as possible to protect them from being looted; others went to the "Commander of the Town" for posters to stick on the doors of the homes of our workers and the family members of our religious to protect these buildings from devastation by the German soldiers. Others went to the field of the dairy herd to collect food for the animals; others looked after the cows, goats, pigs, chickens and rabbits. Then came the gardening (we were without workers for this great park), the repair of the house, of the holes in roof, the walls. Quantities of, broken windows and we were at the onset of winter. Finally, sheets, blankets, all the mattresses that had served the wounded and refugees in the cellars formed an abundance of laundry. All the trades came in twos, walking into our beloved home, and everyone worked with all their might. Fortunately the town and the hamlet were deserted when we passed through the streets, pushing wheelbarrows and carts, with our blue aprons on and our skirts well tucked up. How often did we say, "If only our students could see us at work!". This was not however the most painful part of our daily lives. If times had not been not so sad, all our outdoor work and other occupations would have formed a happy diversion from our usual activities. So many things were so comical, but they could not succeed in making us really laugh with a light heart!

Thursday October 8, a sad separation took place; our dear RMG no doubt fearing that food would run out for the numerous community, asked the authorities if there were a way to send a dozen nuns to Brussels. She obtained for her Daughters, 2 compartments for travellers, attached to a freight train. The Community of the Sacred Heart of Mary had to split up and leave, with the exception of the R. Mother, 2 Ladies and 4 Sisters who remained with us. This separation was doubly painful for all. Fortunately our good Sister Kotska who happened to have spent nearly all her

religious life in that house had left us for Brussels just hours before we learned the news of this sad dismal fire!

Sunday 12, we lost our little Treeske whom we had received three weeks earlier. She had had virtually nothing since her arrival in the house, but was admirably patient and abandoned to God's will. She had the gift, much appreciated by her, to receive the last sacraments. Poor Modeste, her husband, was desolated. He was an old man of sound judgment and of great delicacy; he could not have been more grateful for everything that was done for them and apologized for the tears he shed, in spite of himself, on the death of his little wife. From the hospital we obtained a coffin and hearse together with permission to bury the deceased in Hofstade.

The Chaplain went there on Tuesday morning with two men and two Sisters. A few hours after the service, a daughter of the good people, married in Brussels, arrived with her husband. They had often tried to reach their parents, but for over a month, the journey to Elewytt was forbidden. This time they obtained permission for the return journey to Hofstade. There they learned that their parents were in Coloma, but they were devastated to learn that their mother had passed away. The interview with their father was very touching. One felt that these were good children who had tried many times to take care of their parents in their old age, but they had preferred their life together, as in earlier times, in their rustic house in Hofstade rather than being a burden on their offspring. "Now," said the good daughter, "you are no longer Master of the house, Father, we have already loaded the car with all the furniture in your home and tomorrow we return to collect you." They came, in effect, the following day. The son had brought a cross from Brussels which he placed on his mother's grave; then he came to take his old father and had the delicacy to drive via Hofstade to enable him to visit the cemetery there. The dear old man was moved by his departure from us, and apologized for not being able sufficiently to express his gratitude to us.

That same Tuesday 14, we received the best, most cordial, most fatherly visit imaginable. The Chaplain was in town visiting the sick in the hospital and giving a little consolation on the way. He was met by his Eminence who invited him to get into his car and accompany him to Coloma. It was 4 pm. On entering with Canon Vrancken and the Chaplain, our good Archbishop asked where we were at that time. On hearing the answer that we were together in the refectory, he said to the RM .G. : " But that's fine; if you want, I'll go with you". His entrance was like a happy apparition. Our good Prelate was all smiling mien and hands outstretched in blessing. Spontaneously we fell to our knees, and instinctively we cheered our beloved Pastor and his welcome arrival. He congratulated us on our courage when put to the test, and had kind words of regret and condolences on the destruction of our house on Rue St Jean. He immediately added : " Are you going to have a cup of coffee? We will have one with you, if you

would permit it ". It was so simple, so kind! Immediately they slid in place the cups already poured, added 3 places, and a few minutes later, we were in position. It was a real family scene as happens when you unexpectedly welcome back a long awaited and much desired member of the family. The meal simply continued as a community occasion, the conversation becoming animated. After grace, His Eminence said that we had served good snacks: bread and butter, with jam and excellent pears. It was indeed very good, too good for this time of war, or rather; it was above all an interruption of the war by this visit of balmy serenity, peace and fatherly concern. Our good Cardinal, aware of the general animation, pleasantly teased our Chaplain and hired 'Mr Prisoner' to write his story. He described the conduct of the Germans in our dear little country in just 2 words: "It is unworthy! It is inhuman!"

He told us that our faces were blooming and peaceful, far removed from thoughts of the war, and he added: "This is fine, it is the effect of your surrender to God's will ". He could not imagine what struggles we had had to undergo to keep quiet, and in a good humour, surrounded as we were. There were Germans everywhere : sometimes it was a butcher who had killed an animal for us; sometimes soldiers who helped carry objects from Rue de St John, saved from the fire; and yet others the workers who came to mend the roof. They were at home here as in their own bedroom.

Wednesday 15, a sheep that we had received 15 days earlier was stolen from us ; the next day they came to sell us some mutton for 15 francs. !!

Friday 17, during Mass, a sister heard the squeals of only pig we had left - because most owners had come to take their animals back. Sister came out of the house and saw the departure of soldiers leading away the pig, the cow's calf, 6 ducks and a goose. It was seen without doubt as payment for all the good services they rendered. Moreover we fed the fox, not at all surprised that he ate our chickens ... hoping that he would stop at that! We complained to the governor who redoubled his attentions! He sent us a guard at night and continued to meet the requests we made of him.

Saturday 18, our good RMG received a letter from Alost, which told her that this beloved community was sorely tested, and the lack of food was beginning to be felt. What a concern for all of us but especially for our beloved RMG. She could not sleep the next night.

Monday 21, the RM .G. obtained a car which took her to Aalst with 2 nuns. They took with them that of which the beloved community of St. Joseph would have the greatest need. All those good relationships with people we wanted to have 10,000 leagues<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> translator's note: one league = 3 miles approximately

from here were probably well described by: Burn a candle to the devil! But finally, one has to give in and wait.

Besides they also duped us with beautiful stories they had to try to make us believe. Thus: "The Belgians were good people fighting the Germans reluctantly! They were looking for the French and especially the English", and they hoped that we would have the naivety to believe that Mechelen and Antwerp were the right way to go to meet them. They insinuated that the Belgians had been abandoned by the Allies, hoping, no doubt, with such verbiage, to give birth to regret and submission among the vanquished. But Belgians knew how to await, in the midst perhaps of this blackest of miseries, the outcome of this struggle in which God will intervene at the right time. They knew well that what mattered to the Allies was especially important for the Freedom and Independence of Belgium: it was ultimate victory over the purported conqueror of Europe. Patriotism is not buried under the ruins that cover a country; it allies itself more often with heroic submission to the sad events of the present moment. Thus, the poor fellow, wanting to go home with his wife and 2 children, finds his house burnt down and searches in vain for his cow, his two pigs and two goats. When we say: " It's sad, winter will be tough ! "He courageously responds : " Yes, but all this will be quickly forgotten if we can remain **Belgian.**"

But the most amazing story was told us by the Germans. We would have regarded it as a fairy story, if it had not been told to our dear RMG by the Town Commandant himself! This was it: "Belgium will not lack for food, Germany will provide for her! ".

How could he have the audacity to say such a thing in a town subjected to looting for a whole month; in a country where, for nearly three months, hundreds of thousands of German soldiers lived at the expense of its people? Not to mention the important requisitions flour, grains, livestock and horses seized in the most productive areas?

Belgium knows from elsewhere what to think about German promises, even though they are written down, and historically they are given the title of "**Treaty**", perhaps now it is more like "Cloth of paper"!! ...

As for us, Daughters of Mary and Joseph, our trust is more than ever in the God's Providence that has guarded us so miraculously through the dangers, and fed us so paternally in the midst of our wilderness. We only use, it is true, what is strictly necessary, practising a rigorous economy and poverty: not so that we might have had, up till now, real privations to apprehend but that, in the destitution so widespread around us, our greatest consolation during this sad winter will be to be able to share widely with the needy. Since the beginning of hostilities, the motto of our good

Mother was : "Refuse nothing! ". May we have the happiness to put that into practice until the end of this terrible calamity!

Our dear Mother House had welcomed 5,260 valiant defenders of the Fatherland. All the inhabitants of the village, who had sought shelter in Coloma against the bombs, had found a place in our cellars and at our table. Our hospice for the elderly received from time to time a new member. One day it barely escaped becoming an asylum. One night, they brought us an old woman found abandoned in the town, and an old man with rather peculiar behaviour. He rampaged around the house, complaining of an inner evil against which there was, he said, good medicine: "A small drop of ..!!! ". Finally, we learned that "Jan" was the resident of Cell Brothers<sup>6</sup>, who had not accompanied his guardians on their flight.

Our good RMG, recognised her Daughters did not have the qualities required for this kind of work. We did not know anything, but it is certain that, from the time she knew the history of "our Jan", she sought a way to transfer him to another facility. Nothing like that was still open in Mechelen; she wrote to the RM Lutgarde, who obtained some information from Mr Holvoet, attorney to the King and uncle of one of our nuns. This was the epitome of kindness: to take the necessary steps to accept our disturbed inmate in an institute in Brussels, and send his car to fetch him. Meanwhile, "our Jan" had escaped and went to see a doctor. He had found him really ill, and admitted him to the hospital. Consequently, when Mr Holvoet appeared to bring him to Brussels we conducted him there as our "noisy Jan ' has already left us.

Another function of our beautiful house of Coloma during these troubled times, or rather of confusion, is to have served as a byre for our cows. One day the German soldiers come to ask us to purchase them from us. We said that they did not belong to us, and we wished to restore them to their owner. All day, we were worried about them, but at 8 in the evening, worry turned into a conviction that by the next day, our cows would have disappeared. What was to be done? It was decided that the two most valuable animals could sleep at the school, one in the nook under the stairs, the other, back to back with the first, attached to the door under the bell. What a picture this made! ... Sweet dreams complemented by an harmonious chant!

On the next day, "Salve Regina ", "Meditation" and "Mass", as always with music. The house was 'de-odorized' on all floors! Final scene: serious cleaning with a lot of water!

From that moment (it was Thursday, October 22), there was nothing special here, except for the number of visitors increasing every day. Among them were some

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<sup>6</sup> translator's note: literally ' Frères Cellistes'. There still remains a building in Mechelen known as ' The Cloister of the Cell Brothers' now refurbished and used as a B&B. The brothers looked after mentally ill men.

refugees who were returning home and requested hospitality for the night. Often they had had several days of walking, with small children who were dropping from fatigue. Then there were acquaintances who came to visit us, and some curious souls who asked to see the effects of the bombing in the house and on the garden ; they were happy to take a piece of a bomb, souvenir of the war that is in abundance here.

Friday 30, the experts came to survey all the damage. Hopefully they will soon send the bill to the Kaiser.

Wednesday, November 4th, we had a good and enjoyable visit from Monsignor Mierts, who had just returned to Mechelen. During the first bombardment of the town, he had retreated to Kempen, and on the approach of the enemy to these places, he had taken refuge in Bar-le-Duc, a small town incorporated in Dutch territory. After a journey, full of adventures, he arrived in a real earthly paradise where there are only good people and where the Germans could not enter without passing through the neutral country. What a country of delights in time of war!

Friday 6 was marked by the second return of the parish priest Father Moeremans. This time, he returned from England via Holland. He was delighted to stay in this hospitable country, which from the beginning of the war had opened its doors so wide and its heart to our poor brothers in exile. The parish priest told us a touching story of the generosity of the British people, less experienced than the Belgian in this common cause, who not only gave their money but also their admiration and deep sympathy. He had carried out a very consoling ministry among the 5,000 refugees at Alexandra Palace, and had had the honour to accompany our dear Prince Leopold, during his visit of his fellow countrymen settled in these premises. The parish priest was just waiting for the command of His Eminence to go back - but the order never came.

Gradually, some of the population returned, especially the poorer people and the working class, and the Cardinal wanted the Pastors to relocate themselves without delay in the midst of the flock entrusted to their care. The diocese also sought to restart the schools.

On Saturday 7, our dear RMG announced that R. Mother and several nuns of the Sacred Heart of Mary would begin their classes on November 30 in the Boulevard des Arbalétriers at the house occupied, hitherto, by the Ladies of Saint Julienne, and previously by the Jesuits. The Ursuline Mothers of Wavre (whose beautiful establishment was first looted and then burned) would give education to poor children in the primary school buildings, the only part of our house of the Sacred Heart of Mary still standing. Our dear sisters would go to class for half a day, and return daily

to the house of the Coloma family. It was a small resumption of our apostolic work among the young Christians.

Our beloved house of the Queen of Angels also opened its doors to the children of the primary school, of which the number was very incomplete. While waiting for better days, they remained the daily refuge for the needy.

Already, by the 21 November, 70 families were coming to them daily for soup; each day, as well, others came asking for potatoes, coal, clothing, blankets, etc ... O that the protection of our good Patrons, Mary and Joseph, might multiply the gifts in our hands, and enable us not to send on their way any of those in misery, without some relief, while awaiting the greatest gift that Heaven can not fail to grant to so many supplications : " **the sweet gift of deliverance, victory and a happy Peace !** "

translation by Felicé Wright dmj February 2017.