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Max Pemberton, *The Bells of St Valoir*, 1914

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THE BELLS OF ST VALOIR

A Drama of the War

By

MAX PEMBERTON

PERSONS OF THE PLAY

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<u>MARCEL DE ST REMY</u>	Captain of Belgian Lancers
<u>MAJOR WILHELM VON GALTZ</u>	A Major of German Uhlands
<u>LOUISE DE ST VALOIR</u>	Daughter of the Comte de St. Valoir
<u>GEORGES</u>	Major Domo at the Chateau
<u>TWO UHLANS</u>	

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THE SCENE is in the Library of the Chateau of St. Valoir on the Belgian Frontier

PERIOD To-day

TIME About midnight

1.

THE BELLS OF ST. VALOIR

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(THE SCENE IS THE LIBRARY OF THE CHATEAU DE ST. VALOIR. A DARK-PANELLED ROOM WITH BOOK-SHELVES AROUND. A LARGE WINDOW AT BACK OPENING ONTO THE GARDEN. FIREPLACE WITH PORTRAIT OVER AT L. A SMALL DOOR BY THE SIDE OF FIREPLACE. A DOOR R. OVER R. A FRENCH WRITING TABLE WITH CHAIRS. SOFA AT L. WITH CHAIRS NEAR FIREPLACE. CURTAINS TO DRAW OVER WINDOW. A FIRE BURNING IN GRATE. A PAIR OF SWORDS ON WALL NEAR FIREPLACE. A BELL-PULL NEAR CHIMNEY-PIECE. WHEN THE CURTAIN RISES THE STAGE IS EMPTY AND LIGHTED ONLY BY THE GLOW OF THE FIRE. A LOW SOUND OF RAUCOUS SINGING IN GERMAN GUTTURALS IS HEARD OFF R.)

(LOUISE ENTERS FROM R. AS SHE OPENS THE DOOR A FLOOD OF LIGHT POURS INTO THE ROOM. THE SINGING OF THE "WACHT AM RHEIN" BECOMES A TIPSY ORGIE OF SOUND. LOUISE IS VERY FRIGHTENED. THE LIGHT IS SEEN ON HER FACE. SHE SHUTS THE DOOR AND TURNS ON THE ELECTRIC LIGHT.)

LOUISE. In my father's house – oh God, in my fathers' house!

(SHE LISTENS AGAIN FOR AN INSTANT. THE SOUNDS CONTINUE. SHE CROSSES SWIFTLY TO THE WINDOW AND LOOKS OUT. IF POSSIBLE THE BAYONET OF A SENTRY SHOULD BE SEEN THERE. SHE DRAWS THE CURTSIN AND WHILE SHE IS DOING SO, THE DOOR L. OPENS AND GEORGES, A TYPICAL FRENCH MAJOR DOMO, ENTERS.)

GEORGES. Mademoiselle – Mademoiselle.

LOUISE. (STILL ARRANGING CURTAINS) Yes, yes, I am here, Georges – what is it? (SHE LOOKS AT HIM, STILL HOLDING CURTAINS.)

2.

GEORGES. There is news of Captain Marcel, Mademoiselle.

LOUISE. (AGHAST) News of Captain Marcel!

GEORGES. Yes, Mademoiselle. He was at Courcelles an hour ago. He went there to see Colonel Chassaigne. The Abbé Bernard met him in the town: he spoke with him. In an hour's time, he says, the Captain will be here to bring Monsieur le Comte his orders. Ah, Mademoiselle, if the Abbé had known that there would be Germans in your father's house when he returned. It is too late now – too late. We can do nothing.

LOUISE. (HALF ASIDE) Nothing – we can do nothing. I wrote to him, Georges: I asked him to come. If they kill him, it is by my hand that he will die – no, no, oh God, not that. Have I not suffered? My father wounded and a prisoner. This house – ah, you know what they have done in this house.

(DISCORDANT MUSIC OFF AND A CRASHING OF GLASS.)

GEORGES. Mademoiselle, the Captain will come by Fort l'Eveque. There are sentries at the cross roads, he is a soldier and will know. I have sent Jacques, the innkeeper, to the wood of St. Pierre to watch the footpath from the hills. If the worst comes, we must hide him here, Mademoiselle, in the Château itself. (LOOKING ROUND) We must find a secret chamber, Mademoiselle, you and I.

LOUISE. (AS ONE DAZED) He will come because I wished it, Georges. You know what courage he has. Nothing will keep him away if he discovers the Germans are here. He will come because he loves me – and I, oh God, I have called him to his death. (SHE TURNS AWAY DISTRESSED.)

GEORGES. Ah, Mademoiselle, courage, courage. Whatever befall, the God of mercy knows and will repay. He is watching over those we love to-night, believe it, Mademoiselle, believe it always.

LOUISE. I do. I believe it always.

(A SOUND OF RAUCOUS MUSIC AND HEAVY FOOTSTEPS HEARD OFF R.)

3.

LOUISE. Hush, what's that?

(THEY STAND AND LISTEN. THE DOOR R. IS THROWN OPEN WITH A BANG AND MAJOR VON GALTZ, SLIGHTLY INTOXICATED, ENTERS. HE SLAMS THE DOOR BEHIND HIM AND LOOKS AT LOUISE INSOLENTLY WHILE HE STILL SMOKES.)

VON GALTZ. So, you left us, eh. Didn't like our music, eh, my beauty. Didn't like anything about us, seems to me. (HE CROSSES THE ROOM TOWARDS HER AND KICKS OVER A SMALL CHAIR OR STOOL AS HE GOES.) Well, that's not friendly That's not the right spirit to receive all the kindness we've shown you, all the kindness – (HE SEES GEORGES AND INSTANTLY BECOMES SOBER) Who's that man?

GEORGES. Georges, Monsieur - the Count's steward.

VON GALTZ. Don't monsieur me – what are you doing in this room? Out with it – what have you been telling her? (LOOKS FROM ONE TO THE OTHER.)

GEORGES. I have been telling Mademoiselle that there is still a God who sees and will avenge the things that are done to my poor country – that is all, Herr Major.

(THE GERMAN MAKES A GESTURE OF ANGER AND HALF RAISES HIS PISTOL. LOUISE STEPS BETWEEN THEM PROUDLY.)

LOUISE. (PROUDLY) Georges, leave the room. (TO THE MAJOR) At least you can respect courage, Herr Major. Go, Georges, I will ring if I want you. (SHE INDICATES THE DOOR L.)

(THE OLD SERVANT GOES SLOWLY.)

(THE MAJOR CROSSES.)

4.

GEORGES. Mademoiselle, I shall come immediately if you ring. (HE EXITS.)

(THE MAJOR NOW CROSSES TO FIREPLACE AND DELIBERATELY
SLASHES THE BELLROPE WITH HIS SWORD. HE LAUGHS HILARIOUSLY.
LOUISE IS OVER R. SHE WATCHES HIM AND SITS AT TABLE.)

MAJOR. So he's your father's servant. An old retainer, I suppose, especially where the cellar is concerned. Come now, you don't want to ring that bell for him – you know you don't. We are going to be friends, you and I, Mademoiselle Good friends. Why shouldn't we? I can do a lot for you and I think you might do something for me. (CLOSE TO HER) Who's this Captain Marcel the servants are talking about? Do you know him?

(SHE SITS AT TABLE. HE PUSHES A CHAIR UP.)

LOUISE. (FRIGHTENED) Captain Marcel. What of him?

MAJOR. Oh, a good deal at headquarters. He's one of the staff messengers, I think, who was spying in Cologne last week when that d—d Britisher blew up the aeroplane shed.

LOUISE. Marcel a spy. It is not true, Herr Major – you know it is not true.

MAJOR. A German officer only knows what he's told.

LOUISE. And what he's told is sometimes a long way from the truth.

MAJOR. I see that you know this man and perhaps can say something in his favour. He'll want all he can get when we catch him. That won't be long if he's with the contemptible little English army, as I hear. By heaven, Mademoiselle, we might take him this very night. And if we do –

LOUISE. (RISING) And if you do, Marcel will show you how nobly a man can die for his country, as you have shown me how basely he can live for it. I think that is all, Herr Major –

5.

(SHE TURNS HER BACK ON HIM. HE RISES AND CATCHES HER BRUTALLY BY THE HAND.)

MAJOR. All – and what verdamt fool do you think has come to the Château St. Valoir to-night! Mademoiselle, I thought you would be sensible but as you are not, I am going to teach you that war is war, (HE TRIES TO KISS HER) to show what price your cursed little country is going to pay for the noble sentiments with which you favour me. Ah, my beauty, a little kiss – just a little kiss upon those divine lips – upon –

(THERE ARE MUSKET SHOTS OFF. SHE SLIPS FROM HIS ARMS. A VOICE OFF R. CALLS “HERR MAJOR – HERR MAJOR.”)

MAJOR. Here. (TO HER) Our little engagement can wait, Mademoiselle –

(HE EXITS QUICKLY R., LOCKING THE DOOR AFTER HIM.)

(SHE HAS AN EMOTIONAL SCENE. SHE SWITCHES OFF ALL LIGHTS EXCEPT TWO BY FIREPLACE. SOUND OF VOICES HEARD FROM WINDOW. SHE GOS THERE; SHE OPENS THE CURTAINS, THEN DRAWS THEM QUITE CLOSE.)

LOUISE. If it were Marcel –

(ENTER GEORGES FROM L.)

GEORGES. Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle.

LOUISE. What is it?

6.

GEORGES. Captain Marcel is here.

LOUISE. Here – where?

GEORGES. Here – in this house!

LOUISE. Here in this house!

GEORGES. Yes, he came in by the chapel gate, this instant, Mademoiselle.

LOUISE. Bring him to me – here, Georges.

GEORGES. Yes, Mademoiselle! (HE EXITS.)

(IF POSSIBLE MARCEL ENTERS BY TRAP THROUGH ROOF ONTO STAIRS.
OTHERWISE BY DOOR L. HE STANDS AND MAKES A PICTURE IN THE
LIGHT.)

MARCEL. Louise – alone.

LOUISE. Yes, alone, thank God - (THEY EMBRACE.) Marcel, Marcel –

MARCEL. Is your father here, Louise?

LOUISE. You don't know?

MARCEL. What can I know? I left the English headquarters at sundown. They told me at Fort l'Eveque that all was well at the Château. A mile from here the innkeeper's son met me and said the Germans were in the house. There were two at the crossroads when I came down – they fired at me and I put my horse at the old brook and got over. The chapel staircase brings me here – Louise, there is no ill news of your father!

LOUISE. He was taken prisoner at Namur. I believe he was wounded. They tell me he has been sent to Cologne. Ah God, what I have suffered since last we met – what weary hours of faith and waiting – Marcel, Marcel. (BREAKS DOWN WEeping.)

MARCEL. Louise My darling.

LOUISE. You must not think of me – is not your life my life? Marcel, you must go, as you came, now, there is not an instant to lose – they are here, in this very

7.

house. We are but their prisoners – Marcel, why do I keep you even for one moment of my happiness – you must save yourself for my sake.

MARCEL. There are greater things than a man's life – there is a better way than that which leads to safety. Louise, I am going to be your guest a little while. Germans in the house, you say. There may be other guests by and by.

LOUISE. Are the English coming, Marcel?

MARCEL. They will be here at midnight if we can give them the signal. Who is here, Louise?

LOUISE. Major von Galtz and three of his officers.

MARCEL. And in the village?

LOUISE. A squadron of cavalry, I think.

MARCEL. Then I will see your Major for myself. Turn up the lights, Louise –

(SHE DOES SO)

LOUISE. You are going to stay, Marcel?

(MARCEL LOOKS ROUND THE ROOM. SHE WATCHES HIM AS HE STANDS CENTRE.)

MARCEL. Yes, I am going to stay. Louise, come to me! (VERY QUIETLY AND QUICKLY)

(SHE CROSSES TO HIM)

Do not be afraid. There is a man standing at the window who is covering me with his rifle.

8.

(SHE SHUDDERS BUT DOES NOT LOOK.)

(LOUDLY) Louise, I was ordered to give your father this despatch. As he is not here I propose to give it to you.

(HE PASSES THE DESPATCH DELIBERATELY. THE FACE OF THE SOLDIER AT THE WINDOW IS CLEARLY SEEN.)

(IN A WHISPER) Put it where the Germans can find it, Louise.

(SHE TAKES THE PAPER AND THRUSTS IT INTO HER BREAST. THE SENTRY AT THE WINDOW WITHDRAWS. MARCEL PERCEIVES THAT.)

MARCEL. (ALOUD) And now if old Georges could come and give me a glass of wine. (HE GOES OVER TO THE BELLROPE.) Why, someone's been nibbling your bellrope, it appears. A German rat – eh!

LOUISE. Major von Galtz cut it, fearing I might ring the bell for Georges.

MARCEL. Major von Galtz. Is he in the house now?

LOUISE. He has just left me, Marcel.

MARCEL. What has he been saying to you, Louise - ?

LOUISE. Nothing – that mattered. Nothing that a woman should not expect from a German.

MARCEL. Louise!

(SHE BREAKS DOWN AGAIN AND HE CATCHES HER IN HIS ARMS.)

9.

God help him when we meet.

LOUISE. Oh, is it not enough that my father's life has been offered for the land we love. Marcel, Marcel, must I lose you too, you who are all in the whole world left to me. If you would but save yourself, now, now, because I love you – Marcel.

MARCEL. I will save myself when I have paid the debt that any Belgian owes to Germany. Louise – when I have killed this man, I will remember that I must leave you. But until then – ha!

(THE DOOR R. BURSTS OPEN. VON GALTZ AND TWO UHLANS ENTER.
LOUISE CRIES.)

MAJOR. Seize that man.

(THE UHLANS ADVANCE TO MARCEL. LOUISE GOES TO FIREPLACE R.)

MARCEL. (WHO BECOMES INSTANTLY THE READY SOLDIER) Herr Major. (HE OFFERS HIS SWORD.)

(THE MAJOR SEIZES THE SWORD AND TRIES TO BREAK IT. HE CANNOT DO SO.)

MARCEL. (SMILES) Bent but not broken – like my country, Herr Major.

(THE MAJOR FLINGS THE SWORD FROM HIM. HE DRAWS HIS REVOLVER AND COVERS MARCEL.)

MAJOR. What are you doing in this house?

MARCEL. At present I am looking down the barrel of a pistol in the hands of an officer and (WITH IRONY) a gentleman. Introduce us, Louise! (HE THROWS THE TROOPERS OFF.)

(LOUISE COMES FORWARD.)

LOUISE. This is Major von Galtz, who has promised me your freedom, Marcel.

(SHE LOOKS AT THE MAJOR. HE IS AMUSED AND EVIDENTLY DETERMINED TO PLAY UP TO THE IDEA.)

MAJOR. (TO TROOPERS) Let the man go, you.

MARCEL. (WHO IS QUITE FREE) Thanks.

MAJOR. (TO THE UHLAN NEAREST TO HIM) The lieutenant will provide a firing party in a quarter of an hour's time – we may have a prisoner to be shot – aus.
(POINTS TO THE DOOR.)

MARCEL. (CALLING AFTER TROOPER) I'll be there – don't begin without me.

(EXIT TROOPER.)

MAJOR. (TO OTHER TROOPER) Remain where you were, but be within call – I may have need of you.

(THE TROOPER EXITS BY WINDOW,)

(THE MAJOR APPROACHES MARCEL) Now we understand one another.

MARCEL. Yes, have a cigarette. (HE SMOKES).

MAJOR. (LOOKING AT THEM BOTH CURIOUSLY) You know what I am going to say, Captain!

MARCEL. Yes, you're going to apologise for sitting in the presence of a lady.

LOUISE. (FRIGHTENED) Marcel, for my sake –

(HE SIGNS TO HER TO BE QUIET)

MAJOR. So, she is your fiancée – well, I'm sorry for her.

MARCEL. I saw you were directly I came in. You looked sorry. Sit down, Louise – the Major wishes it.

(SHE SITS LOOKING INTO THE FIRE.)

Now, sir –

MAJOR. You are the Captain Marcel St. Remy who went to Arras with the despatches for the English General French some five days ago. We heard of you at Lille and again at Courtrai. You captained a squadron of lancers in the village of Fermoy the night my friend Carl Hensor was killed – that's the first thing to your account.

MARCEL. Yes, that's No. 1 (EMPHASISING IT) I'll remember.

MAJOR. Yesterday you were again with the English and left with their Scottish Colonel at a quarter past four o'clock?

MARCEL. Excuse me – five o'clock. We were having a bottle of wine at four-fifteen – I know because I paid.

MAJOR. Since then we have lost sight of you –

MARCEL. Oh, I'm sorry!

MAJOR. But we can quite imagine what you have been doing! (STANDING) This despatch which you carry from the English General French to the master of this house, where is it?

(IN THE EXCITEMENT OF THE MOMENT LOUISE STANDS UP AND CRIES OUT. MARCEL IS A LITTLE SHAKEN APPARENTLY. HE GLANCES AT LOUISE FOR AN INSTANT AND SHE INSTINCTIVELY CLASPS HER HANDS TO HER BREAST.)

MARCEL. Major, I am carrying no despatch from the English General – and if I were, I would not give it to you while I am alive.

LOUISE. Major, will you not listen to me. Captain Marcel is my fiancé. It is natural that he should come here to my father's house to see me. You are a soldier and will understand. He is here at St. Valoir for my sake and for my sake he will now return as he came –

(THE MAJOR REGARDS HER CYNICALLY. HE SIGNALS TO THE UHLAN AT THE BACK.)

MAJOR. **For your sake, by heaven, Mademoiselle, for your sake, he would cut the throat of every German in Belgium.

MARCEL. I can't deny that – no, I can't deny it.

MAJOR. (TO UHLAN) Search this man.

(ANOTHER LOOK, DELIBERATELY GIVEN, PASSES BETWEEN MARCEL AND LOUISE.)

No – search the woman!

(LOUISE IS TERRIBLY AFRAID. MARCEL COMES OVER TO HER.)

MARCEL. Give it to him, Louise.

(SHE TAKES OUT THE DESPATCH. THE MAJOR SNATCHES IT GREEDILY.)

MAJOR. Ha – so you are his abettor, Mademoiselle. I shall have the pleasure to remember that by and by.

(HE CARRIES THE DESPATCH TO THE TABLE L. HE LAYS HIS PISTOL ON THE TABLE. LOUISE GOES UPSTAGE BEHIND HIM. MARCEL ENCOURAGES HER AS SHE GOES.)

MARCEL. (TO HER) Fear nothing. It is as I wished.

(THE MAJOR HAS TORN THE DESPATCH OPEN. HE TRIES TO READS IT AND EVIDENTLY FINDS A DIFFICULTY. HE LOOKS AT MARCEL.)

MAJOR. Read it.

MARCEL. You can't ask me to do that.

MAJOR. I give you ten seconds by the clock – read it.

MARCEL. Bear witness – I have no alternative.

MAJOR. Pah – who will know? Tomorrow you will be on your way to Germany – if you live.

LOUISE. (COMING DOWN A LITTLE) If he lives!

MAJOR. (TURNING TO HER) Mademoiselle, I think upon second thoughts you had better read it. This gentleman is too well aware of its contents.

(HE TURNS ABOUT TO OFFER IT TO HER. AS HE DOES SO, MARCEL SLIPS THE REVOLVER INTO HIS POCKET.)

LOUISE. I – Monsieur!

MARCEL. Read it, Louise, we cannot help ourselves!

LOUISE. (SEEING THAT HE MEANS HER TO READ IT) Very well, Monsieur. (READS SLOWLY AND CLEARLY) “From the Commander of the 1st Division to the Count of St. Valoir. The Brigade of Guards will move on St. Valoir to-night. If we are not to come, ring the chapel bell three times about the hour of midnight when we will retire upon Fermoy. Silence implies that Your Excellency recognizes the reverse which you last despatch implied. The Commander of the 2nd Division.”

(SHE PUTS THE LETTER DOWN AND GOES UP STAGE. THE MAJOR LOOKS AT THEM BOTH.)

MAJOR. Three times to keep the English out – ha – ha – and we are but twenty-two in your pleasant village, Mademoiselle. (HE THINKS) Read it again. (TO MARCEL THIS TIME.)

MARCEL. The whole?

MAJOR. Every line of it.

MARCEL. (READING) “The Brigade of Guards will move on St. Valoir to-night. If we are not to come, ring the chapel bell three times about the hour of midnight when we will retire upon Fermoy. Silence implies that Your Excellency recognizes the reverse which you last despatch implied. The Commander of the 2nd Division”.

MAJOR. Three times to keep the English out – what’s he mean when he speaks of reverse – does he recognize he’s beaten?

MARCEL. I am not in his confidence, Major. The word “reverse” is one we rarely hear from the English. (FEIGNING SORROW) I suppose there was an engagement.

LOUISE. (QUICKLY TO HELP HIM) When my father was wounded and made a prisoner.

MAJOR. (CALLING AT DOOR L.) Kommen Sie nur (TO WINDOW) herein.

(THE UHLANS ENTER, ONE AT DOOR, ONE AT WINDOW. THE MAJOR SITS AT THE TABLE AND WRITES THREE LINES.)

This is for the officer commanding at Maroi – immediately.

UHLAN. Yes, Herr Major. (HE EXITS L.)

MAJOR. And you – go to the chapel yonder and ring the bell thrice. You understand. Thrice! (HOLDS UP HIS FINGERS) Immediately.

UHLAN. Yes, Herr Major. (HE EXITS BY WINDOW.)

MAJOR. (ANGRILY) So that was it! Three times to keep the English out.

(HE STALKS TO THE WINDOW AND THROWS IT OPEN. MARCEL LOCKS THE DOOR AT L. IN A FLASH.)

MAJOR. That was it. Verdamt hound. Your cursed English were coming in to cut our throats like sheep – but you shall pay – to-night you understand – you and the woman shall pay to-night – when your back is to the wall and she is where no English swine can help her – you hear – thrice to keep the English out – ha-ha! (HE ROARS WITH LAUGHTER, AND TURNS TO THE WINDOW) Listen, fool – listen to that – ha, ha, ha!

(THE BELL TOLLS THRICE. MARCEL HAS BEEN APPROACHING HIM STEP BY STEP DURING THIS SCENE. HE NOW COVERS HIM SWIFTLY WITH HIS REVOLVER.)

MARCEL. Hands up.

(THE MAJOR UTTERS A STARTLED CRY, FEELS FOR HIS REVOLVER AND REELS BACK.)

Hands up, dog of a German, your turn has come. One word and it shall be your last, by God. You think you have kept the English out. Fool, you have brought them in. The despatch was to be read in the reverse and the truth was in the last line of it. Ah, butcher of women, you who make war on children, you whose Iron Cross was forged in Hell, you whose laurels run with the blood of the weak and helpless, you who burned Louvain, you who carried your cursed culture to Antwerp, whose trophies are the tears of women and the orphans' cry – you shall win them no more. To-night you answer to your God for them all, ay, answer for my country which cries to me, answer for Belgium which is no more.

(THE GERMAN CAN CONTAIN HIMSELF NO LONGER)

MAJOR. Hound!

LOUISE. (ALARMED FOR MARCEL) Marcel – Marcel!

MARCEL. Ay, and answer for her, whose honour was in your keeping. (HE SHOOTS HIM) God, I thank Thee for this hour, I thank Thee.

(HE REELS TO THE WINDOW. THE MUSIC OF THE BRITISH GRENADIERS IS HEARD OFF, AT FIRST FAINTLY, THEN LOUDER AND LOUDER. IT SWELLS TO A MAGNIFICENT CRESCENDO OF SOUND. THERE IS FIRING HEARD.)

LOUISE. The English, the English! Marcel!

MARCEL. Louise!

(THE CURTAIN UPON THE PICTURE.)

~~**DELETED~~ "MAJOR. For your sake – I don't doubt it. For your sake, he will kill every German he meets and burn the houses which harbour them. For your sake he will spend his days with the verdamt English and his nights on the high road – for your sake he will spy us out in this house and carry the news to the hounds who are waiting for it -"