

Verlaine, Tennyson and Arthur

by

Scott Brummitt

Cast of Characters

VERLAINE:

31, French poet attempting to rebuild a sober life after imprisonment for shooting his runaway lover Arthur Rimbaud. Though he now wears a cloak of respectability, he is still an unpredictable character.

TENNYSON:

66, Poet Laureate and east Lincolnshire local. Also carries the hurt of a loss of someone called Arthur (Hallam), but is the embodiment of respectability; something Verlaine could never be.

VERLAINE, TENNYSON AND ARTHUR

(IT IS 1875. VERLAINE SITS ALONE AT HOME IN
STICKNEY, WRITING AND EATING)

SOUND: A BURNING FIREPLACE AND A LETTER BEING WRITTEN WITH
DIP PEN

VERLAINE

My dear, great soul Arthur.

There are no drawbacks, as they say here, only trees,
windmills and sheep. Stickney is the picture of rural
England as Shakespeare himself would have it, and I am
the picture of moral rectitude; the upstanding
schoolmaster and occasional figure of fun. But I don't
mind - after three stormy and dolorous years, I have
finally found flat terrain.

As I walk this land of foaming hedgerows I reflect and,
yes, repent. It took a week to remove the bullet from
your ever-flailing arm and I have regretted it every
day since. For you see, I have dressed my wound for
years. A season in Hell, you say? Well that would be
mercifully brief.

SOUND: KNOCK ON WOODEN DOOR

VERLAINE

(SLIGHTLY ANNOYED)
Yes?

SOUND: WOODEN DOOR OPENING

TENNYSON

(SLIGHTLY APPREHENSIVE)
Er, is George not here?

VERLAINE

(SLIGHTLY SUSPICIOUS)
George? Do you mean Canon Coltman?

TENNYSON

Yes! I'm a great friend of his, and as I was paying him
a visit, he recommended that I meet with you - he said
we would meet you here. He has told me much about you.
(BEAT) I'm sorry Monsieur Verlaine, I should be more
clear - my name is Alfred. Alfred Tennyson.

VERLAINE

(SUDDENLY CHEERFUL)
Oh, Mister Tennyson, it is an honour! Please, sit down
- would you like to share some of this chine? Truly
delicious food.

SOUND: TENNYSON TAKES SEAT AT TABLE

TENNYSON

(SLIGHTLY WARY)

Er, no thank you, I've just eaten. (BEAT) So, er, can I ask you, what exactly brought you to Stickney?

VERLAINE

(CHEWING FOOD)

Can you keep a secret?

TENNYSON

I see no reason not to.

VERLAINE

After leaving my wife and child for my young lover, I shot him in the wrist, and he had me sent to prison in Belgium for two years. Then, I decided to come to England to teach.

TENNYSON

(INCREDULOUS AND AWKWARD)

I...

VERLAINE

A joke, you understand. (BEAT) No, I simply found myself at a loose end, and had to get away. (BEAT) But yes, it is as you say: "tis better to have loved and lost"...

TENNYSON

(WARMLY)

I'm glad my words are of comfort.

VERLAINE

Oh bien sûr; of course.

TENNYSON

(CHANGING SUBJECT)

May I ask what you were writing before I interrupted?

VERLAINE

(FURTIVE)

Er, a letter, to a friend.

TENNYSON

I see. Ma francais est mauvais, but I couldn't help noticing the name Arthur. That was the name of my friend too; about whom I wrote In Memoriam.

VERLAINE

(TAKEN ABACK)

That is true?

TENNYSON

(MORE CONFIDENT)

Yes. We met at university and saw wondrous things together; wondrous places - France, even. (BEAT) But then one day, I received a letter. He died, in Vienna. 22 years old.

VERLAINE

Oh, I am very sorry; je suis désolé.

TENNYSON

Many years have passed. (BEAT) But I take it that for you, the pain is still fresh.

VERLAINE

Yes, but the details are similar. (BEAT) I must ask: how did you move on, from Arthur?

TENNYSON

Monsieur Verlaine, I could answer that, but if you are seeking advice, you can only look within. The path that each man treads is dim.

VERLAINE

Yes; it is unfortunate. (BEAT) If only it were true, as a friend of mine once said, that we poets are 'seers' - delirious visionaries of remarkable insight into the human condition.

TENNYSON

Myth-makers, perhaps; at best, sufferers of a romantic delusion. (BEAT) No, one writer can no more illuminate another's path than any other person could. (BEAT) Certainly, I dare say I still know nothing of you.

VERLAINE

That may be so. (BEAT) Though please be assured, Mister Tennyson, that there is very little to know. I am a simple man of God, who has found great beauty in Lincolnshire, où le ciel comme du lait. I teach, I walk, I pray. And I intend that things stay that way.

SOUND: VERLAINE RISES FROM CHAIR

VERLAINE

So we must move on. I hope you would agree when I say that now is the time to be noble; not heartbroken.

SOUND: PAPER IS TORN AND THROWN IN THE FIRE

VERLAINE

Au revoir, Arthur.