

# Total Eclipse

A Play in Two Acts

by Christopher Hampton

A SAMUEL FRENCH ACTING EDITION



New York Hollywood London Toronto

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The first performance of *Total Eclipse* was given at the Royal Court Theatre on September 11, 1968. The cast was as follows:

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE — Verlaine's  
mother-in-law . . . . . Kathleen Byron  
MATHILDE VERLAINE — Verlaine's wife . . Michele Dotrice  
ARTHUR RIMBAUD . . . . . Victor Henry  
PAUL VERLAINE . . . . . John Grillo  
CHARLES CROS . . . . . Malcolm Ingram  
M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE . . . . . Nigel Hawthorne  
ÉTIENNE CARJAT . . . . . Nigel Hawthorne  
ERNEST CABANER . . . . . William Hoyland  
JEAN AICARD . . . . . Stanley Lebor  
CLERK . . . . . Stanley Lebor  
JUDGE THÉODORE T'SERSTEVENS . . . . . Nigel Hawthorne  
EUGÉNIE KRANTZ . . . . . Ursula Smith  
ISABELLE RIMBAUD — Rimbaud's sister . . . Gillian Martell  
A BARMAN . . . . . William Hoyland  
MAID . . . . . Judy Liebert  
Artists, customers in cafés, etc.

*Directed by* Robert Kidd  
*Designed by* Patrick Procktor

**WESTSIDE ARTS THEATRE**

**(Downstairs)**

**Charles Paul Kopelman, Mark B. Simon, Gary P. Steuer  
present**

**TOTAL ECLIPSE**

**by Christopher Hampton**

**Starring Peter Evans**

**with**

**Marissa Chibas, Caitlin Clarke, Lynn Cohen,  
Ann Hillary, I.M. Hobson, Adrian Sparks,  
Adam Storke and Michael Cerveris**

**Scenery by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg**

**Lighting by Richard Nelson**

**Costumes by Bill Walker**

**Music by Nick Bicât**

**Casting by Johnson-Liff Assocs.**

**Projections by Lucie D. Grosvenor**

**Sound by Gary Harris**

**Fights Staged by J. Allen Suddeth**

**Assoc. Producer Mike Tolman**

**Production Stg. Mgr. Marjorie Horne**

**Directed by John Tillinger**

**The Producers wish to express their appreciation to  
Theatre Development Fund for its support of this pro-  
duction.**

The present version of *Total Eclipse*, by Christopher Hampton, opened in New York City, on Dec. 13, 1984, at the Westside Arts Theatre (downstairs). It was produced by Charles Paul Kopelman, Mark B. Simon, and Gary P. Steuer, directed by John Tillinger, setting by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg, lighting by Richard Nelson, costumes by Bill Walker, music composed by Nick Bicât, sound by Gary Harris, projections by Lucie D. Grosvenor, production stage manager Marjorie Horne, associate producer Mike Tolman.

## CAST

*(in order of appearance)*

ARTHUR RIMBAUD . . . . .	Michael Cerveris
MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE . . . . .	Ann Hillary
MATHILDE VERLAINE . . . . .	Marissa Chibas
PAUL VERLAINE . . . . .	Peter Evans
M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE . . . . .	I.M. Hobson
CHARLES CROS . . . . .	Adam Storke
ÉTIENNE CARJAT . . . . .	I.M. Hobson
JEAN AICARD . . . . .	Adrian Sparks
JUDGE THÉODORE T'SERSTEVENS . . . . .	I.M. Hobson
EUGÉNIE KRANTZ . . . . .	Lynn Cohen
BARMAN . . . . .	Adam Storke
ISABELLE RIMBAUD . . . . .	Caitlin Clarke

At the beginning of September 1871, Paul Verlaine received a batch of poems and a request for advice from an unknown writer, Arthur Rimbaud. He replied, "Come, my dear great spirit." And enclosed the train fare.

Christopher Hampton

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

PAUL VERLAINE  
MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE  
MATHILDE VERLAINE  
ARTHUR RIMBAUD  
M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE  
CHARLES CROS  
ÉTIENNE CARJAT  
JEAN AICARD  
JUDGE THÉODORE T'SERSTEVENS  
EUGÉNIE KRANTZ  
BARMAN  
ISABELLE RIMBAUD

# Total Eclipse

## ACT ONE

### SCENE 1

VERLAINE'S VOICE. Sometimes he speaks, in a kind of tender dialect, of the death which causes repentance, of the unhappy men who certainly exist, of painful tasks and heart-rending departures. In the hovels where we got drunk, he wept looking at those who surrounded us, the cattle of poverty. He lifted up drunks in the black streets. He had the pity a bad mother has for small children. He moved with the grace of a little girl at catechism. He pretended to know about everything, business, art, medicine. I followed him, I had to!

*(During this, the lights go up on the drawing-room/conservatory of the Paris home of the MAUTÉS DE FLEURVILLE at 14, Rue Nicolet. It's the 10th September, 1871. Indications of discreet affluence. MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE, a handsome middle-aged woman, is trimming flowers and handing them to her daughter, MATHILDE VERLAINE, who arranges them in a vase. MATHILDE is an attractive girl of eighteen, now eight months pregnant. The women continue working for a moment in silence; then, a strange, incongruous figure enters the room and stands for a moment, waiting in the shadows, watching them. Neither of them notices him. He is ARTHUR RIMBAUD. His appearance is striking. He is not quite seventeen and looks his age. His hands are large and dirty. His tie hangs*

*loose round his neck like a piece of old string. His trousers are too short and end an inch above his blue socks. His boots are filthy. He's extremely good-looking: thin lips, cold, grey eyes. Eventually he speaks, startling the women considerably.)*

RIMBAUD. Evening. I'm looking for M. Paul Verlaine.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Are you . . . M. Rim-  
baud?

RIMBAUD. Yes.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Oh, M. Rimbaud, I am  
Mme Mauté de Fleurville, M. Verlaine's mother-in-law.  
And this is Mme Verlaine, my daughter. (*RIMBAUD  
smiles frostily, nodding to the two women.*) You're not  
with M. Verlaine?

RIMBAUD. No.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Only he went to the sta-  
tion to meet you. I suppose he must have missed you.

RIMBAUD. Yes, well he doesn't know what I look like,  
does he?

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Er, how did you get here?

RIMBAUD. Walked. (*silence*)

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Perhaps . . . would you  
like a wash?

RIMBAUD. (*considers this a moment*) No thanks.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Did you give your luggage  
to one of the servants?

RIMBAUD. I didn't meet any servants.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Well, then, it's in the hall,  
is it?

RIMBAUD. What?

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Your luggage.

RIMBAUD. I haven't got any luggage.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. No . . . luggage?

RIMBAUD. No.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Oh. (*silence*)

MATHILDE. Won't you sit down, M. Rimbaud? (*RIMBAUD does so, slouching back in the chair and reaching into his pocket to find a repulsive old clay pipe and some matches. He lights the pipe, sucking noisily.*)

RIMBAUD. Mind if I smoke?

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. (*with obvious distaste*) Not at all. (*silence*) M. Verlaine and I were very impressed by your poetry.

RIMBAUD. He let you read it?

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Oh yes, I'm a fervent admirer of the Muse. We're great friends with M. Victor Hugo, you know. He's an utterly charming gentleman.

RIMBAUD. He's getting a bit senile.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. I don't think so. He still has perfect command of his faculties. Naturally to the young he seems a little elderly. But then the young must always be revolutionary.

MATHILDE. You're even younger than we thought you were.

RIMBAUD. Oh, yes?

MATHILDE. How old are you?

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Darling, it's not very polite to ask people their ages.

MATHILDE. I'm sorry. I was just so interested. (*RIMBAUD, ignoring this exchange, has risen and crossed to the window. He stands, looking out at the garden.*)

RIMBAUD. Pleasant view.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Yes, charming, isn't it?

RIMBAUD. Pleasant.

(*RIMBAUD picks up a china animal, considers it with*

*distaste, puts it down and turns back to the window. At this moment, PAUL VERLAINE hurries in. He's twenty-seven, bearded, but already going bald. He's well-dressed and looks like a civil servant with private means — which is what he is. He doesn't at first notice RIMBAUD.)*

VERLAINE. I combed the station but no sign of him.

RIMBAUD. (*without turning round*) He's here.

VERLAINE. M. Rimbaud? (*He advances toward RIMBAUD, hand outstretched, then, as RIMBAUD turns towards him, hesitates for a moment, apparently transfixed by RIMBAUD's appearance.*)

RIMBAUD. M. Verlaine. (*They shake hands.*)

VERLAINE. You found your own way here. What initiative.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Good, well, I must see about organizing some dinner. I expect M. Rimbaud must be hungry.

RIMBAUD. Starving.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Yes. (*to MATHILDE*) Come along, dear. We'll leave the men to have a little chat. (*She leaves with MATHILDE.*)

VERLAINE. Well this is . . . (*RIMBAUD nods.*) How old are you, if you don't mind my asking?

RIMBAUD. I do.

VERLAINE. Oh, sorry.

RIMBAUD. Sixteen.

VERLAINE. Sixteen? Are you sure?

RIMBAUD. Of course I'm sure.

VERLAINE. It's just that in your letter you said you were twenty-one.

RIMBAUD. You never want to believe what I say in my letters.

VERLAINE. I'm amazed. I thought those poems you

sent me were remarkable for someone of twenty-one. For someone of sixteen, they're—unprecedented.

RIMBAUD. That's why I told you I was twenty-one. I didn't want you to feel patronizing before you'd read them.

VERLAINE. Of course, it all becomes clearer now. The fact that your mother kept you at home with no money. If you're sixteen. You've left school, have you?

RIMBAUD. Yes.

VERLAINE. I suppose your mother must be very angry with me.

RIMBAUD. No, once she found out you'd sent me my train fare, she seemed quite happy

VERLAINE. You don't get on with her?

RIMBAUD. I wouldn't mind if she were just stupid. All the rest of my family are stupid and they're perfectly acceptable. But she's religious as well.

VERLAINE. I'm sorry I missed you at the station. The thing is, your train arrived at the emerald hour. The hour of absinthe. I don't suppose this is quite what you expected. My wife and I did have an apartment on the Quai de la Tournelle when I was working. But what with one political upheaval and another I decided I was too sensitive for the Civil Service. So I couldn't afford to keep the apartment. Then Mathilde's father, rot his guts, very generously offered us a floor of this house. I thought it might be a good idea, Mathilde being pregnant and everything.

RIMBAUD. And wasn't it?

VERLAINE. Yes, yes, except for my loathsome father-in-law. Fortunately for you, he's away at the moment. On a shooting party. Where I sincerely hope he will meet with a fatal accident. My daily devotions are entirely directed to that end.

RIMBAUD. What does he do?

VERLAINE. Nothing. He's a gentleman of leisure and he does absolutely nothing. He's the most pointless person I know. His sole purpose in life is to die and leave me all his money. What do you think of my wife?

RIMBAUD. I don't know. What do you think of her?

VERLAINE. I suffered for that girl, you know. I had to wait over a year before I could marry her. The fates were against it. It was delayed so many times. By pestilence and war. Literally. She caught smallpox at the last minute. I thought, Mary Mother, have I waited all this time to get married to a flayed hedgehog? Fortunately she was quite unmarked. Two days before the wedding one of my best friends committed suicide. Then the next day, the final indignity, I got called up. But I was immune to all the portents. I even squirmed out of that and I married her. It's just that living with her parents has had a bad effect on her. And being pregnant. She's only a child.

RIMBAUD. So am I.

*(MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE comes in with MATHILDE, who crosses to VERLAINE and kisses him on the cheek. Then she smiles at RIMBAUD, who doesn't respond, but fills and relights his pipe.)*

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Dinner's almost ready.

RIMBAUD. Good, I'm famished. (*silence*)

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. You come from the Ardennes, don't you, M. Rimbaud? Charleville?

RIMBAUD. Yes.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Pleasant town, Charleville, isn't it?

RIMBAUD. The last place on God's earth.

MATHILDE. And what does your father do?

RIMBAUD. Drinks mostly, I believe. We haven't seen him for ten years.

MATHILDE. I'm sorry.

RIMBAUD. No need to be. He's very well out of it.  
(*silence*)

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Perhaps you'd like to read something to us after dinner?

RIMBAUD. I don't think so.

MATHILDE. Oh, why not?

RIMBAUD. I don't want to.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. M. Rimbaud's probably tired, dear.

RIMBAUD. No. I never read out my poetry.

MATHILDE. Oh, but all the other poets do it. We have soirées here and . . .

RIMBAUD. I'm not interested in what all the other poets do.

VERLAINE. Don't you think poets can learn from one another?

RIMBAUD. Only if they're bad poets.

MATHILDE. I'm sure you'd enjoy our soirées. We had a lovely one last week. Poetry and music. Musset and Chopin.

RIMBAUD. Musset?

MATHILDE. Yes. Don't you like Musset? Daddy was at school with him. He's my favorite poet. Except for Paul, of course.

RIMBAUD. Slovenly facile rubbish. The most objectionable and least talented of all the miserable buffoons of this dreary century. A poet for schoolboys and women.

VERLAINE. Ah, but what about his plays?

RIMBAUD. The theatre is beneath contempt.

VERLAINE. Your opinions are firm.

RIMBAUD. Shouldn't they be? (*silence*) Listen, I must have a piss. Where is it? (*VERLAINE leads him across the room, murmuring directions. Then, when RIMBAUD has left, he turns back to the others.*)

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Well.

MATHILDE. He's not how I imagined him.

VERLAINE. He's all right.

## SCENE 2

*The same; 25th September, 1871.*

*RIMBAUD walks into the empty room, smoking his pipe. He looks round the room, then, after a moment's consideration, goes over and picks up the china animal we have already seen him handle in Scene 1. He contemplates it briefly, then deliberately drops it on the floor and smashes it. He's moving away, back towards the door, when M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE appears. He's an imposing man of sixty-four, with a white beard. He's startled to see RIMBAUD, who, by contrast, seems remarkably calm.*

RIMBAUD. (*hospitably*) Morning. Everyone's out, I'm afraid. They should be back soon. Unless you've come to see the old boy.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. The old boy?

RIMBAUD. M. Mauté de Fleurville. You're not a friend of his, are you?

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Er . . . no.

RIMBAUD. No, I didn't think you were. As far as I can tell he doesn't have any friends.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. (*faintly*) Really.

RIMBAUD. Yes. Apparently he defeats all comers with an impregnable combination of tediousness and avarice. It is darkly rumoured that he cannot resist rifling the pockets of those who fall unconscious at the monotony of his anecdotes. (*M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE is beginning to show signs of impending fury. He utters one or two indeterminate sounds, but RIMBAUD interrupts him, suavely changing tack.*) You wouldn't like to buy a crucifix by any chance, would you? (*He produces one from an inside pocket.*) Because I happen to have one with me which I can let you have on extremely reasonable terms. It's ivory, I think. (*M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE stares at the crucifix, which he recognizes as his own, with rage and incomprehension.*) Tempted?

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Who the hell are you?

RIMBAUD. I might ask you the same question. Except I'd be more polite.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. I am Mauté de Fleurville.

RIMBAUD. Morning.

*(He exits smartly. M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE gapes after him. Then he hurries out the other side of the room. Hiatus. VERLAINE and MATHILDE appear, the former looking considerably more rumpled than in the first scene and already somewhat drunk.)*

VERLAINE. All I'm saying is, if he goes, I go.

MATHILDE. That's just silly.

VERLAINE. We can't just put him out on the street, he's only a boy.

MATHILDE. Have you been in his room?

VERLAINE. No.

MATHILDE. Its disgusting. His bed's all filthy and open and there are animals crawling all over the pillows.

VERLAINE. Lice.

MATHILDE. What?

VERLAINE. Lice. He likes to keep them handy to throw at priests in the street.

MATHILDE. Wouldn't it be more sensible to get one of your friends to give him a room for a while? (*She sits down on the chaise longue and puts her feet up, grunting slightly with the effort.*)

VERLAINE. People don't understand him. I'm the only one who understands him.

MATHILDE. Well, Daddy certainly won't understand him.

VERLAINE. I'm tired of being ordered about by that old bastard. He has no sympathy at all for my position. None of you seem to realize we had a revolution this year, which I supported. I could have been shot. If I hadn't been thrown out of my job, do you suppose I'd have accepted his bloody charity for one moment?

MATHILDE. No, but it's . . .

VERLAINE. I've been very tolerant with him, but this time I'm putting my foot down. Now do I make myself clear?

MATHILDE. Yes.

VERLAINE. And you're going to give me your full support?

MATHILDE. Yes.

VERLAINE. I know you, the minute he comes back, you'll start agreeing with him.

MATHILDE. No. I won't.

VERLAINE. It's not asking much, for God's sake, all I'm doing is helping a friend. I don't know why we have to go through all this. I'm your husband.

MATHILDE. I'm sorry, Paul.

VERLAINE. Are you trying to annoy me?

MATHILDE. No.

VERLAINE. Well, don't. (*silence*)

MATHILDE. Why is it you like him so much?

(*Silence. RIMBAUD slips into the room. He looks cheerful.*)

RIMBAUD. I'm off.

VERLAINE. No, look, you don't have to go. We're going to have it out with him when he gets back.

RIMBAUD. He's back.

VERLAINE. What?

RIMBAUD. We met. I don't think he's very pleased.

VERLAINE. Did he ask who you were?

RIMBAUD. It wasn't that kind of conversation.

VERLAINE. Well, look, we've decided you must stay.  
(*to MATHILDE*) Haven't we?

MATHILDE. (*hesitates fractionally*) Yes.

RIMBAUD. It doesn't matter.

VERLAINE. Of course it matters. Why should we let the old jackass treat us like this?

RIMBAUD. It's his house.

VERLAINE. Right, well, I'm going to say either we all stay or we all leave together, what about that? (*RIMBAUD smiles at MATHILDE, a touch ironically.*)

RIMBAUD. Suits me.

VERLAINE. I mean, what could he do?

MATHILDE. He could cut off our allowance.

RIMBAUD. Ah.

VERLAINE. He wouldn't do that. Yes he would. Well, what the hell, eh, don't you think?

RIMBAUD. It's your money.

VERLAINE. Look, why don't we discuss this over a few drinks? Then . . . er . . . I mean, look, go down and order one up for me, I'll join you in a minute. In fact . . .

RIMBAUD. What?

VERLAINE. I was just going to say: I happen to know Cros has a spare room. What's the joke?

RIMBAUD. Nothing.

VERLAINE. Listen, if you'd rather . . .

RIMBAUD. No, no. I'll go and order you a drink. (*He starts moving towards the door, then stops, turns back and produces a piece of paper out of his pocket.*) I've got a list here of the books I want from Mauté's library, I thought you might steal them for me, not all at once, one by one will do. They'll obviously be more use to me than they are to him.

(*He hands the list to VERLAINE. As he does so, M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE sweeps into the room followed by MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. He's about to speak, but falls silent when he sees RIMBAUD. Silence. RIMBAUD grins.*)

RIMBAUD. (*to VERLAINE*) Don't be long. (*He leaves, bowing to the MAUTÉS. Silence.*)

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Since when have you had the right to invite people to stay here without my permission?

VERLAINE. Since you had the kindness to offer the third floor of your house to Mathilde and me, I've treated it as our home.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. So it is, your home, not a guest house.

VERLAINE. If I can't put up one guest in my home when I feel like it, I might as well live somewhere else.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. If you weren't so idle, you might be able to afford to.

VERLAINE. Now, listen, you know very well, that since the Commune . . .

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Any excuse.

VERLAINE. I don't notice you working your fingers to the bone.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Now look here, Verlaine, I want that hooligan out of my house. Is that clear?

VERLAINE. (*roars at him*) He's already left! (*silence*)

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. And when you see him next, you'll kindly ask him to return all the objects he's pilfered.

VERLAINE. What are you talking about?

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. I'd hardly stepped in the door when he tried to sell me one of my own crucifixes. (*to his wife*) Come along, dear.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. I think perhaps I'd better stay and have a word with them.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Will you come with me! (*Cowed by his tone, MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE follows her husband out of the room. VERLAINE is still furious.*)

MATHILDE. You'd better get him to give back Daddy's crucifix.

VERLAINE. What?

MATHILDE. You must get it back from him.

VERLAINE. I've no intention of doing anything of the sort. If your father's capable of throwing that boy out without a penny he deserves to lose more than a few religious knick-knacks. He's got no right to have Christ hanging all over his walls. You people don't understand what poverty is. Do you realize that in Charleville, whenever Rimbaud wanted a book, he had to go and steal it off the bookstall?

MATHILDE. That proves what sort of a person he is. (*VERLAINE bounds across the room, seizes MATHILDE by the ankles and drags her off the chaise longue. She crashes heavily to the floor. He stands over her as she struggles to her feet, then punches her hard in the face. She goes over again, bringing down a small table as she falls. Brief silence. She moans softly. VERLAINE starts forward and lifts her off the floor.*)

VERLAINE. I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry, love . . . sorry. You shouldn't have said that. (*He helps her over towards the chaise longue. M. and MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE hurry in.*)

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. What's going on? (*silence*) Mm?

MATHILDE. Nothing.

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. What was all that noise then?

MATHILDE. I . . . knocked the table over.

MME MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. Are you all right, dear? (*MATHILDE nods, very pale. M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE turns to VERLAINE, and speaks in venomous undertones.*)

M. MAUTÉ DE FLEURVILLE. There's nothing more contemptible than a man who maltreats a woman.

VERLAINE. Unless it be a man who maltreats two. (*He storms out.*)

### SCENE 3

*A small attic room in the Rue de Buci.*

*RIMBAUD is lying on a divan and VERLAINE is sitting in an armchair.*

VERLAINE. You see, I didn't think it really mattered

who I married. I thought anybody would do. Anybody within reason.

RIMBAUD. I don't know why you wanted to get married in the first place.

VERLAINE. I was tired of it all. I was living with Mother then. Only because I was too lazy to live by myself and look after myself. She did everything – and to an extent it was all right. I did what I liked and only went home to sleep or to eat or to change. But in the end it began to wear me down, the office was so boring and home was so boring, and I started to drink more and more and I had to keep slipping off to the brothel, things got worse and worse. Day after day I'd wake up fully clothed, covered with mud or with all the skin off my knuckles, feeling sick and nursing a dim memory of three and a half minutes with some horrible tart who hadn't even bothered to take her shoes off. This can't go on, I said. It has to stop.

One day I went round to see Sivry, who was doing the music for a farce I was going to write and as he was showing me up to his room we passed through the Mautés' main room, you know, and there she was, standing with her back to us, looking out of the window. I think we startled her because she turned round very quickly. I was stunned, she was so beautiful. She was wearing a grey and green dress and she stood in the window with the sun going down behind her. Sivry said, had I met his half-sister, Mathilde, and I said, no, unfortunately I hadn't. So he introduced me and said I was a poet and she smiled and said how nice, she was very fond of poets. I tell you, that was it.

A week later, I was in Arras, I woke up in bed with the most grisly slut you can imagine, sweaty she was, snoring. I was trying to tiptoe away when she woke up

and called me back. I went back. Later on that morning I wrote to Sivry and told him I wanted to marry Mathilde. I thought she was ideal. Plenty of money. Well enough brought up to have all the wifely virtues. Innocent. Beautiful. Sixteen. She would look after me. And be there every night in my bed.

I had to wait over a year before I could have her. It was agony. Delicious. I used to go there every evening and look at her. When the wedding was put off for the third time, I practically went berserk. And when it finally took place, I couldn't believe it. I felt giddy all day. The next few months were marvellous, you know. I didn't care about the war, the Prussians could do what they liked as far as I was concerned. I was otherwise engaged. I can't tell you how wonderful it was. It was a kind of legalized corruption. She was impossibly coy at first, she didn't like it, she didn't understand it, it hurt. And then slowly she began to take to it, she relaxed, she became . . . inventive. And then one night, when I was very tired, she suggested it. (*silence*)

RIMBAUD. And now you have a son.

VERLAINE. And now I have a son. (*silence*)

RIMBAUD. What happened last night, anyway?

VERLAINE. Well, I . . . can't remember it very clearly. As you know I wasn't quite myself when I left you last night. My idea was to go to bed with her, as I think I mentioned to you.

RIMBAUD. Many times.

VERLAINE. Yes, well I thought, it's a week since the child was born, it ought to be all right by now. I said I'd be careful, but, I mean, it's been such a long time. Anyway, it was no good, she wouldn't.

RIMBAUD. So what happened?

VERLAINE. I don't know, God knows.

RIMBAUD. Did you hit her again?

VERLAINE. No, no, not this time. I woke up, as in Arras, with my boots on the pillow, and tiptoed away. But she didn't call me back.

RIMBAUD. So you're still frustrated? (*VERLAINE nods. Silence.*) Why don't you leave her?

VERLAINE. What?

RIMBAUD. Leave her.

VERLAINE. Why?

RIMBAUD. Because she's no good to you.

VERLAINE. What do you mean?

RIMBAUD. Do you love her?

VERLAINE. Yes, I suppose so.

RIMBAUD. Have you got anything in common with her?

VERLAINE. No.

RIMBAUD. Is she intelligent?

VERLAINE. No.

RIMBAUD. Does she understand you?

VERLAINE. No.

RIMBAUD. So the only thing she can give you is sex?

VERLAINE. Well . . .

RIMBAUD. Can't you find anyone else?

VERLAINE. I . . .

RIMBAUD. You're not that fussy, are you?

VERLAINE. No.

RIMBAUD. Anyone within reason would do, wouldn't they?

VERLAINE. Within reason.

RIMBAUD. What about me? (*Silence. RIMBAUD laughs.*) Are you a poet? (*Silence. VERLAINE smiles uneasily.*)

VERLAINE. (*cautiously*) Yes.

RIMBAUD. I'd say not.

VERLAINE. Why?

RIMBAUD. Well, I hope you wouldn't describe that last volume of premarital junk as poetry?

VERLAINE. I most certainly would. Very beautiful love poetry, that is.

RIMBAUD. But you've just admitted that all you wanted to do was to go to bed with her.

VERLAINE. That doesn't make the poems any less beautiful.

RIMBAUD. Doesn't it? Doesn't it matter that they're lies?

VERLAINE. They're not lies. I love her.

RIMBAUD. Love?

VERLAINE. Yes.

RIMBAUD. No such thing.

VERLAINE. What do you mean?

RIMBAUD. I mean it doesn't exist. Self-interest exists. Attachment based on personal gain exists. Complacency exists. But not love. It has to be re-invented.

VERLAINE. You're wrong.

RIMBAUD. Well, all right, if you care to describe what binds families and married couples together as love rather than stupidity or selfishness or fear, then we'll say that love does exist. In which case it's useless, it doesn't help. It's for cowards.

VERLAINE. You're wrong.

RIMBAUD. When I was in Paris in February this year, I was staying the night in a barracks and I was sexually assaulted by four drunken soldiers. I didn't like it at the time, but when I got back to Charleville, thinking about it, I began to realize how valuable it had been to me. It clarified things in my mind which had been vague. It gave my imagination textures. And I understood that

what I needed, to be the first poet of the century, the first poet since Racine or since the Greeks, was to experience everything in my body. I knew what it was like to be a model pupil, top of the class, now I wanted to disgust them instead of pleasing them. I knew what it was like to take communion, I wanted to take drugs. I knew what it was like to be chaste, I wanted perversions. It was no longer enough for me to be one person, I decided to be everyone. I decided to be a genius. I decided to be Christ. I decided to originate the future.

The fact that I often regarded my ambition as ludicrous and pathetic pleased me, it was what I wanted, contrast, conflict inside my head, that was good. While other writers looked at themselves in the mirror, accepted what they saw, and jotted it down, I liked to see a mirror in the mirror, so that I could turn round whenever I felt like it and always find endless vistas of myself. However, what I say is immaterial, it's what I write that counts. If you help me, I'll help you.

VERLAINE. How can I help you?

RIMBAUD. By leaving your wife. As far as I can see, it's the only hope there is for you. Not only are you unhappy as you are, it's not even doing you any good. What are you going to do, write domestic poetry for the rest of your life? Bringing up baby? Epics of the Civil Service? Or will you be forced, you, Verlaine, to write impersonal poetry? Foolish plays and feeble historical reconstructions? If you leave her and come with me, both of us will benefit. And when we've got as much from one another as we can, we split up and move on. You could even go back to your wife again.

It's just a suggestion, it's up to you.

VERLAINE. You seem to forget that I have a son now.

RIMBAUD. On the contrary, that's what makes it so ideal. If you leave your wife now, you won't be leaving her alone.

VERLAINE. But how would we live?

RIMBAUD. You've got some money, haven't you?

VERLAINE. Ah, now I understand. I help you by supporting you, and you help me by renewing my rusty old inspiration. Is that it?

RIMBAUD. Not altogether.

VERLAINE. Well, how else are you going to help me, then?

RIMBAUD. You name it. (*long silence*)

#### SCENE 4

*The Café du Théâtre du Bobino; 20th December, 1871.  
A dinner of the Vilains Bonshommes, a poetry society.*

*Five of the guests are visible to the audience, arranged in such a way as to suggest a much larger gathering. At one end, although placed as if in the centre of the table, is the featured poet, JEAN AICARD, a portly and respectable figure, now somewhat nervously sorting through his papers. Next to him is ÉTIENNE CARJAT, 43, a dapper figure with a goatee, who is talking to CHARLES CROS, 29, a languid dandy with frizzy hair and a lugubrious moustache. Next to CROS is VERLAINE, somewhat the worse for drink and, next to him, RIMBAUD, slouched back in his chair and wearing a battered top hat. The scene opens with two simultaneous conversations: between CROS and CARJAT and between RIMBAUD and VER-*

*LAINE. In addition, there's the buzz of general chatter. The following is overlapped.*

CROS. The principle is very much like photography. Only instead of photographing a man's face, you photograph his voice.

RIMBAUD. For Christ's sake, let's get the fuck out of here.

VERLAINE. We can't.

CROS. Then twenty years later, just as you might open a photograph album . . .

RIMBAUD. Why not?

VERLAINE. He's just about to start reading.

CROS. . . . you simply put the relevant cylinder into the paleophone and listen to him reading his poems or singing his song.

RIMBAUD. Who?

VERLAINE. Aicard. Just there.

CARJAT. And you think you could invent a machine like that which worked?

CROS. Perfectly possible.

RIMBAUD. I don't think I'm going to like his stuff much.

CARJAT. Why don't you get on with it then?

VERLAINE. You won't, it's dreadful.

CROS. I don't know. I can't be bothered with all the organization and effort.

RIMBAUD. I want another drink.

CARJAT. You're an idle bugger.

CROS. I'm a man of ideas.

RIMBAUD. (*He calls offstage.*) Oy! Any chance of another drink?

CARJAT. What about your colour photographs? How are you doing with them?

CROS. There's no money in it.

CARJAT. (*leaning across to RIMBAUD*) Are you interested in photography?

RIMBAUD. No.

CARJAT. Only I was wondering how you'd like to be photographed.

RIMBAUD. Not particularly.

CARJAT. Because I'd like to photograph you. I find your appearance very striking. You have a very fine bone structure.

RIMBAUD. Really?

CARJAT. Yes. I don't think much of your poetry, but I love your bone structure.

RIMBAUD. Why don't you think much of my poetry?

CARJAT. Well, it's very promising of course. But it seems to me that all that ingenuity is rather marred by . . . well, not exactly a juvenile urge to shock, but something of that sort.

RIMBAUD. And were you shocked when you read it?

CARJAT. No, I . . . no, of course not.

RIMBAUD. Then why should you suppose that I intended you to be?

CARJAT. Well . . . that's not really the point.

VERLAINE. Seems fair enough to me.

CARJAT. I . . . I could object to your technical approach.

RIMBAUD. I could object to your tie.

CARJAT. Well, if you're going to take that attitude . . .

VERLAINE. He doesn't like discussing his poetry.

CARJAT. I see.

CROS. I don't think you're being quite fair to the boy. I like his work. Especially that one about the girl spending the night before her first communion in the lavatory with a candle. Wonderful stuff.

RIMBAUD. (*coldly*) Thank you.

*(There is now a general ripple of applause, as AICARD rises to his feet. CROS and CARJAT applaud, VERLAINE and RIMBAUD do not. CROS then turns away from RIMBAUD and murmurs to CARJAT, as AICARD begins speaking.)*

AICARD. Thank you very much, gentlemen. I should like to start by reading a poem from a collection I am planning for children. *(As he continues to speak, RIMBAUD fetches a small phial out of his waistcoat pocket and empties the contents into CROS's beer, which immediately begins to bubble and fizz.)* I would ask you to bear in mind that the poem is written expressly for children, although, as with all worthwhile work for children, it is hoped that what is said is not entirely without relevance to adults. *(CROS turns back to the table, reaches for his beer, lifts it almost to his lips, then does a horrified double-take and puts the glass down hurriedly. He speaks to RIMBAUD in an urgent whisper.)*

CROS. What have you put in it?

RIMBAUD. Sulphuric acid.

CROS. What?

AICARD. *(simultaneously)* The poem is called "Green Absinthe" *(He clears his throat.)* "Green Absinthe." *(CROS, appalled, continues to stare at RIMBAUD, but the latter has turned his attention to AICARD, and bursts into ironic applause.)*

"Green absinthe is the potion of the damned . . ."  
*(RIMBAUD belches.)*

"A deadly poison silting up the veins,  
While wife and child sit weeping in their slum . . ."

RIMBAUD. *(distinctly)* I don't believe it. *(A certain sensation. AICARD soldiers on.)*

AICARD.

"The drunkard pours absinthe into his brains."

RIMBAUD. Shit.

AICARD.

“Oh! Drunkard, most contemptible of men . . .”

RIMBAUD. Shit.

AICARD. (*his voice cracking*)

“Degraded, fallen, sinful and obtuse . . .”

RIMBAUD. It is! It is! Authentic shit!

AICARD.

“Degraded, fallen, sinful and obtuse . . .”

RIMBAUD. I like it.

AICARD.

Degraded, fallen, sinful and obtuse

You scruple not to beat your wife and child . . .”

RIMBAUD. For trying to deprive you of the juice.

(*Pandemonium. Protests, laughter, shouting. CARJAT springs to his feet.*)

CARJAT. Get out you! (*Silence falls.*)

RIMBAUD. Me?

CARJAT. Yes you, you offensive little bastard. Get out, or I'll throw you out. Who the hell do you think you are?

RIMBAUD. I think I may, may I not, be permitted to raise some objection against the butchering of French poetry?

CARJAT. No. You may not. Now apologize and get out. (*He moves towards RIMBAUD, who rises and grips VERLAINE's swordstick.*)

VERLAINE. Careful.

CARJAT. If you think you can frighten me with that thing . . . (*CARJAT pulls at the stick and reveals the sword.*)