

ON THE TRINGHAM TRAIL

by Michael Pearcy

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The Village of Slough 1866

CHARACTERS

Ellen Ternan	Late twenties. Born in Kent but grew up during her family's travels. An actress, as were her parents and her two sisters. Her accent would be without a regional influence but with mild pretensions of class.
Jane Wheeler	Late teens. A Slough girl with a country burr. Maid to Ellen.
Freddy	Twenty. A Slough boy with a similar accent to Jane. A platform superintendent.
Albert	A mid-twenties Londoner with a distinct London voice, possibly south of the river. Not cockney. A struggling newspaper reporter feeding stories to the Victorian gutter press.

It is fact that Dickens maintained Nelly Ternan and her mother in a cottage in Slough. The exact relationship between Dickens and Nelly is open to speculation. In this play a Victorian gutter press reporter comes to Slough in search of a story about Dickens. Nelly and her maid Jenny (both real characters) become the subject of the reporters attention. Jenny is beguiled by the reporter without realising his true aims. Jenny's long-standing beau has to fight for her and stand up for Nelly and Dickens against the snooping of the reporter. Dickens does not appear in the play but Victorian society's feelings for him and his attitudes to women and the poor come under the spotlight. The people of the village of Slough close ranks, the reporter is despatched and Nelly and Jenny are left considering the role of women in the life of Charles Dickens.

The piece is intended to flow and flashbacks are used where attention should be paid to cutting into the flashback with a mechanism (indicated) which does not break the flow. Props are minimal and lighting could be used to effect as could a few sound effects if available (eg at the station).

married well – I did not even have enough talent to find a man of my own.

Jenny You are caring for your mother, that's the important thing.

Ellen You've a talent for saying the right thing.

Jenny I mean what I say.

There is a short silence.

Ellen I think it did not help having the mysterious Mr Tringham coming and going.

Jenny It's not a mystery. He's the gentleman who looks after you. A good friend to have if you ask me. It's private business for you and him.

Ellen I do not want to have private business between us Jenny. And I want to acknowledge Mr Tringham: he has been a good friend to our family since I was eighteen. He has connections in the theatre and helped us when he could. And now, he is our benefactor. Mother and myself. And you, without Mr Tringham we could not afford you. We have very little income of our own. But I do get lonely here, like now, when my mother is staying with my sister and Mr Tringham is working in London. Now it's your turn. Tell me about your boyfriends, or do you have a proper suitor or even a fiancé?

Jenny Not to speak of. There is only Freddy. He's a platform superintendent at the railway station. We were at school and our mothers have been plotting ever since to bring us together. But I can't seem to have the right feelings for him. He's just a boy who used to pull my hair in the school yard.

Ellen Boys and men, they are difficult to tell apart most times.

Jenny There is a man... well, I don't know him really.

Ellen Ah a secret admirer?

Jenny It cannot come to anything. I was tending my father's grave and he came over and talked to me.

Jenny turns away from Ellen and takes us into a flashback at the cemetery. Albert enters moving towards Jenny approaching unseen. Jenny is singing to herself. Albert takes up the song.

Jenny *(Starts.)* I didn't see you there.

Albert You were holding a fine tune.

Jenny Just a bit of humming.

Albert I'm Albert Priestwood by the way.

Jenny You're not from the village.

Albert Got me there. But I might be soon. I'm looking to rent a house in Slough and I was wondering what to look out for.

Jenny A roof, four walls and a good solid front door would be my advice.

They laugh.

Albert I was meaning the decent districts in the village. Church Street looks the part. Did I see you come out of one of them Church Street cottages ?

Jenny turns back to Ellen. Exit Albert. Resume lemonade in the garden.

Jenny I told him what I know of Slough.

Ellen If you like the look of him my advice is to get in first before he has time to meet any other local girls.

Jenny I have seen him since. The next evening he was waiting at the roadside. This time he gave me a bunch of flowers for being so helpful.

Jenny Is this a proposal? I thought not. You're blushing
Freddy. Have I embarrassed you?

Freddy I don't know what you want. I've got a good career.
The railway is the best sort of job a man can have
these days. The railways are the future.

Jenny begins to walk again with Freddy in her wake.

Jenny You say everybody knows about us but I don't. Is it
that I cannot talk to any other man? I can't invite
another man to my house for tea? Is that what it all
means Freddy?

Exit Freddy and Jenny.

Enter Ellen to her table with a tea tray.

Ellen *(Calling...)* Jenny. Jenny.

Jenny ***(Enters.)*** Here madam.

Ellen I have made a pot of tea and there's cake. I am
desperate to know what impression Albert made on
your mother.

They take tea.

Jenny Her mind was set against him from the start. She even
talked about Freddy, right there at table in front of
Albert. And to make matters worse she invited
Freddy's mother.

Ellen It sounds horrible. How was Albert?

Jenny He was polite. He sat it out as best he could and left
as soon as decent. I was so angry. But he had a word
for me as I said goodbye.

***Jenny turns away taking us into a flashback with Albert. Enter Albert. It
must be as if they are in a small intimate space – the hallway of Ellen's
mother's house.***

Jenny I'm sorry. I could swing for my mother, honest.

Albert Don't worry. She won't get the best of me.

Ellen Don't be silly.

Jenny Why is he interested in a village girl like me. He's a London man – good job I expect. Why would he look twice at me?

Ellen You are a beautiful girl. You're are intelligent, witty. Talk to him. Be your own woman.

We hear a knocking at the front door off.

Jenny It's him.

Ellen I'll answer the door.

Jenny No, I should...

Ellen I will answer the door. Sit there. Don't fidget.

Exit Jenny. Jenny coughs to clear her throat and takes several deep breaths.

Ellen *(Off.)* You must be Albert.

Albert *(Off.)* Thank you for the invitation.

Ellen *(Off.)* Come in please.

Enter Albert

Albert Hello Jenny.

Jenny Albert. Nice to see you.

Enter Ellen.

Ellen I will go and make some tea.

Jenny I should do that. It's not right for you...

Ellen Talk to Albert. That's what he's here for.

Exit Ellen

Albert How are you.

Jenny Well. But... so nervous. As you can see.

Short silence.

Albert This is very kind of Ellen. It is Ellen isn't it, Ellen Ternan The actress?

Jenny Do you know her?

Albert I think there is. It's news when a man who is supposed to be the moral conscience of the nation keeps a young woman hidden away – a woman half his age.

Enter Freddy and Jenny.

Freddy You. Out. Now.

Albert I am going but all you've done is confirm my suspicions.

Jenny There's nothing to be suspicious of.

Freddy Come on, you've been asked nicely.

Albert Get your hands off me.

Ellen Wait. I want to say something before he leaves.

Albert Very wise.

Ellen Mr Dickens is our benefactor. He has been a friend to my family since I was a child.

Albert I'm sure he has.

Ellen Have you heard of Urania Cottage?

Albert Is that another little love nest?

Ellen Urania Cottage is a refuge for fallen women? Did you know that Mr Dickens gives freely of his time and money to that good cause? Would you not rather write about that?

Albert I write what my readers want to read. And if there's nothing up – why the false name?

Ellen Because people like you are determined to see something unsavoury in every act of charity he does.

Freddy You heard, he's just helping out the lady and her mother. The man ought to get a medal, whoever he is. Come on, out.

Albert Don't push. I'm going.

Freddy You know where the front door is.

Ellen Are you alright Jenny?

man for security. You are lucky, you have your
Freddy.

Jenny

I suppose so.

Ellen

Don't look sad. He seems a good man. And you'll do
well to have a good man. It seems to me a woman
must be either a wife or a prostitute. There's little in
between.

Jenny

Ellen!

Ellen

I am sorry if that shocks you. But on the one hand Mr
Tringham supports a refuge for fallen women and on
the other, he is my benefactor. I am grateful but
sometimes the difference appears only slight in my
eyes.

The two women look at each other

BLACKOUT

ENDS