

AUSTRALIA FELIX

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BY LOUIS ESSON
A DIALOGUE

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LOUIS ESSON

New performer. G.

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A U S T R A L I A F E L I X

C H A R A C T E R S

MICHAEL GAVAN (a writer and politician, about fifty-five)

STUART GRAHAM (a young painter)

HELEN (his wife)

DICK (a bushman, about thirty)

WILLIE (Gavan's son, about twenty)

Scene:

GAVAN's permanent camp, a lonely but picturesque spot in far Eastern Gippsland, overlooking the Southern Ocean. It is a big, well-fitted up tent, opening on to a long verandah. It is a warm, calm and beautiful summer's evening.

A U S T R A L I A F E L I X .

Inside the tent (that is wide open) seated at the rough solid table are GAVAN, STUART, and HELEN, finishing their evening meal, oysters and black duck.

GAVAN is a man of fifty-five, six feet in height, active and powerful, with many red streaks in his hair and beard. He has an open shirt, leggings and riding breeches. STUART is carelessly dressed in open shirt and grey slacks. HELEN in short dark skirt and light blouse with short sleeves.

GETTING their guns and about to leave, are DICK, a typical bushman, with old trousers and leggings, leather belt and old jersey, and WILLIE, Gavan's son, with grey pants, leggings and dark blue shirt.

GAVAN (TO BOYS) Have a mug of tea before you go.

DICK Right-O!

HELEN How are the ducks, Dick?

DICK They're still coming in.

HELEN Where are you off to tonight?

DICK Swanny Lake.

GAVAN It's only a stone's throw from here.

DICK We'd better get over before it's dark.

They gulp down mugs of tea, and get their guns and cartridges.

GAVAN Have you got plenty of cartridges?

WILLIE Don't you worry, dad. I've borrowed some of yours.

HELEN I wish you'd take me duck-shooting one of these nights Dick.

DICK Any time you like, Mrs. Graham.

GAVAN You won't starve. There's plenty of natural food round here.

STUART Natural food! It's safe as far as I'm concerned.

HELEN I wouldn't trust him with a gun, but he might learn to catch fish. I caught a lovely schnapper.

DICK I'll get you a better line. You could catch twice as many.

HELEN Stuart fancies himself as a bushman, because he lives in a tent and shaves only twice a week.

STUART You're the sporting member.

GAVAN You can't go down Bourke Street and shoot a brace of ducks. You might be able to shoot an alderman, but there seems to be some regulation against it. God knows why.

HELEN I'm terribly excited! How do you think the elections will go, boys?

DICK It won't effect us much in these parts.

HELEN You're a great patriot, Dick. Something new and marvellous and unexpected might happen and you're not interested. I hope we get the results tonight.

- HELEN Have you fixed up the wireless, Willie?
- WILLIE Yes. It'll work all right if there are no storms. We got the last Tests.
- GAVAN We're not quite savage, you see. Willie's got a wireless set, so we get the news of the great world, for what it's worth.
- WILLIE (GOING TO DOOR) We won't be long.
- HELEN (WAVING TO BOYS) Good luck.
- DICK (SLOWLY) We may get a few.
- EXEUNT DICK AND WILLIE.
- GAVAN (BANGING TABLE) It's rough, as I told you, there's no table cloth and there's only tin plates and pannikins - but I feel I belong here, and not to a respectable home in South Yarra.
- HELEN Oysters - and black duck - what more do you want than that!
- GAVAN I'm glad to get away from the city. I'm always happier in the bush. I'm used to rugged outlines - Melbourne is all straight lines and right angles - straight streets, straight tram lines, straight railway lines, straight, narrow lives - damn it all, I've always said the people there were living like wombats in electric-lit burrows.
- STUART We're free here - about a hundred miles from everywhere.
- GAVAN I told you it would be primitive. Is you tent all right?
- HELEN It's splendid... better than a house.
- GAVAN I've spent half my life under canvas, and I think it's the best half. Another piece of duck, Helen?
- HELEN No, thanks.
- GAVAN Bring your seat out here. (THEY RISE FROM TABLE, AND WALK OUT ON TO VERANDA) What do you think of it. We're looking right over on the Pacific.
- HELEN It's beautiful! I can't believe it, the bush and the Pacific.
- GAVAN (IN A LOW VOICE) Australia! How I have loved this Australia! A chair, Helen? (BEFORE SITTING DOWN)
- GA Look over there - it was along that shore, some miles down the coast, that Captain Cook first sighted Australia. He saw the smoke rise from some black-fellows' camps. There used to be a lot of black-fellows then. I wonder what they thought about it.
- GAVAN sits between STUART and HELEN, on an old, long cane chair. STUART has a deck chair.
- HELEN And I wonder what Cook thought of his discovery.
- STUART In my opinion, Australia hasn't been discovered yet. That's a job in store for our writers and artists. Captain Cook discovered only the outline.
- GAVAN By God, you're right, Stuart. People have never imagined what a great country they have.

- HELEN Perhaps we've had a bad tradition. Our parents may be to blame for that. They were aliens, and how they hated this country, they really hated it. They hated the natives, white as well as black, they seemed to be a bad lot in those days, mostly convicts, bushrangers and working men. And how they hated the bush! Everything was wrong. The birds had no song, the blossoms no scent. They saw no beauty anywhere. Australia was a desert. What could young Australians do with parents like that!
- STUART Pioneers, O, pioneers!
- GAVAN We're still in the pioneering stage. You can hardly expect a cockie farmer to look at nature with the eye of an artist.
- STUART Well, boy, what are you going to do about it?
- GAVAN It seems simple enough. This is a new country, with new conditions. We can do as we like, but we never originate anything. We borrow ideas, as we borrow money, from London or New York. We prefer to live at second hand. It's all wrong. It's ridiculous. We need an entirely different system of values.
- STUART I agree.
- PAUSE.
- GAVAN (SLOWLY) Well - they can't put Harding and his Liberals back into office. I'm not an optimist; but I believe there is a limit to human stupidity. Everybody must know what a blight he is. Yes, it's good-bye Harding at last.
- STUART I was told he was a typical Australian, a proletarian who rose from the ranks, rabbit-trapper to Prime Minister, or something like that.
- GAVAN That's not a rise, it's a fall. A rabbit destroys pests - Harding breeds them.
- HELEN Perhaps we'll hear good news tonight. It may be the dawn of a new era.
- STUART (LOOKING OUT) Sunset is no less beautiful. Look over there - that's impressionism for you - just as good as Turner. I must paint it.
- HELENE Why don't you?
- STUART It's these damned elections. You've all been talking politics, the corporate state, bourgeois ideology, planned production, dialectical materialism, art as a weapon of the toiling masses -
- HELEN We've done nothing of the kind.
- STUART The tempo's terrific. I'm a painter, and how can I work in an atmosphere like that!
- HELEN We've been trying to encourage you.
- GAVAN This is Saturday night. It isn't often I have the honour of receiving such highly civilised visitors in my barbaric tent. (HE PRODUCES A BOTTLE OF WHISKY, THREE GLASSES, AND A JUG OF WATER) We must celebrate this historic event. I'm sorry I've no wine, Helen. Can't drink it myself, gives me a headache. There's something Dago and decadent about wine. Whiskey's better. This has the right Celtic glamour. Steady, Stuart, don't drown the miller.

- STUART Here's to the next revolution!
- GAVAN (DRAINING GLASS AT ONE GULP) Better luck this time!
- HELEN The revolution! But look over there! Isn't it wonderful!
- GAVAN You people have travelled a lot. But have you ever seen anything more beautiful than that!
- HELEN (LOOKING OUT) I wonder what it will be like in fifty years.
- GAVAN Fifty years! Anything might happen in fifty years. I sometimes wonder if we're going to hold it. And damn it, do we deserve to hold it!
- STUART It depends on what sort of people we become.
- HELEN But this country may be more important than its people.
- GAVAN I'd give nobody an inch, not an inch if I could help it. I've loved this country all my life. I don't think anybody ever loved it more than I have. But we must have effective occupation. We want people, twenty millions, fifty millions.
- STUART And all Britishers! Millions and millions of Britishers!
- HELEN It's an appalling prospect.
- STUART Why not a few Dagoes sprinkled about - to add a note of colour, wine in straw-covered bottles - mandolins - fritte misce - and some Bavarians too. They would improve our music, and they certainly can brew good beer. But if we're all Britishers - Anglo-Saxons -
- PAUSE. A Far away shot is heard.
- GAVAN Did you hear that?
- STUART No. What was it?
- GAVAN It must have been the boys shooting.
- HELEN I hope they'll get a bag.
- GAVAN If there's any about Dick'll get them. He's a real bushman. Wait a minute. I'll show you something. I've got some old papers about somewhere. Help yourself.
- EXIT GAVAN, into tent.
- STUART He's a remarkable man, no doubt about it.
- HELEN What stories they used to tell about him....
- STUART He's pitched his camp in the right place, a painter's paradise.
- HELEN I'm glad Gavan asked us to camp here. You ought to work well and we'll have a wonderful year.
- ENTER GAVAN, with a big scrap book.
- GAVAN (PUTTING DOWN BOOK) Here's some old junk I've kept, I hadly know why. I wonder will you be interested in it.
- HELEN What is your guilty secret?

- GAVAN My past.
- HELEN How many parts?
- GAVAN I suppose it's natural to women to conceive a man's history only as a series of love affairs. I'm sorry to disappoint you, Helen. They're only old papers, articles, photos... memoranda - a little secret history long forgotten. Where's the bottle. Fill your glasses. (FILLS HIS GLASS AND TOSSES IT OFF) I always take it neat.
- STUART You Irish are bad drinkers.
- GAVAN But you must admit we're good triers. (OPENS BOOK) There are some queer old things in this book. It's the past, the romantic past. It's strange how the past always seems romantic.
- STUART (LOOKING AT PHOTOS) Who are these heroes? They look very solemn.
- GAVAN Our early leaders, standard bearers, soldiers in the army for the liberation of humanity. There's little Harding with his first whiskers.
- HELEN Not our Harding!
- GAVAN The same. He was a fiery little man, and one of our fiercest soap-box orators.
- HELEN (Laughing) So this is the great Harding!
- GAVAN Just for a handful of boodle he left us. Poor little Harding. We thought he had the soul of a prophet. It turned out to be the soul of an oathsworn.
- HELEN (LOOKING AT BOOK) Is that a portrait of you?
- GAVAN That handsome young fellow, looking like Dan O'Connell - yes, that was Michael Gavan... Michael Gavan thirty years ago. Do you think I've changed a bit? (TAKES ANOTHER GLASS OF WHISKEY) When I see you, Stuart, I think of my own youth. My future's behind me, and your past is still in front of you. You're the new generation. It's up to you. The struggle is still on and you can't run away from it. I'm fifty-five, and I've got to sort things out. Before I was twenty I thought I could do anything - just like you, Stuart. When we used to meet, a number of wild young men in back rooms and at street corners, we had our great plans for the future. There were all sorts among us, poets and orators, Irish, Germans, Dagoes, lumpers from the wharf, college men, shearers, nondescripts. We had all night sittings. We dreamed dreams. But we were not pacifists, like you people. We wanted action. We delivered fiery speeches, we organised groups, we controlled two newspapers - I edited one myself. Soon we became a power in the land. Sydney was our headquarters, but we put our faith and hope in the bush. There would be a great movement through-out the bus - it might come any day. We just lived for it. Those big brown lanky men, shearers and drovers, silent, slow, stoical, akin to the bush that bred them, with its dry sunlight and limitless spaces, they were the real Australians, we thought... We were striving, you see, to create a national sentiment. Does that seem old-fashioned nonsense to you? Here we were with a new country, a rich and beautiful country with boundless possibilities, a fresh sheet, an untouched canvas, a block of marble waiting for the hand of the sculptor. Australia Felix! A whole continent, fresh and unspoiled,

without history, its soil unstained with blood, surely to God we could do something with it. How we worked, day and night, studied, organised, fought for our ideals. (SLIGHT PAUSE) But now, look what has happened to our leaders! ~~THESE~~ A few have stuck - but the others, respectable old gentlemen with soft seats in Parliament, at Board meetings, in newspapers offices. Some have gone to London for a knighthood or High Commissionership. Not once or twice in our Colonial story, the path to Brixton was the path to Glory. And there's little Harding, still going strong—

HELEN (LOOKING INTO SCRAP BOOK AND LAUGHING) Fancy Harding in that galley. He certainly has evolved.

GAVAN He was not exceptional. We have produced a number of patriots like Harding.

HELEN We'll know his fate tonight.

GAVAN I sometimes wonder were we mad, just hare-brained enthusiasts! Can you credit it, we really intended to make Australia a nation, yes, we had the audacity to believe that we could create a new democracy.

STUART A new democracy. And still think we can do it.

GAVAN Have another whiskey. (FILLS HIS GLASS) I can't take it like you, sipping it as if it were wine.

HELEN Hullo! Here are the boys.

ENTER DICK and WILLIE, with ducks.

HELEN How did you get on?

DICK (THROWING DOWN DUCKS) We got a few.

HELEN It's a pity there should be all this killing. What lovely colours their feathers have!

STUART They would make a good still life.

DICK (GENEROUSLY) Willie got half of them.

The put away their guns.

GAVAN Have a drink, Dick?

DICK (FILLING GLASS) Here's to everybody... The ducks are still coming in.

GAVAN What about the wireless, Willie?

WILLIE I'll fix it in a minute. (ARRANGES APPARATUS ON TABLE)

DICK I don't think I'll wait tonight. I'd better get home.

GAVAN Great Caesar! Don't you want to hear the results?

DICK I don't go much on politics.

WILLIE (Working at wireless) It's tuned up. Something's coming through.

GAVAN Listen!

WIRELESS VOICE. The Government has a substantial lead in all states.

GAVAN Ye God! What's that?

- VOICE We feel assured of a working majority in both houses. I am immensely pleased with the result of the poll...
- GAVAN That's Harding's voice... My old friend Harding.
- VOICE The great Liberal Party has succeeded in restoring responsible government on the broad platform of progress and reform. The cause of democracy has been triumphantly vindicated.
- HELEN It's incredible. I suppose you're pleased, Dick, that law and order have been restored.
- DICK (GRINNING) I dunno. We don't go much on law and order in these parts.
- VOICE I thank the people of the Commonwealth, and the public-spirited Press, for their patriotic support during this great battle for political liberty, and in placing us in the proud position we occupy tonight.
- GAVAN Cut the old fool off. Tell him to go to bed.
- WILLIE I'll turn him down a bit.
- GAVAN To hell with him, and bad cess to him! It's the same old story. I should have known. An election is held. Politicians babble. Newspapers pour forth their usual flood of platitudes. And then the nation votes. And what happens? Nothing. It's our own faults. Yours Stuart, mine - every one of us.
- VOICE Two great parties have united without the sacrifice of a single principle.
- GAVAN O, help! (GETS WHISKEY BOTTLE AND FILLS GLASSES) I can't stand it. (HANDS HELEN, STUART and DICK GLASSES) Just a decch and doris.

EXIT DICK.

- VOICE We mean to continue in the future as we have in the past and carry out the policy which the entire people of this great country have so enthusiastically endorsed.
- GAVAN (CUTTING OFF) I won't believe it. That is not the voice of Australia.
- HELEN No it's not. Here's to the future.

THEY all laugh, holding up their glasses.

- GAVAN Australia Felix!
- HELEN }
STUART } Australia Felix!

CURTAIN.