

Ken Leask

VENUS AND ADONIS IN THE BUSH

STEVE was a good coach captain. He knew the history of the district, knew and loved the rain forest, told a few jokes but not too many, and was happy on a warm afternoon like this to see that some of his passengers were having a little nap.

It was half-past three. All very successful so far. The long winding drive up the mountain to get the best views of the bananas and papaws and pineapples was always a good start and today it was perfect. At the top there had been that unusually clear view of the blue ocean under a few sleepy white clouds. Then, after morning tea, everyone had seemed pleased to get into the shade of the rain forest. A quiet hour there to experience a different world, a world of ferns and giant trees and waterfalls and that special kind of bush silence when even the birds are enjoying a siesta.

The barbecue lunch on the banks of the creek had gone off well too. Sausages and steak and crusty bread with billy tea or wine could always be counted on to break down the reserve of people who had got on the coach complete strangers a few hours earlier. The middle-aged couples and the pensioners had chatted together, the few young men had done the best they could to make the two pretty girls laugh, and the old man who had said he was going on for ninety hadn't needed much encouragement to finish up the wine.

But this was the difficult time. On a full-day excursion a coach captain needed something a bit exciting in the mid-afternoon before heading back to town. And the only thing he had to offer was this stop at Algiers Creek, a little old town that had once been the centre of a community of early German settlers but didn't have much going for it now except the pretty little park and the Art Gallery. Anyway the park had a toilet, which would be a relief to the people he could see looking anxious up at the back, and the Art Gallery had some interesting Australian landscapes by a local artist named Carlo Pedersen. Betsy Gorman, who ran the Gallery, was engaged to Carlo and she had told Steve on his last visit that Carlo was working on a new and exciting painting. She hoped it would be ready for this weekend. Steve hoped so too. A visit to the Ladies and Gents, a walk

in the park, and a look at some local paintings — it really wasn't enough to fill up the half hour allotted to this stop. But he had to admit that Carlo's paintings — with their creeks and gum trees and their little old houses each with its water tank at the side and its dunny out the back — looked natural enough. Steve pulled the microphone over.

“Sorry to wake you up, folks, but we're just coming into Algiers Creek. Not a lot to see, I'm afraid, but there's a little park where you can stretch your legs, and it has a Ladies and Gents. After that we'll all go into the Art Gallery together. You won't see any masterpieces but there's some landscapes by a man named Carlo Pedersen that I think you'll like. Carlo's a local man who's had a bit about him in the country papers lately. An exciting new Australian impressionist, they call him. A young woman named Betsy Gorman runs the Gallery and she'll show you around. Be careful what you say about Carlo's paintings because Betsy's engaged to him.”

A few polite laughs. Coughs, murmurs, stirrings from people coming to life to listen to Steve and to look out the windows. Some of them were surprised to see they had come off the highway on to a dirt road.

Steve pushed the microphone away. He liked the view here — real country this, with no supermarkets, no lines of shops, no traffic lights, no people in sight. Then down the hill. On the right a comfortable old bungalow, a few acres of pineapples, some papaw trees, on the left the bush with its creek coming close to the road. Clear blue sky. And he could see the half dozen or so houses now, and the Gallery and the one-pump service station. He would be glad of a break too. It was good to get out into the warm dry air and leave the big wheel for a while. He stopped the coach outside the park.

“Say about half an hour here, folks. There won't be any burglars around here if you want to leave all your stuff in the coach.”

The doors opened. It always amazed Steve to see how well-mannered most people were. There was no indecent rush for the toilets, but no doubts either about where most of them wanted to go right now. The men were lucky. In less than two minutes there was a queue in front of the Ladies. Steve helped the old man over to the park and saw that he was okay in the Gents. Went himself while he was there. A companionable place with some jokes and some sighs of relief.

Outside again the husbands waited for their wives or talked to them in the queue. Three young men were already strolling round the park with the two pretty girls. There was never much time for romance on these

day excursions but young people didn't waste time. They exchanged looks and smiles on the coach, happened to walk near one another at the stops. No trouble. Good to get away from the oldies for a while.

The last lady in the queue had gone in and come out again and there was a general move to the Gallery. Betsy met them at the steps and Steve introduced his passengers. And his passengers were impressed, as he knew they would be, the men in particular, for Betsy was young and had large and beautiful brown eyes which looked at you in a grave but trusting way. And Betsy's body was also beautiful, beautiful in a large and grand way. Artists might think of contrasting masses. Ordinary men would swallow hard and think of sex. Very young men would be scared.

Steve was glad to let Betsy take over. He felt a pleasant sense of freedom. For at least twenty minutes now it was somebody else's job to keep his people entertained and happy. He stayed back a little as they all trailed in behind their guide, who told them a little about the Gallery's beginnings and the clever painter who was her fiancé and also her partner, then led the way to the first landscape. It was a large canvas with a man fishing in a creek, sharp sunlight through the trees, a young woman reading a book, and two children walking over the stones further up the creek.

Betsy talked about the importance of Australia's bright sunlight and why Carlo had such strong contrasts of blacks and whites in his paintings, then led them away to the other landscapes, taking her time, telling them how Carlo did all his paintings in the open air, how he had been influenced by painters like Arthur Streeton and John Ford Paterson and Hans Heysen ...

Steve followed, looking with the others. He had seen it all before and heard it all before, but it was good manners to look and to listen while Betsy drew attention to this or that.

A few people, mostly the older ones, were obviously interested, asking questions, nodding their understanding and appreciation. That was good. Some of the men studied Betsy more than the paintings but asked questions to be polite. Some others were only mildly interested. A few were plainly bored.

Betsy moved on rather more quickly, making only brief comments on each painting. In front of the last one she stood for a few moments in silence, then said, "A lot of landscapes can look a lot alike, can't they?"

There were some laughs and a few people nodded.

"A few weeks ago," Betsy told them, "I said exactly that to Carlo. I told him it was time to try something else. Seascapes. Portraits. City scenes. Anything but landscapes. We had a long talk. I know a bit about art but Carlo's lived it and breathed it since he was a kid. That and literature. He reads poetry the way I read novels, so somehow we got on to the idea of linking some poetic idea with the good old Australian bush. He said he'd like to leave Aboriginal legends to the Aboriginal painters, but there ought to be something else. We had more talks over a lot of cups of coffee and at last Carlo gave me a wide smile and told me he had an idea. Ten days later after a lot of work and a lot of arguments a new painting was finished. It's a big one so we've got to make more space before we can put it out here in the Gallery, but you can see it now if you want to. It's in the studio over here."

Betsy led the way and opened a door, and Steve and his people followed her in and stood in front of a huge canvas that almost covered one wall of the studio. And the shock was immediate. Gasps. Puzzled frowns. Laughter.

It was striking, no doubt about that, and it was very sexy, no doubt about that either, but was it some kind of a joke, a joke on the grand scale? After the landscapes this was very confusing.

"We haven't got a name for it yet," Betsy said. She smiled in her frank and friendly way. "I told Carlo we could call it *The Woman has a Problem*, but Carlo told me I had a coarse streak in me. It was meant to be totally serious and he thought he would call it *Venus and Adonis in the Bush*, after Shakespeare's long poem, *Venus and Adonis*."

Steve was impressed. But was it obscene? He didn't care himself, but the Company would murder him if there were a lot of complaints. He tried to make up his mind. You didn't see the front view of the woman, and the whole scene was certainly Australian, with its creek and its gum trees in the background, but it was the foreground which jumped out at you. On the patch of green grass lay a naked woman, a woman with flesh that looked like smooth white marble. And what a woman she was, a massive woman with huge buttocks and bulging breasts and powerful thighs, and she was lying just about on top of an undersized runt of a man, or a boy, hard to say which, who was pretty in a kind of delicate way, and who was trying hard to push the woman away. You could see by his large staring eyes that he was scared stiff. His red shirt was nearly all unbuttoned and he was wearing short dark pants. Except for that

angelic look he could be any Australian kid of twelve or thirteen. And one of the woman's long white legs was over him, pinning him down.

But what was she doing to him? It certainly looked as if she had undone those buttons. And she was gazing at him with wild eyes as her lips came close to his. She looked as if she could eat him up, soft white cheeks, red lips and all. She was sweating over him, holding his head between her two hands, trying to kiss the red lips.

Steve looked at the coach people. They were all registering astonishment in different ways, but they were all obviously interested and impressed. But what was it all about? Why was this vast white woman holding down this callow youth in the Australian bush? And there was something else. The woman made Steve think of Betsy. There was the smooth flesh, the beautiful brown eyes. He was sure some of the other people must have noticed it. He had an odd thought, a very odd thought. Had Betsy been Carlo's model? Out there on a grassy patch near the creek? But he would keep that thought to himself. Coach captains had to be very careful what they said.

Betsy was trying to get some opinions on the painting. Was it just silly? Or too sexy? Or ridiculous, or what?

A few people ventured a few words. It was impressive, it was kind of exciting, yes, it was sexy, but hardly objectionable. There were murmurs of agreement, murmurs of disagreement, then a confident male voice took command of the discussion: "The woman's very beautiful, very desirable, and hungry for love. And she's going to be disappointed. So I think the painting says something about love and lust and a rejected woman. It's the kind of thing that grand opera — and soapies — are made of. And I also think it's a very good painting."

Murmurs of approval. Betsy gave him a little clap. She said, "I wish Carlo had heard that. I think that's exactly right. Any other ideas?"

The same man said, smiling and looking thoughtfully at Betsy: "I'm taking a chance here, Betsy, but I'm curious. The woman's face — as much as I can see of it — and the shape of the head generally — well, it's all a bit like you. Quite a lot like you really."

Betsy laughed, so everybody laughed. She said, "It is a bit like me. I suppose that's because Carlo sees more of me than anyone else" — more laughter, especially from the young men — "but of course this woman is meant to be larger than life. She's meant to be Venus, the Roman Goddess of Love and Queen of Heaven." She took up a folder from a small table near the painting and opened it. "I told Carlo that not many

people would know what it was about so he wrote down a few lines about it. He didn't like talking about his own paintings but I could read it out if I wanted to. Have you had enough or shall I read it?"

The vote in favour was unanimous. Betsy read aloud:

Venus was worshipped in ancient Rome as the Goddess of Love. There are all kinds of legends about Adonis, but in the one Shakespeare chose he is an ordinary but very handsome young mortal. Venus meets him in the forest and falls hopelessly in love with him. She tries all the wiles she knows to make him love her, but Adonis sulks and turns away from her. She makes him a promise:

A thousand honey secrets shalt thou know:
Here come and sit, where never serpent hisses;
And being set, I'll smother thee with kisses ...

And when Adonis merely looks at her with terror in his eyes she goes on:

Art thou a woman's son, and canst not feel
What 'tis to love? how want of love tormenteth?

But the poor boy wants only to escape.
Venus knows he has come to hunt in this forest so she tries again:

I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer;
Feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale:
Graze on my lips, and if those hills be dry,
Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie ...

But Adonis cannot love her, and in spite of her tears and her entreaties he at last breaks away from her and goes on with his hunting. Deep in the forest he comes upon a huge and dangerous-looking boar. It is all

quickly over. The boar gores him and the boy's blood streams out on to the ground as he dies. Venus finds her beloved boy when he is dead, weeps over him, then becomes angry. And her anger is very great because of course she is the Goddess of Love, and Love and Death have both betrayed her. So she curses them both, curses them very deliberately and in many ways, and ends with these words:

Since in his prime Death doth my love destroy
They that love best their love shall not enjoy.

Betsy looked at her audience in silence for a few moments then smiled.

“For those of you who like a happy ending the story goes that a purple and white flower grew where Adonis's blood was spilled on the forest floor and today we call the flowers anemones.”

Back in the coach and heading towards the highway Steve listened to his passengers. Everybody seemed to be talking at the same time. There were some heated arguments but also a lot of laughter. One thing was certain: these people had come to life with a vengeance. When he came out on to the highway he pulled the microphone over.

“Remarkable painting, wasn't it?”

General agreement and more laughter.

“Any complaints about it? I mean — you know — was anybody offended?”

A chorus of negatives. Steve felt happy.

“Just one thing, Steve,” a man's voice called. “We've been having an argument. Have you ever met the bloke that painted it?”

“I have,” Steve said. “Plenty of times. Why?”

“Well, what’s he like? Is he anything like that little squirt in the painting?”

“Nothing like him. Carlo’s a great big bloke and strong as an ox. I wouldn’t want to pick a fight with him.”

The laughter behind him drowned out the noise from the engine. Steve pushed the microphone away. He smiled. He wished he could hear some of the jokes but he had to keep his mind on the road ahead.
