

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# The Falls

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by Hilary Bell

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EXTRACT

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## CHARACTERS

NELLIE TWIST, 40

ALBERTA HOLLOW, 28

JACK HOLLOW, 40

PRAISE-GOD HOLLOW, 24

ERNEST PIGEON, 55

DOCTOR RACHEL SYLVESTER, 45

*Alberta should be played by a very feminine woman; Praise-God has a full beard.*

## SETTING

Sydney, Australia

1901

### **Note.**

The various tableaux and transitions should have the heightened appearance of Victorian melodrama / music-hall sketch, or frontispiece illustration: footlight-created shadows, dramatic poses, crudely-drawn and sentimental yet with a sinister edge. They should be accompanied by music.

### **Lay-out.**

i). Text that is underlined indicates it is sung.

ii). A forward slash indicates the interruption point by the ensuing speaker.

eg.

	PIGEON
I'm neither lonely / nor glum.	
	ALBERTA
Stand beside her, come on.	

iii). The speeches of two or more characters speaking simultaneously are aligned:

eg.

ALBERTA	NELLIE	JACK
Why? What are you saying?	Jack?	Pigeon, keep your hat on! Nothing's been proven yet.

*Music for 'The Falls', including songs, dances and underscore and composed for piano accordion by Phillip Johnston, may be obtained by contacting the author's agent.*

**ACT 1**

TABLEAU: *NELLIE with a chair raised high, poised to bring it crashing down on ALBERTA's head; ALBERTA cowering in terror.*

SCENE 1.

*NELLIE; ALBERTA; JACK; PRAISE-GOD in his bath chair, who watches everything with interest.*

ALBERTA

Welcome, my dearest darling sister!

*NELLIE drops her luggage in shock.*

JACK

Nice to meet you at long last, Miss Twist.

ALBERTA

'Nellie' – she's your sister-in-law!

JACK

May I call you Nellie?

ALBERTA

She's overwhelmed by our generosity! – Sweetest, your tonsils are showing.

JACK

– Alberta.

NELLIE

*Alberta ... ?*

ALBERTA

Yes, it's really me! And this is Jack, and this is your home now.

NELLIE

I'm just, I can't – . I'm sorry, I feel faint.

JACK

*(fetching her a chair)* It's a long trip.

ALBERTA

*(yanking NELLIE up)* It's only one o'clock!

JACK

We've made up a bed for you in my study.

NELLIE

*(staring at ALBERTA)* ... Thank you.

ALBERTA

Jack can work in the conservatory. It's all glass, he runs a bank and makes pots of money!

JACK

Are you sure you're alright?

ALBERTA

Of course she is – she hasn't seen me in twenty years.

NELLIE

I'll be working myself, keep out of your way.

ALBERTA

Writing? Oh, you must let us read your story!

NELLIE

If it gets published.

JACK

If it doesn't, we'll kick you out into the street to fend for yourself.

ALBERTA

Or worse, marry you off to one of Jack's friends!

*ALBERTA , JACK and PRAISE-GOD laugh.*

NELLIE

...Who's this?

JACK

This is our little boy.

NELLIE

Your what?

ALBERTA

Praise-God, say hello to Aunt Nellie.

*PRAISE-GOD mouths words.*

NELLIE

Is he alright?

ALBERTA

Oh, no. Poor dear baby, he'll never really be alright.

JACK

He's mute.

ALBERTA

But he's also very sickly. He never leaves that bath chair except to haul himself into bed at night. Only six years old, and he suffers like a saint.

NELLIE

Six?

JACK

Nearly seven.

NELLIE

He's got a beard.

ALBERTA

Yes, isn't he pretty?

NELLIE

He looks twenty-five.

JACK

He's big for his age.

ALBERTA

But we do all we can to bring joy into his life. We have hope: he might grow up to meet a nice blighted girl.

*PRAISE-GOD smiles at NELLIE.*

Go on, talk to him!

*NELLIE hesitates, then to ALBERTA:*

NELLIE

Look, I really don't / understand –

ALBERTA

*(to PRAISE-GOD)* Your barren spinster auntie isn't comfortable around children, darling. Be patient.

NELLIE

*(to PRAISE-GOD)* But I'd like to get to know you. Perhaps I'll wheel you around the garden, and tell you what your mother used to be like!

ALBERTA

Oh no.

JACK  
He can't leave the house.

ALBERTA  
Not in his condition.

NELLIE  
Why not?

ALBERTA  
Questions! You novelists.

JACK  
Tell us about your book!

ALBERTA  
Manuscript. It's unpublished.

NELLIE  
(*shrugs*) I –

ALBERTA  
Poor Nellie, a writer and you can barely string a sentence together!

JACK  
Alberta said you have a meeting with a publisher.

NELLIE  
Yes.

JACK  
That's marvelous!

NELLIE  
Next week. And if all goes well –

*Doorbell.*

ALBERTA  
A visitor!

JACK  
It'll be Pigeon, we're having lunch at his club.

*Enter PIGEON.*

ALBERTA  
Ernest! What a lovely surprise!

PIGEON

Afternoon. (*Pats PRAISE-GOD's head*)

ALBERTA

Ernest, this is my long-lost sister! She was a bush-savage but now she's civilized and looking for a husband.

NELLIE

(*laughs, mortified*) That's not quite true.

ALBERTA

Which part?

NELLIE

Any of it.

JACK

Except the sister part. Had an aperitif?

PIGEON

Let's have one at the club.

ALBERTA

Oh, poor old Pigeon. You're as gloomy as ever.

JACK

Alberta love –

PIGEON

I'm perfectly happy.

JACK

(*to ALBERTA*) Don't.

ALBERTA

I just want him to cheer up! You'll never find a sweetheart moping around like that, Ernest.

NELLIE

Which club do you belong to, Mr. Pigeon?

JACK

He's President of the Paleontologists' Club.

ALBERTA

And he runs the museum. He's very important, you can look him up in all the books.

NELLIE

Really?

JACK

And he's on the Federation committee. – Still recovering from the party?

ALBERTA

We are!

PIGEON

I didn't go.

ALBERTA / NELLIE / JACK

...Oh.

ALBERTA

But Jack's a member of all the other clubs: The Spiritualists' Society, the League of Operetta-Lovers – And *he* digs up fossils too!

JACK

I'm a dilettante.

NELLIE

Spiritualists?

ALBERTA

They invite ghosts to come and rattle the windows! I've never watched, I'm too terrified.

PIGEON

It's after one.

ALBERTA

Ernest, when are you going to visit properly? You're always hurtling off the second you arrive, I'm beginning to think you loathe me.

PIGEON

Well, with my work at the museum –

ALBERTA

It's just because you're so famous and we're so dull. Perhaps now that there's an unattached lady in the house, you'll consider favoring us with your company a little more often.

JACK

Mr. Pigeon leads a busy life.

ALBERTA

I'm only trying to help. Look how lonely and glum he is.

PIGEON

I'm neither lonely / nor glum.

ALBERTA

Stand beside her, come on: bookends! You're perfect together!

JACK

You're making them blush. – Nellie, it's been a delight.

*JACK goes to kiss NELLIE's hand, and she to kiss his cheek.*

ALBERTA

*(laughs)* Look at them! So eager to kiss they're tripping over each other!

NELLIE

I should unpack.

ALBERTA

I'm in a terrible rush too. But tell us about your book before we all run away.

JACK

Where are you going?

*ALBERTA smiles brightly.*

Princess?

ALBERTA

Oh, I feel silly. Didn't I tell you?

JACK

No.

ALBERTA

Someone – well, this World-Famous European Artist – saw me on the ferry –

PIGEON

World-Famous? Who?

ALBERTA

Incognito. I'm sworn to secrecy. I can barely keep it in – *(to JACK)* you know what I'm like – but I must! Anyway, I was spotted –

JACK

What's he like?

ALBERTA

Ninety-five, don't panic! He came up to me, very cosmopolitan, and said ...  
Oh, I feel silly!

JACK

Go on.

ALBERTA

He said I had an indefinable quality. And he begged me to sit for him.

JACK

A portrait? Can I buy it?

ALBERTA

No, it's a commission. And it's one of those allegory things, where I have to wear Greek sandals. I'm a muse, I think he said. I'll be decent – goodness, I wouldn't have dreamed of saying yes otherwise!

JACK

So you're going.

ALBERTA

Everyone will see it and say, "What a pretty wife that Jack Hollow has! He must have been quite a catch!"

JACK

Let's hope so. (*Kisses ALBERTA*) Now Pigeon, we'll be late.

ALBERTA

Go on then, abandon me.

JACK

(*to NELLIE*) And I do want to hear about your book tonight.

PIGEON

You've written a book?

*ALBERTA barrels through the group with PRAISE-GOD in his bath chair.*

NELLIE

Yes.

ALBERTA

Shall we wheel little Praise-God out into the conservatory for some sunshine?

NELLIE

It's just a story.

ALBERTA

Will you come home for dinner?

JACK

Will you be here?

ALBERTA

He said it'd take hours.

JACK

Then I won't bother. Welcome to our little family, Nellie. So glad that ancient relative you were nursing finally fell off the twig.

*ALBERTA, JACK and PRAISE-GOD laugh.*

PIGEON

A pleasure, Miss Twist.

ALBERTA

Pleasure? You couldn't spell it, you old sad-pants! *(to JACK)* Will you drop me somewhere, darling?

JACK

I'll take you to his doorstep.

ALBERTA

Oh no, it's miles. Drop me by ... I know, the Macquarie Arms! I'll get a cab from there.

JACK

We'll be outside.

ALBERTA

Darling?

*ALBERTA proffers her purse. JACK puts money in it.*

*(Kisses him)* Thank you!

JACK

Don't dawdle.

*JACK and PIGEON leave.*

*ALBERTA busy at the mirror as she speaks to NELLIE.*

ALBERTA

I can't tell you how happy I am you wrote, Nellie. And intrigued! Something you must tell me? I feel like the heroine of a melodrama!

NELLIE

You've changed.

ALBERTA

I've just put on weight. Have I put on much, do you think?

NELLIE

'Alberta'? That's what you call yourself?

ALBERTA

*(gaily)* As hostess, I ask all the questions!

NELLIE

Why didn't you say anything in the letter? I'm reeling...

ALBERTA

I wrote that I was married, had a son.

NELLIE

*(laughs)* Oh yes! But –

ALBERTA

Stop stop stop!

NELLIE

For God's sake! How did you expect I'd react? Considering the shock, I think I behaved / remarkably well.

ALBERTA

*(dangerous)* Enough.

NELLIE

What does your husband think?

ALBERTA

I don't know what you're talking about.

NELLIE

You've kept it secret? *How* long?

ALBERTA

Five years of conjugal euphoria. Now shut up or I'll chop your head off.

NELLIE

Do you want a smack?

ALBERTA

You have nowhere else to live.

NELLIE

Are you threatening me now?

ALBERTA

That aged relative left you penniless.

NELLIE

My God, you refuse to discuss this.