

Helen Allan

SELLING DEADMAN'S BILLABONG

Pye certainly hadn't wanted to take the child. He just knew she'd jinx the sale and it wouldn't be for the first time. But what could he do? Beryl had to go to the doctor and she didn't want Em along. Another baby coming eh? Another mouth to feed. Not the best news to get in nineteen thirty. One thing he did know, though, he'd never let Beryl "use anything". A man **would** be a fool once they got that idea.

Well it was all the more reason to make today's sale. And it ought to be easy enough: he knew the client could raise the ante even if he was (or seemed to be) a mug of the first water.

Certainly no one but a mug would want to buy any farm at all right now, especially not a place like Dead Man's Billabong. With its sour soil, lack of permanent water and its situation in the driest pocket of a very dry valley, Dead Man's Billabong was no place for a beginner. But let the buyer beware! Pye had already sold the place three times in the seven years since it had been subdivided from the big Krubi Downs station and he meant to sell it a fourth today. Why shouldn't he? That was his business, selling properties, good or bad. And he had a wife and four children to feed, not to mention a hungry mortgage on his own home.

So he took care before they picked up the client to dare Em within an inch of her life to open her mouth today. He'd never lifted a hand to any of them so she didn't seem scared, only rather hurt. "But what mustn't I say?" she wailed from the back seat of the second hand Buick. "Just don't say anything" he barked back. He'd have liked to be a bit easier on her, she was still a bit peaky from her measles but you never dared give her an inch. "Are we going to the Billabong?" she chirruped. "Mum said it's the biggest White Elephant in the whole herd."

He was appalled. Look, she'd say anything. He stopped the car and threatened to take her straight back, she could stay home on her own. But he knew he couldn't do it, Beryl would never forgive him. Probably Em knew this too for she didn't panic. "But I only said that to you" she explained. "I wouldn't say it to the man 'cos I know we have to pretend the Billabong's a great place."

He didn't like that any better. He simply couldn't afford, in his job, to admit to any need for pretence. He **had** to be a true believer in his own rhetoric. How else could he ever sell anything? He could only repeat his stern warning to keep her mouth shut. "Of course I will" she promised indignantly. But his spirits fell.

However, once they'd picked up Green and were spinning along their way to Krubi Valley his spirits rose. It was a sparkling early Spring day and the countryside looked at its best. Recent rains, quite unseasonable but welcome, had drenched the south east corner of the state, for once not by-passing the valley. Even Deadman's Billabong would be greened over if only temporarily and the billabong itself, that long-discarded poor relation of Krubi Creek, would be showing some water, the run-off from the ridges. The owner of the moment (courtesy the Bank!) was one Gormley, and he would no doubt be putting on his usual good show when buyers came, while Mrs Gormley would be busily preparing another of her sinkers of roast dinners. Roast pork, it might be, served with baked potatoes, pumpkin, onions and chokos, plus long beans from the dunny trellis.

Such a feast would provide Pye with a chance to boast. "All grown right here on the property" he'd say. "No one need ever go hungry on a farm." Yet even as he bragged he knew that the Gormleys and he himself would be very hungry indeed — hungry for the client's signature on that dotted line!

"Lovely country 'round here" he raved as they entered the valley proper. Proprietorially he waved at a passing paddock of lucerne. "See that? Typical valley scene. Rich black soil — grow anything. Volcanic, of course." He waved now at the Great Dividing Range, a dramatic blue backdrop semi-circling the valley. "Active volcanoes once, most of them. As you would know." Green merely grunted. Apparently, mug or no mug, he had enough sense not to go into any raptures about anything pertaining to the sale, not even mountains. On the contrary, he seemed to feel that he ought to be criticising something, so he chose for this purpose the road they were travelling on. Or rather, roads. For a tangle of six or seven black soil tracks snaked between the road boundary fences. Fastidiously, the faithful Buick picked its way among them, pausing sometimes before it made its choice. Now and then it almost skidded on a low-lying rut but Pye's firm hand would steady it as one steadies a shying horse.

"What a nasty greasy surface" Green commented disparagingly. "A few days ago it must have been impassable. It's a disgrace to the Shire. Whatever are they thinking of?"

Pye laughed this off. "Once it dries out properly they'll put a grader through. You won't know it. This stuff makes a really fast surface."

Green was far from impressed. How the dickens were you supposed to get out of your property in the meantime, he wondered. What did you do if it rained for weeks? But Pye had his answer ready, he'd used it many times before. "Well in that case of course you just **don't go out**. You do what all the other farmers do — you **stay in**. What you do is you just sit on your verandah and you wait — and you watch the pennies fall! Oh yes, and you smile! You smile.' He gave a free demonstration of just how you would smile.

But Green didn't even look. "That's all very well, but what if you **had** to get out? Say it was an emergency. Could be a matter of life and death to get out." Pye was about to suggest using your chains, or your team of horses, or even your own common sense (if you had any) when Em piped up gratuitously from her lair.

"Excuse me Mr Green but you don't have to worry about all that. There may never be another rain like this. Dad said it was once in a lifetime. It's really a very dry valley isn't it Dad? It doesn't rain much here at all does it?' at this time of the year, usually, no," Pye finished neatly, but an angry nerve pulsed in his cheek. "No, most of your rainfall in this area occurs in January or February. Could be March" he added judicially. Then: "But look Green you'd always get out of your place all right. Everyone else does. They just pick the highest track or make one of their own."

He left the mug of the first water (if indeed he was) to mull this over.

Lucerne, pumpkin and potato paddocks sped by lusciously while the encircling mountains moved closer as the Buick bored into the valley. Elusive homesteads were hinted at by kerosene-tin mailboxes at the start of long tracks. Here and there a herd of Jersey cattle chewed their cud in newly-greened fields. They looked round with expressions of not knowing how they'd ever get through all this food. From the side of the road, some daredevil bird would flash up and across, just missing death by inches. The valley ticked and teemed with life. "No doubt about this place" Pye enthused. "It's an absolute paradise." But Green wouldn't concede anything. "All right then" he challenged "if it's such a wonderful place and if Gormley's place is so great tell me this. Why is he selling? What's the real reason, I mean?"

What a question to ask a land agent, especially in the middle of a Depression! Pye grinned wolfishly.

“The real reason? But I’ve already told you. Gormley just needs more acres around him, more space. Dead Man’s Billabong is too small for him. Always has been. He’s got four big sons to settle, you know.” He waved expansively towards the mountains. “He’ll probably end up going west” he prophesied. “West!” And in more than one sense, Pye said to himself, that could be the truest word I’ve ever spoken.

“That’s Gormley land we’re passing now” he announced later as the Buick topped an ironbark ridge. He pointed to lightly wooded slopes on their right. “On your left” he said with a kind of flourish in his voice “we have Krubi Downs. That’s Hoare-Gordon’s place you know. Show-place of the district. State governors have stayed there, shot quail. Nice neighbours, eh? Very friendly people, too. But country people always are.” He pointed again. “See that dark line of scrub in the distance? That’s Krubi Creek. Beautiful creek — crystal clear — lovely water to drink.”

“If you got near enough to drink it” Green said peevishly. “Pity it’s not on Dead Man’s Billabong. You say there’s no running water at all on the place?” Pye seemed to deliberate before his answer. “Well, yes and no. Not exactly. Not as such. But I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Gormley’s back gate is just down the road from here. We’ll go in that way. I can see you’re a bit worried about water so there’s something I’d like to show you before we go up to the homestead. Here’s the gate now. Em, hop out and open it will you?”

The moment had come, he felt, for the billabong, so shortly, having picked up Em they bumped and lurched along the slopes to the gully, where, under Pye’s hand, the car coughed its way to a standstill, its hot engine ticking. Crows arked sombrely from the branches of a dead flood gum, high above the sandy bottom of the forsaken channel. From scrubby banks Pye pointed out a snail trail of glistening water.

“You see?” he said with pride.

Green was scornful. “That trickle? That’s not much more than a gully drain.” But he wouldn’t hear of it. “That’s the billabong and that water — well, some of it would be run-off from the ridges, but most of that would have sunk in by now. No, there’s Krubi Creek water there too.”

“Go on! That creek’s ’way across the road on the other place.” Green was looking less like a mug of the first water every minute. “They’re not connected any more.”

Pye suddenly caught Em's watchful eye. He could have done without her intense interest, it often preceded an indiscretion. But he went on, needing to go on. "Not connected" he echoed, but added "as far as one can see. Not at surface level anyway. But you don't ever want to underestimate water, Green. The ways of water" he pontificated "are most mysterious. Take this billabong. It can be as dry as a desert for months, even years. Then all of a sudden, and not necessarily from any rain whatsoever, suddenly — **water.**"

Green might have sneered "and pigs might fly" but in fact he only said, politely, "Impossible."

"Not at all. What about Lake George? D'you know Lake George? Now that's a strange lake. Boats have sunk and people been drowned in that lake yet at other times cattle graze it to dust — some people say there's an underground connection. And speaking of drowning" he went on rapidly to forestall a protest from Green "that's how this place got its name, Dead Man's Billabong. A man was actually drowned here. In this billabong. Son of one of the owners, he was."

Em chipped in eagerly. "You never told us that before, Dad. Does Mother know? Which owner was it?"

"How many owners have there been for God's sake? The thing's only been subdivided seven years you tell me." Green asked, pouncing. "Look Pye, I might as well tell you now. I'm far from happy about the water situation on this property. Apparently, as your girlie said, it's a dry valley, so, all right, fine, if you're on the creek, but if you're not, and all you've got to rely on is some sort of magic billabong that stays dry for ages and then ups and drowns someone, what's the good of that?"

Pye got the message, even seemed to have anticipated it. He turned his back on the billabong, dismissing it as a lost cause. "We'll go up to the house" he said, the nerve jumping in his cheek as he led the way to the car. "Mrs Gormley will be expecting us for a cup of tea. You know" he added as the Buick plodded across the flats "there's really water all 'round you in this valley. The whole place is practically floating on it. You can sink a well practically anywhere and get it but it helps to know where's best. Actually I can help you there. After we've had our tea I'll show you how I do it."

In the back, Em leaned forward confidentially. "Dad's a great water diviner" she informed the client. "He always does his trick when we come here. My mother doesn't believe in it, but."

“That’s the very last time” he vowed to Beryl that night when they finally got to bed.

“Why what did she say this time?”

“What did she say! Besides it’s not just what she says. It’s — well she cramps my style Beb. I can’t sell properly with her there.”

“So you don’t think he’ll buy?”

“I don’t know. He’s got this bee in his bonnet about water. His trouble is, he wants a place like Krubi Downs for a Deadman’s Billabong price....”

“The grocer rang this afternoon, Hotham. He wants his cheque. Well, it’s three months. I felt awful.”

“You needn’t! He’ll get it eventually. Wish I could be as sure of getting Greens....”

“But with the baby coming too... what’ll we do if things don’t pick up?”

“We’ll be **all right** Beb. Have I ever let you down? God, I’m tired. Must have walked miles over the place today ... miles ...”

He fell asleep, on the instant, like a baby.