

An excerpt from
Jamberoo Road
by Eleanor Spence

1 The Midsummer Visitor

In mid-January in the Illawarra, the few and scattered settlers were thankful that theirs was a land of lake and creek, dim jungle-growth and unexpected mountain-stream. There had been times in the winter months when they had cursed this same lavishness of water, when the floods had risen over the scarce grassy flats where the cattle grazed, and covered the rough tracks which were not yet roads, but which constituted none the less the only paths to civilization, as represented by the tiny military settlement of Wollongong, and the boat-harbor whence, with some luck, one might even travel to Sydney.

But Sally Braithwaite could not remember Sydney, although the others told her that they had all lived there once. That had been five years ago, too long for a ten-year-old to retain memories of any but momentous events, like the long journey, by dray and on foot, from Appin up in the hills to the shores of the Illawarra. Francis and Gavin and some of the older children spoke occasionally, too, of a mysterious place called Switherby, and Missabella called it 'home'. This, Sally thought, was just another of Missabella's eccentricities, for where else could 'home' be but Mount St. Matthew?

On this hot, hushed, breathless morning, Sally had one of her favorite jobs to do—she was taking the cows to pasture down near the beach. Her task might have been much more onerous had her charges included Mike the bull, but only Eben and Gavin were required to cope with him. As it was, four tubby Jersey cows and two half-grown heifers made up the little herd that ambled in single file down the shady track, with Jessie in the lead, for Jessie was the oldest, and had been placidly treading this path for five years. Sally had only to follow, stopping now and then to listen to the sonorous beat of invisible waves, and to surmise that there would be but a light surf running today, quite suitable for paddling.

The moods of the sea seemed almost to regulate the life of everyone at Mount St. Matthew, sheltered now unseen on the thickly-timbered ridge at Sally's back. With heavy grey seas came the driftwood which when dried made such excellent fuel, and often other, stranger, pieces of flotsam whose sources Sally could only guess at. Once she had found a waterlogged rag-doll, once a leather-bound book with sodden, illegible pages, and she had made quite a collection of empty bottles—none, alas! with a message inside. On these stormy days, Paul could not put to sea in his beloved home-made boat, patiently hewed by Gavin and himself from the trunk of a cabbage-palm—indeed, if Missabella had had her way, Paul would never have launched it at all, but she had finally allowed him to set forth this summer, provided he did not go beyond the confines of the bay known to them all as Bull-Calf Cove.

On the fine sunny days when the sea was decorous and gentle, all the children bathed, and the older boys fished from the rocks, while Paul trawled quite effectively with his net—also made by hand at home, but this time by the housewifely twins, Martha and Marianne. Or perhaps the aboriginal boy, Cammy, would hunt and spear crabs when the tide was out; lately, however,

there were whole weeks when Cammy was absent entirely from Mount St. Matthew, and no one knew of his exact whereabouts. The swamps and ridges and gullies to the west of the homestead could have effectively hidden a hundred fifteen-year-old native boys, let alone one.

The cows had reached the flats beside the beach, and spread out fan-wise, swinging heads well down, tails twitching rhythmically to ward off the little black flies that were the inevitable accompaniment to summer. Sally took off her shoes and stockings, and kilted up the skirt of her striped cotton dress. Missabella still held firmly to the belief that young ladies, even in the remotest outpost of the Colonies, should never go barefoot, and must always wear sunbonnets to protect their complexions from the ravages of the sun. Sally reasoned that it was only logical to discard footwear on a beach, but force of habit restrained her from removing the bonnet. It was an article with a long and varied history; once a modish affair of straw and pink ribbons and artificial blossom, it had graced the head of Selina Crosley on her voyage to New South Wales with the rest of the Switherby pilgrims and characteristically she had treasured and refurbished it until it became too small for her. Thence it had been bequeathed to Marianne, an incongruous decoration for her plump and prosaic figure, and finally, battered but brave still, it had come down to Sally. In fact, she was the one girl in the group who had no need to fear the colonial sun—her skin was a deep smooth brown, touched with pink over the high cheek-bones, and her long, wayward, and frequently tangled hair was matt black, darker even than the lumps of coal she often found along the shore to the north. Missabella sometimes called her 'the gypsy', which was appropriate enough in view of both Sally's coloring and her love of wandering far afield.

'Maybe it was the gypsies who left you on Missabella's doorstep,' Luke had said to her teasingly not long ago. 'Somebody did, anyway. Your name isn't really "Braithwaite".'

'Yours isn't either,' Sally had retorted. 'So who cares?' Her insouciance was quite unfeigned. Missabella had explained long ago that none of the children at Mount St. Matthew was actually related to herself, that they were all orphans collected in Switherby and taken in a group to New South Wales under Miss Arabella Braithwaite's guardianship. Among the ten of them they had five different surnames—Sally had adopted Missabella's because her own was a complete mystery—and Cammy, the eleventh orphan, had no surname at all. To Sally it was a romantic and pleasing story, and she never tired of hearing the older members, like Francis and Gavin and Cassie, recalling details of the lengthy pilgrimage beginning in Switherby in 1825, and ending here in the Illawarra the following year.

Sally waded along the edge of the shadowy creek known as Switherby Brook. It had gouged out a sandy trough across the beach to the sea, and as Sally left the shelter of the gums and cabbage-palms she felt the full blinding glare of the sunlight surrounding her. But the little frilled waves that met her were cold as snow, so cold indeed that she gave a gasp of shock. The wonders of the sea never ceased to astonish her. Contentedly she splashed in the shallows, pausing occasionally to dig her feet into the damp sand in search of the flat shellfish Cammy liked to eat, or to pick up an especially shiny, colorful pebble to take home to Robin. Sally was always rather disappointed to find that once taken from the water, these sea-pebbles lost their glow and brilliance, but Robin was satisfied with whatever she brought him. Fourteen-year-old Robin, hardly taller or broader than Sally herself, had none of the astuteness of Cassie or her brothers, nor the abilities of Gavin the builder, but on the other hand, he did not have Luke's temper nor Selina's airs and graces. Robin led a very quiet and placid life, bounded utterly by the walls and fences of Mount St.

Matthew.

Sally was so absorbed that she hardly bothered to glance up when one of the cows gave a low, inquiring sort of moo. The cause of her disturbance was probably no more than a wallaby hopping through the adjacent bush. Blacks were not likely to be loitering so close to a settlement in broad daylight, although rumors of night raids on crops and cattle were currently rife from Wollongong in the north to the far Shoalhaven estuary in the south.

It was, however, neither aborigine nor wallaby that presently came into view over the broad brow of the headland to the north of Bull-Calf Cove. Squinting against the sunlight, Sally distinguished the light-limned outline of a horse and rider, approaching at a sensible walk. As the two grew nearer, it became obvious to her detached and mildly interested gaze that, firstly, the horse was a particularly fine and well-kept animal, in an area where horses were mostly shaggy, ungainly, and hard-worked, and secondly, the rider was a young man decked out in breeches and linen shirt of remarkably good cut and a quite startling cleanliness. His riding-boots shone so brightly that Sally was positively dazzled.

She waded to the shore and stood watching, perfectly composed and not at all ashamed of her own bedraggled and faded attire. The man was a stranger, and neither he nor she was required to utter more than a passing 'Good morning' on a beach which was public property. Sally remembered one of Missabella's maxims, that in such a social situation the lady always spoke first. So—

'Good morning,' said Sally, and prepared to return to her paddling.

But the young man, having returned her greeting, reined in his horse. Seen near at hand, he was a tall, well-built young fellow, brown-haired and keen of eye, and clean-shaven. Sally, had she been asked to guess, would have observed that he was a few years older than Francis, who was eighteen.

'Perhaps you live somewhere hereabouts?' asked the stranger, glancing around at the grazing herd.

Sally nodded, maintaining her reserve. Missabella had warned her against conversing freely with unknown men—but this was the first time Sally had had cause to recall the precept. Strangers were rare creatures in the Illawarra.

'I'm looking for Miss Arabella Braithwaite. Could you tell me where to find her?'

Sally considered this for a few moments, then decided that she could safely be more forthcoming. She quite liked the young man's appearance, and she was even more impressed by his horse, which stood impatiently tossing its head and shaking its glossy mane. The Mount St. Matthew horse, the elderly broad-backed Tomkins, was a mere yokel by comparison.

'I can show you part of the way,' said Sally. 'But I'm not supposed to leave the cows for long. It would be quicker, wouldn't it, if I could ride on your horse too?'

The young man looked rather startled.

'She's a bit skittish, you know—she mightn't care for two riders.'

Sally continued to stare up at him with wide and hopeful brown eyes.

'Let's try it, then,' said the stranger, relenting. 'Give me your hand.'

The mare shied a little, but somehow, thanks to her own natural agility and the man's assistance, Sally eventually found herself perched behind the saddle, and they moved off along the firm wet sand.

'What's her name?' Sally asked, observing nonchalantly her seemingly remarkable height above ground.

'Angelica—because that's exactly what she's not,' explained her escort. 'Are we going in the right direction?'

'You turn right here, and follow the creek. Why do you want to see Missabella?'

'Who? You mean Miss Braithwaite, I suppose? I'm on an errand for my father—our name is Marlow, and we have a place at Jamberoo.'

This was an interesting piece of information. Sally had thought she knew the names of nearly all the settlers in the district, identifiable usually by the names of their properties—the Spearings of Paulsgrove, for instance, or the Osbornes of Marshall Mount. Admittedly, the members of Missabella's flock had few social contacts, but from occasional visits to Wollongong, they kept in touch with all local news, and the name 'Marlow' had not been heard as far as Sally knew.

Curiosity about one's fellow-beings was frowned upon, at least by Missabella, so Sally tried a circuitous method.

'We haven't been to Jamberoo. Which way did you come?'

'There's a track of sorts from our place to Shellharbor. After that it was easy—I just followed the coast.'

A brief silence ensued while Angelica, somewhat suspicious now, was guided up the hill path beneath ever-thickening foliage.

'I expect Missabella will be surprised to see you,' ventured Sally. 'We don't have many visitors.'

She clutched desperately at the saddle as Angelica shied violently at something ahead. Peering round the young man's broad back, Sally saw a familiar figure coming down the track, a half-grown boy in too-short trousers and homemade cabbage-tree hat, fishing line dangling from one thin hand.

'It's only Paul,' said Sally. 'Now he can mind the cows while I show you the way.'

'I think I could find it myself, if it's not much farther,' said the newcomer politely.

But Sally was determined to discover the end of the story—for unknown young gentlemen of substantial means would hardly be seeking out Missabella and her charges simple to pass the time of day. So she gave her instructions to Paul, who passed on with barely a glance at either the gentleman or his mount, so intent was he upon his fishing expedition.

'How many more of you are there?' asked young Marlow, urging Angelica over a protruding root.

'About eight. Nine, if you count Cammy, only he's away just now. We don't really know where—he's a black boy, you see.'

'You mean, he usually lives here?'

'Of course,' said Sally in surprise. 'He came with us all the way from Sydney, years ago.'

'And you trust him around the place?'

For the first time during the encounter Sally was nonplussed. She could not begin to guess at the man's meaning. Cammy was more friend than servant, even to Missabella, and without his skilled hunting and bushcraft they would often have come close to starvation in the hard seasons they had endured.

The subject was not pursued, however, because at that moment they arrived at the slip-rails of the Mount St. Matthew yard, and Sally slid down to open them. As he entered, young Marlow appraised his surroundings thoughtfully and at some length, and Sally, following his gaze, saw her home for an instant through a stranger's eyes. By local standards, it was fairly presentable; the yard was stoutly fenced, the bark stable more or less waterproof, the vegetable garden to the left of the slip-rail well tilled and well stocked, although inevitably rather dry and dusty at this time of the year. A few hens pecked about the bare patch in the middle of the clearing, and beyond that was the house, flanked on either side by young and struggling pear-trees.

'We all helped build the house,' Sally said, and in spite of herself she spoke defensively. Out at Jamberoo the Marlows probably had a proper house of stone or brick, with a slate roof. The Mount St. Matthew habitation had been put together over the years, by hands always eager but not always skilful, and its outward appearance rather belied the homely comfort within. Originally there had been only two one-roomed huts, with slab-walls and cabbage-tree thatch; these had been joined and expanded, so that now there were four rooms and a lean-to kitchen-cum-dairy, and the old thatch had been replaced by rough-hewn cedar shingles. To one side of the door were a pair of large water-barrels; on the other, a lovingly-tended patch of garden, at present displaying only three small geranium plants.

'Robin likes to work in the garden,' Sally said. 'That's Robin, over there with the spade.'
The approach of the stranger had clearly frightened Robin into utter immobility. Small, pale, and slightly deformed, he stood staring with open mouth and round eyes.

'It's all right, Robin—it's someone to see Missabella,' Sally assured him, in the comforting tone that they all used in addressing Robin. To the visitor she added, in a lowered voice:
'Robin's not very clever, because he had a fall when he was little. And he's afraid of people he doesn't know—once his father came and tried to take him away. His father was a convict, you see.'

The puzzled frown on Marlow's face was proof that, indeed, he did *not* see, but the arrival of Missabella postponed any further explanations. She came round the house from the dairy, wearing the old yellowed straw hat and the patched muslin dress which were her standard articles of attire, and had been ever since Sally could remember. Seeing the immaculate young gentleman at her front door, Missabella hastily snatched off her holland apron, and handed it to Sally.

'Good morning. Did you wish to see me?'

Accent and demeanor would not have been out of place in an English drawing-room. The visitor found himself bowing—he had already removed his hat.

'Yes, ma'am. I'm Edward Marlow, from the property called Falls Farm, at Jamberoo. I'm here on behalf of my father.'

'Jamberoo?' repeated Missabella. 'Then you will have had a long ride. Would you care for a drink of tea?'

By this time several other orphans had gathered. The twins, Robin's sisters, stood at a safe distance, stolid and red-cheeked, and so much alike that only their adopted relatives could ever say with certainty which was Marianne and which Martha. Luke should have been chopping wood, but any distraction served him as an excuse for downing tools. He was strong and tall for a fifteen-year-old; while Marlow was engaged with Missabella, Luke's longing gaze was upon the stranger's horse, the kind of mount the boy had always intensely desired for himself.

Missabella, however, was issuing instructions, and no one, not even the oldest boy, dared disobey her—at least, not yet.

'Martha, put the kettle on to boil, and you, Marianne, take out the best cups. Luke, bring two chairs out here into the shade. Sally, fetch some water for Mr. Marlow's horse.'

For once, Luke accomplished his task in the shortest possible time, and caught up with Sally as the latter staggered across the yard with her wooden bucket.

'I'll do it,' said Luke. 'It's too heavy for you.'

'You've never said so before,' remarked Sally. 'I've carried the water hundreds of times.' But she relinquished her burden willingly enough, for she was anxious to overhear the conversation being carried on beneath the she-oaks on the other side of the yard. So she ran back to the house for a handful of grain for the hens, and gradually coaxed them as unobtrusively as possible in the right direction.

'I knew, of course, of the property called Falls Farm,' Missabella was saying. 'I understood it belonged to a family called Graham.'

'My father purchased it from Mr. Graham two or three months ago,' answered Edward. 'We have been in the Colony only since last September. We left Southampton in March of last year, aboard the *Princess Caroline*.'

Missabella's lined and sunburnt face was at once alight.

'You must have news of doings at home, then. We so seldom meet anyone fresh from England—tell me, do you know the Midlands?'

'A little, ma'am, but we're from Sussex ourselves. My father had a fine old estate there, and would not have left it, but for the unfortunate circumstance of my sister's health. She is much younger than I—only thirteen—and the doctors advised us to remove her to another climate to lengthen her life.'

'Indeed—then surely the long voyage must have been very trying for her?'

'We expected it,' admitted the young man, 'but in fact she seemed to enjoy it once we entered the tropics. So far her state of health is much improved.'

By the time the twins arrived with the treasured state-occasion teacups, the loitering Sally was beginning to wonder whether Edward Marlow would ever come to the point. Missabella, however, was obviously relishing the prolonged discussion of Marlow affairs, and the cups had been emptied and replenished before Sally again pricked up her ears.

'My father is a widower,' Edward was saying, 'and although we have an excellent housekeeper who came with us from Sussex, and several other servants, we have no one capable of seeing to Gillis's education.'

That was a very strange name for a girl, Sally thought. And why should a thirteen-year-old, in poor health but obviously wealthy surroundings, have to be taught anything? She would never have to earn her own living, like the orphans, male and female alike.

'My father heard from the Spearings that you had settled here with several—er—charges, and he thought that perhaps one of your girls might care to consider employment as a governess and companion to my sister.'

Having at last established the reason for his visit, young Mr. Marlow gulped his tea and sat back, wiping his forehead with a fine silk handkerchief. He gazed about the clearing, apparently ill at ease under Missabella's thoughtful scrutiny.

'It needs careful consideration, of course,' said Missabella, with dignity. 'I am only too mindful of the fact that my wards must make their own way in this Colony. Such employment as your father suggests might prove highly suitable for one of the girls. However, I shall require to know—'

The well-bred gentlemanly Edward Marlow suddenly did the unforgivable thing—he actually interrupted his hostess, and in his loudest tones.

'Where the devil,' he demanded, jumping up and almost upsetting the precious china, 'is my horse?'

And at the same time, while Sally watched in bewilderment and consternation, a most untidy and inelegant figure appeared at the top of the beach path, brandishing a pair of discarded shoes. 'Can anyone tell me,' asked Cassie breathlessly, 'why Luke is racing up and down the beach on a real thoroughbred? Any minute he'll either kill himself or the horse!'

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