

THE SWITHERBY PILGRIMS

Also by Eleanor Spence

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The  
Switherby Pilgrims  
A Tale of the Australian Bush



Eleanor Spence

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## Author's Note

All characters in this story are fictitious, with the exception of Thomas Rose of Appin, and Dr. Halloran of the Sydney (Free) Grammar School. Brief mention is also made of John Macarthur and Governor Ralph Darling. For information on these people, on the historical background generally, and on the Illawarra District particularly, I am indebted to the *Journals and Proceedings* of the Royal Australian Historical Society.

E.S.

## Publisher's Note

British spellings in the original text have been changed for the sake of our predominately American readership.

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THE SWITHERBY PILGRIMS



## Miss Braithwaite Counts Her Burdens

**H**ER PROPER NAME was Miss Arabella Jane Braithwaite, and so she might always have been known had it not been for an outbreak of typhus in her home village of Switherby, early in March, ten years after the Battle of Waterloo.

In Switherby, Waterloo was long since forgotten; indeed, it had not been greatly remarked even at the time it was fought. Switherby had then been but a small village, tucked away behind a ridge just north of the center of England. It was the tiny unhurried heart of a farming district where nothing seemed to have altered greatly since Roundheads and Cavaliers fought across the fields. The farmers brought their produce to Switherby for sale, and the farmers' wives their woven shawls and pats of butter and crocks of cheese, and their leisurely gossip to regale in the little market-square beside the Saxon church. Two of Switherby's sons had died at Waterloo, and young Oliver Brown had lost a leg and most of his health, but after a week or two the talk in Switherby was once again mostly of the seasons and the spinning, the betrothals and the babies.



Miss Arabella's father had been the Vicar in those days, preaching to a sleepy sun-reddened or wind-chapped congregation in the squat stone church by the market-place, the church of St. Matthew the Lower. It was called thus to distinguish it from the other St. Matthew's, a mile away up on the ridge among the fields. When Miss Arabella's brother Hugh succeeded his father as Vicar, six years after Waterloo, St. Matthew's the Higher was no longer out in the country, but rather linked with Switherby by a ragged chain of low brick cottages and a rough well-trodden road. Life was changing at last, and as the farmers' pastures were gradually enclosed, and new steam-powered factories rose bleakly along the valley, more and more bewildered country-folk moved in to make Switherby a larger and larger village, until it could almost be called a small town.

"And much good that has done us," remarked the Reverend Hugh sadly. "What shall I do for peoples' souls when their bodies are not getting enough food?"

"We must see to the food first," answered his practical sister.

Certainly she did her best, for whatever Miss Arabella did she tried to do thoroughly. No one was ever turned away hungry from the vicarage door, even if it meant that the vicar's sister had to turn to and help the overworked cook, or share out the roast-beef prepared for their own dinner. But Miss Arabella had not the means to clothe the unemployed in winter, or to pay their overdue rent or give them warm beds. Nor could she rescue all the babies and small children who succumbed to every ailment known to man, because lack of good food sapped their resistance.

"I can still help the older children," she said, refusing to admit defeat. "I shall start a school."

The old shabby vicarage had space enough for several classes, but as Miss Arabella expected to be the only teacher, she prepared only one room, the back parlor which opened on to an overgrown rose-garden. She dragged downstairs all the nursery furniture and some wobbly wooden chairs which she found in the attic, stocked up on slates and pencils and samplers, and asked her brother to broadcast news of her school from the pulpit.

“No fees charged, of course,” she added. “And I shall take both boys and girls from four years old.”

In theory, it seemed promising. Switherby boasted one grammar-school and a small private establishment for young ladies, but both of these required fees, and Miss Arabella was hoping to attract the sons and daughters of the poorer folk. She had plenty of faith in her own ability to instruct them; she had been educated along with her brother, first by a governess and then by a tutor, and had had the freedom of the vicarage’s ample untidy library. All she needed was a supply of pupils.

A week passed, however, and the number had not exceeded eight. In the second week two more appeared, but three others left. It continued thus throughout a term, with the average enrollment standing at seven.

“There are *dozens* of children in Switherby who should be at school,” sighed Miss Arabella. “Why don’t they come?”

“Why don’t their fathers and mothers come to church any more?” asked the Vicar gloomily. “I can tell you why—it’s because they work so hard on all the other days that they’re too tired to go anywhere on Sundays. Or they haven’t any clothes fit to wear. And the children work, too—that’s why they don’t come to your school. Even at eight or nine the children can earn a few shillings a week in the factories.

In the old days they worked, too, but then it was clean work on the farms, with plenty to eat and a good night's rest."

"We talk too much of the old days," objected Miss Arabella. "It is here and now that we must help."

For another four years she struggled along with her tiny school, coaxing and scolding and praising her pupils while she forced the rudiments of education into their often weary heads. It was a discouraging business. Her few promising charges usually left after one or two terms, when their parents found employment for them, or decided to move on to one of the larger towns. Those who might have won scholarships to the grammar-school were not permitted to go because their fathers could no longer support them in what was generally considered idleness. Only a very small measure of success came to Miss Arabella, from two sources. One was from the family of Oliver Brown, the Waterloo veteran now deceased. His widow was a valiant little woman who did every manner of work in and around Switherby in order that her three children, and in particular the older boy, Francis, should have a sound education and consequently secure employment. The children showed every sign of fulfilling their mother's prodigious ambition, and were Miss Arabella's pride.

The second source of satisfaction had literally appeared on the vicarage doorstep, a minute tattered wailing bundle abandoned by its unknown mother one vicious midwinter night. The mother had certainly shown some foresight, for had the baby been left at the door of the district workhouse its chances of healthy survival would have been greatly diminished. As it was, Miss Arabella refused steadfastly to turn the child over to the local authorities—who in any case had their hands more than full—and added its exact-

ing care to her long list of parish and domestic duties. The child was duly christened Sarah Louisa, and in time began toddling about the schoolroom during lessons, being petted and admired by the older girls, who called her Sally-Lou. Miss Arabella secretly believed that her foundling was of gypsy stock, so dark-eyed and black of hair was she, but if Miss Arabella had anything to say in the matter, Sally-Lou would undoubtedly grow up a well-educated and well-spoken young English lady.

And so it might have been. But the typhus epidemic struck Switherby, and Miss Arabella's plans underwent a drastic change.

Epidemics of various kinds had occurred many times before, of course, and everyone accepted them as inevitable strokes of fate. In the old days, however, when the farms were scattered and the village small, illnesses did not spread so far and so fast. With Switherby now overcrowded and standards of hygiene at their lowest, with whole families living and sleeping in one damp un-ventilated room, and only one harassed doctor in the entire town, the typhus raged like a fire out of control.

At the vicarage, Miss Arabella and her brother fought it grimly throughout that dreary spring, risking their own lives to save at least the children of the worst-affected families. When Oliver Brown's widow became ill with the disease, Miss Arabella kept the three children at the vicarage, along with several other pupils whose own parents were unable to look after them. Her greatest fear was for Sally-Lou, now an active prancing four-year-old, but apparently one heritage the child had acquired from her vanished forebears was a remarkable constitution, for she survived the epidemic untouched.

Spring came slowly to Switherby, covering the vicarage elms with drifts of green, and setting the churchyard aglow with daffodils. More and more people began to venture forth again into market-place and factory, and on Sundays the church was no longer three-fourths empty—only half-vacant, as before the epidemic. Gladly, Miss Arabella and the cook threw open the windows and doors to admit the warming sun, and the schoolroom was put in order for its returning pupils.

But some of the vacancies in Switherby were permanent. Miss Arabella's face grew sad and thoughtful as she talked with her brother after Evensong one beautiful day in June. They sat in the study facing the church, where the sunlight lingered on golden-brown stone and jewelled glass.

"I fear Mrs. Brown had no chance at all, poor soul," said the Reverend Hugh, still tired and pale from those hectic weeks. "She was quite worn out even before she took ill. And that other widow, poor Mrs. Crosley the dressmaker—she slaved to keep the little girl."

"Selina—her mother never let her come to school for fear of her catching an illness," observed Miss Arabella. "Yet the child came through this quite safely, I believe. Hugh, how many new orphans are there in our parish?"

"Apart from the Browns and Selina Crosley, and those two little Scots fellows you once had in your school—let me see, there are the Gracechurch children. Their father is living, but he's precious little use to them, I'm afraid. Always drunk, and ill-treating that poor boy. If you count them, that makes nine. Several others have already gone to the work-house."

Miss Arabella stared fixedly at a brilliant forsythia blooming by the churchyard wall. She was seeing, not the golden

blossoms, but the great grey bulk of the Bingleton work-house, ten miles away.

“And the Browns will go, too?”

Her brother sighed.

“Where else can they go? And you know, Arabella, the present head of the work-house is a most humane man—the children are never badly used there.”

“Perhaps not,” agreed Miss Arabella. “They are simply put out to work for twelve hours a day, and sent home to sleep in a huge bare room with absolutely nothing to call their own. Mrs. Brown was always so sure that Francis at least would make his mark in the world, and grow up to keep his sister and brother in comfort. Francis will be fortunate now if he rises to be overseer in the hardware factory.”

The Reverend Hugh gazed at his sister in pity and perplexity.

“My dear, all this is perfectly true, and regrettable, but try as we might, we cannot put right all the wrongs of the world, or even of Switherby.”

Miss Arabella studied the forsythia for several more minutes, and when she spoke again she seemed to have changed the subject completely—although her brother, knowing her so well, remained a little wary.

“Now that the worst of the epidemic is over,” said Miss Arabella, “I suppose you will go on with your plans to be married in the summer?”

“If Charlotte is willing,” answered the Vicar cautiously.

He had been betrothed for some months to the daughter of a neighboring minister in Bingleton, and his sister had taken the news very calmly at the time. She had, indeed, been delighted at his choice of a wife, for Charlotte was both cheerful and conscientious, and would make an

excellent mistress of the vicarage.

“I hope you won’t be inconvenienced if some of these children remain at the vicarage for a few weeks,” Arabella continued.

“Of course not, Bella. You know, both Charlotte and I should be only too pleased to have you here indefinitely, and goodness knows, there’s enough room for a dozen children, if that’s what you want. But,” he added shrewdly, “that’s *not* what you want, is it?”

Miss Arabella at last removed her gaze from the window, and looked at her brother squarely. She was a small, slight lady, with mouse-colored hair and an indifferent complexion unflattered by her choice of grey or lilac as dress-materials, but her eyes were fine and commanding, and reminded the Reverend Hugh that his sister had been a determined and dominating character since their nursery days.

“You are quite right, Hugh—I have other plans. You will no doubt call them outrageous, but my mind is made up. These children must have a new start in life, and a chance to do something worthwhile with their lives. So I am going to take them away.”

“You mean to another village? I understand conditions are bad almost everywhere just now—”

“Exactly. So I intend to take them to New South Wales.”

Had she named the moon or the planet Venus as her destination, her brother would hardly have been more astonished. He considered himself a rather well-traveled clergyman, having been once to Scotland, twice to Wales, and at least half a dozen times to London. He even hoped to visit the Continent one day. But his sister had led the sheltered life customary to one of her class, and as far as he could