Jamberoo Road

Also by Eleanor Spence

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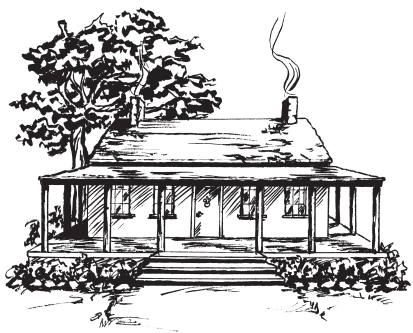

by Eleanor Spence

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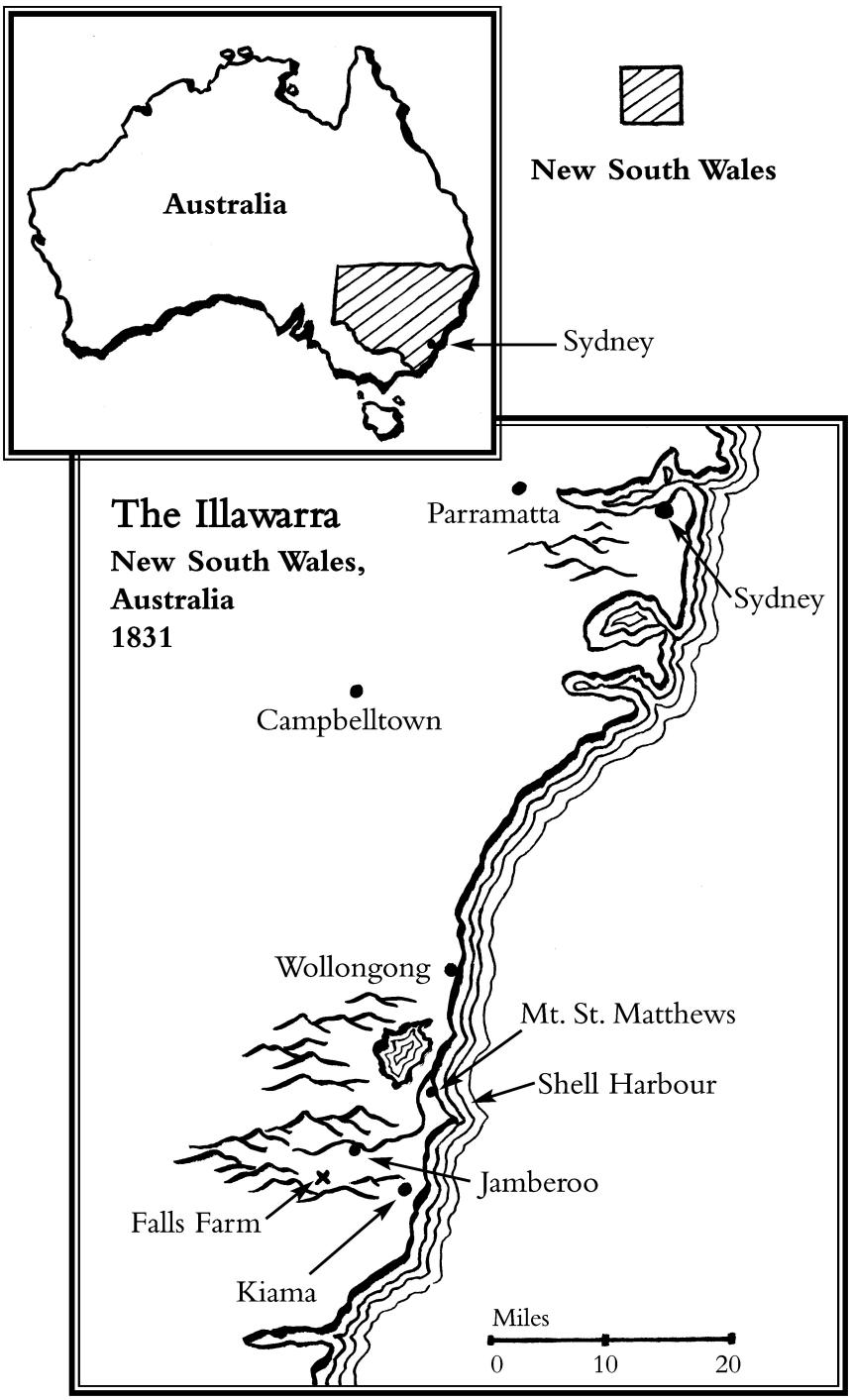
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The Midsummer Visitor

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