

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA
CHAPTER XXIII
and
Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month,
April, 2025.

Rain had been falling for days or so it seemed to the good people of Gloucester, but for the members of the Black Spot Gang the remaining days of February 1889 would be their last of freedom, most for eternity and for a few for many years to come.

The 4th February had been another day of heavy showers, but when Marie and Hubert emerged from the Music Hall they were pleased to see that the sky had cleared of rain clouds. A strong wind had developed with patchy clouds scudding across the sky. The pair were from quite humble families, but though poor they were entirely honest. Marie, who was fifteen years of age that day lived with her father in a little cottage near the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal just south of the docks in a quiet rural location. Once they had cleared the docks, a journey Marie would never have made on her own, as it wasn't safe for young ladies to be out after dark without the protection of a beau in such a vulnerable location frequented by various undesirables. Had Marie's mother been alive she would have prohibited her daughter walking out with a young man of an evening, but Mrs. Trulove had tragically died six years earlier of diphtheria leaving her husband with the task of bringing up their then nine-year-old daughter. Mr. Trulove, who was an employee of the canal company was certainly a caring, responsible and sober father, although he had but one weakness, he found it impossible to resist his daughter's wheedling and coaxing to obtain his consent even when she knew her mother would not have approved had she still been in the land of the living. Marie was a pretty girl, petite of form and of desirable proportions; one toss of her long curly auburn hair and who could resist her charm.

As the pair walked along the canal towpath, somewhere over in the vicinity of the railway running to the north of the city centre the steam whistle of a train engine could be heard faintly in the distance. Hubert, who was employed by the "Midland Railway", could not have been more enthusiastic for railways and if Marie had not been so in love with him she could have been utterly bored. As it was she thought him wonderful with his extensive knowledge. Hubert could recognise not just "Midland" but also "Great Western" and "London & South Western" whistles as well as the different styles of semaphore signals and stations. To Marie he was also an expert on the recognition by sound of "GWR" broad gauge and standard gauge locomotives together with the beat of their wheels on the rails of four and/or six-wheel coaches. Suddenly, while Hubert was explaining the different sounds of the shrill shriek of a steam whistle Marie grabbed his arm and with an exclamation of alarm pointed to a dark form floating in the water near the bank. They both peered into the canal trying to decide what the rather large object could be when some underwater disturbance moved the thing to reveal a head and a hand that in the semi darkness took on the form of a man, who was so still he could only be dead.

Marie's initial reaction was to drag the poor man out of the canal, but Hubert quickly said no, they must not touch the body until the police arrived. The thing to do first is to go

straight to her father's cottage where Marie would be safe, then he would return to Gloucester to report the dead man to the police.

As they turned away from the canal in the direction of Mr. Trulove's home Marie spotted something quite small glistening on the path, it was a fleeting glimpse for when the pair looked closely they could not find anything. Hubert declared it was probably a droplet of water glistening in the moonlight and so Marie duly returned home where she related the story of finding the corps to her father, while Hubert made all haste to the Gloucester Police Station.

That night the police fished the body from the canal whence it was removed to the city mortuary for examination by the pathologist the next day. The following morning a man walking his dog further south, only five miles from the lock at Sharpness reported what he believed to be the body of a woman, and whom the police would identify as Mrs. Juliet Browning, the wife of the dead man found earlier, Mr. Charles Browning, proprietor of Charles Browning, Gunsmith of Southgate Street, Gloucester. Further enquiries revealed that the shop had been visited the previous evening by four shabbily dressed men of uncertain age but there were no reports of their leaving the shop, or at least by the Southgate Street entrance.. This description had been supplied by the resident of a neighbouring property who had been hanging curtains and cleaning, a task he had promised his wife he would undertake while she was away visiting her mother in Stroud but had neglected. She returned the day after.

Two days later George received a letter from his old school friend, the Assistant Chief Constable, in which George learnt that matters regarding the Black Spot Gang had taken on a degree of urgency and requesting he come with all haste to the Police Station in Gloucester. On arrival a few hours later, George was informed of the two brutal murders which the Police attributed to the Black Spot Gang adding that the postmortems carried out by the pathologist on the two bodies revealed that they had indeed been murdered in a most savage manner, but that in the surgeon's opinion both were still alive when they entered the water, but only just. By comparison with other cases in Gloucester it looked very much like the work of Bill the Knife and others.

"We have a witness too." Said the Assistant Chief Constable.

George gave him a look of enquiry.

Algie held up a hand to stay his friend's curiosity and continued. "Not perhaps at this stage a very reliable witness, but we must proceed with care to construct a waterproof case. We will be the tortoise not the hare, a what! They are probable laughing at the "Jolly Tar", but he who laughs last laughs longest, not that we will be laughing to see the gang committed to gaol, just a little pleased with such an outcome." Now with a serious expression Algie looked straight at George when he said. "There is more but I am prevented from revealing any further details at this stage. However, the matter I touched on when we last met has been approved by the Chief, and thus we can plan the next phase in which you will be involved, that is assuming you are still willing to help."

George indicated his desire to be of assistance.

“Good show, old man.” Exclaimed Algie and pulling on a cord hanging beside the mantelpiece he requested tea for both of them of the constable who had promptly arrived in response to the summons.

When they were on their own again Algie continued to fill out some of the details of what they knew so far. Four men, so far unknown, were seen entering the premises of Charles Browning, a gun shop on Southgate Street in the late afternoon, that is at dusk.



Southgate Street, Gloucester.

At the moment we cannot be certain of the identity of the group, but they could just be Mad Mick McNab, Bill the Knife and two accomplices. Having gained access to the shop by seemingly legitimate means, we can only suppose that they engaged the couple in conversation with the pretence of purchasing a gun. Again, this is conjecture, but either they overpowered the proprietor and his wife, or perhaps one of them seized Mrs. Browning threatening injury and/or death if Mr. Browning did not follow their instructions by locking the street entrance to the shop and opening the rear door which leads onto a yard with access to a lane where the remainder of the gang were waiting with a hand barrow. The two were then bound and gagged and loaded onto the hand barrow together with a quantity of guns and ammunition. So far, you understand, this is the most likely explanation, because the two bodies retrieved from the Gloucester & Sharpness Canal have been identified as those of Charles and Juliet Browning. Furthermore, the Surgeon is of the opinion that neither were actually dead when they entered the water, but almost dead from terrible knife wounds.

George was about to ask a question, but Algie held up a hand saying that there is more. One body was recovered near the cottage occupied by a Mr. Trulove, and the other some miles downstream, nearer to Sharpness. In daylight we found wheel ruts in the wet soil of the tow path between Gloucester and the point where the male body was found together with a great many footprints suggesting that there were a number of criminals and that

both bodies had been dumped at the same location.

“And you think that the lady being lighter was carried downstream by a gentle current?”

“Quite so.” Said Algie. “Whats more we found a gold ring near the same spot with an interesting inscription on the inside.”

“Seems to me you have enough to arrest the gang already, so why wait?” Enquired George.

“Ahh, but we have not, too much superstition. A good defence lawyer would have our guts for garters. We would be the laughingstock of the county. No, we need more evidence to prove our conjecture, and that’s where you come in.”

“Oh yes, and how is that?”

“If we are right that the murders and the Black Spot Gang are one and the same, and we have good reason to believe that, then the answer lies in the “Jolly Tar” which we have had under surveillance for a few days now, both front and rear. As you know, the property is terraced, so no side entrances. We would like you to walk in, large as life, but not dressed too well, don’t want a good suit ruined. Don’t be too polite to them though, they will probably mock you, don’t take it. Inside there will be several burly constables but you won’t recognise them, they will be mingling with the crowd looking just like common workmen. We will make sure the Gang are there – surveillance. Now here’s what to say when you meet Mad Mick McNab. You’ll know what he looks like from these photographs.” And he showed George photographs of Mad Mick McNab, Bill the Knife, and four others. Algie continued by outlining how he wished the meeting to proceed.



The Jolly Tar.

George was kitted out by the Police in suitable wearing apparel and at 7.50 pm a rather breathless Constable arrived at the Police Station to report that all the gang were now at the “Jolly Tar”. All three, Algie, George and the Constable made haste for the tavern which George entered alone. Mad Mick was standing in front of the bar, a pint tankard of ale in one hand, and his left thumb in his waistcoat arm opening. Displaying all the arrogant confidence he undoubtedly felt he looked straight ahead to the open door through

which George had entered and exclaimed “Gaud blimme, just look what the wind’s blown in! Thought we’d seen ther last ‘o you. Cleared orf pretty dammed quick last time you was ‘ere. And taking hold of George’s jacket lapels, he continued. “What’s the matter with you, our Fanny not good enough for yer ain’t she. She’s good enough for us, ain’t she lads.” Turning to the motley bunch of ruffians who had crowded around. “Wouldn’t kick our Fanny ou’er bed would we lads, though she’s far too grand fer th’ likes o’ us.”

All this time George had held his counsel, while Mad Mick continued, unable to restrain himself from the enjoyment of tormenting Mr. Ashbourne. “What’s up wi’ you today? Yer misses pawned yer only decent suit ‘as she? Must need the cash to maintain tha’. big ‘ouse o’ yours out Ross way.” There rang out peals of laughter from the mob gathered around and now blocking any retreat George may have contemplated.

Mad Mick expected George to grovel, make some sort of apology and beat it pretty dam’d quick. But George stood his ground. Then Bill the Knife appeared at his boss’s elbow and enquired. “Do you want ‘im done over, gov’nor? It un’be a pleasure, cocky li’ll toff.”

Mick waved him aside. “Not now, Bill.”

It was then that George stepped forward, and looking Mick straight in the face said. “Very sure of yourself, aren’t you. Could that be something to do with that stash of guns and ammunition your helped yourself too recently? I might be in the market to help you off load some. Always buyers for good quality going cheap, come to consider the matter I could do with a new revolver myself. One can never be too careful, would you not agree?”

McNab looked at George with a puzzled expression on his face. It said loud and clear ‘there’s more to you mate than I thought at first sight.’ Now Mick turned to Bill and enquired what his ‘lieutenant’ thought.

Bill the Knife thought for a moment before saying, loud enough for most of the assembled company to hear. “Well, it’s like this, we got more than we need, but we didn’t get no money, so seems to me we should take the gent up on his offer.”

“I dunow Bill, can we trust ‘im? I really don’t know.” Muttered Mick rubbing his chin.

“Tell you what.” Said George slipping into the uneducated speech of the common street urchin. “ ‘ere’s five quid in advance. You produce a good revolver, and I’ll double that, can’t say fairer than that can I?”

Mick took the white five-pound note and asked Bill to go and bring one down, and turning to George said. “He’ll be back in a moment.” Mick wondered how many more the man had about his person, and if it would be better to knock him down and just take his money. Then they would keep the guns and money. He had the ‘boys’ with him so no difficulty, but something held him back and then Bill appeared. He walked in holding a Colt model 1877 revolver pointing directly at George’s chest. Bill did not posse Mick’s fairly quick brain, but what he lacked in mental agility was compensated by a low animal cunning, and he did not trust George, in fact he would rather have murdered the stranger who seemed to

know too much.



Bill the Knife.

This or something similar was just what the police had been waiting for, actually the production of the pistol was better than could be expected. The appearance of Bill with the gun seemed to act as the instigation for all hell to break loose. The Publican had been in the cellar replacing a barrel of beer, his wife had been behind the bar when George walked in, but instantly she had sensed trouble. Not being aware of the police presence, but noticing they had an unusually large crowd that evening she pushed her sleeves up exposing arms with mussels the size of any navie's with a general physic to match. She had the appearance of one who could give a good account of herself in any brawl.

The stage was now set. The Publican's wife, Amie, holding a quart beer bottle leaned forward over the bar and brought the bottle down on Bill's right shoulder, the gun was in his right hand. At the same moment Mick reached for the gun and seized it by the barrel, it went off with, in the confined space, a resounding crash. Bill staggered gripped the bar and remained standing. The bullet just missed George but killed one of the gang, a 41mm shell passing through his neck just below his jaw and lodging in the rear of his skull. Soundlessly he collapsed in a heap on the floor amongst the sawdust. And so Dick 'Danger' Swiveller passed away.

With an agility that completely surprised the one person who noticed Mrs. Body, the Publican's wife shifted her elephantine bulk around the end of the bar and commenced laying into Mad Mick's mob. She had never agreed with her husband's courting and currying favour with criminals, and she especially disliked the young tart Fanny upstairs.

Everything had happened so quickly, quicker than you could say 'Jack Robinson' that afterwards none of them could relate the events accurately, even the police sergeant nominally in command. A policeman rushed to secure the front entrance door to prevent escape whilst another secured the rear door. The police constables now outnumbered the gang of which there were now only five left standing, one dead and Bill the Knife nursing his right shoulder. Mrs. Boddy accounted for two, Jo O'Sliver and Pat McGrab both now

lying unconscious on the floor, while the police quickly rounded up the others, Paddy O'Hara and the innocent looking photographer Harry Flash. Harry was arrested simply because he had been observed talking amiably with Paddy O'Hara and Pat McGrath so assumed to be a member of the gang.

The Publican, Jock Boddy, a giant of a man, quickly emerged from the cellar being alerted to trouble by the noise of the gun being fired, to be met by a scene of utter turmoil, bodies lying on the floor and across upturned chairs to his horror and amazement. He saw his wife laying flat a fearsome looking villain whom he knew by name only as Pat, and the police, now clearly identifiable since at the first opportunity they had removed their outer covering being their disguise to reveal police uniforms. George stood amongst the debris.



The journey to the Police Station was something of an anticlimax for all concerned. The Police brought two black maria into which the gang, now numbering six were unceremoniously placed handcuffed to fittings secured to the sides of the vehicles and on arrival put into cells. There followed a few days of interrogation and thereafter days of waiting while the police counsel prepared the case for a court hearing.

Eventually the day of the court appearance arrived and all six, under guard, were led up to the dock. It was a sobering occasion for them. Counsel for the Prosecution outlined the principal crime they were charged with committing the brutal and horrific murders of Mr. and Mrs. Browning together with various other crimes. Some details of the criminal brutality were withheld although it was stated that Mr. Browning's eyes had been rendered sightless using a knife for which Bill the Knife was held responsible. It was revealed that wheel tracks in soft soil at the rear of the gun shop near the rear entrance exactly matched wheel marks along the canal tow path. It was also demonstrated that some of the footprints near where the body of Mr. Browning was recovered matched those of Mad Mick's boots, but perhaps most damning of all, the gold ring which Marie had spotted on the tow path was inscribed on the inside "To my beloved Bill Jones, Coleford 22nd March, 1873". This was the most conclusive evidence, the church records revealed that Bill Jones had in fact married Jill Smith at All saints Church in Almshouses Street, Coleford, Gloucestershire on the date inscribed. Mick, standing next to Bill in the Dock could not contain his rage, his face became suffused with fury. Had he not been manacled he would have killed Bill right there in the Court. All the gang with the sole exception of Harry Flash were charged with murder, either actual or by association, aiding and abetting in the crime.

The jury, after twenty minutes deliberation, returned to the court room to find the prisoners guilty as charged, whereupon the trial judge had a black cap placed on his head, over his sorrel wig by the clerk to the court and pronounced sentence of death on all five of the accused with the chilling words “You (followed by the name of the accused in full) shall be taken to a place of execution and there hung by the neck until you are dead.” Five times the court listened to the Judge deliver punishment on the gang including ten years hard labour on Harry Flash who had served the gang but had been able to prove he was elsewhere on the fatal night of the murders, was sentenced to ten years hard labour.

George had been in Court to hear sentences delivered together with his father William and James Aleman, the former proprietor of the Bonnie Moira Brewery in Drybrook. All three were seated in a “GWR” railway carriage, travelling westwards, reflecting on the recent events, George having come through the tavern brawl unscathed considered himself fortunate, William was only pleased the whole affair was now over and the arch criminals would soon be beyond causing further harm, whilst James could not believe his good fortune. Before the murders of the gunsmith and his wife, the catalyst for the dramatic events which followed, James had thought he would have to swing for Mad Mick McNab and Bill the Knife as the only way of riding himself of the violence they threatened in their attempt to obtain possession of the brewery. Now George had bought the property and planned its restoration to full active production with him, James Aleman, as general manager. The Wheel of Fortune had turned yet again, this time in his favour. The future looked rosy, just how rosy he was yet to discover.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



Poster for the International Exhibition in Rome, 1911.

From before the days of equality, diversity, political correctness and much else, often summed up as ‘woke’. Here the ladies have it all to themselves, and no false modesty in the Italy of 1911 and elsewhere.

Trailer for May.

In Vienna Edward is honoured with inclusion, he is a member of the delegation representing the German Empire at the mournful occasion of the funeral of Crown Prince Rudolph, but the unexpected intervenes and our young hero is despatched to a remote region of Galicia.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st April, 2025.