

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER XXI

and

Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

February, 2025.

As winter set in for 1888 James sat in the parlour of the comfortable house he and his late wife Moira had caused to be built overlooking the brewery in Drybrook. By local standards it was a large house, positioned on a hillside from where the Bonny Moira Brewery could be surveyed. He was a broken man, with the loss of their eldest son in the military disaster that was Isandlwana in Zululand in the January of 1879, and the tragic loss of his dear wife Moira and their only surviving child, Archie in the devastating catastrophe that was the Tay Bridge Jamie had lost his willingness to make any effort whatsoever. With Moira they had built and fulfilled his one ambition, or rather two, a successful brewery and a happy and contented family, but now in one year all had been swept away, and there was nothing left.

It was nine years since the devastating disaster and James Aleman had not recovered from the tragic loss, if anything he was far worse than immediately after the tragedy. Nothing would inspire him to any action, if the truth be known his one desire was to join Moira. He had no desire to continue living. In winter the house was cold. He had plenty of coal and logs but preferred to freeze. The brewery gradually lost business, maintained only by his trusted foreman, but even he could not manage all the complexities of business, purchase of materials, brewing, transport and sales. Revenue plummeted and debts mounted.

None of this was helped by the activities of a well-meaning friend, a misguided friend, who introduced Jamie to opium and laudanum. He also took Jamie to an opium den in Gloucester, by the docks, convenient for the Chinese gangsters who owned the disreputable establishment and their mainly Chinese seamen customers. The health, both physical and mental of James Aleman deteriorated alarmingly, but so sunk in misery was the master of the Bonnie Moira Brewery that he refused aggressively to listen to the concerned people of Drybrook, and least of all to his own family in the Forest of Dean.

Jamie blamed himself for the misery which he considered self-inflicted, firstly because he had arranged purchase of the commission in the 24th Regiment for Ernest, and secondly because he had willingly agreed Moira should visit her sister which involved crossing the Tay Bridge that fateful night. If only he had suggested delaying departure by a day she would still be with him, but no, he had encouraged her to go with Archie to their deaths! It was all his fault. He was to blame and must now suffer.

There had been a few local lassies who thought they could bring comfort to him. To James they were all scheming hussies after his money. None of them could ever come anywhere near to his bonnie Moira and he knew better than to allow another into his life when all he would see would be a very poor substitute. So everything decayed while opium, laudanum and strong liquor rotted his health.

Then on Monday the 14th January at 9.31 am the postman delivered a letter from the manager at the Gloucester County Bank, a Mr. C. McLedger, or to honour him with his full name which James knew from more prosperous times, Colin Algernon Sydney Haines McLedger. Not the first James had received but this time he was requested to attend for an interview with the branch manager and to bring the business account books with him. A date was set for the following week at 10.30 am.

James knew what lay behind the politely worded demand, he had not made any payments against the bank loans for over twelve months, in fact not since his foreman had left for better paid employment and less responsibility at the Gloucester City Water Works. The debt had increased considerably the erratic payments that has been made fell far below the amount required to service the loans.

Mr. McLedger, a shortish somewhat portly gentleman rather past his prime, but with a twinkle in his eye bounced from behind his desk as James was ushered into the Branch Manager's office. Unlike James Aleman who had sort of tumbled into a check suit with a once white shirt and badly stained tie, the manager was dressed in an immaculate black frock coat, pin striped, grey/black trousers and waist coat with white spats over polished black shoes. He wore a blue patterned necktie and on a hat and coat stand James noticed a black silk top hat. Mr. McLedger always maintained an air of kindly superiority to establish an advantage over his customers, but this was compensated by his practice of always establishing a friendly rapport with his visitor, at least until matters became too difficult.

Thus, it was that James was offered coffee in a bone china cup, and polite enquiry as to his health and the financial wellbeing of the Brewery. James said as little as possible. In fact, he had not been looking forward to the meeting and dreaded the outcome. Producing the cash book for the Brewery when requested, Mr. McLedger took very little time appraising himself of the situation which he had already suspected. Looking up at James whilst removing his monocle he remarked.

"You do not seem to be doing so well now. Income is sadly depleted whilst debts mount. Apart from ourselves do you have any other creditors?"

James was at a loss what to say. He had no idea the true state of his indebtedness, so he mumbled about money due to the butcher, baker, and the ironmonger for lamp oil.

The Branch Manager shook his head with a sad expression saying. "Dear dear me, this is a sad state of affairs. Let me see, it must be over ten years since you came to see me after that tragic accident when your wife died. So very sad, and your young son too. It must have been a great shock, but then many in similar situations manage to carry on, mostly with a new wife. Never quite the same though."

James studied his boots and looked a perfect picture of misery.

"You do realise that matters of debt with no apparent means of repayment are outside my remit. In such circumstances the Bank has a very strict policy. I have to refer your case to head office in Cheltenham. I expect you will be hearing from them very shortly."

James merely nodded.

"I am extremely sorry for you, but unfortunately there is nothing more I can do." Said Mr. McLedger rising from his desk and ushering James from his office whereupon the Chief Clerk rose from his desk and escorted James from the premises.

James stood on the pavement not knowing what to do and even less what to think. Spying a tavern further along the street he shambled in and ordered a large whisky. He drank

scotch to avoid thinking and because it reminded him of Moira.

James did not have long to wait. The next day a letter arrived bearing the crest of the Gloucester County Bank. Postmarked "Cheltenham" James was left in no doubt as to its contents, inside was a letter in beautiful copper plate writing informing him that unless he repaid the debt, which with unpaid interest, was far in excess of the original loan, within the next fourteen days the Bank would have no alternative to foreclosure, and the Bonnie Moira Brewery plus the House would be offered for sale by auction unless a prior sale by private treaty could be arranged. In the final paragraph James was informed that in the event of the proceeds of sale and expenses exceeding the debt any balance would be made over to him. James did not expect there to be a balance in his favour.

Two weeks and one day later notices appeared in the various local and national newspapers announcing that Messrs Wright Hassel & Company, solicitors, acting on behalf of the Gloucester County Bank offered for sale a Brewery and Gentleman's Private Dwelling House at Drybrook in West Gloucestershire and requested offers in writing to purchase the freehold interest, either separately or combined, adding that if they did not receive any suitable offers the whole estate would be placed in the hands of Messrs Gravel, Shout and Handle, Auctioneers of Tewksbury.

George read the announcement in the morning paper over breakfast and sat thinking for some moments. He had been considering how best to expand and develop the family business and the prospect of acquiring a local brewery at hopefully a knock down price was a temptation, an opportunity not to be ignored. Summoning the maid, he gave her a letter he had just written to the solicitors requesting an interview instructing her to ensure that it was despatched by the first available post.

That afternoon a reply was received at the house in Weston-under-Penyard which George read on his return in the late afternoon. Two days later, on the 31st January, 1889 George Ashbourne, Esq presented himself at the offices of Messrs Wright Hassel & Company situated above the Gloucester County Bank in Cheltenham's High Street at the corner with Winchcombe Street.

He was received by a very deferential elderly gentleman wearing a black frock coat of a design fashionable some thirty years earlier complete with other accoutrements from the same period. Indeed, it seemed to George the man would have been more comfortable dressed in britches, shoes with silver buckles topped off with a cape and tricorne hat.

Bowing to George he said. "Would Sir deign to come this way, please." And the visitor followed him along a corridor decorated with portraits of various well-presented gentlemen whom George took to be past and present partners of the firm. He was conducted into a spacious though somewhat cluttered consulting room with leather buttoned chairs which George thought had seen better days, and a blue and beige rather worn patterned carpet. The day being warm the fire had not been lit, but either side of the chimney breast the recesses were occupied with open bookshelves on which rested numerous books containing details of countless legal cases, trials which set precedents for future legal actions. Either side of the small, framed painting above the mantel piece there were gas brackets with glass globes whilst walls and ceiling were in considerable need of

cleaning from soot both from the fireplace and the gas lights. From behind a mahogany partner's desk littered with papers, and in stark contrast to his surroundings, arose a younger smartly dressed young gentleman who seemed to his visitor to portray an air of condescending superiority if not arrogance towards the newcomer. With a brisk rather plummy voice the junior partner of Messrs Wright Hassel and Company enquired how he could be of service to, er, Mr. Ashbourne. George thought that this obviously well healed chap had no intention of being "of service" to him, but he replied politely that he is interested in the brewery, he understands, the solicitors have been appointed to sell on behalf of the brewery's creditors.

"Mmm, let me see, would that be the Bonnie Moira Brewery at Drybrook?" the Partner, the younger Mr. Hassel enquired, now in a rather lazy and disinterested voice, or so it seemed to George.



The junior partner's office at Messrs Wright Hassell & Company.

George was on the point of rebuking the solicitor by replying that if he had read his letter he would not need to ask such irrelevant questions, but quickly realised that if he wished to proceed he had better not antagonise the man so he replied in the affirmative adding that the advertisement for the sale by the Gloucester County Bank stated that the brewery would be sold at auction if a buyer had not come forward with a realistic offer beforehand.

"So, you would like to make an offer for the business."

"I would like to inspect the brewery first, and then to have access to the accountancy records."

"I am sure that can be arranged, see our chief clerk before you leave, and he will make the necessary arrangements." Said the Solicitor rising again from behind his desk and ushering his visitor into the corridor adding. "You will recognise our clerk; he conducted you to this office." And with that he closed the room door on George.

George left the solicitor's offices furnished with a letter of introduction addressed to Mr. James Aleman at the Bonnie Moira Brewery in Drybrook, it was now about noon railway time and not having eaten since early breakfast he entered a smart looking tearooms in North Street where he availed himself of much needed refreshment before hailing a cab to take him to the railway station.

Seated in a "Great Western" railway carriage George had time to contemplate. The attitude of the Solicitor had rattled him, he was certain the man had treated him badly at best and more likely with complete disrespect and condemnation. He, George Ashbourne, had the means and, he thought, ability to relieve the solicitor's client, namely the Gloucester County Bank of a failed business transaction and he found himself on the receiving end of the young partner's obvious contempt.

Memories he had thought well and truly buried flooding back to him as the train trundled along to the junction at Gloucester. At Monmouth School the other boys sneered that Ashbourne was "only trade", they mocked him saying he should be at a Dame School whilst others said he would never be one of them. His younger brother Edward never seemed to be on the receiving end of such mockery, but then Edward was a "Good allrounder", one whose easy-going jovial manner, quick wit and charming smile won him friends in abundance. Edward had gone off to sea as a mere deckhand and now had an important position in the German Imperial Navy and was about to marry an Earl's daughter. George began to feel sorry for himself. He had all the responsibility of the family business and a wife who did not help in any way but gave herself up to prayers and endless church services. He had two sons, but a wife who steadfastly refused to have anything to do with him and seemed to blame him for every trifling little matter which was not quite right.

By the time the train drew into the junction station of Mitcheldean Road George had had time to regain his composure and emerged from the carriage thinking 'dam the lot of them!'

Striding into the yard by the house which had once been the family home and now occupied by his grandparents George was met by their farrier and a trap with harnessed pony. On enquiry he was informed that neither pony nor trap were required at present, so George immediately set off for Drybrook and the Bonnie Moira Brewery. It was a pleasant enough drive across open country climbing through the woodland before descending into Drybrook.

James Aleman was none too pleased to receive George. He read the letter of introduction muttering that he had better take a look around though there would not be much to see. George had only a smattering of knowledge of breweries and their operation, nevertheless he did notice the general run-down state of the place if not downright dilapidated. However, the premises did seem to offer opportunity and have potential, but he would need to enlist the help of someone knowledgeable to report on the brewery's condition and cost of putting the place in a state of repair to resume commercial brewing. Such a report would be of great assistance when it came to negotiating a purchase. He thanked Mr. Aleman and prepared to depart, but then he noticed a photographic portrait of a young lady, the frame draped in black crepe on the wall opposite where James Aleman was

seated, steeped in misery. Indicating the picture George, with sincere sympathy in his voice enquired if she had been his late wife.



The late Moira Aleman.

“Most certainly, my dear sir.” Was the sorrowful reply.

“She is very beautiful; you must miss her dreadfully.”

“Oh! I do, she died when the Tay Bridge collapsed.” Said James in a broken voice though not without a glimmer of gratitude.

George bowed respectfully to the shambling wreck, obviously a shadow of his former self, the man who had established the brewery. The younger man wondered if he could do anything for him, perhaps offer him employment if his attempt at buying the brewery succeeded.

George moved swiftly. Within a week he received a typed survey report on the condition of the Bonnie Moira Brewery at Drybrook, both regarding the buildings and the plant and machinery together with estimates of the cost of putting the brewery in a state to resume operations. He was now ready to commence negotiations with Messrs Wright Hassell and Company but thought it might be wiser to engage the services of another legal house to add weight to his situation. Giving this matter some thought he approached a firm in Cirencester who he believed to be retained by the Earl of Bingham, the local noble resident.

The following day George received in the post a reply thanking him for his enquiry but regretting that they would not be able to accept his commission siting a possible conflict of interest without elaboration. The would-be purchaser of the brewery thought the matter over for a few minutes before penning a letter to a firm in Hereford outlining his proposed purchase and requesting their support in the endeavour. Within the week a reply to the affirmative was received in Weston-under-Penyard from Messrs Heap, Basket and Jolly asking if it would be possible for Mr. George Ashbourne to call at their offices in Hightown on either Tuesday or Wednesday in the forenoon.

In a rundown part of Gloucester, near the docks, but not far from the prosperous business of Samuel John Moreland manufacture of Vestas and Lucifers (matches) which sold under the trade name of "England's Glory" printed on the match boxes with a picture of HMS Devastation, there was a tavern, the "Jolly Tar" frequented by the deckhands from the numerous ships in the docks and the boatmen of the canal boats transporting goods across the country to cities as far away as Birmingham and Leeds.



HMS Devastation.

Two men sat in a quiet part of the "Jolly Tar", and although there was no one near enough to overhear their conversation they spoke in hushed voices discussing how they could prevent a certain gentleman from Ross, they did not yet know that George resided in Weston-under-Penyard, from gaining possession of the Bonnie Moira Brewery in Drybrook. They both planned to intimidate James Aleman into signing the property to them, but in spite of numerous attempts had not so far succeeded. Now this other bloke was sticking his oar in. He must be stopped. The two were leading members of the "Black Spot" gang, a notorious Gloucester group of thugs who intimidated parts of the city and also were very active in parts of east Gloucestershire including Cinderford with plans to move on Coleford and Drybrook. Ownership of the brewery would provide both a way of legitimising their criminal income and a means of producing duty free beer and possibly gin and whisky. All they had to do was to destroy the man from Ross. If James Aleman saw they had killed the potential buyer he would be too scared to resist, or so the two criminals thought.

Bill the Knife, the smaller of the two then had what he thought was a brilliant idea. The barmaid at the "Jolly Tar" was a young wench with plenty to show for herself. A pretty enough girl with a generous bosom and nature to match who as a side line loved the sailors and much as Maggie May in Liverpool the captains of the whalers. They would entice their rival to the "Jolly Tar" on some pretext where "Fanny" as she was known would invite him up to her chamber after they had plied him with strong drink. Once in her bed with both of them in a state of undress a photographer, one of the gang, would take a photograph of the pair. This could then be used to drive away the intruder by threatening to destroy his reputation. Thus, claimed Bill the Knife, they could destroy him without actually murdering the man.

His fellow conspirator, one known as Mad Mick McNab, a big fellow over six feet tall and weighing about eighteen stone sat back, took another swig of beer and thought for a few minutes. When he looked up he enquired of his friend Bill. "And how we goanna know the cove? Do you know what he looks like?"

Bill shook his head in reply.

"I thought not!" Muttered Mad Mick.

"But I knows someone who does, or rather he knows the housemaid, and she knows."

"Right" Said Mick, "You better get him here quick, like now!"

Bill disappeared into the Public Bar and came back after some ten minutes with a greasy looking youth of medium height shabbily dressed with nicotine-stained fingers to his right hand.

Mick studied the apparition of neglect standing before him before enquiring in a demanding voice. "And what's your name sonny?"

The young man who felt most putout stammered. "They call me Shout, Sir. Shout the Scout but my real name is Nathan Smith."

At this point Bill intervened to inform Mick that "Scout" was walking out with the housemaid at the house in Weston-under-Penyard, the residence of George Ashbourne, the gent what wants the brewery.

"Interesting, mused Mick, and do you know the house?" He asked addressing the Nathan Smith.

"I knows the joint, and I seen the old geezer what owns it, one George Ashbourne. Well-dressed upright sort of bloke, walks about like what he owns the world."

"I see." Said Mick, "And could you point him out to us?"

"Don't see why not."

"What time does he leave the 'ouse in the morning, Nathan?"

"About 8.30 to 9 o'clock or so my girl says."

"And does *your Girl* have a name!"

"Yeah, Alice Morgan."

"There is a pub in Weston-under-Penyard I seem to remember." Said Bill.

"Yeah." Said Nathan, pleased of the chance to air his knowledge. "The "Weston Cross" there's a good view of old Ashbourne's place from the pub windows, you can watch the 'ouse wiv ou being seen, I ofen wait for me girl in there."

So, the matter was settled and next morning early the three sat in the "Weston Cross" with tankards of beer each keeping a eye on the Ashbourne family residence some fifty yards away on the opposite side of the highway. They did not have long to wait. George came striding out smartly dressed in a grey frock coat, dark green cravat and black silk top hat swinging a swagger stick.

"That's 'I'm." Declared the "Scout." "I'd knows 'I'm anywhere."

Mick and Bill took careful note, it would not do to apprehend the wrong man.

They waited until they were sure that George had departed the village then returned to Gloucester by the same route.

Mick and Bill now hatched a plan to lure George to Gloucester, but as luck would have it, before they had progressed very far that evening George walked into the "Jolly Tar" and wandering up to the bar he was greeted by non-other than Gillian Godless herself, otherwise known as "Fanny" who readily agreed to bring him a plate of their best roast beef and mash with a pint of best bitter. Mick was there and saw for himself that George had arrived of his own accord. He quickly summoned Bill and the photographer Harry

Flash, another of the Black Spot Gang usually referred to as Flash Harry. The plan already formulated was quickly put into action. A few words with Fanny and the sight of three sovereigns soon persuaded her to comply with the scheme. When George had finished his meal she would give him another glass of best bitter and a large glass of whisky 'on the house', and she would sit and make pleasant conversation allowing her blouse to gap open at the lower neckline. As they expected George was bewitched, but quicker than they anticipated. The gang were unaware of the sad state of marital affairs between George and his wife, Alice had not thought to mention the matter to Nathan.

In Fanny's chamber on the second floor of the tavern there resided a portrait painting of her from the time she had been the mistress of the wealthy sophisticated and well-connected Baron San Tour d' Eau and residing mainly in Paris, but also at his country house in Provence and the Cote d' Azur. Whilst the Baron was thirty years her senior he had the health and vigour of one half his age. At fourteen years of age her exceptional beauty and charm had opened doors for her leading to a life she could never have dreamt of, while it lasted. He loved her to distraction and introduced her, nay he launched her into the height of Parisien Society. Together they attended Balls, banquets, visited the opera and theatre. Twice a year they were seen at the Saloon de Paris and were acquainted with the great artists of the day. The painting now residing in her chamber the work of the Belgium artist, Leopold du Maar.



The Belgium artist's portrait of Fanny.

But there was a fly in the ointment and the Baron came to realise that although he had removed the girl from the slum he could not take the slum out of the girl. At times her conversation was extremely dull. Gillian was incapable of leaving her past behind. A past inhabited by a drunken loutish father who worked when the fancy took him, which was rarely. Mostly he stole to obtain money to spend on strong drink. On the spasmodic occasions when he did return to the hovel in which they existed he beat her mother unmercifully. When he turned his fury on Gillian, Gillian left for good.

Gillian enjoyed enormous privileges as was normal for the mistress of a wealthy aristocrat, but she did need to apply herself to her new status. Try as she might there were times when her lowly origin showed through the surface sophistication and at the opening of the

Salon de Paris in 1886 she committed the ultimate blunder. Standing before a painting of King Charles X of France by the French artist Charles Joseph Frederic Soulacroix she turned to a lady who was also studying the same picture and casually remarked that she had never heard of a “King Charles X”. The princess turned to Gillian and with a look full of the utmost disdain countered. “Really, then your education is sadly insufficient, he is my great grandfather, as you obviously do not already know, I am Princess Margherita of Bourbon-Parma.”



Un Coin du Salon en 1880 by Edouard Joseph Dantan.

The Mistress had become accustomed to men being most deferential and considerate to her and the rebuke cut her to the core. The Princess, knowing full well who and what the young woman was, a kept woman, had expected Gillian to beg her forgiveness with a low sweeping curtsy.

But the Kept Woman whom the aristocracy referred to as “Marrie Anne” otherwise known to as “the Slut”, the female personification of the Republic they detested saw her past rise up before her and without any further thought angrily responded.

“Bourbon! The Yanky whiskey. Do your lot make whiskey?”

Such rudeness was too much, the wife of Don Carlos de Borbón y Austria-Este, Carlist claimant to the throne of Spain as Carlos VII from 1868 following his father’s demise. Her Majesty was never going to suffer such an insult from a wanton, a mere trollope, she turned on her heel and walked away.

Retribution followed swiftly and brutally. Words were exchanged in sophisticated drawing rooms the Baron was politely but firmly informed that if he wished to continue to ‘be known’ he must get rid of her, that woman. The Mistress was dismissed and returned to England with a purse of gold coins. She arrived at the ‘Jolly Tar’ requesting lodging for the night and was still there five years later.

Gillian was mistress of her trade, and she soon had George eating out of her hand, whilst she lifted a leg to adjust a garter knowing George would be watching. When she asked him if he would like to see her portrait George eagerly followed the pretty tart upstairs to

her chamber on the second floor. Leaving the door unlocked Fanny wasted little time in removing her clothes and lying quite naked across the double bed her pink and white body the more revealed against a dark red sheet with the gas light burning in a wall bracket she lifted George's right hand so that he caressed her right breast whilst drawing his attention to the painting of her on the opposite wall; George now faced towards the door. He felt a surge of excitement flow through his veins and watching Fanny's charms rise and fall with every breath he assumed her anticipation matched his own. He was unaware she was concentrating on keeping George's attention focused on the picture near the door. At this point 'Flash Harry' entered with camera at the ready and captured the pair in a blinding flash. As Mr. Flash made a hurried exit, George, now in complete control and aware to the trap did not allow the photographer to escape. Burdened with the cumbersome plate camera and tripod, his escape hindered. George was on him before 'Flash Harry' realised. Seizing the camera George removed the silver gelatine glass plate and smashed it into shards of glass on the banister.

Grabbing his coat Mr. George Ashbourne was otherwise fully dressed he lurched out of the tavern, in a foul temper. He was lucky to hail a cab for the "GWR" station and a train home to the halt at Weston-under-Penyard. Passing Longhope Railway Station to the surprise of the other passengers George suddenly burst into peals of laughter. With time to reflect he thought the whole affair extremely funny.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



Flirtation by Eugen von Blaas, 1887.

Trailer for March.

The Black Spot Gang are successfully confronted, the acquisition of the brewery draws to a satisfactory conclusion and plans are afoot for the marriage of Edward and Alexandra at the castle in East Prussia.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st February, 2025.