

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER IX

and

Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

January, 2024.

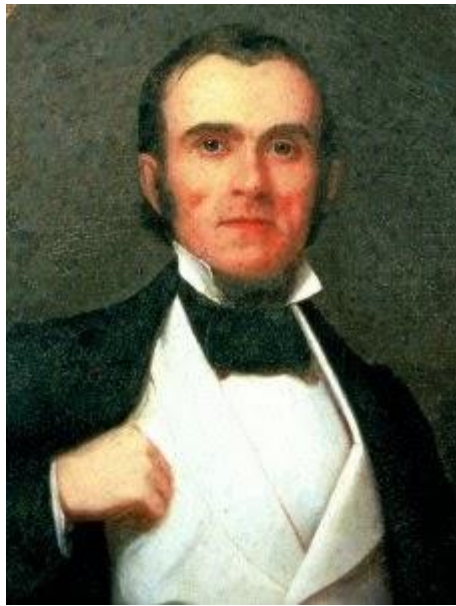
Firstly, to all those who follow the unfolding of this saga a very happy New Year, it may not be better than 2023 but it should be different.

Just before Christmas 1887 we left Aunt Roberta making her way back to London, it was a fairly uneventful journey from the halt at Western-under-Penyard on the Great Western Railway to Paddington via Gloucester, and on arrival at the London terminus she travelled on to Kings Cross by the Metropolitan Railway, and then on an omnibus to Shaftsbury Avenue from where it was a short walk home. Aunt Roberta was not happy, the visit to her father, brother and his family had been a disaster, she had, in her mind, been ignored and ridiculed. She had taken the trouble to visit them and not been wanted. The whole episode had made her very miserable, and she hated everything. Nothing was right now, she could not even remember the number of the house in which she rented a few rooms, and stood on the pathway until she recognised someone she could ask to help. The weather was cold, damp, and by evening a fog was descending on the Capital, which developed into a regular peasouper. Even in her rooms the yellowy green fog penetrated and provided a veil to shield the furthest reaches of the room she referred to as her drawing room. Aunt Roberta made an attempt to light the coal fire but found the effort too much and giving up made do with the gas light. Taking a blanket and the eiderdown from her bed wrapped herself in these still in her traveling clothes and without supper, sat in her club chair and fell asleep.

Aunt Roberta slept fitfully in the intense cold, and as she slept images from the past appeared seemingly before her eyes. She was a child playing in the fields near Grandfather's carriage works and along the highway between Ross and Gloucester farm wagons, haywains, drays delivering coal, and an assortment of light two wheeled vehicles passed by.



There was the regular Royal Mail Coach painted black and bright red with smartly dressed driver and guard, and also the occasional scruffy stagecoach usually painted bright yellow, mud splattered in wet weather with its equally scruffy driver and outside passengers. Hers had not been a happy childhood, she did not know why, but always something was wrong. Then she was in the docks in Gloucester, much older now, she had thought old enough to decide matters for herself, and there appeared Jack, leaning against a lamp post with a cheroot between his lips, and a straw boater on his head set at a jaunty angle. Here was excitement, adventure, and freedom. She did not answer his question honestly regarding was she alone, merely nodded and with a coquettish smile asked him the name of his ship as though it belonged to him. Just as all those years before, the sailor put his arm around her waist and guided her to a quayside tavern, except now she did not feel the warmth and strength of his embrace, merely sensed his presence.



Captain Jack McGregor.

Jack McGregor was superseded by a strange lady, not old but dressed in a grey crinoline dress and a poke bonnet, both were or seemed to be, dripping with water. The apparition said nothing, but merely conveyed the thought of one admonishing a naughty and disobedient child, however, as Roberta surveyed the spirit more closely, she realised that it was a little indistinct as it was covered in a grey veil which became a shroud, and then relapsed into fits of coughing. The coughing became more prolonged as the image gradually faded leaving only the cough which also slowly disappeared or rather became fainter until it was no longer audible.

She awoke to find the gas light still burning on its wall bracket, the eiderdown slipped off her and lying on the bare floorboards at her feet together with the blanket and a penetrating cold, made far worse by the all prevailing fog, from which she was shivering. Looking out of the window set in the front elevation of the building, and facing eastwards she could just make out a very faint haze of brighter light which may have indicated the coming dawn or may just have been from the occasional gas streetlamp. It was now five o'clock in the morning of Christmas Day. She virtually crawled to her bedroom taking the bedding with her, and still in the clothes she was wearing the day before, went to bed and slept till ten minutes past seven o'clock when she was awoken by the noise of the other tenants, a

clatter of pails, scrape of boots in the yard below, and thump of feet on the wooden stair way.

The woman who lived on the floor below, Mrs. O’Leary, sent her husband Shamus up to Mrs McGregor at about 8.30 to wish her a Happy Christmas and to enquire if she was in need of any food, and would she like to have a pail of water brought up. By now Roberta was shivering with cold and nauseous with hunger. Her usual belligerence seemed to have evaporated and even in the state she was in she welcomed Shamus’s generosity and requested water and coal, thanking him most profusely. When Shamus returned to his wife Melissa and their numerous offspring and reported the condition in which he had found the poor woman upstairs, whom they only knew vaguely, Melissa immediately responded with.

“Look at you Shamus, you can see the poor soul is in a bad way and you leave her there, that’s no Christian charity, and on Christmas Day as well. Look you, go bid her come and have the day with us, off you go now!”

Shamus returned to Mrs McGregor, and with some difficulty persuaded her to come down to the flat below. On gaining the lower floor Roberta was immediately given a bowl of porridge and a chipped tin mug of hot broth. Gradually she stopped shivering, and with the food began to recover. The O’Leary family were very far from comfortably provided for, and the thought dawned on Roberta that she could have been of some help to them since the family moved there about sixteen months ago. It would be wrong to offer them money now, but she resolved to see what she could do. With the fog and cold persisting, they all stayed in the flat, cheered by a coal fire, a goose cooking in the oven, all part of a small cooking range, and the bottles of booze Shamus produced. By evening snow began to fall and the children became very excited and wanted to know if tomorrow they could go out and play, whilst Roberta wondered why they asked as that is what they normally did. Sensing the thought Melissa explained that last night they had all attended church for midnight mass, and today was always kept sacred for the Lord.

For the next three days Roberta kept to herself, and feeling depressed in the flat she went out walking the streets of London, and eating in cafes whenever hunger prevailed. There was no particular purpose to her ramblings save a vague desire to revisit old familiar locations, theatres where she had been engaged, and the roads, streets, and passageways until recently a familiar haunt. With nothing else to do Roberta took far more notice of the seeming multitude of people she passed. Not many spoke to her, and then either to beg pardon for accidentally bumping into her or to ask her to buy whatever. One lively young lad in the tatty cloths of a street market vendor who greeted her with a cheery “Come on Mother dear” waltzed her a couple of dozen steps down the road, whilst those in the crowd called out words of encouragement. There was much other activity, sometimes hot chestnuts from a kerb side brazier, a ragged girl offering posies of flowers, an organ grinder with a monkey dressed in a red jacket.



Northumberland House prior to demolition in 1874.

Near Trafalgar Square she passed a little German band in green uniforms entertaining the passing pedestrians with rousing military music. On the south side of Trafalgar Square Roberta passed into Northumberland Avenue, the throughfare created in 1874 when Northumberland House (built in 1609) was demolished, being the London residence of His Grace the Duke of Northumberland. The “Percy Lion” was removed prior to destruction of the mansion and placed atop Sion House, His Grace’s residence west of the Capital. The family name of the dukes of Northumberland is “Percy” and the lion forms part of the family coat of arms.



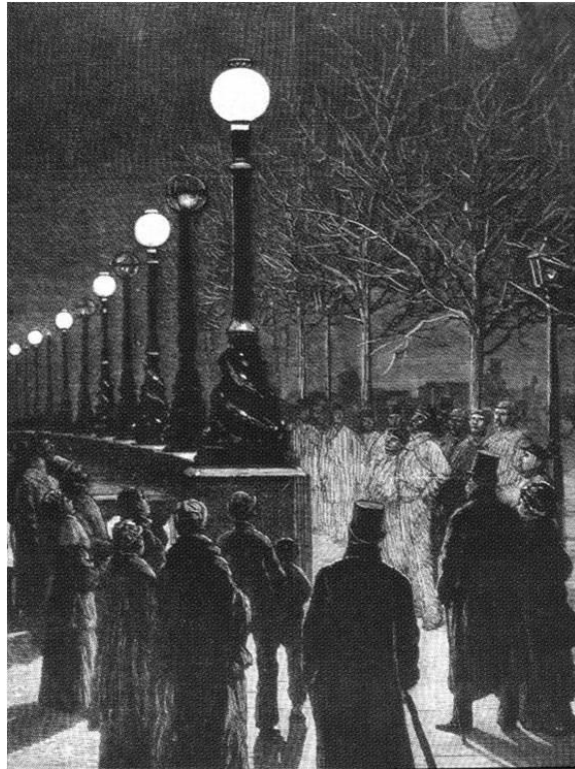
The Metropole Hotel in Northumberland Avenue, opened in 1885.

On the corner of Northumberland Avenue and Whitehall Place, on the south side of Trafalgar Square Roberta passed the recently opened and extremely fashionable Metropole Hotel in which the hotel’s 88 page brochure proclaimed that its location is particularly recommended for ladies and families visiting the West End during the Season; to travellers from Paris and the Continent arriving from Dover or Folkestone at Charing Cross Railway Station; to Officers and others attending the levees at St James; to Ladies going to the Drawing Rooms, State Balls, and Concerts at Buckingham Palace; and to colonial and American visitors unused to the great world of London.

Further along Northumberland Avenue she passed the new Victoria Hotel opened earlier in the year, and the Playhouse Theatre opened in 1882. As Roberta approached the entrance of the Victoria Hotel she was halted in her shuffling gait by the arrival at the hotel of a g

leaming clarence drawn by two splendid dapple greys. The groom seated on the box beside the coachman promptly jumped down and opened the carriage door for his master and mistress to alight. Roberta shrunk back into the shadows on catching sight of the gentleman, elderly down, but there was not a shadow of doubt in Roberta's mind that he once provided her with an exquisite house in St. John's Wood, just north of Regent's Part, Baron James de la Motte. Did he recognise the crouching dishevel woman hiding in the darkness, he may have done for he tossed a half sovereign towards her. He had hoped his wife, the Baroness Alicia de la Motte, had not noticed, but Roberta clearly heard the lady enquire of her husband "Who was that old woman you through a coin to, an old flame of yours, not much to recommend her now!" She did not hear the Baron's response as they passed into the hotel escorted by a hotel footman.

Continuing her absent minded ramble and having reached the end of Northumberland Avenue with the River Thames ahead, now reduced in width by the Victoria Embankment and turning to her left she passed under Hungerford Bridge which carried the railway lines leading into Charing Cross Railway Station. Roberta remembered the opening of the Embankment in 1865, now lit by electric light provided by Yablochkov candles first illuminated in December, 1878.



Electric lights first illuminated in December, 1878 on Victoria Embankment.

A flight of stairs led up to a walkway across Hungerford Bridge, and also the entrance to the District Underground Railway's Charing Cross Station, and just in the illumination of a gas lamp stood a bare foot ragged girl about ten years of age attempting to sell posies of flowers to passersby, with little success, Roberta thought, and gave the girl a shilling.



By now Roberta was very tired, hungry and faint and decided that although she had no particular desire to return to her dismal flat, it would be better than sleeping out in the open. She made her way towards Covent Garden, passing the Gaiety Theatre and traversing Duchess Street to bring her to Long Acre. Here she attempted to enter Evan's Eating Rooms, an establishment where she had been entertained in in the past by many a beau, but she had quite forgotten, if she ever bothered to take notice, that no unaccompanied ladies were allowed to enter the dining room, but for a fee of five pounds were obliged to wait seated a small tables behind a wooden screen which stood about two feet six inches high with a wicket gate in the centre. Only ladies were allowed in this area of the establishment save for the waiters. Some of the ladies were waiting for their gentlemen, but others were constantly watching and trying to attract the attention of any gentleman on his own in the hope that he would ask her to join him for dinner, and whatever may follow. In the altercation which followed Roberta stoutly refused to pay five pounds to enter the ladies' room whilst the cashier in the entrance lobby stated that "The lady is not properly attired for Mr. Evan's Eating Rooms!"



Captain Jack McGregor's ship the "Lady Roberta" wrecked on the Lizard.

Roberta gradually made her way home through the fog which had now descended making visibility almost impossible combined with the darkness of the night. The occasional gas lamp a dim marker of the road, but of little assistance as the next could be seen and thus no indication as to direction. She arrived home, wet through from the fog with a sore throat, and shivering from the penetrating cold. Sleep, when it came was a blessed relief to begin with, but then once again she was in the squalor of Poplar Rents with Jack, then he was not there anymore as the sensation faded, and for a while Roberta slept, then Jack McGregor was there again, but not how Roberta had known him. He was smartly dressed in clothes of a captain of the merchant marine, and as he beckoned her forward she saw a fine timber built ship with what had been a barque rig battered by a surging sea against jagged rocks. The freezing water crashed over Roberta, but she was now dimly aware of daylight filtering through the curtains. She was still cold, but the dreadful image of Jack drowning at sea in that awful tempest with his ship disintegrating under his feet had left her.



Poplar Rents off Cable Street, London's East End.

Next morning, she was suffering from a very bad cold which became far worse whilst even the coal fire did little to alleviate. By evening, and she did not leave the flat all that day, the cold had developed into pneumonia, she ached all over and her head felt as though it was being hit constantly with a wooden mallet. In the small hours of the following day, which was the 31st of December her plight was exacerbated by bouts of feverish heat followed by shivering cold. She lay in bed unable to move, and as the day and year drew to a close Roberta drew her last breath, unloved and uncared for, except by the O'Leary's' of the floor below.

Many miles away, across the sea, in a far off land where the snow lay thick on the ground, Edward the nephew she had not seen and only vaguely knew of, in his sleep in Lansdorf Schloss dreamt that his great aunt Roberta, a remote and shadowy relative whom he had

not met stood before him and he became aware rather than distinctly heard a message from her in which she informed him she was well pleased with the life he was carving out for himself and that he should continue, his destiny lay not in rural Herefordshire but in the wider world where adventure, fortune and happiness were to be found. Then the vision faded, and he awoke next morning with a clear idea of what he should do, the best path to follow.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



This Dutch lass is celebrating the New Year before dawn, full marks for eagerness. The caption “Gelukkig Nieuwjaar” translates to Happy New Year.

Trailer for next month.

In which Edward receives an unexpected and belated Christmas Present, and whilst with Alexandra the pair almost come to grief, but not as you may imagine. There is much drama and thrills to come.

Historical Talks.

In addition to writing these articles or “blogs” for the Chimes, I am available to give illustrated power point talks on a variety of historical subjects. To see the complete list please email to me at brockswoodfs@yahoo.co.uk, or telephone 01989 780634.

Dorian Osborne

1st January, 2024.