

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA
CHAPTER XIII
and
Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

May, 2024.

On returning from the ball given by General Sir James and Lady Lucy Fitzmayor at the Chase in Ross Annabell had been quite unable to sleep. Her mother Emily had been quite exhausted and almost slept in the carriage on their return to Western-under-Penyard, but the young lady was too wide awake and excited to sleep. It seemed to her she had been awake for hours, although she did eventually sleep some time before the morning sun crept over the windowsill.

Arising late and on appearing in the breakfast room Annabell was greeted with a cheery smile by Morgan the recently employed house maid who had been engaged to provide some relief from the endless chores of keeping the house clean and tidy which mainly befell Emily and Annabell. Morgan as she was known, actually Miss Alice Morgan, but then servants were normally only referred to by their surnames, a practice which helped to maintain a separation between Mistress or Master and their staff thus avoiding misunderstandings frequently the result of over familiarity. Annabell enjoyed a cup of tea followed by buttered toast and marmalade. It was late morning, and as the hall clock struck the hour of eleven there was a loud thump on the main entrance door which Morgan promptly answered. Annabell knew immediately that their visitor would be a gentleman, only servants, tradesmen and pedlars used the bell pull which rang a bell in the kitchen. Gentlemen used their walking or swagger stick on the door to obtain access.

Morgan promptly reappeared to announce "There's a man what's t' see you Miss."

Annabell cringed and wondered how the maid had greeted the caller, should she correct the girl, or report the matter to Mother? To Morgan she merely said, "Did he give you a visiting card?"

"He gave me this, Miss." Passing a small white card with black printing.

Looking at the card, Annabell bid the maid to show the gentleman into the drawing room adding "I will receive him there." Looking carefully at the card Annabell was puzzled. The printed name she did not recognise, and much less the address, 49, Belsize Park Gardens, London, NW. However, she thought to herself, 'why should she be concerned, all would be revealed in a few moments.'

Entering the drawing room, she was confronted by a tall young man impeccably dressed in a dark green frock coat, red trousers, white shirt, a red paisley patterned neckerchief, and black polished shoes.

Bowing politely, the young man confidently thanked Annabell for allowing him the honour of the interview and explained that they had danced the previous evening at General and Lady Lucy's ball.

Annabell was not so sure, her recollection of the previous evening was rather vague, it was all such a whirl of music, people, and voices, but she smiled sweetly to him and said she is very pleased to see him but could still not recognise him from the ball.

"I fear you may not recognise me out of uniform, I hold Her Majesty's commission to the 28th Foot, Second Lieutenant, at your service mi lady." With a rather cheeky smile.

"Why yes of course, my beau at the ball."

"One of several, if I am not mistaken, I am returning to the Regiment today, otherwise I would not have presumed to call so soon. I merely wish to pay my respects and to thank you for making a lonely young man very happy, I greatly enjoyed dancing with you."

"Do you know the General and were you staying at the Chase. Do you have far to travel today to re-join the Regiment?"

Lieutenant Gilbert was not impressed, the maid had left him standing on the doorstep, failing to ask him to step inside, when he passed his hat and cane to her she did not seem to know what to do with them, and conducting him to the drawing room had merely said "Would you come this way." A total omission of 'sir' and bobbing a curtsey. A glance around the drawing room informed him of all he needed to know, the few pictures which adorned the walls were either studio photographs of family members or oilettes and lithographs of popular views or reproductions of well-known pictures. There was a pronounced absence of any original paintings to give substance to the family's history: clearly these people were in trade and 'almost nouveau riche', which explained the slovenly maid. He did not know the General personally but did not wish to say so.

After a few minutes of polite but rather meaningless conversation Lieutenant Gilbert addressing Annabell said "Dear lady, I know this meeting will be short, but I have some way to go to report to the Regiment, and cannot be late, please excuse me, but I truly must be taking leave of you." Bowing politely.

After the rather pompous lieutenant departed there were no more callers that day, and Annabell, being at a loose end, returned to her room for a while, then remembering how helpful her mother had been preparing for the Ball, she sought mother to enquire how she could be of help, which might be in the counting house, the kitchen, or errands. It was the office drawing up invoices for the repairs to various vehicles, a task Annabell was familiar with.

Towards luncheon time Old Sid looked in, now he was always known as "Old Sid." As he once related to Annabell, there was a time, in her great grandfather's time, when he was known as "Young Sid", then just "Sid", and now "Old Sid." He had been in the employ of the family for as long as anyone could remember, and nothing seemed to be beyond his capability, except the three "Rs", "reading, righting and rithamatic."

"How's the Belle of the Ball this bright morning." Exclaimed Old Sid as he entered the converted outbuilding that had become the firm's counting house, "Found the gen'leman o' yer dreams have yer, came to see yer earlier I don't doubt?"

Annabell was not flustered by Old Sid's remark, neither did she take offence, the pair knew each other too well for that. Laughing Annabell merely said she had been waiting and keeping herself for him.

“Be careful young Missey,” He said, “I may just take you up on that!” and they both laughed.

“I brought you some cider, my dear, you can work up a real thirst wiv all them there numbers. Don’t know how you do it, all foreign to me.”

Annabell thanked him for the refreshment and Old Sid toddled off to collect some tools.

Over the next few days, a succession of gentleman called at the detached house, standing in its own grounds at Western-under-Penyard to be received by Miss Annabell. Some she welcomed, some, on reflection, she would have preferred had forgone the politeness, though being a well-bred young lady, she welcomed all and politely offered refreshment, usually tea.

Just when she had given up hope of seeing the young tea garden manager again, he arrived at the house with a posey of flowers and profuse apologies for not calling sooner. Nigel Edwardes explained that he had been summoned to the head office in The Strand of Twinings the owners of the tea garden where he was the appointed manager. He was full of enthusiasm for tea and in particular the Twining family who owned and controlled the company.



The portico above the entrance to “Twinings” offices at 216, The Strand, London.

From London he had been despatched to Liverpool, again on company business. In two weeks’ time, he informed Annabell, he would be sailing for the Subcontinent aboard the “Titania,” a tea clipper on this occasion expected to be transporting a shipment of machinery for Calcutta then on to Sydney. On the return voyage she would be carrying tea, the first of the new harvest gathered in April or May. Nigel’s infectious enthusiasm inspired Annabell and she listened attentively to his description of India, its sounds, colours, and smells.



The Titania by Jack Spurling.

They were seated in the parlour, that more intimate of reception rooms where the maid had served tea at Emily's request, Annabell's mother who had joined the two, it being quite improper for an unmarried young lady to entertain a gentleman alone at home, she also took a keen interest in the presentable smart young gentleman.

Accepted dress being less formal in the country than in large towns and cities, the ladies wore warm and modest long sleeve dresses without any glaring extrovert decoration, whilst Nigel had dispensed with a frock coat, and had arrived wearing grey flannel trousers below a blue blazer, having divested himself of his topcoat with the maid in the entrance hall.

Nigel added to his mention of the "Titania" by stating that she is a tea clipper built at Greenock on the Clyde and launched in 1866. She has an overall length of 200 feet and is captained by Robert Deas. One of the clerks had informed him, so he stated, that Captain Deas preferred to be known as Bobby.

"So, you will be navigating the stormy seas of the "Cape?" (Cape of Good Hope) enquired Emily.

"That's right," responded Nigel, "But I shall be thinking that the passage around Cape Horn is so much more terrifying. Anyway, it will be interesting sailing before the mast as the old salts call it, not that I shall be more than a grateful passenger, with only the wind and sea, and the open sky overhead, unlike steam ships with the smoke from the funnel to grubby the unwary, and the constant pounding of the engines. It might be quicker, but in summer the heat especially through the canal can be insufferable. For my part, better of open sea.

Nigel thought how charming the Ashbourne family are, although so far, he had only met Emily and her daughter Annabell, and decided that he must try to reserve any judgement until he had met the master himself.

Almost simultaneously both Emily and Annabell enquired after the health of Nigel's parents, whilst Emily quickly added that she trusted that they are both she

trailed off, adding only “You know.”

Nigel assured the ladies that both his mata and pata enjoyed excellent health, and in response to further enquiry, that his father is a medical doctor with a practice in Droitwich. He added that as a young doctor his father had been seconded to accompany the 30th Regiment of Foot during the Crimean War, and that it was after the Battle of the Alma River that he had come to know General Sir James Fitzmayor, although he was not a general nor a knight then, and it is their enduring friendship that led him to be invited to the Ball. The ladies asked where he is staying to which he assured them he had a room at the Royal Hotel overlooking the horseshoe bend in the river, and thus well away from the stable yard on the opposite side of the building.

The Young Man was pleased that there were no further enquiries regarding his family as he had no desire to introduce his Aunt Amelia, the wife of his father’s brother, Uncle Albert into the conversation. A pleasant mild-mannered gentleman was Uncle Albert, who was always excellent company provided his wife was not present. Amelia, judging by a pre-marital portrait of her which hung in the drawing room of their house in Cottonopolis, had been a stunning beauty. The only surviving child of the owner of Grimsdyke Mill, Amelia eventually inherited the Mill on her father’s demise four years ago in 1884, which proved convenient as the 1882 Married Woman’s Property Act provided for such inheritance. Her mother had died fifteen years earlier, and since then Amelia had cared for the foul mouthed demanding and ungrateful old man, Albert always thought Old Grimsdyke treated his family the same way he had treated his employees, never any praise and always finding fault. If it had stopped with the old man life would not have been so bad for Uncle Albert, but his wife Amelia seemed to develop the same mental frame of mind soon after their marriage from where their marital bliss, if there ever had been any, descended into a steady, enduring, and relentless decline. Now the only interchange between them consisted of Amelia’s constant complaints.



Nigel’s imagination of his Aunt and Uncle.

Nigel’s not so pleasant revelry was sharply brought to an end when Annabell declared that he must tell them all about India. Emily had been about to ask why he had chosen to manage a tea garden rather than follow his father’s profession, but the question would have to wait.

Turning to Annabell, Nigel began by saying that India should be thought of as part of the Orient or Far East as there are so many similarities. “However,” he continued “The Indian Empire is vast, and no two parts the same. Perhaps the greatest difference is between the hills and the plains. Life in a hill station is the most pleasant, the best, I think, along the north and eastern side of the country, from Simla in the foothills of the Himalayas in the north to Darjeeling and Assam in the east. To rise before dawn, have one’s Pukawallah bring tea to you while seated on the veranda of one’s bungalow and watch the sun rise over the hills. A great orange disc rises in the sky coming up like a silent clap of thunder, over the ridge defining the eastern frontier, out of China spreading light and illuminating the vast plains of the Indian Empire, a sight to behold.”

“What are the natives like,” asked Emily.

“A sullen lot most of them, and not to be trusted. After the Mutiny we’ve all learnt to be much more careful, don’t leave temptation their way, but most of them are not too bad as long as you remind them who’s their master, their Sahib.”

Nigel was one of those unusual chaps who had a tendency to confuse others by seeming to be both recklessly adventurous and at the same time careful and cautious. He refrained from telling the ladies the most negative aspects of life in India, the gangs of thuggee who befriended fellow travellers on the major routes across the country only to murder them at night, a Hindu practice in honour of the goddess Kali, nor the custom of suttee, widows dying in the flames of their deceased husband’s funeral pyre, nor the cruelty inflicted on junior members of a household to maintain authority which could involve amputation of hands at the wrist of young men or women, sons, or daughters. Neither did he mention the sacred cows which wandered the streets leaving vile mess everywhere coupled with much stink. He thought the Ashbourne family, or those he had seen so far quite charming, and did not wish to create possible barriers should he decide to propose marriage to Annabell. So, he talked of other native customs, both Hindu and Mohamedan, their temples and colourful dress, exotic trees, and shrubs of colourful rhododendrons.



Natives gathering leaves of tea plants on a Tea Garden in Eastern Bengal.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the entrance hall, and George strode into the parlour, he was red in the face, and clearly in a foul temper, something had greatly displeased him.

Rising quickly to her feet his mother, Emily exclaimed, “Whatever is the matter, something has gone badly wrong, has it?”

Nigel realised he had stayed too long and rose to go hastily making his apologies.

George noticed him for the first time, and looking straight at Nigel enquired in a most unfriendly manner, “And who might you be?”

Ignoring Nigel’s stammered reply, George turned to his mother saying, “That new boy we engaged last week, I set him to block up Charles Morgan’s brougham so we could repair one of the wheels and axle and he couldn’t even do that, the carriage has slipped off the blocks and there is damage to the side and roof. Old Sid would never let me down, but that impudent boy is going, just as soon as I calm down otherwise, I may cause him an injury.”

Nigel retreated to the entrance and was almost at the garden gate when he caught sight of Annabell running towards him, she was in tears and sobbing just managed to say, “I’m so sorry, Nigel, George is my elder brother and now has control of the business together with its problems. Let me write to you please, you’re talking about India was fascinating, and I do so wish to hear more.”

Nigel extracted a visiting card from a little silver case and wrote on the back the address of Twinings in London, the printed address being that of his parents in Droitwich. Departing he kissed her hand, fearing he would cause offence, but she smiled sweetly while he promised to write to her very soon.

Saucy Sophia’s Snippets



Advertising Ovaltine in the 1920's

Trailer for next month.

In chapter XIV to be published in June, we rejoin Edward in Berlin. After a quiet few months while he tries to get to grips with his employment at the Imperial Admiralty there is frantic activity when the elderly Kaiser dies, and the succession is not as straight forward as would be hoped.

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