

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER XXX

and

Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month,

December, 2025.

George Ashbourne had received a list of six public houses from the solicitors acting for the Vendors and he wasted little time inspecting his proposed purchases. Less than a week after returning from Oxford he set out on his tour of inspections on Tuesday the 15th October, a day of bright sunshine, but with a touch of chill in the air, a prelude to Autumn.

Hiring a horse from a local livery stable, George set off along the lanes of South Herefordshire, riding beneath overhanging trees, some of whose leaves were beginning to turn a golden yellow. Within a month they would fall creating a carpet of softness to quieten the hooves of passing horses and the iron tyred wheels of carriages, coaches and waggons. George made his way first the visit the “Apple Pickers” at Mitcheldean, a rather dilapidated establishment it seemed to him, set in the middle of the High Street between a butcher’s shop and second-hand clothes shop, neither of whom appeared to be anything remotely prosperous. One look at the premises confirmed George’s worst fears, and closer inspection would not improve matters. He looked around for a hitching ring but there wasn’t one anywhere. There was a group of urchins, about half a dozen staring at him. Addressing the one who seemed to be the eldest with the words. “You boy!” George continued. “Would you like to earn yourself half a crown?” To which the boy nodded. “Then take care of my horse.” And pressing a half crown into the boy’s hand he promised another half-crown (two shillings and six pence – 12 ½ new pence decimal currency) when he returned to collect the horse.

“Corre, thanks Gov’ner, I’ll look after yer hos.”



The “Apple Pickers” Mitcheldean High Street.

Entering the “Apple Pickers” George was instantly assaulted by a reeking stench, an unpleasant mix of damp, rot, stale beer, tobacco smoke and something else more difficult to accurately identify but reminded the visitor of the odour of sweat, urine and vomit. He was not favourably impressed.

The man standing behind the bar matched the general appearance of neglect. He was wearing a dirty, once white shirt with the collar missing and rolled up sleeves. While some of his front teeth were missing, his hair had not been brushed or combed for weeks, and the fingers of his right hand were stained a dark yellow from tobacco. Neither did his manner of greeting help to dispel the general atmosphere of decay.

“What you want then?”

“I’m here to inspect the premises, and from what I’ve seen so far I am not impressed.”

“Oh yeah, you better get out then.” Was the belligerent response.

George produced the letter of authority and showed it to the publican. He took one look and nodded. “ ‘spose yer be’er look round then.” Making no attempt to rouse himself.

Making his way to the rear he spotted an open door leading to the cellar with a wooden stairway which had clearly seen better days, so covered in grime was it. George did not go far, there was only a modicum of light from a grating at the front revealing the complete untidiness of the place, and a death trap for the unwary. He had seen enough and made to leave.

“Yer ain’t going upstairs then?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Please yerself then. Yer can’t go up there anyways, Mrs up there with some bloke.”



The foot of Pump Hill leaving Mitcheldean, Gloucestershire.

George thought better than to offer his reluctant host any remark. On the pavement outside he collected his horse, gave the urchin a further half crown and rode away thinking to himself, one down and five to go. From Mitcheldean the road led up Pump Hill with views on his left towards the estuary of the River Severn. Next stop was the “Collier” in Cinderford which proved to be a far more potentially profitable business. A typical working class ‘pub’ but clean and tidy, nevertheless. The buxom barmaid greeted him in a friendly manner, and after he explained the nature of his visit called to the potboy to show her visitor around. Well satisfied George rode on to his next port of call, the “Barley Moon” in Coleford. This proved to be an even better prospect than the “Collier.” More of

an inn or small hotel than a public house he was surprised to be confronted by a long bar of polished mahogany in front of gleaming engraved glass mirrors. The whole setting one of elegance and modest prosperity. The walls which were covered in green flock paper were decorated with framed watercolours of the locality, or perhaps how it had looked before the coal mines. A very helpful manager was pleased to escort George on a guided tour of the premises.

George, ambitious as ever, had intended to turn eastwards to Lydney and the “Anchor” but time had marched on and consulting his pocket watch found the time to be a little after three o’clock. Realising it would be dark in two hours and from Coleford it would take most of that time with a horse nowhere near as fresh as when leaving that morning, he turned for home.

Over dinner that evening George outlined the day’s events, his father William nodded saying that Cinderford and Coleford sounded interesting, but not the “Apple Pickers” in Mitcheldean. George’s mother Emily said nothing, but his sister, Annabell asked if she could accompany him the following day when he had said he would be visiting the remaining three on the list. It was agreed that the pair would travel together.

The profound truism “Man proposes but God disposes” proved its truth when the following morning George was called away on an urgent matter which required his attention. Then there was another and another until it was not until the end of following week when the inspection of the remaining premises could be achieved,

At 9 o’clock on Friday morning George was waiting outside their home with a gig, a two wheeled vehicle with a hood as a precaution against inclement weather. Annabel appeared shortly after dressed in a warm traveling coat and fur trimmed hat with matching boots. They set off for Newent, through Lea turning after the “Crown” onto a road leading via Aston Crews, Aston Ingham and Kilmot to Newent. The “Railway Arms” lay in a hollow hard by the railway station. They found the publican sweeping the floor and briefly looked around, it could do with a lick of paint but otherwise seemed passable.



The railway station, Newent.

Before departing Newent they ventured into the station, not to enquire about train departure times but the frequency and more importantly the numbers of passengers travelling. The volume of passenger traffic sounded promising, potential customers for the “Railway Arms.” Then it was on the “Ship” at Westbury-on-Seven, a route through woodland with leaves fluttering down along their way. At Huntley they turned right along a lane leading to their next destination past the Union Workhouse they arrived at a very pleasant tavern standing on raised ground overlooking the river. A coal fire was cheerfully burning in the grate as they entered to be received by a round-faced jovial stout publican who, on being informed of their business offered them a glass of hot mulled wine and was only too happy to show the pair around. George was favourably impressed and made a mental note to keep the man on if the purchase went ahead. On being informed that they would next be visiting

Lydney, Albert Gooch for that was the publican's name, produced a well-used copy of "Bradshaw's" and consulting the pages declared that it would be better to take the train to Lydney Junction, a twenty-minute journey with a train leaving in fifteen minutes.

Westbury-on-Severn was only a halt on the "Great Western" main line from Gloucester to Cardiff, Swansea and the ferry port at Fishguard, originally partially constructed by the South Wales Railway, thus they had to wave the train down when it arrived. Fortunately, the Engine Driver spotted them and drew the train to a stop for the pair to step aboard. From Westbury-on-Severn they stopped at Newnham, Awre for Blakeney, Gatcombe after which they had a splendid view of the river and the recently opened railway bridge from Sharpness on the east bank before passing under the bridge which carried the line over them and gradually descending along an embankment to Lydney Junction.



The Severn Railway Bridge and Severn Bridge Station at Sharpness.

Arriving in Lydney they easily found the "Anchor" in the High Street at a 'T' junction opposite a road leading into the Forest of Dean, a road to Park End and ultimately Upper Lydbrook. The public house itself proved to be a cross between the "Apple Pickers" in Mitcheldean and the "Ship" at Westbury-on-Severn. Not as awful as the former, but nowhere near as hospitable as the latter.

Inside the tavern was clean and tidy with a smell of beer and tobacco as was to be expected while the manager seemed polite and helpful when informed of the purpose of their visit, it was only when George attempted to pursue more detailed questions regarding the regular patrons and bar receipts that he became rather evasive. George decided not to question the man further deciding instead that if he continued with the purchase he would have to replace the manager. They left for the railway station.

The booking office clerk, taking notice of their attire apologised profusely that there were not any first-class carriages on the Gloucester train which had just drawn into the station. As they made their way onto the platform a coarse looking man roughly pushed past them making for the way out. At the time George and Annabel took no notice except to remark on the seemingly uncouth man's lack of manners. A porter held a door to a second-class compartment open for them and with a whistle from the guard and a shout by the porter the train moved forward with a jolt. There was one passenger in the compartment already sitting on her own, a well-dressed lady of a certain age who sat quite still, that is until there was another jolt when she flopped forwards and her reticule fell off her lap onto the floor spilling the contents.

Both George and Annabel immediately jumped up to go to her assistance. It was Annabel who made the discovery with a gasp and stepping back she exclaimed.

“Oh George, please help, I think she may be dead!”

George who had been replacing her possessions in her reticule stood up. One look confirmed his sister's finding, the lady was indeed quite dead, but only very recently. Now the train was composed of non-corridor stock as was normal, each compartment having a single door on each side thus there was no way of summonsing help other than the communication cord to stop the train. There was no alternative other than remain where they were until the next station at Gatcombe just after the Severn Bridge. It was an anxious ten to fifteen minutes and when they arrived George immediately jumped out and ran to the Guard to inform him of the situation. From that moment on all pandemonium seemed to break loose, but in rather slow motion. The Guard informed the Driver and Station Master. The Station Master stated that the train would have to stay put until the police arrived and dispatched the Porter to the local police station, meanwhile the other passengers leaned out of windows or alighted onto the platform all demanding in their own way to know why they had stopped, what was going on while the more vocal besieged the nervous Station Master demanding that the train continue without further delay, citing an urgent need to reach Gloucester for the London express. All to no avail.

The police sent Inspector Victor Plod who, when he arrived, was in no great hurry to make his enquiries, but methodically questioned all the passengers in turn even though there were only two, George and Annabel, with anything to report, and even they knew very little. The train stood still with the locomotive gently smoking away accompanied by the occasional shriek of released steam pressure which took the unwary completely by surprise. However, after a delay of over half an hour during which time many of the

passengers became repeatedly demanding that they be allowed to continue their journey, Inspector Plod made the decision to arrest George and Annabel and release the train to continue to its scheduled destination.

The Inspector, whom Annabell judged not to be the brightest informed the pair that as they were the last to have seen the deceased alive they must be guilty of the good lady's murder and marched the two to the local police station where their personal details were recorded and they were locked in separate rather smelly and uncomfortable cells. Meanwhile, as is the way with the general public, the deceased, who had been removed from the railway carriage, was initially referred to as a lady of some quality, but with the retelling became a baroness, a wealthy duchess and an Austrian Archduchess, all of which was merely the product of fertile imaginations. Human ingenuity being such that shortcomings in information were soon made good regardless of actual accuracy.

Brother and sister were left to languish in the police stations cells while the Inspector meticulously prepared his report setting out his reasons for reaching his conclusion and suspicion of guilt. Completing the report, it occurred to him that his superiors should be informed. He was not the senior officer, but the Superintendent was away at a meeting in Cheltenham, for the moment he was temporarily in command. He relished being left in charge, especially when all was quiet, but this was different, and he dithered over what to do, then he had it. Send a telegraphic message to the Chief Constable at Gloucester. Summoning the station constable, he despatched him with a written message to the railway station where it could be wired by telegraph.

Inspector Plod now made himself a cup of tea and sat back to continue reading the local newspaper and await developments. Meanwhile in the cells time passed at a snail's pace, it was cold and damp, an opening high up near the ceiling providing a little natural light but only during the hours of daylight, and it would soon be dark. At about six o'clock a constable brought to them both a metal mug of tea and an unbuttered chunk of bread. Each cell was furnished with a plain wooden chair and an iron bed equipped with a non-too clean horsehair mattress and one thin blanket which could have seen service in the Peninsular War. There was nothing to do, when darkness descended and unbeknown to each other they attempted sleep.

Away in Gloucester, Inspector Plod's telegram arrived on the desk of the Assistant Chief Constable, one Algernon Wallace, unfortunately he had left the office for the day and none of the staff thought fit to take any action. The telegram lay on Algie's blotter until he arrived next morning. Assistant Chief Constable Algernon Wallace took one look at the telegram; his face went white and he summoned the station sergeant.

"When did this arrive?" He demanded.

"Don't know, sir." The bewildered man stammered.

Algie thought for a few moments, the railway would be quickest, but he lacked the authority to order a special, it would have to be a scheduled service. 'Bradshaw's' revealed that by chance and good fortune, there would be a "GWR" train leaving in fifteen minutes and stopping at Gatcombe en route for Lydney and Chepstow. Algie arrived at the railway station just as the guard was blowing his whistle and waving the green flag for departure.

He was immediately recognised and briskly saluted as he ran for the train. A porter opened a carriage door, and he jumped in just as the train was moving off.

The cells at the Gatcombe Police Station were perhaps the most unhygienic or so they seemed to Annabell. She now regretted accompanying her brother, but most of all she thought she would die of some horrible disease in this awful place, and how long would she be confined here she wondered. That night she slept not a wink. She refused to lay on the bed but spent the night seated on the wooden chair. Her brother meanwhile fell asleep on the bed, but tired though he was, slept fitfully. In his mind the mug which had contained an apology for tea slowly changed. It grew larger. At half the size of a man the handle slowly transformed itself into an arm whilst another arm appeared opposite. Then a head appeared, not with a kindly face, but evil resembling a giant, brutal with missing teeth and very battered. The image grew larger until it reached the ceiling which had miraculously gained a few feet in height whilst a roughly hewn club appeared in the giant's right hand studded with long cruel nails protruding several inches on each side. Advancing on the miserable victim the giant lifted the club preparatory to striking a devastating blow to inflict painful and serious injury if not death. George awoke ready to try to defend himself – the image vanished, only the mug remained. How long he remained awake is impossible to say, but when sleep returned he was seated backwards on a horse facing the tail. The horse galloped through the night, on and on it went. George clung on as best he could though there was nothing to hold on to while the horse sailed over hedges, ditches, houses and churches. Then a train was heading straight towards them. It came from the horse's rear so was ignored, all the while, with malevolent fury the locomotive belching fire and smoke grew closer until it was upon them. Again, George awoke. He did not attempt sleep again.

Algie Wallace entered the Gatcombe Police Station to be greeted by a young constable who had only just come on duty and thus totally unaware of the previous day's events. His ignorance did not amuse the Assistant Chief Constable, but he quietly requested to see Inspector Plod only to be informed that he was not there, it not being his duty day.

“You have two persons held in custody, I believe?”

“Do we, sir.”

“You do and I would like to see the evidence for their arrest.”

Algie kept his patience.

“Well sir, I dun no, see the Inspector keeps them papers in ‘is office.”

“That’s alright, now you man the desk and I’ll study the report, and you had better send for Inspector Plod, I may have a question or two for him”

Some ten minutes later the constable ushered George and Annabel into the Inspector's office. They were both clearly distressed by their experienced and more than worried having been arrested for the murder of the lady on the Gloucester train. So shaken were the pair that

George failed to recognise his old school fellow pupil, and they just stood a picture of dejected melancholy in now bedraggled clothing.

“Well now, this is a sorry pickle you’ve got yourselves into. What did you think you were doing?”

Still George did not immediately recognise his old friend, and his sister thought it a cruel remark. Then he looked up and the penny dropped.

“Algie!” George exclaimed. “But we are in serious trouble, accused of a murder we did not commit.”

Annabell experienced a confusion of emotions in a matter of seconds. She could hardly believe what she was hearing and almost fainted. Algie produced a chair for Annabell while he seated himself behind the Inspector’s desk and George took another. He waited while the lady composed herself with the help of a little bottle of smelling salts, before taking the liberty, as he expressed the action, of introducing himself and explaining how earlier that year her brother had rendered great assistance to the police in enabling the arrest and conviction of the vile black spot gang.

Fresh drinkable tea and palatable breakfast were provided by the Constable at Algie’s request and their release papers signed, and now it was time to depart. The three of them travelled by railway, brother and sister as far as Westbury-on-Severn while the Assistance Chief Constable alighted at Gloucester. At the “Ship” the jovial publican expressed his delight at seeing them again and produced the gig with the horse already harnessed and with many wishes of good cheer they set off for home.

Especially for Christmas, 2025.

A little Relish for All

with acknowledgments to the late Ronnie Barker

Christmas roses, Christmas roses!

Greet the sunshine cold and clear –

Who’d resist such pretty posies

Heralding the Christmas cheer?

Santa Claus, within the mountain

Stirs himself as they appear,

Watching as they bud and blossom

Heralding the Christmas cheer.

Christmas roses, bloom un-noticed

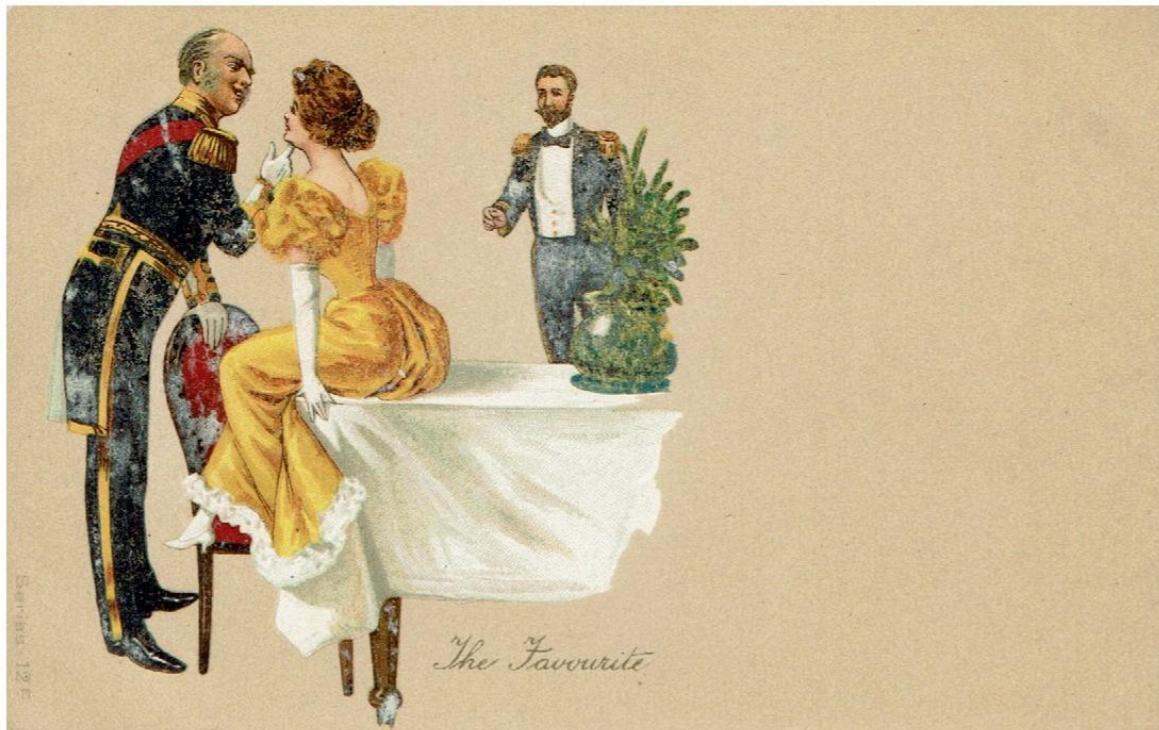
While we drink our Christmas cheer,

Polishing our Christmas Noses

Not with roses, but with beer.



Saucy Sophia's Snippets



The Favourite

Is she daddy's favourite daughter, niece or perhaps not quite a lady but one of humble origin on the make. They may not be at home, but the officer's mess or a restaurant. Clearly the waiter is surprised. She is seated on the dining table, an expression of provocation possibly inviting the officer to take advantage. There again, maybe she is attempting to wheedle a special Christmas present from her admirer. The postcard is from the late 1890's so it is unlikely we will ever know the answer.

This month we celebrate
CHRISTMAS
and to wish you all a very merry Christmas
a greeting card from the 1900's.



Trailer for January, 2026.

Both George and Annabell have been released from the Gatcombe police cell. The culprit is uncovered and his accomplice and both are duly executed, otherwise from mid-October very little happens other than the normal rhythm of life, but the New Year brings some surprises.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st December, 2025.