

# THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

## CHAPTER XXXI

and

**Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month,**

**January, 2026.**

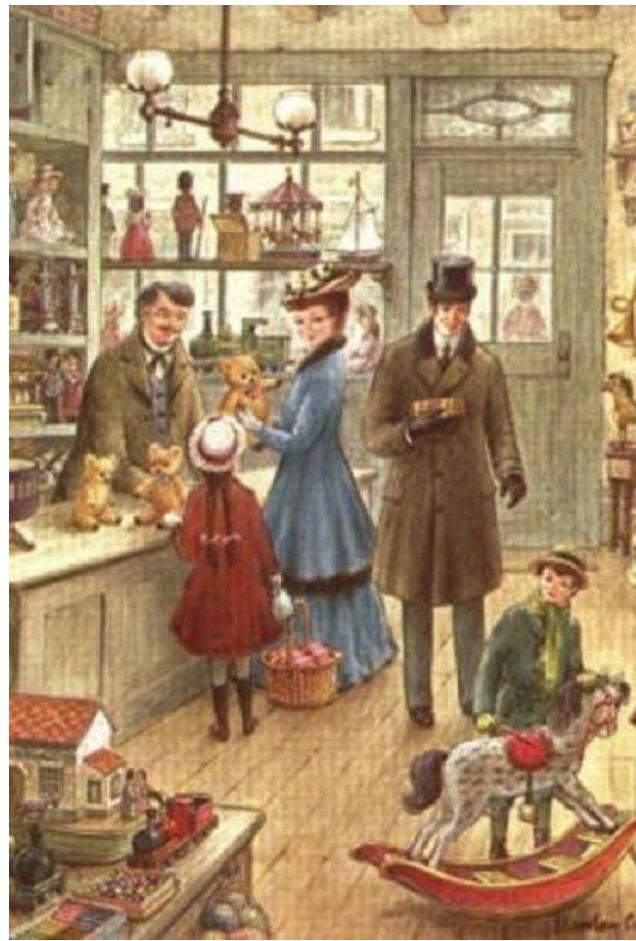
From the release of George and Annabell at the police station in Gatcombe and their return home to Christmas 1889 very little occurred to upset the normal rhythm of life. True there was Christmas with all the extra activities including a reception for all the employees based in Ross on Christmas Eve when as a 'thank you' for all their hard work and loyalty at the premises near the railway station hot mulled wine and minced pies were passed around by Annabell, dressed in red and green for the occasion, while George thanked each one of them individually giving a sovereign to the managers and a half sovereign to their assistants, stable lads and other hands. The evening ended with three rousing cheers for George and his family while George announced that the Christmas Holiday would extend to the day after Boxing Day giving the employees a Wednesday, Thursday and Friday holiday.

Six days earlier, on the 19<sup>th</sup> December both George and his sister, wearing the same costume, had travelled to Cinderford, Coleford, Newent and Westbury-on-Severn, the purchase of the four taverns having completed in mid-November. George had decided not to buy the 'Apple Pickers' at Mitcheldean and the 'Anchor' in Lydney. At each location the procedure was much the same, except that Albert Gooch at the "Ship" received a five-pound note in gratitude of his services on the occasion of their arrest at Gatcombe.

Finally, it was the turn of James Aleman and his staff at the Bonny Moira Brewery in Drybrook where the Master Brewer also received a five-pound note in grateful thanks for all his successful management and the employees a half sovereign each.

Earlier that month, on Thursday the 12<sup>th</sup> December as a special treat George decided to take his parents and his sister Annabell to Worcester to visit the city and the shops. Although they did not know it, George had arranged something extra special, to be revealed later. After Emma's demise he had realised that the day to day caring of his two sons, Charles aged two and Alfred aged three would be just too much for his mother and so a nanny was hired, and it was in her care that the two boys spent much of their time. Thus, it was perfectly natural for Nanny to be in charge now, they being far too young to be included in the journey to Worcester.

The day and evening proved to be most enjoyable for all four of them. They visited a toy shop to buy presents for the two boys, and it was whilst they were there they met Angie looking for a Christmas present for his niece, the nine-year-old Amelia, his sister's daughter. Angie was pleased to see George and suggested they look in at a café nearby as he had some news to impart. He was however delighted to meet Annabell again whom he declared to be perfectly charming whilst she admitted that on the previous occasion she had hardly been at her best, straight from a prison cell.



### The Toy Shop in Worcester.

In the café Angie, who had by now been introduced to George and Annabell's parents, ordered coffee for all five of them, when the waitress appeared, and informed them that the murderer and his female accomplice had been arrested and was surprised that George and his sister did not already know. It seems that Gatcombe police station had not bothered to write to George. Angie said he could not understand why. He had his own beliefs but wisely kept the thoughts to himself. He did however inform the party that the pair, posing as Mr. and Mrs. McTavish, had attempted to purchase a diamond and ruby necklace with four new five-pound bank notes in a jeweller's shop in Gloucester. The Jeweller being both astute and wary as the couple, who were very shabbily dressed, appeared to be rather nervous, obviously foreigners and the man in need of a shave, kept them waiting while he took the notes into his back office to check the numbers against a recent police notification. Finding a match, he sent his assistance via the rear door to summons the police. At this point Angie explained that the murdered lady had in her reticule a slip from the Gloucester branch of the Dalgliesh Bank for the sum of Two Hundred Pounds and the bank were able to confirm the serial numbers of the bank notes. The man had tried to pretend that he had been paid the money legally while the woman screamed at him. A search of his person revealed the other One Hundred and Eighty Pounds also in bank notes with matching serial numbers. In court at the conclusion of the hearing the trial judge, with a black cap placed atop his sorrel wig, pronounced sentence of death, the pair were led away, the man swearing like a trooper and the woman wailing. A sorry state of affairs, but they will not be able to repeat their crime. They were hanged in Gloucester Prison. What Algie omitted to relate, mainly from gallant consideration of the fair lady's sensitivity, was that he had been required to witness the execution of the pair whose real names were Gregori and Svetlana Stalinsky from the Pale of Kurland from where they had

escaped under the noses of the Imperial Russian Police, the Okhrana via German Lithuania. Algie was present when the pair were brought from separate condemned cells their ankles shackled and wrists tied behind their backs. As soon as Svetland saw her husband she again began cursing and berating him while the poor man just stood there waiting to die. As she stormed at him in a mixture of Russian and Yiddish the others understood not a word except that her attitude made the intent obvious. A noose was placed over their heads by the executioner, a priest pronounced the forgiveness of the Almighty if they truly repented of their sins, then the hangman pulled a large lever, the trap door on which the condemned pair were standing opened and they dropped to the chamber below, to be abruptly stopped at the end of the rope when with a crack or snap the knot struck their vertebrae below the scull severing the spinal cord and instant death. The limp bodies hung together until taken down for burial within the prison grounds quite unmarked.

“Inspector Plod must be regretting his haste action, arresting George and I while the actual villains thought they had made their escape.” Observed Annabell.



### The Café in Worcester.

“Quite so.” Responded Angie. “But keep this to yourselves.” Continued the Assistance Chief Constable in an undertone. “The Chief will be sending for him, seems he may be demoted to the ranks, Constable Plod! He will tread very warily now.”

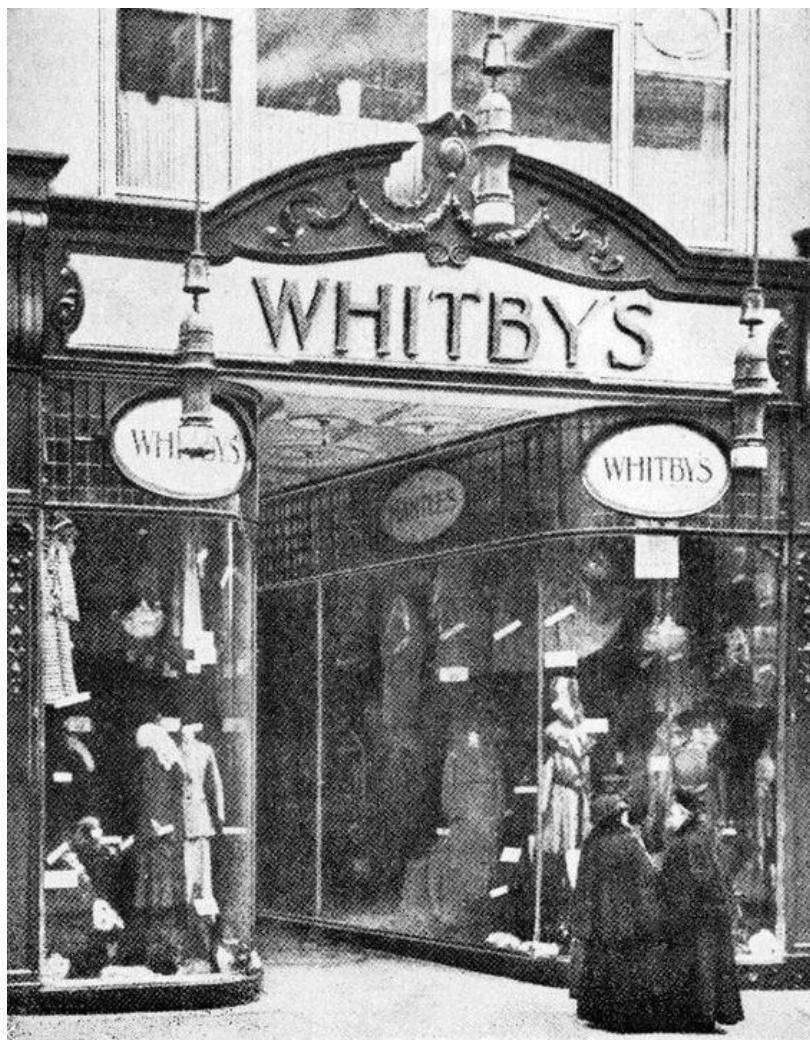
“Thank you, Angie, for trusting us with the confidential information, none of us will

breathe a word, of course." Said George.

"That's right." Rejoined Annabell. "Perish the thought that we should mention this to anyone."

Angie smiled broadly, and with more than a hint of jollity in his voice said. "My dear friends, you can discuss the case with however you please, just don't mention Inspector Plod!" Coffee finished it was time to leave. Angie, who needed to return to Gloucester took his leave of the party, and bowing low kissed Annabell's hand saying that he greatly looked forward to their next meeting, complimenting her on her beautiful sparkling blue eyes, auburn hair and her pretty bonnet with its blue ribbons to match her eyes. While Annabell blushed at the unexpected compliments and stammered a smiling response with a flourish of top hat and silver topped malacca cane Angie departed.

Leaving the café they separated, the ladies to visit a couturier while father and son called on a tobacconist and connectionist for cigars and boxes of chocolates. It was while mother and daughter were on their own that Emily observed to Annabell that the charming policeman seemed quite taken with her, adding that he had been at school with George and that as yet he remained a bachelor. Oh yes replied Annabell, I felt sure he is unmarried, and with a flourish and a certain saucy aire added that a girl knows these matters.



**The Ladies Dress Shop visited by Annabell and her mother.**

Mid-day found all four participating of luncheon at the Midland Hotel where they would be staying the night and the location gave George the opportunity to check on the delivery of their luggage which had been sent on ahead, advance passenger train railway delivery.

Arrangements had been made for all four of them to attend a variety performance at the New Theatre Royal on Angel Street, an exceedingly comfortable and elegant theatre being a rebuild after the disastrous fire of the 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1877 which destroyed the earlier building. The new theatre was opened on the 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1878. At a cost of One Pound or thereabouts the party enjoyed the comfort and privacy of a box with a splendid view of the stage and the auditorium. There was a varied programme of entertainments including a comedian, a conjurer, ballet, a rendering of "Champagne Charlie" by a singer posing as the great George Leybourne, followed by Jacques Offenbach's overture to "Orphee aux enfers" (or Orpheus in the Underworld).

As this music includes the section otherwise referred to as the Can-Can the Stage Manager had argued for the inclusion of a group female dancers performing the notorious French risqué dance, but the theatre Manager had demurred stating that the sight of a troop of wanton hussy's or loose women on stage would be considered an outrage and bad for business.



**Can-Can dancers at the Moulin Rouge in Paris.**

And last but by no means the least, the star of the show, Miss Vesta Tilley. A little confusing for while billed as Miss Vesta Tilley she appeared dressed as a boy and performed so convincingly in a male role that at times it was difficult to believe that a girl lurked under the boy's costume, but the audience applauded with genuine enthusiasm and gusto. She sung 'In the Pale Moonlight', 'Bring back the Flag from Majuba' (refers to the Battle of Majuba Hill in South Africa, a tragic defeat during the First Boer War) 'The Latest Chap on Earth' and "Pretty Polly Perkins of Paddington Green."

The theatre benefited from the installation of gas lighting throughout with enormous gasoliers suspended from the high ceiling providing good all-round lighting, but which from a central control of the gas supply could be reduced so that during performances the lighting in the auditorium was turned down with only a pilot light burning in the gas lights

to achieve near darkness thus the stage appeared the more brilliantly illuminated.

Formerly when theatres were lit by candles including large candelabras and chandeliers the stage and auditorium remained fully lit throughout performances which meant that the audience were also on view and could be, in some cases, the more important part of the entertainment.

Returning to the Midland Hotel where a light supper was served preparatory to retiring for the night, served by the hotel manager himself whom George and William had prearranged. Annabell was in a jubilant mood having stepped light footedly from the theatre to the hotel. She would have skipped singing a few of the songs they had heard that evening, but her parents would never have been able to keep up, with skipping that is. It was obvious to the Manager which theatre they had visited, so when they were comfortably seated he enquired of Annabell.

“And how did you like our Tilley?”

“Our Tilley? Enquired George and William together. “I did not realise she also works here.” Said George.

“Oh no! She’s far too well connected, and mistress of her trade for that, but we of Worcester still think of her as one of our own.

“Do you know her? Enquired Emily.

The Manager nodded.

“Oh, do tell us!” Exclaimed Annabell. “We would love to know all about her.” Clearly meaning herself.

Turning to George and William with a spare chair in one hand the Manager enquired. “May I?”

“Most certainly.” Both Father and Son confirmed simultaneously.

“Her name’s not Vesta Tilley, or rather that’s her stage name.” Said the Manager. “Her real name is Matilda Alice Powles; one of thirteen children and they lived in Beaver Row. Tilley is short for Matilda, see, that’s where that’s from, she was born in 1865 I think. No, let me remember, it were the same year my sister were born, so must have been ‘64, in the May I recall, the thirteenth, Matilda not my sister. We always remembered it ‘cause there were May trees in blossom, then they all moved away to Gloucester, her dad lands is ‘self a job at the Star Music Hall, manager he was. Little Tilley been on the stage since she were five years old so with her old man at the “Star” she’s performing there, 1872 it were when she was eight. Two years later she’s off to London. Now she’s Great Little Tilley.”

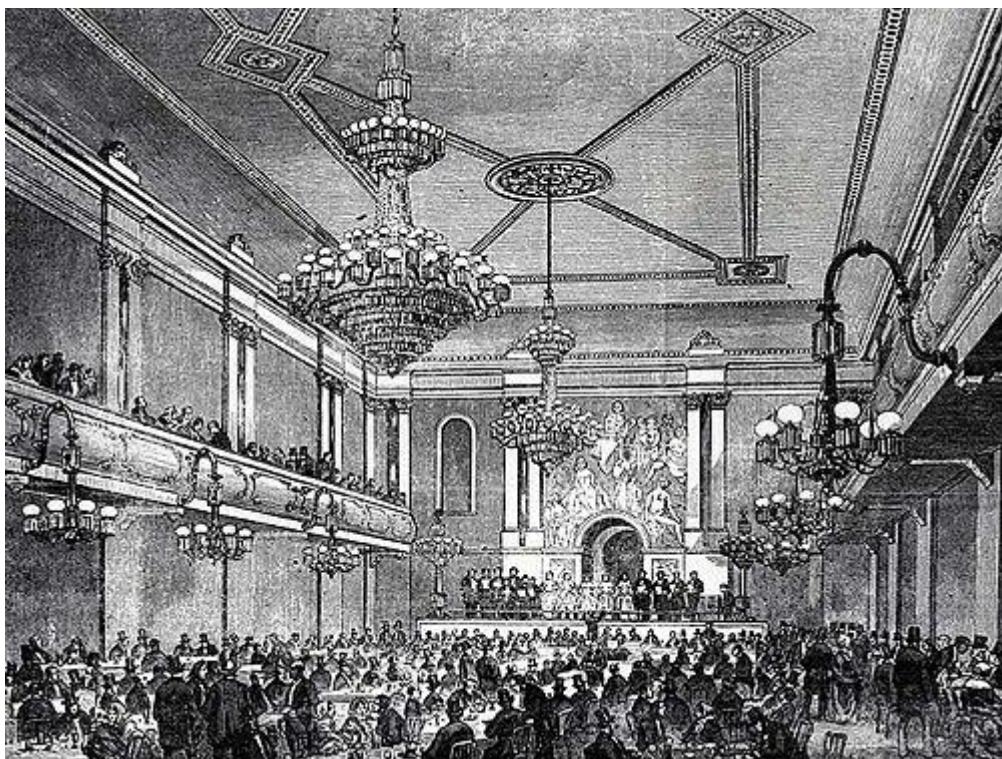
“How did she become Vesta Tilley? Did she change her name?” Enquired Annabell.

“We don’t know for sure. Her dad was known as Harry Ball, and I think that before she was Great Little Tilley she was Tilley Ball, then Little Tilley, all before she was ten years old. Seems that as she grew older she could no longer be Little Tilley, that’s when she became Great Little Tilley, but the Manager of the Canterbury Music Hall where she was performing didn’t like the contradiction, said she couldn’t be both great and little, like someone being both big and small, public would be put off – bad for business, so her

Father chose Vesta Tilley."

"Was there a reason for "Vesta" that's a most unusual girl's name, I don't think I know anyone called Vesta?" Said Emily.

"We think it's a clever use of words. Vestas are matches same as lucifers, as in Swan Vestas, they are small but illuminating, but also vesta is the Latin for virgin so Vesta Tilley is both pure and illuminating, a powerful combination I am sure you will agree." And smiling the Manager rose, and after ascertaining that there was nothing more they required, taking the ladies hands, one at a time, bowing he lightly kissed the back of their hands before leaving the party to finish their supper.



**The Canterbury Theatre where Matilda Powles performed three venues each night from 1874 as Great Little Tilley.**

Christmas Day was enjoyed by all the family at the now enlarged residence in Weston-under-Penyard, whilst on Boxing Day, in keeping with the practice at most, if not all, grand houses throughout the land, the staff were entertained by the family, though the servant's ball in the servant's hall was not quite up to the mark. The staff only numbering four being a nanny, cook, parlour maid and the elderly chap who served as a general handy man. They also received presents distributed by Emily.

## Saucy Sophia's Snippets



### Oriental Dance

Painting by the Italian artist Fabbi Fabio who was born in Bologna in 1861. An Orientalist who in 1893 was appointed professor to the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence. His paintings include both scenes of life in the Near East together with religious works for principal ecclesiastical centres of worship. He also illustrated translations of books by foreign authors including Charles Dickens and Jules Verne. He died in 1946.

### Trailer for February, 2026.

There is an unexpected visitor from Ireland who potentially brings another “string” to the bow of George’s growing business empire and yet further diversification. Meanwhile on the Continent a severe outbreak of influenza is reported in the press. In Paris it is believed that five hundred souls have died of the infection.

*Dorian M. Osborne*

1<sup>st</sup> January, 2026.