

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER XXXV

and

Saucy Sophia's Snippet, Humorous Quotation plus trailer for next month,

May, 2026.

The captain of the "Prince of Baden" had turned his ship eastwards and entered the Straits of Gibraltar, that eight-mile-wide passage between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Arriving off the Rock where bunkering facilities are available to replenish supplies of coal, fresh water and edible provisions. Whilst he had anticipated a swift turn around it was not to be. The Royal Navy had priority, and a small fleet had arrived just hours earlier, one battleship, five cruisers and three frigates all requiring coaling. Foreign ships would have to wait, possibly for five days.

Edward had heard that both officers of the Gibraltar garrison and of Royal Navy ships calling at the Rock, to relieve boredom, would travel to Ronda, a two-day journey on horseback to visit the Plaza de Toros de Rhonda (bull ring), the oldest in Spain dating from 1785. Enquiries revealed that an expedition to Rhonda would be rather less straightforward than he had first envisaged. With five days to spare for a journey of four days there and back there would be a whole day in the mountain town, but it would be wise to recruit a guide as the route could be perilous in parts, and there lingered desperadoes in the more remote sections of the route. He had come to the conclusion that he would have to abandon the idea, when at a chance meeting with Captain Karl Schmit Edward was informed that coaling would not be taking more than two days at the most.

"The chap in charge of provisioning arrangements and especially bunkering is a very reliable man." Said the Captain. "I have known him for years, good man, thought yesterday that he had gone elsewhere, but it was only his day's leave. Seems the deputy is one of those who is frightened of his own shadow. Expects everything to go wrong. A can't be done type, not a can-do type. The boss, one Peter Cobb, gets things done, I expect we will be sailing by nightfall. You had better make the most of our putting in here and visit the place. Go up to the galleries and see if they will show you around. There is a massive banqueting room created for the visit of ex-President Ulysses Grant in November 1878, truly remarkable, an enormous gothic window carved from the living rock. How they did it with a drop on the outside of well over a hundred feet the Almighty alone knows."

Edward abandoned the idea of visiting Rhonda, and taking advantage of the ship's tender putting other passengers and crew ashore arrived at the outer mole from where he made his way to the office of the garrison command where on revealing his rank in the Imperial Navy a sergeant was detailed to escort him and they immediately set off for the defensive galleries high up on the north face of the Rock.

"You come 'er to spy on us, 'ave yer?" Declared the amiable NCO. When Edward looked somewhat askance he immediately followed up his rhetorical question with a jovial. "Only joking mate, we gets all types what wants to see the hidden gun emplacements, most real gents, not many o' them ladies mind, but sometimes there's a right cove, thinks 'e owns the bleedin' place they do. Corse they only gets the short tour. Shouldn't be telling you all this, only barrack room gossip really."

There was a pause in conversation while Edward viewed the galleries and listened attentively while the Sergeant explained how the Royal Marines had blasted out the tunnel

they we're standing in within the Rock behind the sheer cliff face with gun powder. While one marine held a long heavy rod against the rock face another hit the end with a sledgehammer. When a hole had been bored to the approval of the corporal or sergeant commanding the group a charge of gunpowder would be inserted and fired by a touch of the slow march. A small section of rock would be blown out and the procedure repeated again and again. Tedious work and dangerous the sergeant had said.

Deeper in the tunnel they came to the cathedral like chamber that Captain Schmit had described, even grander and more magnificent than Edward had expected, a wonder to behold the space capable of seating over a hundred people he thought. President Grant must have been very impressed.

The Sergeant and Edward then descended to the lower level of Main Street with the intention of making their way towards Europa Point. However, it had been a steep climb up the tunnel entrance past the ruined remains of an Arab fortress and an equally difficult descent. Espying a café close by Edward suggested that they take some refreshment, he was not to know that Madam Katerina Tataniaevna Santova whom he thought of as Madam Bella Donna had been watching the pair as they made their way down and waved to them as they entered the café.



‘Bella Dona’, Edward and the Sergeant take coffee in a café.

Duly seated the Sergeant was enraptured and could not take his eyes off her; obligingly he jumped to her every request. She was dressed in a pale grey day dress with a matching broad brimmed hat while a bright red chiffon scarf knotted under her chin prevented the hat from being blown away. Red cotton gloves and shoes complimented the hat band.

They drank coffee served by an exceptionally polite waiter, while she questioned the Sergeant regarding his length of service, regiments he had served in, the locations he had been sent to and campaigns in which his regiment had taken part. For the Sergeant's part he entertained both Katerina and Edward with harrowing tales of life in India particularly the Northwest Frontier and the almost daily skirmishes with the Afghan tribesmen of the Kyber Pass and the foothills of the Hindu Kush Mountains.

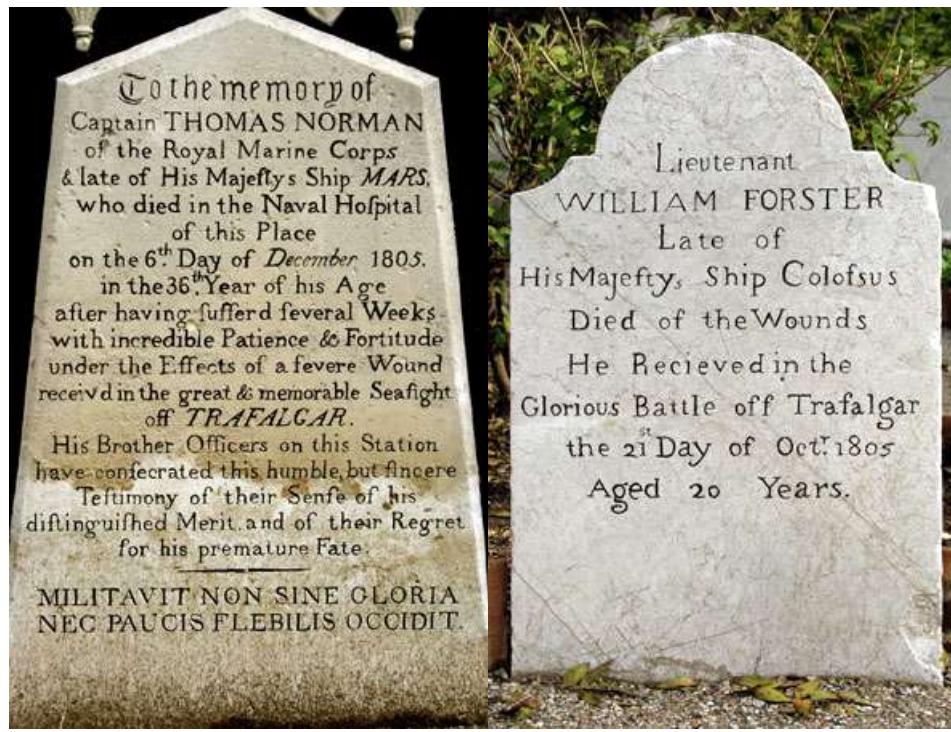
Katerina sat quietly intrigued, here was the British version of an all too familiar story, the relentless Russian advance across Northern Asia where there had been constant fighting with tribesmen who understandably resisted their homelands being overrun. It was in the region beyond the Frontier, India south of the Himalayas, where their countries agents had involved themselves in cat and mouse espionage known on both sides as the 'Great Game'. Katerina was learning about the other side, though without any potentially valuable details.

Leaving the café, they turned away from Main Street to proceed southwards and just outside of the Charles V Wall and Southport Gate, bounded by the Southport Ditch a defensive trench, a small triangular shaped graveyard was pointed out to Edward and Katerina containing the corpses of two of those who had died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. The young captain was surprised to note how many of the tombstones described the cause of death as fever, not enemy action, though doubtless the proximate cause was enemy action.

"Not so, the others are mostly of bodies those who died from yellow fever epidemics which plagued the Rock from 1804 to 1814." Said the Sergeant.



The graveyard with the Southport Gate in the background.



The tomb stones of the only two of the dead of Trafalgar buried by Southport Gate.

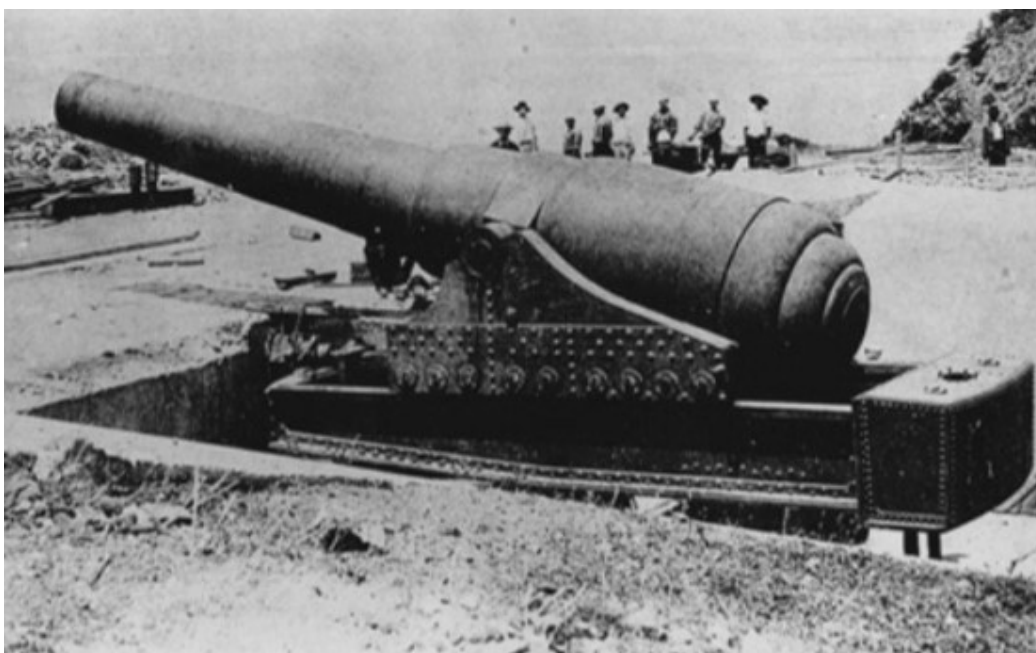
Further on nearing Europa Point the Sergeant, who had introduced himself to ‘Bella Dona’ as Algernon Burton of the Royal Garrison Artillery as they approached the 100 ton gun he proudly drew Edward’s attention to the enormous gun and informed both of them that the artillery piece had been manufactured in Newcastle by ‘Armstrong’ and brought here by HMS Stanley. In the café on Main Street, whilst the lady had left the pair together for a few minutes Algernon had reverently enquired of Edward if she could be trusted.

“Begging your pardon sir, don’t mean no offence like, but you being English which makes you one of us, but she’s foreign ai’nt she, must be careful not to talk too freely, if you know what I mean.”

“Madam is quite trustworthy, as far as I know.” Confirmed Edward. “I do understand your concern, you are perfectly right, but we are not at war with the Czar, just don’t reveal too much.”

At Napier Battery in Rosia Bay Algernon also volunteered some more information, none of which could be regarded as approaching a state secret or remotely militarily sensitive. Despite Edward’s assurance Sergeant Burton remained wary of their reliability, the lady being Russian, a foreigner whilst although Edward hailed from Herefordshire he wore the uniform of a foreign Great Power, he remained sceptical as to whether they could be trusted.

Algernon Burton stopped before the great gun and discussed its merits stating that it had become fully operational last year (1889), weighed 100 tons and could fire an 18-inch shell a great distance pointing to the North African coast to give the impression that it had a range of over eight miles. He deliberately omitted to mention that the gun’s maximum range was actually only three and three quarter miles, required a crew of 35, and six minutes was required for reloading. Nevertheless, it was a formidable weapon with which to defend Gibraltar and control shipping passing through the Straits.



100 ton gun at Napier Battery, Rosia Bay, Gibraltar.

Returning to Main Street the party separated, the artillery NCO returning to the garrison barracks where he was greeted as he walked through the gate by another sergeant with the cheerful words. “Where you been all day, me old china, thought y’d gorn orf wiv some foreign flussey whats arter all yer money!”

“No mate, I ai’nt that stupid, been showing a right pretty gal what’s from Russia an some posh geezer from home off that German ship that’s in fer coaling all about – right cracker she were, be’er than them native women out east.”

“Yer a lad you are, always got yer eyes wide open fer what’s at ‘and ai’nt yer?” And with that the second sergeant gave him a hearty friendly slap on the back, and they both went into the sergeant’s mess.

Sergeant Burton had not lost the back streets slang of his upbringing in Murphy Rents a foul-smelling overcrowded tenement built around a central courtyard with one lavatory for all forty-eight families which frequently blocked and one water tap. There was a narrow alley on the east side which led into Duke Street near the Covent Garden fruit, vegetable and flower market. His father had been a trooper in the 8th Hussars a fashionable light cavalry regiment which had made a man of him until that fateful day in 1854 when, together with the 11th Hussars, 17th Lancers and the 4th and 13th Light Dragoons, they had charged the Russian army, a feat immortalised by the poet laurate Alfred Lord Tennyson in his memorable poem ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’. The epic event had resulted in massive casualties and Algernon’s father did not escape. As they broke through the enemy battery smoke a captain of artillery brought his sword down in a slashing cut across the trooper’s right knee shattering the kneecap. The cavalry man did not immediately suffer any pain and bringing his heavy cavalry sabre down on the unfortunate captain cleaved his head apart, the man fell dead to the ground. Looking about he saw two gunners preparing to join the fray, both were despatched with a single stroke of the sabre each.

But the event of the 25th October proved to be his ruination, one of the 8th Hussars one hundred and four who trotted forward on that fateful morning, he was one of the thirty-eight who returned, but not complete, his injured right leg could not be repaired and he was issued with an honourable discharge, his life was over – no more soldiering.



Plunged in the battery smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the sabre stroke
Shattered and sundered
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred

Algernon was born in March of 1855, the last child, brother to his three elder sisters and two brothers, his father had aspirations of him becoming an officer and a gentleman, but Providence had other ideas. Worn down with debt, worry, evil overcrowded living conditions he gradually lost the will to live, even the award of the Victoria Cross from the Queen in Hyde Park on the 26th June, 1857 failed to raise his spirits beyond the following day. He died sixteen years later, miserable and cantankerous, his family finding it difficult to truly mourn his passing. Ex cavalry trooper James Burton named his youngest son Algernon in a rare moment of optimism believing, hoping and expecting that he would follow him into the army and rise through the ranks to gain recognition as, possibly, a second lieutenant. Algernon sometimes wondered if he could gain promotion to regimental sergeant major, then maybe fulfil his father's ambition for him. He wasn't sure he wanted promotion, there again he had enjoyed escorting the lady and gentleman, so why not?

Meanwhile Edward and Madam Katerina made their way to the docks past the many ships in the anchorage and moored at the wharfs to where the 'Prince of Baden' lay, covered in coal dust from the recent activity of fuel replenishment. Within the hour the crew had cast off, and they were on their way past the small armada anchored in the roads. A pleasant breeze swept over her as the bridge rang for full ahead and she set her bows for the straights and the open sea beyond that was the Atlantic Ocean.

Standing below the bridge wing Katerina smiled so sweetly into Edward's eyes, touched the sleeve of his uniform tunic as she moved closer to him and he felt overwhelmed and overpowered by her exotic perfume.

"Will I see you at diner?" She smiled disappearing into her first-class cabin leaving Edward in a perfect turmoil.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



The allure of perfume

Humorous Quotations

**“When I was young there was no respect for the young,
and now that I am old there is no respect for the old
I missed out coming and going.”**

J. B. Priestly.

Trailer for June.

What will Edward find himself expected to undertake in Togoland, and how will he cope with the beautiful Russian lady.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st May, 2026.

N.B. The image of the Café scene was generated by Artificial Intelligence (AI).