

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

CHAPTER XIX

and

Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

December, 2024.

During the days before Christmas rain had poured down on the fields and buildings of south Herefordshire, in fact rain had been teeming down on Wales and the West Midlands for days, or so it seemed to the population, but there were times when the rain fell gently and other times when there was no more than a damp mist. The people remembered and discussed at length the days when rain descended resembling stair rods. One wag from Ross quoted a rhyme he claimed to have thought up,

“There are holes in the sky,
Where the rain gets in.
But the holes are small,
That's why rain is thin.”

Three weeks before Christmas on a particularly wet day the village postman delivering the midday mail to the Ashbourne family, brought a letter postmarked Berlin. Edward had written to inform his family the good news that an engagement had been contracted with Alexandra, the daughter of the Graf Andrius von Czernowitz. He continued to explain that arrangements for the wedding are currently being discussed, but will probably be in May, at Alexandra's family home of Lansdorf in East Prussia.

There was great excitement in the family home in Weston-under-Penyard, the ladies clamoured to know if they would be going and if so for how long. Emma, George's wife gave the impression that to travel to East Prussia would be as easy as traveling to Scotland by Great Western Railway from the village halt. She did not seem to have any idea of the complexities involved. Emily, their mother, was excited, her second son was to be married to the daughter of an earl, whilst Annabell, the more level-headed, wondered how they would manage with all the luggage she thought her sister-in-law would expect to bring.

George pondered the matter, thinking that as yet they had not been invited and in the meantime there is much to be done relative to their business, and if they did go there would be travel arrangements to secure.

Edward did not mention in his letter how he had been rather sprung into the engagement by the unexpected arrival in Berlin of Alexandra and her parents. But thinking of the situation he had rapidly realised that this is exactly what he had desired all along and that it is foolish to waste more time wondering. He remembered his grandmother saying that a stitch in time saves nine and made haste to call on Andrius Martinkus and his wife and daughter at the Kaiserhof Hotel, a short cab ride away.

Neither did Edward mention that on arrival at the hotel he had been greeted both by the Martinkus family including Alexandra's brother Karl and Joucta's brother Hans Hoffmann in the suite of rooms they were occupying. Joucta, Alexandra's mother had been delighted to see the young Englishman again, whilst Hans, all *bonne humeur* (good cheer), seemed to have something he wished to inform Edward of privately.

The room service *kellner* (waiter) had been summoned and a bottle champagne opened to toast the future bride and groom, after which they had all repaired to the hotel restaurant and enjoyed a splendid dinner. Quietly, Hans had found an opportunity to inform Edward that there would be a vacancy at the naval dockyard in Danzig in a few months' time as the current superintendent will be retiring soon, and that if he applied for the post he (Hans) believed Edward would succeed as he is highly regarded at the Admiralty. Hans also mentioned that with a superintendent's salary his income would double, and he would be granted the administration rank of *kapitan* (captain).

Edward was delighted with the outcome, and later wondered why earlier that day he had had reservations. Alexandra was radiant in a beautiful pale green satin dress, all ruches, bows and ribbons with a reticule to match. Hans wore his *Kaiserliche marine* naval uniform, whilst Andrius a smartly cut suit of blue wool worsted his dress complimented with a red and black bow tie. Joucta was dressed in a ruby red dress with white collar, cuffs, shoes and reticule.

Joucta enquired after Edward's family in England, she already knew him as the second son of a successful gentleman of business and as their conversation progressed Edward wondered if perhaps he had given, in their eyes, the impression of greater success and prosperity than was actually the situation. He need not have worried, George his elder brother was well advanced with plans for ever greater business success as he would discover in the months to come. Edward, having informed his future mother-in-law, that there are seven of them in total, his grandparents, his parents and brother George plus sister Annabell, Joucta expressed surprise that there were not more. Edward had deliberately restricted the number to only his immediate family whom he thought might make the journey to Lansdorf, although as an afterthought he included his two nephews. Clapping her hands with pure pleasure Joucta declared that of course they must all come, and the castle will vibrate with the laughter and excited voices of the anticipated gathering.

In Weston-under-Penyard there was the inevitable fly in the ointment. Not the ever present fear of financial disaster, the knife edge on which they lived, though the possibility of ruin, starving from lack of food, freezing in winter and the workhouse, no. the problem was even closer to home, actually at home. George's wife had gone cold. It seemed to Emily George's mother, who was very acutely sensitive to matters of the heart, that since the birth of her last child, that a change had come over her. At first Emily doubted her own intuition but as the weeks turned into months she became more convinced of the accuracy of her initial judgment. George had obtained a painting which was actually a copy of the work by the French artist Paul Baudry entitled 'The Pearl and the Wave', but which the copier had named 'The Birth of Venus'. He hung it in their bedroom. A painting depicting the goddess her naked form emerging from the waves, and to anyone versed in Greek mythology the Island of Cyprus. Two months later, after George had departed for the day, Emma had declared that Old Sid could remove "the dreadful thing and that she would not put up with it in her bedroom any longer."



The Pearl and the Wave by Paul Baudry, 1862

Shortly after the birth of Charles last April Emma had increased her religious observance, attending at the church of St Lawrence every day, and often twice a day, neglecting her duties at home. So far the other ladies had disguised Emma's shortcomings, but George was not fooled, and now the painting had been removed by Old Sid. The faithful elderly manservant, being rather shrewd, had carefully stowed the painting in his store.

It was not that Emma was acting contrary to her family's normal religious practices, they all attended divine worship every Sunday morning, but not usually on other days of the week except special days, e.g. Christmas Day, Assentation, St. George's Day, etc., but now Emma was becoming rather fanatical. They were closer to the truth than they realised, after the birth of her youngest she gradually began to develop a repulsion of all things physical, especially the intimacy between husband and wife. She did not just feel revulsion for George's body, but also her own. Intellectually she remained as before, able to take part in academic and political conversation, though she remained silent on matters of Christianity. Increasingly she came to believe that by devoting herself to Jesus and preferably seeking admission to a convent could she secure the peace she craved.



The original Rectory, Ross showing the south front and extensive gardens.

Emma, the daughter of the Rector of St. Mary's church in Ross before her marriage to George had lived, since childhood, at the Rectory, a large and comfortable eighteenth-century house situated in Church Street. It had been a seriously evangelical upbringing, a profound belief in morality, family and the Christian faith; the Anglican protestant faith being superior to all others, that is all other religions being heathen, the preaching of the devil, lucifer or Satan. Emma had tried to be a good wife and to accept the uncertainties of

the commercial world into which she had married, but she missed, nay, longed for the certainty of the living enjoyed by her parents and the security that went with the rhythm of life within the church of England, as one event followed another, Easter, Whitsun, Advent, Christmas and many more between.



The Rectory in Church Street, Ross-on-Wye, photograph by R. E. Davies, c. 1920.

William, who had accumulated a small library since with George's help the business had prospered, and he had more time to devote to expanding his knowledge; he was rather dubious of all the puritanical fervour which the evangelical movement seemed to inspire. He had even read somewhere that if we had not interfered with the customs, religious practices and dress of the natives in India we would not have provoked the sepoy's mutiny. The author had also explained how in the early days of what is now known as the Indian Empire since the Queen had been proclaimed Empress, there had been much admiration of the Indians whose style of dress had been adopted by many from Great Britain in the eighteenth century, with even a divan club in London. Did Edward's love of adventure and travel spring from some of his books? William often wondered. While these thoughts had been transpiring in William's mind he had been occupying his favourite armchair set in the window of the parlour, his preferred room which also contained a rather large bookcase which housed his library. There was a coal fire burning merrily in the grate set within a green marble mantelpiece, and as the sunlight began to fade the flames and glow of burning coals cast shadows and reflections of fire light dancing across the room.



Ross in 1910 much as it had been when Emma lived at the Rectory. The railway line to Hereford and the gas works chimney can be seen in the upper part of the photograph.

William was at a loss to understand Emma, George had provided for her far more generously than he had managed to achieve for Emily. Indeed, he wished he could have done more, but Emily was quite happy with enough money to live comfortably if not lavishly, and the three children had kept her busy and contented. Whatever was the matter with Emma? His old age, ideally a time of rest and comfort, was being disturbed by the nagging unease regarding Emma. Was there something he should be doing or saying? He simply did not know, quite beyond his experience.

It was while he was pondering the insolvable problem of Emma that Annabell entered the parlour carrying an oil lamp, its light instantly brightening the gloom. The night had drawn in by now although the sky had a strange pale blue translucent sheen to it whilst the trees in the garden and beyond stood out in silhouette black. As Annabell set the lamp down on a round marble topped table, and excusing herself momentarily returned with a cup of tea for her father. Seated on a footstool at his feet and looking up at him she said with an enquiring look. "Do you remember that after our visit to the Art Gallery in Birmingham, that is mummy and I, that I wrote to the Hereford School of Art and Science to enquire if I could attend the art classes there?"

"Yes, I certainly do my dear."

"The postman has only just called, and I have a letter from the School." Said Annabell excitedly. "And Daddy! They have asked me to come and see them." And she passed the letter to William.

Reading the letter he saw that it was signed by Andrew Matthews, the second master, of the Hereford School of Art and Science. Turning to his daughter he said in a kindly and thoughtful voice.

"My dear, you must reply immediately and confirm that you will attend for an interview as he suggests. Next Tuesday in the late forenoon I believe he says, meaning between 10 and 11 o'clock. Now let me see, I am sure I have the day free, or it can be free, would you like me to accompany you to Castle Green, I do not mean into the School, just for the travelling, what do you think?"

Annabell clapped her hands with pleasure saying as she rose to hug her father.

"It's so good of you, Daddy, to think of coming with me, thank you. Could we, perhaps, have a little luncheon in one of the cafes in Hereford, or at the Green Dragon?" Smiling her most endearing, sweet and charming smile.

And thus it was settled, and Annabell and her father, William, travelled to Hereford the following Tuesday by railway through Ross, over the many bridges crossing the Wye, through the tunnel after Holm Lacy Railway Station, and on, crossing the river Wye again, rattling over the bridge across the road to Fownhope and into the grand railway station of Hereford.

The interview had been a great success as Annabell related to her father over luncheon at the Green Dragon in Broad Street how both Andrew Matthews and Mr. W. R. Muckley the Headmaster had been impressed by the portfolio of watercolour paintings and drawings she had taken to show the work she could do and had offered her acceptance of her application to study at the School.



The Green Dragon Hotel, Broad Street, Hereford.

And so the matter was settled, and Annabell obtained her wish to study art at the new art school on Castle Green in Hereford.

Their luncheon at the Green Dragon had been an experience for both father and daughter, they both found much in each other that had formerly been submerged by the everyday bustle of activity. Being a dry and bright day in mid-December they had walked from Castle Green and would walk to the railway station. The streets of Hereford were relatively speaking fairly clean, it was when running with rainwater that the manure left by the horses, and sometimes cattle and sheep produced a foul mud which a passing carriage or waggon could slosh through and send across the pavement such an evil spray to instantly ruin a lady's dress. On such a day Annabell would either not have ventured out or travelled by cab if not railway or tram.

At one point William had asked if Annabell had heard any more from the young tea garden manager fellow, and daughter had nodded and smiling said she had received another letter two days ago and would show him when they returned home. William thought his son would not be pleased with either of them; he would fear his sister would become a "blue stocking" with all the learning, and one of these females attending ladies' colleges intent on upsetting everything, and his father for aiding and abetting Annabell, but decided to say nothing. They talked of many things, but mostly artists whose work they both appreciated including John Atkinson Grimshaw, the painter of nocturnal scenes, and John Everett Millais whom William admired particularly for his depiction of the Black Brunswicker. William explained. "Together with his sweetheart they are at the Duchess of Richmond's Ball in Brussels when the news arrives that Napoleon has defeated us at Quatre Bras and the Prussians at Ligny and will soon arrive at Brussels. All officers attending the Ball make haste to join their regiments while the maiden suffers a premonition of the dreadful fate which will befall the Brunswick Hussars the following afternoon on the field of Waterloo."



The Black Brunswicker by John Everett Millais, 1860.

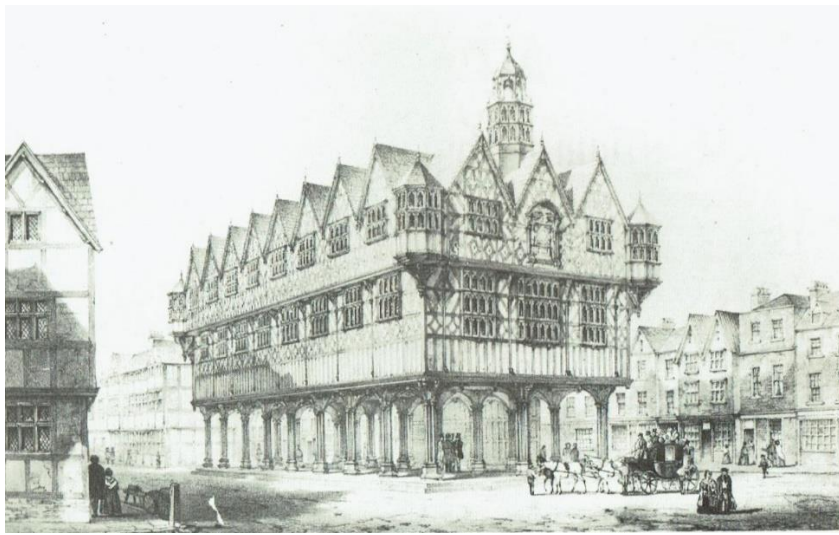
Describing the painting to Annabell William admitted to his daughter that part of his affection for the picture lies in his own perception of a likeness in his mind between Emily, his wife, at the time that Millais created it. Annabell's eyes opened wide at her father's admission, but she said very little. William who was far more intellectually aware than may be normally assumed for the manufacturer of vehicles, chiefly due to his wife's keen interest in the arts enquired of Annabell if she had seen in his wife's magazine the copy of Mr. William F. Yeames painting 'And when did you last see your father' which had caused such a sensation ten years ago when first exhibited.

"Yes!" Exclaimed his daughter, "A perfectly dreadful occasion. The poor boy being summoned to stand before those awful Puritans and answer their searching questions while his mother and sister are held at the back of the room knowing that the slightest mistake will be the downfall of them all and possibly death."



And when did you last see your father by William Frederick Yeames, 1878.

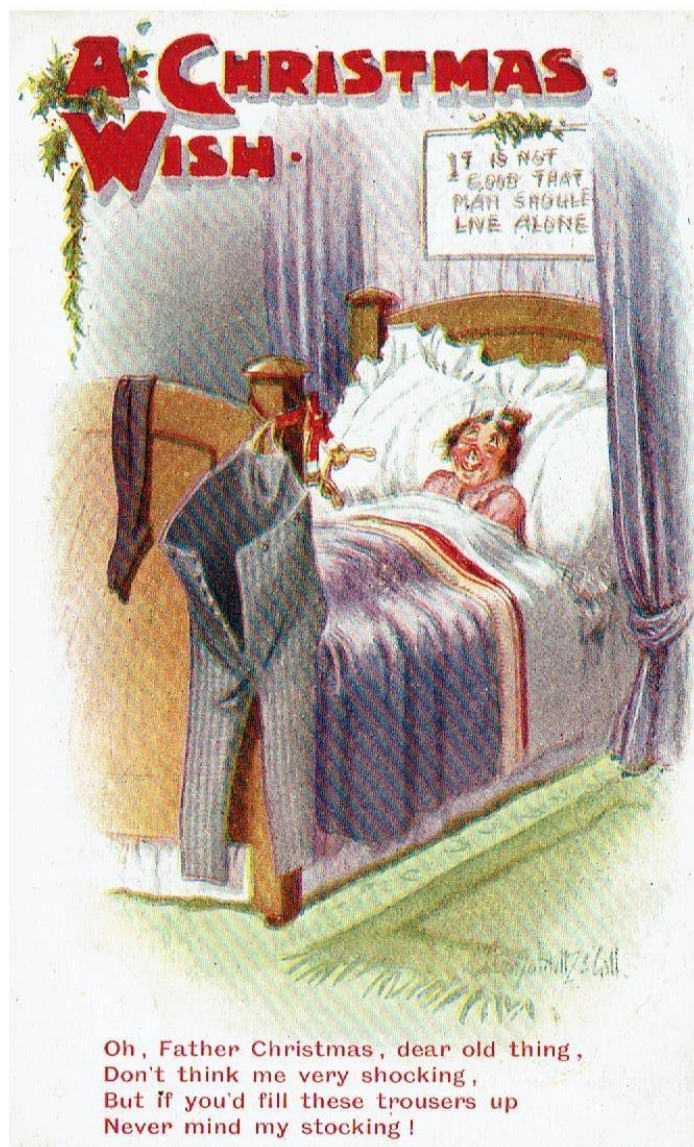
Father and daughter made their way to the railway station in Hereford passing the entrance to the Butter Market in High Town, and the site of the Town Hall which had been removed twenty-seven years earlier and the house which had stood since 1621 during the reign of King James 1st.



**The Old Town Hall, High Town, Hereford circa 1800.
Built 1602, Demolished 1862.**

It had been a thoroughly enjoyable, pleasurable and rewarding day and one to be cherished in the years to come.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



Another post card from the Author's private collection.

Trailer for January, 2025.

George sets his sights on a brewery in Drybrook, but first there is tragedy for the owners, and George encounters unexpected problems.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st December, 2024.