

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA
CHAPTER XXIX
and
Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month,
November, 2025.

“A rolling stone gathers no moss!” Exclaimed Annabel. There was only one other person in the room, her brother George, and his sister was more than just fed-up with his lethargy since the funeral of Emma some three months ago.

“What exactly do you mean by that remark!” Was George’s sharp reply. He had been outlining his latest big idea but in a way that indicated to Annabel that it would never be developed, just another rambling, symbolic of his lethargy.

At first when he returned from Ireland George had pursued the tasks in hand with his usual dynamic vigour. True the interview with his late wife’s mother had upset him badly. Normally he would have taken such matters for what they are, the understandable grief of a mother on the death of her married daughter, but there was more to it than that. Their marriage had been blighted by mother-in-law filling her daughter with such mental stupidity and a fear, nay a loathing, for physical marital contact. Emma had been excessively strait-laced which George had thought would be eroded once she was free of her mother’s overbearing influence, but although at first the freedom of the Ashbourne family had a beneficial effect, after the birth of their second child Emma quickly reverted to her spinster ways, all buttoned up William had called her. But George questioned himself and his judgement. Had he been too harsh on Emma, not understanding of her emotional state and the deep rooted religious evangelical observance of her childhood. He kept these thoughts to himself; there was no one with whom they could be shared. He would be condemned as a fool and a weakling. All this sapped his vitality and increasingly he had found it difficult to concentrate on matters of business. Visits to the carriage works in Ross and the Bonny Moira Brewery in Drybrook helped especially as both were operating successfully and producing good profits.

Three weeks after his return from Ireland they relinquished the temporary tenancy of the house on Wye Pitch and moved to the now enlarged and refurbished house at Weston-under-Penyard, but any satisfaction George derived from the extensive re-modelling of the house was short lived as he seemed to obtain little enthusiasm or happiness from his achievement. Alfred Ursell had been true to his word and shortly after the burial an immaculate tomb had been erected over the grave. The funeral service itself at St. Mary’s church in Ross was conducted by the Dean of Hereford Cathedral, a kind and exceptional gesture so thought the Ashbourne family, Emma’s father being too distraught at the loss of his favourite child to be sure he could keep his battered emotions under any form of control, whilst Emma’s mother did her best to avoid George and his family muttering that she supposed whilst they had more money than sense they certainly lacked breeding, no refinement whatsoever.

The funeral itself had been a success if one can refer to such a sad occasion and success in the same sentence. The weather had brightened up and it was a warm dry day, and whilst the ladies wept prodigiously the gentlemen all looked duly sad and serious as befitted the occasion. It being deemed too far to travel to Weston-under-Penyard so the Royal Hotel had been commissioned for the wake where waiters and waitresses scurried about serving a seemingly endless supply of drinks to the mourners, except the Rector's wife who loudly declared to anyone who would listen and those who preferred not to that she had signed the "Pledge" and not a drop of the devils brew would touch her lips. The employees at the carriage works and the brewery had all been given the day off work and now enjoyed themselves, if somewhat reservedly, consuming more acholic beverage than was good for them, much to the late Emma's mother's chagrin.

Annabell had suggested that her brother call on the two young ladies in Hereford, but he had demurred, in truth he could not bring himself to pay court to a lady he hardly knew when beset with remorse for what could have been regarding Emma.

Then on Saturday the 31st August George read in his copy of the Morning Post of another Parliamentary Bill receiving Her Majesty's Assent. What attracted his attention was the Act's name "An Act to amend the Regulation of Railways Acts; and other purposes" and the announcement continued to draw attention of the accident in Armagh. As George read on he quickly realised that Emma's death and also that of the seventy-nine other passengers and several hundred injured, many very seriously, had not been entirely in vain. This Act would make a major improvement to railway travel. Introduced by Sir Michael Hicks Beach, 1st Earl St. Aldwyn, the member for Bristol West, and formerly for Gloucestershire East, George thought the name was vaguely familiar. Sir Michael, the President of the Board of Trade since last year in My Lord Marquess of Salisbury's administration (Conservative) made the following provisions:-

- (1) The Board of Trade may from time to time order a railway company to do, within a time limited by the order, and subject to any exceptions or modifications allowed by the order, any of the following things:—
 - (a) To adopt the block system on all or any of their railways open for the public conveyance of passengers;
 - (b) To provide for the interlocking of points and signals on or in connexion with all or any of such railways;
 - (c) To provide for and use on all their trains carrying passengers continuous brakes complying with the following requirements, namely:—
 - (i) The brake must be instantaneous in action, and capable of being applied by the engine-driver and guards;
 - (ii) The brake must be self-applying in the event of any failure in the continuity of its action;
 - (iii) The brake must be capable of being applied to every vehicle of the train, whether carrying passengers or not;
 - (iv) The brake must be in regular use in daily working;
 - (v) The materials of the brake must be of a durable character, and easily maintained and kept in order.

George had read the whole report which confirmed and reinforced his thinking, that whilst it had taken a most horrendous accident to bring about measures of railway management which should have been part of normal everyday good practice, this would undoubtedly make travel much safer for all in the near future. With these thoughts he resumed his breakfast only to find that the bacon and eggs which the new maid had brought to him had gone cold.

At the end of the newspaper print of the Act it stated that the Board of Trade should take into consideration the nature and extent of the traffic on a given railway as well as listening to representation from the said company.

He retired to his study and penned a letter to brother Edward to pass on the news especially the Parliamentary Act concerning railways. He reflected on the development of railway travel over the last twenty years, the speed of trains, distances travelled and numbers of passengers carried. If this continued, and there was no reason to believe that it would not, there could be trains travelling at one hundred miles per hour, an unbelievable speed when his parents had visited the International Exhibition in 1862. With such speed it was only understandable that effective brakes are essential, plus universal installation of the "block system." It is testament to the can do and will do attitude of the time, an Act on the Statute Book only two and a half months after the accident, but then George was familiar with the conservative government taking the bull by the horns and getting things done. These thoughts were incorporated into the letter to Edward.

Then, as is often the way, several things happened in seemingly quick succession, though in reality they occurred over about two months. The first of these, a chance meeting occurred on a cold, wet and blustery day in early October, 1889, a day few people would have chosen to venture out if they had the option to keep warm by the fire, but George had an appointment with a solicitor in Oxford. The owners of a large number of public houses across southern England had grossly overextended themselves and debts were mounting rapidly such that they had no other option than to sell as many properties as possible. George was interested in a few spread across Gloucestershire and into Oxfordshire. The solicitors, Messrs Wright Heap and Partners of Botley Road, Oxford had been appointed to arrange disposal of the assets.

George had travelled to Didcot by the "Great Western" from Weston-under-Penyard via Gloucester and Swindon to arrive at Didcot where there was a branch line to Oxford, with a forty-minute wait for the connection to Botley Road Railway Station in Oxford. The permanent way remained true to its engineer's design, broad gauge providing not only the luxury of more spacious carriages and accommodation but a smoother ride which the greater distance between the rails afforded together with a more stable platform, but then Isam Kingdom Brunel paid little attention to the cost of comfort. A comfort that would continue to Oxford. There was a spacious waiting room with a cheerful fire burning in the grate, and George settled himself to wait with a welcome pull on his hip flask of warming brandy. No sooner had he replaced the stopper than a smartly dressed gentlemen entered. He was wearing a dark blue overcoat with an astrakhan colour, black polished shoes whilst a silk top hat and Malacca walking cane with silver knob completed his assembly. Entering the waiting room, he raised his hat to George with the greeting, "Good day to you sir, not a day to be out unless you have little choice." Obviously addressed to George as there were only the two gentlemen in the room.

The smart gentleman sat opposite George and offered him a cheroot from a gold case, and the two sat smoking by the fire.

“Quite cosy in here, what!” Exclaimed the newcomer.

George agreed thanking the gentleman for the cigar.

“You not from these parts?”

“Herefordshire actually.” George replied.

“I should have known, but sadly I’m not very good on accents. What brings you to Oxfordshire, not the weather I’ll be bound?”

The pair embarked on a conversation and to their mutual satisfaction found that they got on like a house on fire. Perhaps it was the cosiness of the room, George’s hip flask or the cigars, but they fell into ready and amiable exchange of ideas during which George disclosed brief details of the family business. It was this that prompted the other, who by now had introduced himself as Hamish McTaggart, to disclose his particular hobby declaring himself to be an inventor.

“What have you invented?” Enquired George.

“My dear Sir.” Began Hamish. “I regret to admit that so far my endeavours amount to very little, I tell people that I am an inventor because otherwise I would have to admit to actually doing very little indeed, leisurely breakfast, luncheon either with my wife or at my club, afternoon, well that depends on the season, and evenings at a reception, ball or dining at a restaurant or my club if Daphne, she’s my betrothed, is out with some of her dragons, I mean friends. So, there you have it, a what! Oh yes, invented you asked, so far a self-opening parachute, not much calling for parachutes you may say, most people have never heard of parachutes, good for falling out of balloons, otherwise no use whatsoever yet, but the time will come when we all want one. Not yet. Just as well, mine only opens on impact. No dam’d use once you’ve hit the ground from a thousand feet, but I’ll keep trying, probable master the trick one day.”

“Anything else?”

“Possibly, but not yet, needs a lot more work, a horseless carriage, or wagon. Some chap in Prussia or Bavaria, forgotten which though I suppose we can call the whole place Germany now; anyway, he’s invented a self-propelled vehicle. Goes quite well I have read but uses ligroin or petrol, makes a lot of fumes. Mine will be steam powered when I finally make it work.”

“I see.” Said George, both mystified and slightly alarmed. Horseless carriages could spell the ruin of the family business in time. But then he had already considered diversifying, he would need to apply himself with more rigour, not as Annabell had said that his ideas would never be developed, just another rambling, symbolic of his lethargy. George sat in silence for a few minutes, then he enquired.

“If you will permit me to enquire how exactly does it work, your horseless carriage, what makes it go along?”

“Well, as I see it, there is a steam boiler, not the long tubes of a railway locomotive heated with coal, but a small vertical boiler heated by paraffin oil, or any other type of

inflammable oil to create steam pressure. This pressure then drives one or two pistons, and these turn an axle to make the whole thing go along. Sounds simple when you described the process quickly missing out the integrate parts that would be needed and which I have to resolve.”

“And do you have a workshop to manufacture the parts needed to make this machine?”

“Sadly, no. I have to create detailed drawings and arrange for the parts to be made.” He was not prepared to admit that the whole project was near to disaster. Daphne was complaining that he was wasting far too much time on a worthless gimmick, and she did not know why she stayed when there were house parties to go to where there would be boating, cricket, croquet, grouse or pheasant shooting and dancing in the evenings. As he thought of these matters he looked a little downhearted.

George thought too before saying. “I may be able to help there. I have a large carriage works in Ross-on-Wye with space to set up just the workshop needed which I can make available.” He then remembered his brother Edward in one of his letters from Berlin describing how some two years ago, or was only last year, how Bertha the wife of Karl Benz had driven a horseless carriage they had constructed one hundred and one miles from Mannheim via Heidelberg to the Black Forest town of Pforzheim and return on the 5th August last year (1888). He described the event to his new friend, who replied.

“Yes, a truly remarkable achievement, and for the lady to travel that distance in a probably unreliable mode of transport displays either great confidence in the vehicle or foolishness.”

“I think she must be a very practical and resourceful lady.” And remembering a photograph which Edward had enclosed he now produced the picture which he passed to Hamish.



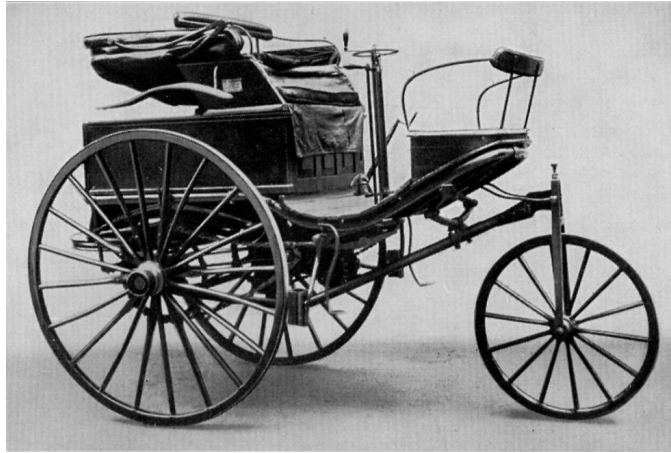
Bertha Benz driving a model 1 Benz Patented Motorwagen in 1886.

But the photograph had not been taken as Bertha embarked on her epic journey but two years earlier.

“Yes, Yes!” said Hamish. “I remember reading of the good lady’s exploit, but your photograph is two years earlier in 1886 in a Model 1. Now where did I come across the report, I should know, but the more I think on the matter the less sure I am, possibly the “Times” or a magazine, anyway it does not matter. Ah, its coming back to me now. It was a model 3, with more solid wheels than your picture and she was accompanied by her

two sons, Richard and Eugen. However, she had trouble obtaining supplies of ligroin, a petroleum solvent only available in apothecaries.” And reaching into his pocket he produced another photograph of the 1888 model.

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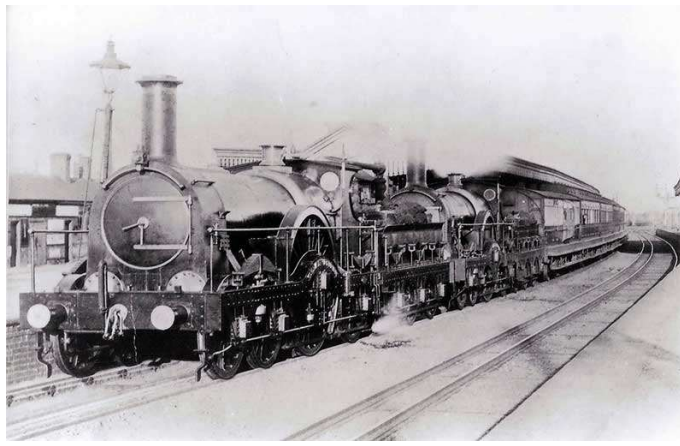


Benz Patented Motorwagen model three of 1888.

George had a moment of inspiration and interrupted saying. “Why, yes, my brother mentioned in his letter, they stopped first in Wiesloch and purchased fuel at the Stadt-Apotheke.”

Between the two after further discussion which continued in the railway carriage to Oxford it was agreed that they would collaborate in a joint venture to make and bring the envisaged steam carriage to fruition. It was of necessity a long-term project to their mutual advantage. Hamish would have more time so as not to neglect Daphne, whilst George thought of the arrangement as a possible addition to his embryo conglomerate. At Botley Road the two parted after exchanging visiting cards.

George continued to the offices of Messrs Wright Heap and Partners where he obtained details of the numerous taverns for sale. Some were freehold premises whilst others were tenancies. George selected six freehold establishments in east Gloucestershire, the “Anchor” at Lydney, the “Collier” in Cinderford, the “Barley Moon” in Colford, the “Apple Picker” in Mitcheldean, the “Railway Arms” in Newent and the “Ship” at Westbury-on-Severn and a price was agreed subject to the usual legal formalities and inspection of the six premises. He returned home via Didcot and Swindon well satisfied with the day’s work and mentally making plans to visit the six taverns, first on his own and for those he deemed worthwhile pursuing with his now trusted builder to examine the structures. Waiting on the platform at Didcot for a train to Hereford stopping at Weston-under-Penyard a double headed train drew into the station bound for Bristol Temple Meads and the south Devon resort of Dawlish



A double headed broad gauge express at Didcot Railway Station.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



It's November and the nights are drawing in, outside it is quite dark except for the occasional gas lamp illuminating a small patch of the street outside and producing a white reflection on the wet pavements. Madam is awaiting the return of her husband from the Bourse, he being a stockbroker; there is a coal fire in the grate warming the room, she is reading a novel by Emile Zola which she finds rather disturbing while their Cook prepares dinner.

Trailer for December.

The season of good cheer has arrived, and George is in a benevolent mood, much to the relief of his sister Annobel. However care has to be taken, the period of mourning for a spouse is twelve months, but nevertheless the demands of business must be attended to. There is much to be done.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st November, 2025.