

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

By early afternoon George was sat back in a comfortable beach chair, not exactly a deck chair, nor a steamer chair, but more the wicker creation associated with continental holiday resorts. It was a calm day, but he was very tired, Emma had been her usual difficult self, obsessed with self and Christian faith and oblivious to all else. He knew that his wife had never visited Ireland, in fact she had scarcely been anywhere outside Herefordshire, a visit to Cheltenham had been like journeying to a foreign country to her, and as for attending brother Edward's wedding in Berlin, at first she had refused to go and it was only through the combined efforts of Emily, William, Annabell, Cook and himself that she was finally persuaded that it would be the good Christian act to attend her brother-in-law's nuptials, and even then she had a headache most of the time.

But now, all was quiet and peaceful, the sky a cloudless blue was reflected in the azure sea which gently lapped the sandy shoreline of the bay over which herring gulls wheeled and cried. George had divested himself of his lightweight summer jacket and neckerchief and was about to remove his shoes when a disapproving look from Emma caused him to think again. The soporific effect of the glass of strong beer or two he had consumed at luncheon combined with the warmth of the sun lulled George into complete relaxation. Laying back into the cushions he allowed his eyes to wonder the distant horizon. There was nothing to suggest the modern age, not even a smug of dark smoke to reveal the presence of a passing steamer perhaps from Liverpool bound for Queenstown and distant ports of the Empire, but as he looked, straight ahead where the sky met the sea he perceived a speck of glistening white, too small to identify. But as he studied the distant image it very gradually grew larger, and he realised nearer. Now he recognised a sail shining white in the sunlight, which materialised into a vessel steering straight towards him. By the trim of her sails, she obviously had a crew who knew their trade.

She was not a large ship, about 30 to 40 feet length George guessed, but the gently shelving sandy beach would not allow such a vessel to come close inshore, her draft would prevent such action, and the keel should have struck the seabed some distance from shore, but she kept coming across the shallows before stopping to rest at the water's edge. As he watched from the prow a beautiful young lady gracefully dropped down into the shallow water and moved towards him clad only in the natural covering she was born with, a creamy white all over, and although she had an abundance of golden curls flowing from her head, otherwise she was quite free of bodily hair. George rose from his seat and as she smiled invitingly to him and with her right hand beckoned for him to approach he ran eagerly towards the girl who bore the gift of all his dreams.

But he never reached the desired object. Tripping over an unevenness in the sand he fell and kept falling descending into blackness. Distantly a voice called to him from the

darkness and surfacing into reality he identified his wife's voice. In an accusing manner she informed him he had been sleeping, and could he please retrieve her parasol which had fallen beside her. He rubbed his eyes but both girl and sailing vessel had disappeared, gone for ever. Had they ever existed? George hoped she had though inwardly he knew otherwise.

They would return to the hotel, the "Marshal Schomberg" where all the usual things would occur, nothing altered, Emma would complain, usually about a headache, but sometimes about the weather, a man or woman on the train, a waitress whom she thought her husband had paid too much attention to, or any other trifling matter. That evening it was the headache **and** the weather being too hot plus the rather pretty young waitress that George had helped with the dishes.

After dinner the pair repaired to the hotel drawing room where Emma picked up a copy of a local newspaper and proceeded to skim the various reports, articles and announcements with no particular interest. Suddenly she exclaimed with some excitement and asked George "How far away is Armagh?" George looked up from that morning's copy of the 'Daily Telegraph' which he had been studying and in reply asked "Why, my Dear?"

He had not bothered to look across to his wife, but awaiting a reply he glanced across to her and was surprised to see that a great change seemed to have occurred. No longer the bored and martyred expression; she seemed quite unexpectedly animated.

"The local Methodist Church have arranged a visit to the coast for the children and are asking for volunteers to help with the arrangements and have asked anyone interested to attend a meeting at the chapel in Armagh. I simply must go; I need something I can understand and perhaps help." And in a pleading voice, which George had not experienced before said. "Please dearest, can we go, it's tomorrow?"

George thought for a moment, the nearest railway station would only take about ten minutes to walk to, and he would enquire. The change in Emma inspired George to reply that he would go right away to make enquiries. He could have retrieved their copy of 'Bradshaw's' but preferred the exercise. On returning he was able to tell his wife that they were in luck, both railway stations are served by the Great Northern Railway of Ireland and that there is a train to Armagh every forty minutes.

The following day by mid-morning they stepped into the Methodist Chapel in Armagh and were greeted by the Minister who on hearing that Emma was the daughter of the clergyman in Ross-on-Wye whisked her away to the vestry for earnest conversation including arrangements for the Sunday School visit to Warrenpoint while George was left to his own devices in a lobby which seemed to be more a dumping ground for discarded items than any sort of waiting room. He was given a cup of tea, and whilst he would have preferred coffee he rightly guessed that the Methodists did not extend their hospitality to "coffee". With time on his hands and nothing with which to occupy himself he lapsed into a revelry, in his mind going over the events of the last few weeks. There had been a remarkable change in Emma, and one totally unexpected. On the return voyage from Cuxhaven, she had almost waxed lyrical over the marriage of Edward and Alexandra, of the Prussian capital and how welcoming the other guests had been towards them all.

Even on the steam packet, having previously declared that he would have to find a way back to England which did not involve a voyage over the sea, she now positively enjoyed

the sea including the voyage from Liverpool to Belfast last week. George was both relieved and grateful for the change which had come over Emma. Gone were the constant complaints and a cheerfulness had taken control, something he had not experienced since their own wedding some years earlier. There was a revived radiance and the beauty which had first attracted George to her had returned, much to his relief.

They had sailed on a packet boat from Liverpool a week ago, on the 5th June, a sojourn which would be part business, a very small part George had promised Emma, and mostly holiday. Now, to please Emma, they would devote Sunday to the Armagh Methodist Chapel Sunday School outing to Warrenpoint in County Down, a distance of 24 miles, or 48 miles return journey.



The Esplanade at Warrenpoint.

During the late morning an assortment of children, as far as George could judge, aged from about five years to say fifteen years, arrived at the Chapel some accompanied by a parent or parents, all excitedly talking about the forthcoming excursion to the seaside, some bringing children's buckets and spades, whilst a few also brought little bundles of food wrapped in a coloured handkerchief. There were far more than George had imagined possible and at the appropriate time they all formed up in a long crocodile in pairs, the younger children holding hands with the older ones scattered along the column to assist with supervision together with various volunteers including Emma. They then set off with the Minister leading the way to the railway station.

It seemed to George that whilst the walk to the station had displayed all the hallmarks of good organisation and planning, the railway staff seemed to be anything but organised. Had George known the nature of the permanent way between Armagh and Warrenpoint with its steep gradients and sharp curves he would have cautioned against their taking part, but he remained blissfully ignorant.

There was a train of thirteen carriages waiting at the platform ready for departure exclusively for the Sunday School excursion. Space had been provided for the anticipated number departing of eight hundred, but their total numbered over nine hundred, actually it would later be revealed that the total number to be about nine-hundred and forty. While children and adults milled about waiting for permission to board the waiting train, unaware of the overcrowding that would result another two carriages arrived shunted up to the rear of the awaiting train when it was coupled up to the last carriage and uncoupled from the tank engine which had brought them.

Wandering to the end of the platform where the engine stood shimmering with a gentle hiss of steam pressure in the sun light its apple green livery shining brightly and the light of apollo sparkling on the vanished timber carriages of the train George became aware of a difference of opinion, although some may have described the ensuing verbal exchange as more of an auto cation, between the engine driver and the Station Master. George tried not to appear to be listening but understood or thought he understood that the engine driver, whose name he gathered was Thomas McGrath, was very unhappy with being required to convey a fifteen-coach train with a four coupled engine when a six-coupled locomotive should have been employed given the extra weight of the train and the greater power of a larger engine. Querying the instructions the Station Master merely retorted that they were not his orders but those issued by a Mr. Cowen who George later was to learn was the General Manager of the railway company.

George now wandered along the platform to where Emma stood with a group of children who all seemed to be regarding her as their fairy godmother. Seeing her husband coming towards her she ran to him and flinging her arms around his neck, kissed him affectionately and loudly whispered “Oh George darling, I’m so happy, it’s wonderful you bringing me on this excursion; the children are so good and kind, and George dear, I’ve discovered that mother is wrong! The children from poor families are not delivered by black storks! No, they all have white plumage.” George could do no more than hug her tightly kiss her tenderly and say how delighted he is that she is so happy, sharing her happiness, and then they had to part as carriage by carriage the passenger’s tickets were checked seats taken and the doors locked. George had purchased tickets for himself and Emma, but now finding himself on the platform not quite alone the only space available was in the first guard’s van immediately behind the locomotive’s tender where he joined a number of others for whom seats had not been available. The Guard of the rear van walked out onto the platform and waving his green flag shouted to the Engine Driver “Right away Mr, McGrath.” With a blast of smoke and steam pressure the engine began to move forward gathering the loose coupled carriages one by one while the Guard deftly stepped back into his van.



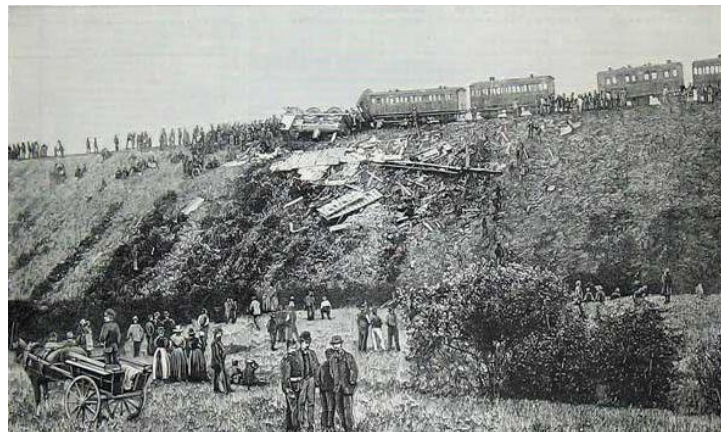
A 2-4-0 locomotive of the Great Northern Railway of Ireland.

Departing Armagh, the engine did not immediately appear to have any difficulty lifting the fifteen coaches crowded with little short of one thousand passengers out of the station in the direction of Warrenpoint, but the two and a half miles to the crest of the gradient of 1 in 82 proved too much and the engine stalled before reaching the summit. George who had overheard part of the conversation between the Station Master and the Engine Driver was quick to realise why they had stopped and as the guard’s van doors had not been locked he alighted and attempted to discover what was going on. Perhaps it was his mode of dress and/or his bearing, but the junior guard explained briefly that the engine did not

have the power to continue so the rear section would stop there, and the forward five vehicles would be taken on to the next station at Hamilton's Bawn where they would be left and the engine return for the rear ten coaches.

George set off down the rake of carriages to pass on the information to Emma and also to see if there is anything she required. She was almost at the end of the train, the last carriage but one, and leaning out of the window she called to him, calling him "darling" a term of endearment from his Wife he rarely heard. As he drew level with the open window the train imperceptibly at first began to move backwards. It quickly however gathered pace, the last George saw of his wife as she leaned out of the open window of the carriage door was a look of utter horror mixed with incredulity and trepidation as the railway carriages swept past on their fatal downhill journey of terror and despair. At first George ran after the departing coaches, he was still running when he heard the whistle of an approaching train, the scheduled service which had left Armagh twenty minutes after the excursion train. The Irish Railway did not operate the block system employed by railways on the mainland of Great Britain to physically separate trains to avoid collisions, but had retained the earlier method of time spacing, which worked perfectly provided nothing went wrong to delay a train's progress.

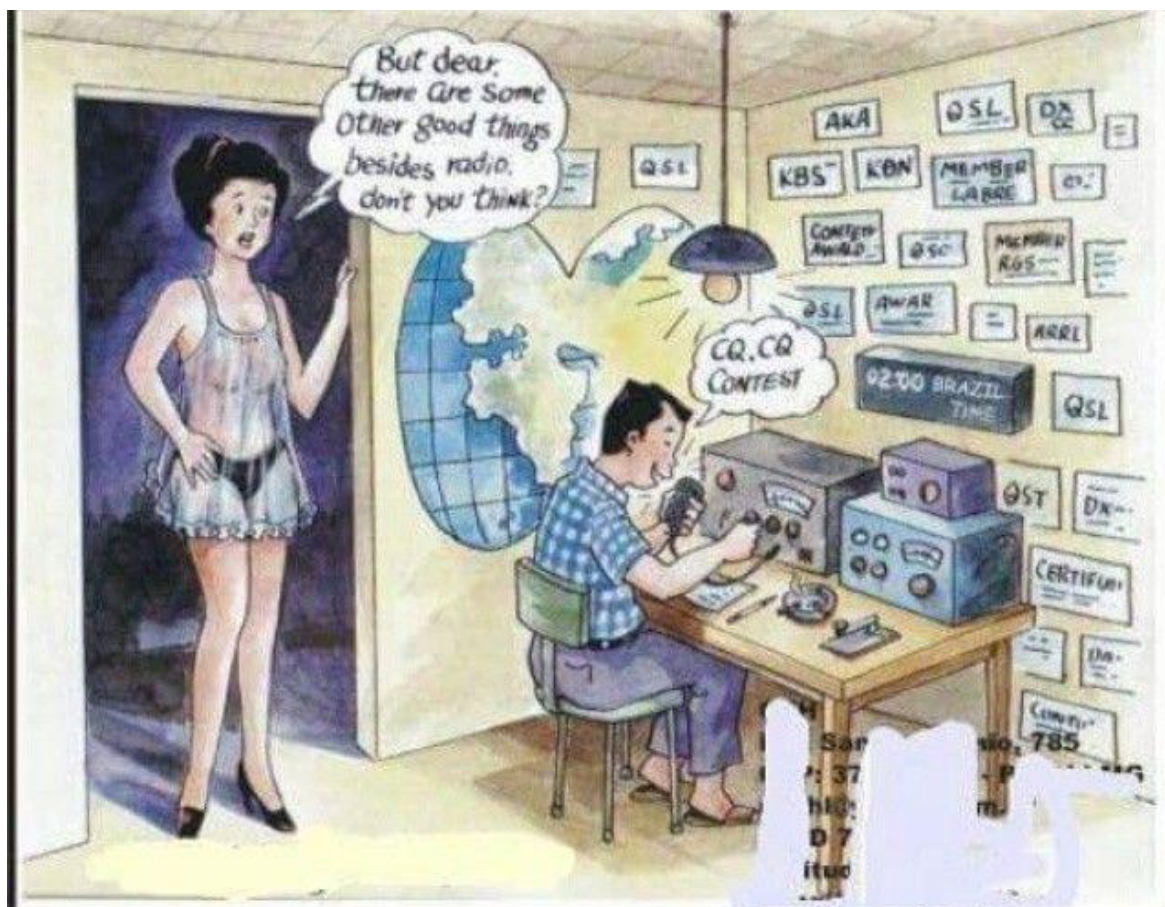
George stopped and watched horror struck as the carriages hurtled down the gradient and struck the locomotive of the scheduled service. The locomotive toppled over on its side whilst the two rearmost carriages and the guardsvan were reduced to splintered timber spread across the forty-five-foot-high embankment. For a moment there was silence, then screams. It was frightful, and a scene of utter devastation such that no human being would wish to witness.



Photograph of the scene of the accident as published in the Illustrated London News on the 22nd of June, 1889.

George found Emma, or rather Emma's dead body lying almost covered in the matchwood that had been a carriage roof, with a section of gas lighting pipe projecting from her upper body. All about there were children crying, moaning or screaming, whilst some, like Emma, lay dead where they had fallen, whilst the engine which had unintentionally caused the disaster lay on its side emitting smoke and steam. It was the 12th of June, 1889, a day George would never forget. Emma was one of eighty passengers killed by the accident whilst two hundred and sixty lay injured many seriously.

Saucy Sophia's Snippets



la radio è bella ma.....
non fate mai quest'errore

“But Dear there are some other good things besides radio,
don't you think?”

Trailer for October.

Time passes, and the years accumulate as the 1880's drift into the late 1890's. Children are born to the Ashbourne family, and George decides let hope override experience or as Dr. Samuel Johnson expressed the sentiment over a century earlier “to marry a second time is the triumph of hope over experience” and marry again, but firstly George has to make arrangements for Emma's funeral.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st September, 2025.