

# THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

## CHAPTER XVI

and

### Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

**September, 2024.**

George was an early riser, and today was no exception, people said he always rose with the lark, and this early in the year it was still dark at 5.30 am. If you had asked him, and again if he chose to answer truthfully, he would have said that the business gave him much to be doing, and even more to be concerned about.

Having crept into the bathroom, a great innovation and virtually unknown locally except for the "big houses" such as Goodrich Court or Holme Lacy House, George proceeded to wash, shave and dress for the coming day. He was very pleased with the bathroom he had arranged to be installed just over twelve months ago, not just for himself, but mainly for his young wife. Although problematical to instal, George had ordered one of the new water closets (flushing toilet) by Thomas Twyford which proved to be a great improvement on earlier designs, and which had only been available since 1885, three years earlier. Decorated with blue flowers and bows on white china, there was also a matching wash basin, bath and bidet. His parents continued to use a wash table with a large, decorated china bowl and a jug of hot water brought up from the kitchen, now by the maid, but previously by George's father.



**The bathroom George had arranged to be installed.**

Normally he would have been thinking of the day ahead first thing in the morning, but today, being Monday, he was thinking of a conversation between himself and the parish priest at the church of St. Lawrence. The family had attended morning service, and the vicar had elaborated in his sermon on the reading taken from the Old Testament regarding maintaining a good, practical and beneficial relationship between master and servant. It was after the service that they had discussed the matter and when the priest had suggested that George might find a reliable and trainable employee at the Union Workhouse.

An hour later and with breakfast eaten the village postman called with a letter for George bearing an embossed crest in red print on the back of the envelope. Opening the sealed envelope George read the short note, which was more of a summons, to call that morning at Holme Lacy House. The note from the master of horse could mean only one thing, business. George was delighted, business from such a prestigious establishment could only enhance their reputation, but the man who was now effectively running the business had a problem. He had promised the Misses Lawson at Gayton Hall in Focle Green that he would deliver to them at the Hall the gig they had repaired, a broken steel step on the left side, and with the best will in the world he could not be in two places at the same time. It was whilst he stood pondering the dilemma and finishing his second cup of tea that Annabell entered the breakfast room, already dressed which being still early in the morning was unusual for her.

Noticing the look on her elder brother's face, a mixture of annoyance and perplexion, she immediately enquired after the reason for anxiety so early in the day. Looking up as though seeing her for the first time George explained the problem. "I cannot fail his Lordship at Holme Lacy, but neither can I provoke malicious gossip from the two ladies at Gayton Hall. The gig is ready for delivery, but it will be too far to go to Focle Green, and then on the Holme Lacy."

"Why cannot old Sid deliver the gig?" Enquired Annabell.

"He has urgent work to do on Mr. Maxwell's dog cart, I cannot take him off that, and we scarcely have time to complete the repairs as it is."

"Then I'll go to the Lawsons with their gig," announced Annabell. "I know them vaguely and it's a pleasant drive past Bollitree Castle. Also, I would like to see Gayton Hall for myself."

George thought for a moment but knowing his sister's resolve and her growing confidence he agreed, and thanked her most kindly, adding that she should take the dapple-grey pony so she could ride him home, reminding her to take a side saddle in the gig.

Having settled the matter, George promptly consulted "Bradshaw's" and found there would be a train calling at the halt in Weston-under-Penyard in twenty-five minutes time which after stopping a Ross-on-Wye as it was becoming known thanks to the tourist aspirations of the Great Western Railway, and the intermediate railway stations before arriving at Holme Lacy railway station before mid-morning. When George arrived, and it was a relatively short walk for him to the House and having located Mr. Grover who was responsible for all forms of transport, a fruitful meeting ensued during which George was shown three vehicles in need of repairs, a phaeton, a victoria and a wagonette.



**A wagonette similar to the one shown to George at Holme Lacy House.**

Annabell had emerged from the house half an hour later dressed in a blue riding habit with

matching skirt over a white blouse, black knee length riding boots, all topped off with a dainty poke bonnet of matching blue. For early April it was a very pleasant morning with scattered cumulous clouds in a bright blue sky as she skilfully turned the pony's head to the left on leaving the house which George had renamed Gilpin House after William Gilpin who had made the Wye Valley famous in the 1780's for its picturesque beauty. At the Weston Cross Inn Annabell turned right leaving the Ross Road and passing under the railway bridge which carried the line from Gloucester to Ross. Annabell drove past Grove Cottage and White Hall on her right, the lane leading to Bollitree Castle, not a real castle, but a folly forming a curtain wall beside a house built during the reign of Queen Anne over one hundred and eight years ago. The story of the origin of the "castle" Annabell had heard many times, of how Thomas Hopkins Merrick had fallen head over heels in love with a Spanish lady, but when she declared that she could not possible live in such a cold inhospitable country as England unless her future husband is either of the nobility or owns a castle. Mr. Merrick considered it extremely unlikely that he, a mere farmer, would be elevated to the peerage, so he set about creating a castle to surround his house, but only succeeded in erecting the wall behind a duck pond with a small gate house, and as Annabell drove past, not for the first time, she thought the whole effect quite charming, a mock castle with a moat. Thomas Merrick had inherited Bollitree House in 1776, but he died in 1789, never to enjoy his Spanish love, she married another.

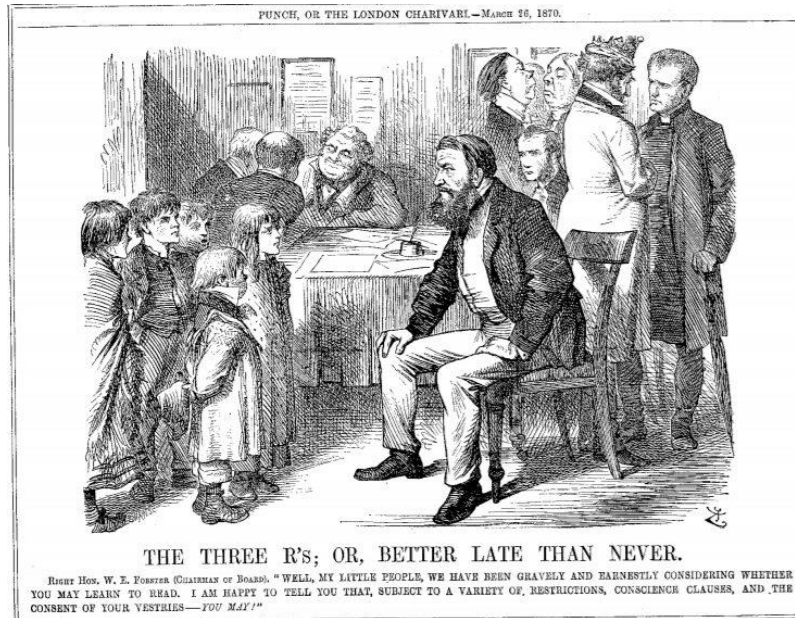
The road to Rudall Manor led over high ground, passing the Porch Farm to the right and Woodfields to the left, and further on past Dairy Cottages and Kington Farm. Occasionally from her vantage point in the gig Annabell saw farm labourers and their families, some of whom Annabell knew and slowed to exchange greetings. Descending the hill to Rudall the road crossed the bridge over Rudall Brook by the Corn Mill with Bridge Farm to her right and Bridge House ahead on rising ground. Had she turned left rather than right she would have arrived at the gates to Rudall Manor, sometimes referred to as Rudall House, the fourteenth century country seat of Alexander Baring, the Fourth Baron Ashburton who had inherited the honour on the demise of his father, on the 6<sup>th</sup> September, 1868, the Third Baron, together with the Manor, some 36,000 acres of estate and control of Barings Bank. The Manor and estate had been acquired by the First Baron, also Alexander Baring, in 1830.



**Alexander Baring, 4<sup>th</sup> Baron whilst serving as Deputy Lieutenant of Norfolk.**

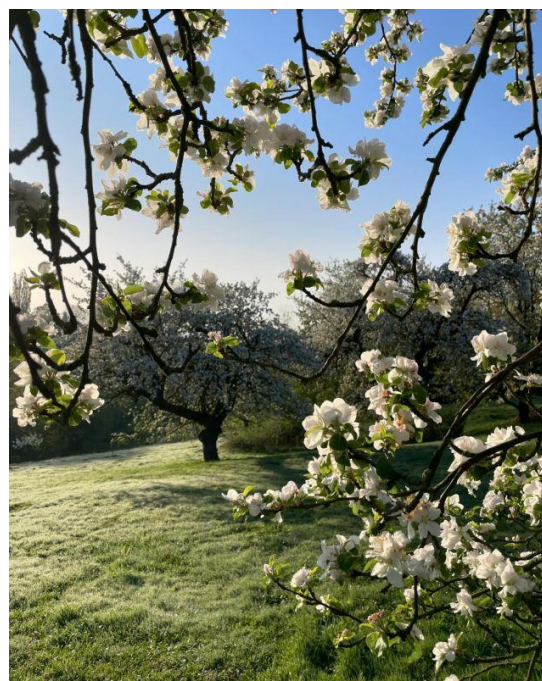
Leaving the group of properties near the bridge over the Rudall Brook behind Annabell came to a road junction where she had to turn left or right. Remembering that the road to Phocle Green would be on the right and travelling in the direction of Upper Foxhall for about one hundred yards, she took the road on the left at the next junction and proceeded

beside a small tributary brook to Phocle Green, sometimes spelt Focle Green, a cluster of approximately fifteen dwellings on the hillside to the young lady's left which included a Post Office. A little further and she came to a crossroads where the signpost confirmed the road ahead led to Fownhope and Hereford, to the left to Ross and right to Crow Hill and Upton Bishop. Turning right and passing a small school on her right, built following the Elementary Education Act of 1870 of William Gladstone's Liberal Administration she turned off the road to the left onto a lesser road which took her into the lands of Gayton Hall which now came into view on higher ground to her left.



**Cartoon from Punch Magazine of 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1870.**

There were fruit trees on the hillside to Annabell's right where the land rose quite steeply the further she travelled. A high stone wall held back the hill where there were two buildings, the first of stone and looking back as she passed Annabell realised it was in fact a stables, though designed to disguise the utilitarian use and to resemble a more important function. The second building gave the impression of having stood since at least the time of Queen Elizabeth in the sixteenth century but may have been of more recent origin.



**Cherry Trees in blossom on the hillside overlooking Gayton Hall.**

The gates to the Hall stood invitingly open to the left, and turning in Annabell for the first time was able to observe the Hall above her with the land sloping down to a rectangular lake at its foot. There was a carriage drive to the lake through mixed planting of coniferous and deciduous trees. The Hall itself was quite imposing on its elevated position and of perfect proportions with a central entrance supported by a portico, with box sash windows on either side and the floor above, all with stucco rendering below a fine slate roof. A portly gentleman stood at the door whom Annabell took to be the butler, and as she approached he indicated that she should take the gig to the rear where there was a paved yard with carriage housing.



**A portly gentleman stood at the door whom Annabell took to be the butler.**

Two lads appeared, not quite footmen, but reasonably well dressed, who helped Annabell unharness the pony and fasten the side saddle in place ready for her ride home. As these preparations were in progress the two mistresses of the Hall appeared and addressing Annabell thanked her for promptly delivering the repaired gig as they inspected the repairs which they found to be quite satisfactory.

“It looks as good if not better than it did before the mishap.” One of the ladies declared.

“Of course it does.” Stated her companion. “Mr. Ashbourne came highly recommended.” And turning to Annabell she commented. “Otherwise, we would have gone elsewhere, but your family are so convenient at Weston-under-Penyard.”

“I thank you.” Smiled Annabell, and remembering the instructions George had imparted earlier she reached into her reticule to retrieve the invoice for the repairs which she passed to the two ladies who took the paper without a word.

The shorter of the two then enquired of Annabell if she would like to have some refreshment before her ride home. The young lady thought for a moment, she was betwixt beating a haste retreat from a situation she found rather oppressive and accepting in the hope she would have a opportunity of promoting the family firm. It took less than a

moment for the wisdom of the latter to prevail.

“I thank you, that would be lovely.” Cooed Annabell in her most endearing voice even though she would prefer to be away to home.

“Come into the house,” said the taller of the two, “Hausmann will serve tea in the parlour.” She announced in her most imperious manner and turning to her companion said. “You will see to it won’t you, dear.”

Annabell entered the parlour and immediately noticed how the heavy brocade curtains made an otherwise light and airy room seem dark and sombre. There was however a splendid view from the window of the countryside and numerous trees beyond the manicured lawns and well stocked flower beds not yet in full bloom. In one corner stood a rather magnificent parlour palm whilst another provided space for an aspidistra in a jardinière. The dark red of the walls were relieved with various paintings of family members and rural landscapes all set in gilt plaster frames, whilst a red and blue Persian carpet covered the floor. Once seated in the smaller of the Hall’s reception rooms, and the butler had served tea from a bone china tea pot decorated with pretty flowers, with matching tea cups, saucers and cream jug the shorter of the Misses Lawson, who seemed to Annabell to be the younger of the two, with a more friendly countenance and an altogether rounder form enquired if their visitor had any brothers and sisters, and wasn’t it brave of her to come all this way quite alone.

The taller Miss Lawson, who, to Annabell, seemed rather severe and disapproving, with a voice to cut one dead simply said, “Don’t be so concerned for everyone, of course she can drive across to us, her family are in trade.”

After a moments pause, and thinking she should be beating a dignified retreat, Annabell turned to the short rather dumpy lady, and with a sweet smile announced that she had two brothers, George who had arranged the repairs to their gig, and Edward who held an administrative post in Berlin at the Imperial Navy.

“Oh! How interesting.” Exclaimed the friendly Miss Lawson, “Do tell us more.”

The other lady, whom Annabell took to be her sister looked down her nose, sat up straighter, if that were possible, and with a dismissive sniff said she thought young Edward no doubt very good at running errands.

Annabell thought for a little while, for the sake of the business she must avoid creating a scene, that would never do. The conversation drifted on with Annabell saying as little as possible. When she judged it polite she rose from her seat, one of the pink velvet upholstered mahogany chairs, thanked the two, especially the younger, for inviting her to take tea with them, but that she must be making her way home.

There was a mounting block in the yard which Annabell found most helpful in achieving a dignified manoeuvre to her perch on the side-saddle and touching the pony’s flanks with her heels trotted away from Gayton Hall, and along the winding road to Weston-under-Penyard. Although she had displayed an outward calm and polite exterior internally the young lady was furious and seething with indignation. How could the old dried-up woman be so insulting she thought. How could her younger sister tolerate the old cow. The pony trotted along quite oblivious of his mistress’s fury. She did not attempt to take her rage out on the dapple-grey, she was too well bred for that.

As she passed the Rudall Brook her temper subsided, she had managed to maintain a serene composure for the sake of the family firm as would be expected of her. She would, in time, find a way of demonstrating to the Lawson sister that her family may be “trade” but they were not costermongers or common peddlers, theirs is a prosperous business and

she would make every effort to support the family. She now turned her attention to the matter of their social promotion, at the same time mindful of the value of the business to be gained from the Misses Lawson and other landed gentry.

On arriving home, she found George had returned from Holme Lacy House and in a very good mood. He had secured the business at the House, and he mentioned to Annabell that if the business continued to accumulate they would need to take on more men. Just then the postman called with a letter for Annabell and looking at the envelope she noticed that it had been posted in Batavia in the Dutch East Indies.

## Saucy Sophia's Snippets



**There is time for a quiet read when the crowds leave at  
the end of August.**

**Another post card from the Author's private collection.**

## Trailer for October.

Annabell in Herefordshire begins to doubt Nigel's sincerity and intentions. She has not received a letter since receiving the one posted in Gibraltar, and not knowing that he is on a ship making for Batavia via the Cape of Good Hope, she reasons that by now he will have enjoyed time ashore in Brazil and Cape Town where he could have written to her. There are other exciting developments, all will be revealed as the saga unfolds.

*Dorian M. Osborne*

1<sup>st</sup> September, 2024.