

THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA
CHAPTER XVII
and
Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.

October, 2024.

Anabell, holding the letter the postman had brought shortly after she had returned from Gayton Hall, sat in a comfortable armchair in the drawing room musing as to who had written to her, she could not recall knowing anyone in Batavia. She did not wait long, and opening the envelope and extracting the letter she was almost overcome with surprise. The letter was from Nigel, the young gentleman, a tea garden manager, whom she had thought had arrived in India months ago. Reading the letter her surprise continued. Written some four weeks earlier he explained the situation which had arisen in Gibraltar, and how instead of the steamer sailing for Port Said, the canal and Calcutta, the vessel's captain, as far as Nigel could tell, seemed to be practicing piracy, or at least gun running. The passengers were confined to their cabins whenever the ship put into port, thus he had had no opportunity to communicate. Post was definitely prohibited.

He interspersed the script with endearments, referring to Annabell as his sweetheart and other tokens of esteem. The more she read the more she thought she had been wrong to doubt for a moment Nigel's earnest sincerity. The young man obviously thought highly of her, perhaps he is in love with me, she thought. How long she sat in the drawing room while one idea crowded upon another she would not have been able to say, it may have been ten minutes or over an hour. She was looking out of the window but not seeing anything.

Suddenly there was a loud boom like thunder, awoken from her daydreams, Annabell looked up startled, then realised it was only the dinner gong, an innovation of Emma's,



Annabell looked up startled.

her sister-in-law. She had already changed from her riding habit to a dress suitable for dinner and made her way to the dining room where dinner would be served. As she arrived George was busy relating the events of the latter part of the day to Grandfather William and Emma, a glass of fino sherry in one hand. He had descended from the train which had conveyed him from Holme Lacy at Ross and leaving the station behind had walked the length of Cantilupe Road, past the Board School to Gloucester Road and at the

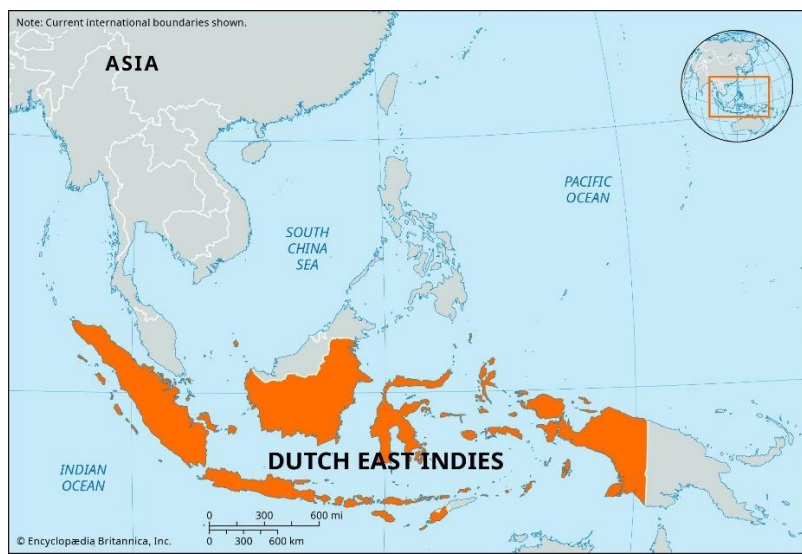


The Market House, Ross, built in 1660.

Market House turned left into Corpse Cross Street in the direction of Walford, stopping at the Union Workhouse on Dean Hill comprising a range of buildings of much later construction than most such institutions not having been built until 1872. Never a one to let the grass grow under his feet, he had followed up on the Parish Priest's suggestion of the day before, and locating the Manager enquired as to the likelihood of their having any strong and able lads who might become suitable employees, having first introduced himself and explained the nature of the family business. The Manager, who introduced himself as "Spendthrift, Malcolm Spendthrift, at your service sir," said he already knew of the family firm and their excellent reputation and was sure they could identify a lad suitable for the work required. He then added that he had a few at the Cottage who had learnt to read, write and knew a little arithmetic, and are now of age to be leaving the school and commencing to earn their own living, and hopefully to cease being a burden on the town rate payers. Also, he had went on to express the hope that the boy would earn an honest Christian living and not turn to crime as so many seemed to do, though he's not quite the full shilling if you know what I mean.

"Tomorrow" continued George, "I shall return to see what Mr. Spendthrift has found for us. I had better take Maitland with me as the boy will be working under his direction and I don't want complaints later."

Emily, the grandmother of the family, that is since the arrival of George and Emma's two sons, but who suffered from ill health and was inclined at times to overindulge in laudanum always took a keen interest in her children George, Annabell and Edward. When there was a pause in the general conversation she turned to Annabell with the kindly spoken enquiry. "I heard you received a letter earlier, was it from the young gentleman you met at Sir James and Lady Lucy's Ball in February?"



Map of the Dutch East Indies shown in dark orange.

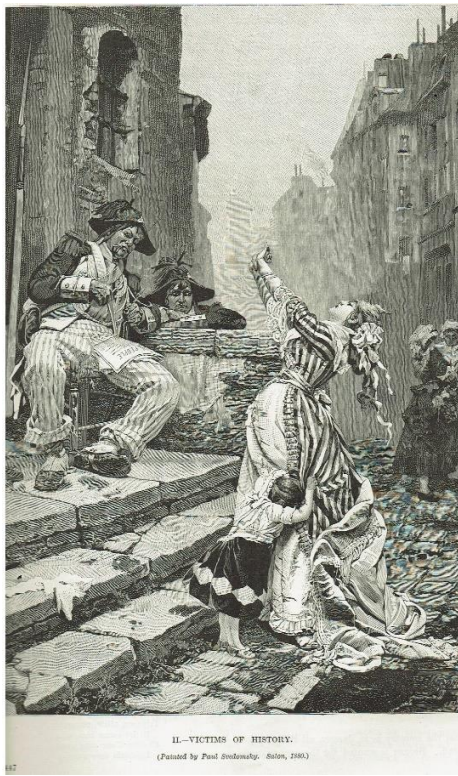
“It is Mother, and you would never guess, a steamer which should have taken him through the canal to India instead went all the way round the cape to the Dutch East Indies. He was grateful to disembark at the port city of Batavia!” Such an adventure! But he is sure the captain and officers were up to no good and as soon as he arrives in Calcutta he is going to report the matter to the Viceroy’s office. But he is rather worried regarding “Twinings.” Will they still require him to manage the tea garden?”

“Oh dear, such goings on! How dreadful dear, and such a presentable young man too.”

“He says he will write again, either from Batavia or the first port the ship calls at, Singapore, Penang, Rangoon or wherever. It all sounds very exciting; don’t you think so Mummy?”

“Well dear, I really don’t know, your father and I were always very happy here in Herefordshire, foreign travel is all very well but full of dangers, shipwreck, savages, dubious food, I’m not so sure.” Said Emily shaking her head whilst looking very uncertain.

“He seems to be very resourceful,” said Annabell “Otherwise Twinings would not have appointed him manager of one of their tea gardens, I am sure he will acquit himself handsomely,” and before her mother had a chance to make further comment, she went on to thank mother for passing to her the latest monthly edition of the “Magazine of Art” and began discussing the illustration of the painting by Paul Svedomsky “Victims of History” first shown at the Salon of 1880 which Annabell found extremely moving. The painting shows a distressed mother with her young daughter pleading to two revolutionary guards who clearly are totally unimpressed, in a run down and delapidated Paris. The whole scene one of utter despair.



“The depth of emotion the artist has managed to convey is quite extraordinary, I do wish I could paint pictures with such depth of feeling and so realistic, do you think I could Mummy?”

“Well dear, such talent, they say, is part natural ability and part study and practice. You will obtain much inspiration from the magazine but being only in black and white with just a few illustrations in sepia, blue and green they can never replace seeing the original. You have to study the artist’s treatment of colours and brush work, or so I have read.”

“There is a splendid art gallery and museum in Birmingham which is explained in the same edition. We could go together!” exclaimed Annabell.

“It’s a long way to go, Birmingham.” Mused Emily. “I suppose we will need to ask your father and George.”

“Oh! Do let’s go, I am sure Daddy will agree, and so will George.” Pleaded Annabell, “There is a description of the gallery and museum in the magazine,” and reaching for the publication the young lady turned to page 361 and she continued “Mr. Alfred St. Johnston writes ‘Birmingham, as we all know is principally occupied with working in iron and metal. Much attention has accordingly been given to those branches of art, and many and very fine examples of the best ironwork of Italy and Germany are to be found in the Italian Gallery and the Industrial Hall.’ Then a little further on Mr St Johnston says that “We engrave on the next page one of the most charming items of silver parcel-gilt hanging lamp of the 16th century. The decoration of Cupids’ heads and festoons of flowers above the open work of this lamp has a very beautiful effect. Had there been a greater number of fine specimens of silver ware exhibited in Birmingham for some years before the production of the “Nettlefold Memorial Vase” on view in this part of the museum, this huge and unsightly piece would never have taken so ungainly a form. He also refers to important branches of Oriental art, porcelain, carvings in ivory and jade, *cloisonne*’ and other enamels, jewellery, lac-work and decorative bronzes from both China and Japan.” There is much more by Mr. St. Johnston it all sounds very exciting don’t you think mother dear.

“Very well, dear. I will discuss the matter with your father, but in the meantime we must pay attention to the rest of the family, it is very rude of us to hold a private conversation.”

It was after dinner had been served by the maid Miss Alice Morgan, the same servant who had been criticised, albeit in thought only, by a Second Lieutenant of Her Majesty’s 28th Regiment of Foot when he called at the house in February, that George surprised them all with his sudden announcement regarding partial rebuilding of the house.

“I have decided.” He announced, “That the time has come to enlarge this house.”

There was stunned silence, then suddenly, it seemed they all wanted to speak at once and questions arrived thick and fast.

“Why” demanded his father, “We have more than enough room here, much more than at the house at Mitcheldean Road!”

“What’s the matter with the house as it is?” Questioned George’s mother.

“Do you really think we should, we seem to be able to manage as we are” Queried Emma.

George was far more resolute than his father and the other family members, and they all knew that once he had made his mind up about something there was no dissuading him, and so far the family firm had prospered, and more than doubled in size since he had taken over the general managership. Everything was twice as large, revenue, staff, turnover and profit thrice as good. There was no denying it, George was the man of the moment, and many years to come, God willing.

“The house is great as it is,” said George, “but to uphold our position in the local society we must not only be a part but must be seen to play our part. I want the business to expand, and we shall need to diversify too. There are great opportunities now, what with the population growth and increased aspiration, which with Elementary Education has already produced a generation able to read and write.” And looking directly at his father said, “unheard of when you took Mother to the International Exhibition, a what!”

They were all listening now, waiting for George to expand on his theme of enlarging their home, what was to follow.

George continued, “The north front and that part of the house is fine and will remain as it is, built in the neoclassical style, it has high ceilings and decent proportions, but the rear is cramped and seems to have been built on the cheap, perhaps the money was running out, or it was thought that hidden behind the facade it did not matter. It is the rear or south part of the house that needs reconstruction – it’s crying out for improvement. My intention is to demolish the poor-quality rear section and rebuild to match the front but larger keeping the neoclassical architectural style. I considered rebuilding the whole house in the latest gothic architectural fashion, but I quite like the classic, and it will cost less.”

“Why demolish the front section merely for a fashion which may last a few years?” questioned William. “Doesn’t make any sense to me!”

“Quite so,” said George. “But we can keep the dining room at the front to the right of the

entrance hall with the parlour on the left. Beyond that will be the kitchens behind the parlour, while on the right a drawing room with a conservatory beyond in which we will have a fountain and exotic plants, you know, parlour palms and others.”

There was a general murmuring of approval from some whilst others were a little dubious.

“The staircase will rise up in the area behind the dining room with a half landing, lit by a skylight above, and larger bedrooms at the rear overlooking the garden, with Penyard (the hill) beyond, once completed you will all be very happy, and.” Turning to his parents

“There will be no need for either of you, mata and pata, to return to the railway house at Mitcheldean Road with its noisy junction.”

“How long will all this take, and where will we live in the meantime?” Enquired Annabell.

“I thought of that.” Said George. “I have started negotiations for a house near St. Mary’s Church in Ross, and if successful will be more than adequate for our needs.”

Now it was William’s turn to comment. “You have done very well, and as I am sure you know, I tip my tile to you, Son. We despaired of you at school, but since then you have proved our fears quite unfounded. But be careful, a conspicuous display of wealth will cause jealousy and envy in others, especially those who knew us when your mother and I first married. Malicious tongues could be very bad for business.”

George fell silent, deep in thought. The others also fell silent until William, to lighten the mood, and speaking directly to his son quoted. “It rained and we all got wet, except for me as I was deep in thought.”

George smiled as Emma and Emily laughed and Annabell giggled.

“Messrs Nicholson and Matthews are sending the plans and drawings which should arrive tomorrow and then you will have a better idea.”

It was now late, and the lamps had been lit for quite some time as the ladies retired for the night. George and his father remained in the dining room with a tot of whisky each for about half an hour while their wives prepared themselves for sleep before extinguishing the light, and taking a candlestick each retired for the night. Whilst they were alone William took the opportunity to say to his son George how much he appreciated the effort and success he, George, had achieved since he had assumed a managerial role in the family firm, although he thought his son should be careful, and warned again that the more successful they became and greater the jealousy and envy that would arise amongst the many who only wished to doodle along, but nevertheless would despise those who improved their situation, and there are established business who will do their best to slap down upstarts as we may well be perceived. There are plenty of baying wolves, we should be careful to turn them to tame dogs first. George nodded, he recognised the wisdom of his father’s advice, and admitted he must avoid behaving like a bull in a china shop, a characteristic of his torus zodiac sign.

The following day George took Tom Maitland with him and returned to the Union Workhouse where, as promised, the Manager Spendthrift produced a likely looking lad

who seemed to be quite strong and healthy although somewhat underweight and reticent in his attitude towards them. Turning aside to Mr. Ashbourne in a subdued voice the Manager vouched the opinion that if he fed the boy, but not too well, offered the occasional words to praise and avoided beating him too often, he could develop into a loyal and faithful servant, same as a dog!

George said he would take the boy, enquiring “Does he have a name?”

“Why yes.” Said the Manager “How forgetful of me, the ones who do not seem to have any parents, that is their mothers die in childbirth, or are too far gone to say anything sensible when they arrive here usually being diseased, specific disease usually, (a euphuism for venereal disease often used on death certificates to disguise the actual cause of death) or drunk, often both with a young child clinging to them, we name the child ourselves. We start with “A”, Alan for boys or Alice for the girls for example, with the month of their arrival for the surname. This one is Jack March.”



Part of the Union Workhouse in Ross-on-Wye.

“And was his mother diseased?” Enquired George trying to hide his concern.

“My goodness no, she died about a week after arriving here, pneumonia or so the doctor thought, poor woman. Dragged herself here with the child about twelve months of age. She seemed to have travelled some distance, soaking wet, utterly exhausted and staving hungry. Would have died of starvation if the rain and cold hadn’t given her pneumonia first.”

“How dreadful, and do you have many such cases?”

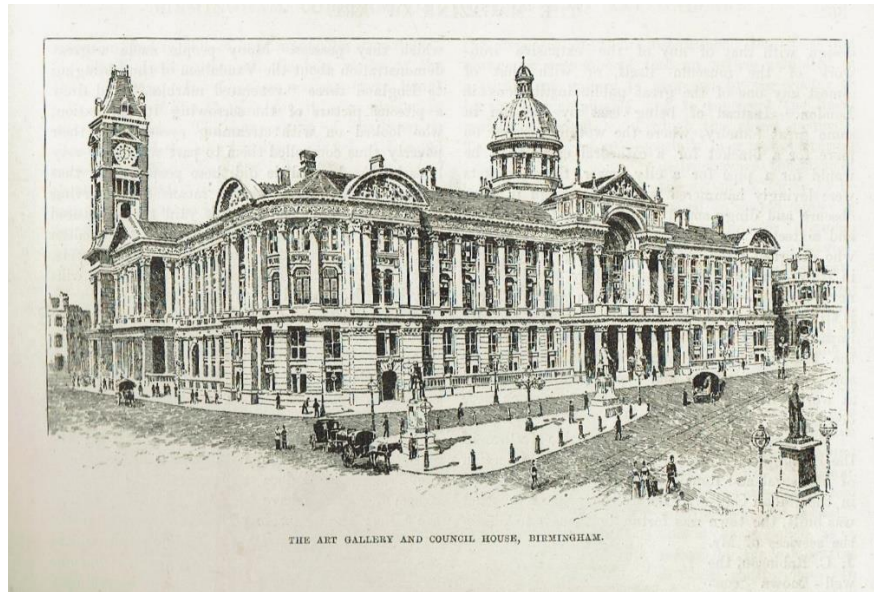
“Why yes, especially when times are hard, though some of them bring it on themselves, argue with their bread and butter some of them, there are those that when in employment think they are as good as their master, most of them find out the hard way and land up here.”

“Give us a few moments, please, there’s a good chap.” And turning to Tom Maitland enquired “What do you think of the lad, think you can get him to work?”

After a moment’s thought Tom replied in the affirmative.

“Very well then Mr. Spendthrift, we’ll take the boy,” and placed a crown (five shillings) in the waiting palm of the Manager the trio set off for the carriage works near the railway station.

It was a fortnight before Annabell and her mother boarded the early morning train at the halt in Western-under-Penyard for Hereford, there they changed onto another bound for Birmingham via Great Malvern and Worcester. On arrival at Snow Hill Railway Station, the “Great Western” station in Birmingham they approached one of the waiting cabs and asked to be taken to the Art Gallery and Museum, arriving there in less than a quarter of an hour.



Annabell was delighted and so was Emily, although her daughter being so much the younger displayed the greater exuberance.



It was somewhat after mid-day before the pair entered a clean and friendly café near to the art gallery, where a polite and tidy waiter took their order, and while he was away Emily said to her daughter that she felt certain both George and your father would raise no objection to you applying to join the Hereford School of Art and Science, as it was then known.



Hereford School of Art and Science, Castle Green, Hereford.

“Do you know, my dear, that the first art school was opened in Hereford in 1853, a legacy of the 1851 Great Exhibition, and the present school only three years ago in 1885. I understand that it is a fine school of art with excellent masters.”

Annabell clapped her hands for joy, then quickly recovering her poise realising that such a display of eagerness is far from the ladylike manner she should adopt in public, thanked her mother with words of equal enthusiasm.

“You will write to the Principal of the School when we return home asking if he will allow you to attend, it will be very good for you, and you will meet many nice young gentlemen there who reside locally, not in the sub-continent.”

Saucy Sophia’s Snippets



The last of summer, a warm day at the beginning of October.

Another post card from the Author’s private collection.

Trailer for November.

Next month we return to Edward in Berlin where one of his friends produces the latest work by Friedrich Engels “The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State” a book by the disciple of Karl Marks. The salient point may not be as you may expect. Also, there are developments in relations with Alexandra.

Dorian M. Osborne

1st October, 2024.