

Prologue

Model, courtesan, dancer, fashion icon, actress, double agent, political hostess, mother, ambassadress and hero's mistress, Emma Hamilton performed many roles in her astonishing rise from poverty to wealth and fame. None would have greater consequence for her than the part she played in Naples on 22 September 1798. She had joined the welcome party for Rear Admiral Horatio Nelson as his fleet anchored off the Bay of Naples. Nelson had come to protect Naples from the advancing French, and the Neapolitans were determined to give him a welcome fit for a hero. Rehearsals had been going on for weeks, but no one had been practising as carefully as Emma Hamilton. Ravishingly beautiful and still only thirty-three, she knew that Nelson's arrival was her great chance.

Her life would never be the same again.

Five years earlier, on Nelson's first visit to the city, Emma had hardly noticed the unprepossessing naval captain. By 1798, after his amazing success at the Battle of the Nile had made him the one man who seemed able to save Europe from Napoleon, she saw his arrival as an opportunity to propel herself on to a bigger stage. Nelson was exhausted after weeks of fighting the French and in pain from his shot eye and the wound where his right arm had been amputated. As soon as the great man boarded the welcome boat, Emma threw herself upon him, weeping with happiness. To the sounds of cheers and cannon fire resounding across the bay, she gathered Nelson into her arms and, leaving the dumbfounded royal entourage and her husband, Sir William Hamilton, in her wake, supported the triumphant but exhausted hero into the ship's cabin. The man fêted as England's bravest man had collapsed onto the bosom of Europe's biggest female celebrity. Emma Hamilton was already legendary as the girl

from nowhere who had catapulted herself into high society. Her consummate piece of stage management on that July day marked the start of her passionate affair with Nelson – and the beginning of her ascent to a level of fame we would find breathtaking, even today.

How did Emma, a girl born into terrible poverty and exploitation reach the position where she was able to seduce and charm England's most famous man? What did she have to do to get there?

If it were fiction, the tale of Emma's life would be dismissed as improbable. Following her takes us through the grand sweeps of eighteenth-century history, to reveal all the glory and horror of her age. To understand how Emma turned herself into the most famous woman of her time, we must go back thirty years and more than a thousand miles, from the glittering Neapolitan court and the duties of an ambassador's wife to her poverty-stricken birth in the slums of north-west England.

...Emma flees to London and works her way up from the streets. Soon she finds herself dancing in one of London's most notorious sex shows

Chapter Ten

Celestial Goddess

In 1778, James Graham, entrepreneur, sex therapist and showman burst on to London society. He hired a townhouse in the fashionable area of the Adelphi, off the Strand by the Thames in central London, called it a ‘Temple of Health’, and gave nightly lectures about sexual matters and the power of electricity, as harnessed by him, to cure all ills. Graham was a supreme showman and his lectures were extravaganzas featuring explosions, smoke, fireworks, music, and, to London’s utter delight, a phalanx of glamour girls posing in flimsy white dresses. In an adjoining room was the ‘Electrical Throne’, which dispensed electric shocks to clients. Next door lay his prized Celestial Bed, which, he claimed, guaranteed ‘perfect Babies even to the Barren’. Dubbed the ‘Emperor of the Quacks’, the handsome thirty-five-year-old with a genius for self- promotion became London’s first celebrity guru, and the girls on the stage were his stars.

Emma never discussed her early life, so she never wrote that she modelled in the Temple, but she told her friends that she did so, and she later sponsored stories in the newspapers that referred to her as a Goddess of Health. Dubious as the Temple was, to be an assistant to Graham was a much less scandalous occupation than being a tavern girl and it was a job Emma felt she could acknowledge. Her early life as Graham’s model was often central to newspaper reports about her – even thirty years later – and Emma never denied it, although she refuted other assertions.

It seems as if Emma began work in early January. Graham combed Covent Garden looking for girls with confidence, natural grace, beauty and the appearance of

good health. He also advertised in the newspapers for a 'young woman' who was 'personally agreeable, blooming, healthy and sweet-tempered [...] She is to live in the Physician's family, to be daily dressed in white silk robes with a rich rose coloured girdle. If she can sing, play on the harpsichord or speak French, greater wages will be given. Enquire Dr Graham, Adelphi Temple'. His readers knew what kind of a girl he was advertising for, under the flowery description – one willing to live with a man in the Strand, like a mistress. Since Emma was still under sixteen, she was, like maids of her age, paid in board and the odd penny of pocket money.

Fanning the flames of London's interest in new shows with effusive promotion, Graham declared the Temple an 'enchanted Elysian Palace!' where love, beauty and 'all that can ravish the senses, will hold their court'. An Aladdin's cave, stuffed with rented glitz, the lecture theatre sparkled with gold decorations, silver statues of Venus, and expensive mirrors. Oriental drapes and paintings of medieval knights adorned the walls and chandeliers and crystals glittered down from the ceiling. Graham had even affixed coloured panes to the original sash windows so they resembled stained-glass windows. Huge glass tubes bubbled with gold liquid (Graham claimed it was electricity). On the stage was the 'Temple of Apollo', a cupola on pillars almost eight feet high, topped with flaming lamps.

The great Celestial Bed occupied the adjoining bedroom. Graham claimed that the Bed was worth the preposterous sum of £100,000 (around £6 million). The bed was available for hire at £50 a night (nearly £3,500). The Goddesses danced around the bed to advertise it to customers and then repeated the performance once the clients were under the sheets. The bed was a king-size concoction of brass, purple satin and crystal pillars, raised three feet off the ground, topped with a dome filled with 'Arabian' perfumes in the 'style of those in the Seraglio of the Grand Turk', and a

statue of Hymen holding a cage containing two live doves. Like a bed in a high-class brothel, the underside of the canopy was decked with mirrors, and the panels were carved with erotic scenes. While the couple used the bed, music played around them and, according to Graham, 'streams of light' whooshed up the pillars. Then the so-called electricity bubbling in the tubes apparently connected with the 500 magnets inside the bed to create an explosion of, in Graham's words, 'exhilarating force of electrical fire'. The 'fire', Graham promised, caused the users to be 'powerfully agitated in the delights of love'. Such 'superior ecstasy' would apparently produce a conception and guarantee a child. The divine illusion of the Bed was probably maintained by the Goddesses playing the secret music behind the wall, wafting perfumes around the room, and pulling levers that jolted the bed to give the clients what they believed were 'electrical shocks'.

Graham's promise of a child was a sure-fire winner with aristocrats desperate for an heir. Women were soon queuing in their carriages outside the Temple in the hope of being 'cured' of their infertility. Graham's rhetoric harmonised with the widespread belief that conception occurred only when the woman had an orgasm, which caused her to ovulate spontaneously.

As a Goddess on the stage and performing around the bed, Emma was the luminous star of Graham's light and sound spectacular. As the artist Elisabeth Vigée le Brun claimed, Emma, as Graham's Hygeia or Goddess of Health, 'attracted the curious and the idle in droves; artists were particularly charmed by her'. Emma became a symbol of beauty to the capital's most fashionable citizens. 'Daily he attracted overflowing audiences', claimed a neighbour, and Henry Angelo described 'carriages drawing up next to the door of this modern Paphos, with crowds of gaping sparks on each side, to discover who were the visitors, but the ladies faces were

covered, all going incog'. Famous customers included John Wilkes, the rabble-rousing former lord mayor of London, and also tabloid-courting MP Charles James Fox. The Prince of Wales also enjoyed its 'superior ecstasy', probably with his mistress, the actress Mary Robinson (who never guessed that the Goddess dancing around her bed had recently been one of her dressers at Drury Lane).

The daily work of a Goddess began with menial domestic tasks: dusting and cleaning the 'Temple', running errands, and even slopping out the basement (all the houses in the Adelphi flooded when the Thames overflowed). Throughout the day, patients arrived to receive the curing vibrations of the magnetic Celestial Throne, electric shocks in milk baths or friction rubs and pulses of electric current. By half past four, the patients had returned home and the Goddesses began dressing for the evening's work in white dresses and pink sashes.

The heavy doors creaked open at five. For two guineas, London's socialites secured seats while 'harmonious sounds..breathed forth from the altar of the great electrical temple'. At seven, an explosion of fireworks stunned the audience into silence and Graham emerged from a trapdoor in the floor, swathed in satin and encircled by his parading goddesses who wore, as one visitor noted, 'no more clothing than Venus when she rose from the sea'. He then delivered his 'libidinous lecture' on the 'celestial brilliancy of that universal resplendent and tremendous fire' in his medicines and bizarre apparatus and their power to cure sexual ills and general debility. Quacks at the humblest fair put on a show, but none had ever fused the theatrical with the 'medical' with such verve. Bursting with self-promotion, sexual titillation and semi-mystic promise, Graham held his audience spellbound. All the while, the Goddesses sang ethereal airs while dancing and posing to show off their radiant health or demonstrate the exercises he recommended. Candles blazed,

fireworks exploded, electricity bubbled and the more louche guests lit pipes – surprisingly, none of the hyped-up doctor's performances ever sparked a serious fire.

Graham promised to tell the secrets of 'rendering permanent the Joys of the Marriage Bed; of preserving and heightening personal Beauty and Loveliness'. In a torrent of suggestive rhetoric, verbal pyrotechnics and explicit description, he trumpeted the 'balmy – spirituous – vivifying' properties of the male emission. 'Without a full and genial tide of this rich, vivifying luminous principle', he claimed, 'continually circulating in every part', no 'man or woman can enjoy health'. At the close of the show, the audience received electric shocks by means of conductors hidden under their cushions. As a finale, a 'spirit' emerged from under the floor and handed the doctor a bottle of Electrical Aether. Then, the windows fell dark, and the room was suddenly illuminated. A Goddess appeared and sang a song worshipping the Ether, emotionally hailing 'Thou Fire Electric'.

The Goddesses had to sell Graham's 'cures'. Electrical Aether rallied the impotent 'exhausted by inordinate and excessive sacrifices to Venus and Bacchus' and Imperial Pills cured venereal disease. Nervous Aetherial Balsam induced an abortion, or as Graham put it, abolished 'every menstrual obstruction in the world – however complicated, or however confirmed'.

Many declared the Temple no better than a brothel.* It was said that the Goddesses were available for hire on the bed. A rake living nearby joked that one of Graham's beautiful employees had caught a fatal chill after spending too much time in 'the damp sheets of the Celestial Bed'. Lucrative as the Temple appears to have

* One commentator described it as an 'abandon'd place' where 'modesty must hide her face' in which 'Damsels who use unnumber'd names' cruised the audience for customers. Many 'cures' were dubious: Graham boasted that he recommended that a lonely middle-aged woman hire a beautiful young female prostitute.

been, Graham soon moved on. By 1781, he had given up on electricity in favour of the restorative qualities of mud bathing in a cheaper house off Pall Mall.

Gossip columnists in Emma's later years could never resist commenting on her short period of work at the Temple, and caricaturists nearly always depicted her on the celestial bed. When she married, the newspapers tittered that her husband fell in love with her after he saw her modelling for him in a show. Twenty years later, they still burred about how her perfect figure ensured her job at the Temple and recalled Graham's description of Goddesses as 'veined with alabaster and streaked with celestial hue'.

Emma soon left the Temple. The wages were poor and Graham was unreliable. She probably left because she was offered a better job, perhaps after being spotted by one of the silver-tongued ex-soldiers who worked as scouts for the bawdy-houses. By late spring, she had a position in Madam Kelly's, one of the most exclusive brothels in London.