

Chapter Thirty-Five

Days of Ease and Nights of Pleasure

‘Heroes and conquerors are subdued in their turn,’ joked *The Times* in November 1799. ‘Mark Antony followed Cleopatra *into the Nile* when he should have fought with Octavius and laid down his laurels and power, to sail down the *Cydnus* with her in the dress, the character, and the *attitudes* of Venus’.ⁱ It later reported that ‘the admirable Attitudes of Lady HAM-T-N are called *Admiral-attitudes*’.ⁱⁱ English readers were hungry for every salacious detail about Nelson’s affair with glamorous Lady Hamilton.

Caricatures began to appear in the print shops. In the eyes of eighteenth-century satirists, mistresses and courtesans could do as they pleased, but a wife who was unfaithful was beyond the pale. Emma received some harsh treatment. One of the most scabrous depictions of Emma and Nelson ever produced appeared at some point in late 1798 or early 1799. *The Night Mare on the Source of the Nile* is a parody of *The Nightmare*, the famous gothic work by Swiss painter Henry Fuseli, in which a woman lies on a bed, a small demon balanced over her. Emma is shown in the same position on a large round bed (perhaps an allusion to James Graham’s Celestial Bed) and Nelson, as a crook-nosed little demon, perches on her midriff and pulls up her skirt. The affair between Nelson and Emma sold newspapers and prints, and few missed the chance to exploit it.*

The ordinary seamen adored Emma, and begged her to intercede in disputes. Nelson’s officers, however, began to fret. Admiral Goodall branded Emma an ‘enchantress’. Captain Troubridge warned Emma that her ‘enemies’ in London were

* As pornographic cartoons tend not to survive, since they are hardly items people treasure for their relations, it is very likely that dozens of similar cartoons appeared.

whispering about her unseemly influence over Nelson and he implored Nelson to stop gambling at 'nocturnal parties' for 'Lady Hamilton's character will suffer; nothing can prevent people from talking'. Lord Elgin was travelling through Palermo on his way to take up a position as ambassador to Constantinople, and the new Lady Elgin, just twenty-one, judged Emma according to the gossip columns: she decided Emma managed Nelson entirely while he behaved 'as if he had no other thought than her'. She derided 'the fuss the Queen made with Lady H.' She thought Emma buxom, described her dress as showy and revealing, and decided she would be just her father's type: a 'fine Woman' of 'good flesh and blood'; a phrase used at the time to imply sexual susceptibility.ⁱⁱⁱ

By January, Lord Keith, the commander of the British fleet in the Mediterranean, was sick of the antics of the 'silly pair of sentimental fools' and ordered Nelson to meet him in Leghorn. Emma clung to him before they parted, no doubt aware that he had conducted an affair there with the singer Adelaide Correglia, and begged him not to sleep off ship or to socialise for 'there is no comfort their for you'. She had no need to worry. He wrote the earliest of his love letters to her that survives:

last night I did nothing but dream of you altho' I woke twenty times in the night, in one of my dreams I thought I was at a large table you was not present, sitting between a Princess who I detest and another, they both tried to seduce me and the first wanted to take those liberties with me which no Woman in this World but yourself ever did, the consequence was I knocked her down and in the moment of bustle you came in and taking me to your embrace wispered I love nothing but you my Nelson, I kissed you fervently and we enjoy'd the height of love. Ah Emma I pour out my soul to you. If you love any thing but me you love those who feel not like your N...no separation no time my only beloved Emma can alter my love and affection for you, it is founded on the truest principles of honor, and it only remains for us to regret which I do with the bitterest anguish that there are any obstacles to our being united in the closest ties of this Worlds rigid rules, as we are in those of real love. Continue only to love your faithful Nelson, as he loves his Emma, you are my guide I submit to you.

The 'Princesses' are probably Maria Carolina's daughters, Amelia and Antoinette, young, single and teasing (future Queens of France and Spain respectively). Later in the letter he uses his small appetite to beg her attention. 'I never touch even pudding you know the reason, no I would starve sooner, my only hope is to find you have equally kept your promises to me'. He is 'confident of the reality of your love and that you would die sooner than be false in the smallest thing to your own faithful Nelson who lives only for his Emma'. She missed him terribly, and her letters to him were probably even more passionate and explicit. He burned them to protect her honour as soon as he could bear to do so.

In January, to his utter shock, Sir William read in the *Morning Chronicle* that he had been relieved of his post. He tried to hope that the newspaper had been mistaken, but he became increasingly worried. When Lord Grenville's letter reached him some time afterwards, probably in late January, he realised despondently that his bid for security and a large payout had failed. Disoriented and feeling wounded and underappreciated by the government, Sir William planned with Emma to travel to England and then return quickly to live on the Bronte estate, with Nelson either fighting in the Mediterranean or retired. Emma worried about returning to England where every woman wanted the hero of the Nile. As Nelson's nephew later remarked, 'His warm heart eagerly strove to attach itself to some object of primary affection; if Lady Hamilton had not artfully endeavoured to inveigle it, some other female would'.^{iv} Anxious that she might lose him, she aimed to have his child.

Nelson had probably been asking for the intimacy of unprotected relations for some time. In mid February, he had his wish. As he reminisced to her later, 'I did remember well the 12th February and also the months afterwards. I shall never be

sorry for the consequences' (then going on to discuss their child). She no doubt promised him a son to inherit his dukedom and his aptitude for leadership. But she needed to become pregnant quickly. She was nearly thirty-five and Nelson was forty-two, and couples of a similar age usually have regular intercourse for over six months or a year before they conceive.

Emma made her decision just in time. Nelson was also about to be recalled. His commanders were angered by gossip in the newspapers that they could not control him. In May, Lord Spencer commanded Nelson silkily, 'You will be more likely to recover your health and strength in England than in an inactive situation at a foreign court, however pleasing the respect and gratitude shown to you for your services may be'.

'We are coming home; and I am miserable to leave my dearest friend, the Queen,' Emma wrote to Greville on 25 February. Their last months in Sicily were a turmoil of arrangements. Emma was concerned by the plight of the people of the island of Malta, south of Sicily. After Napoleon's troops had invaded and looted the island in 1798, the furious Maltese had decided to attempt to force the French troops to surrender by blockading them in the garrison. British ships arrived to surround the island and prevent the French bringing in men or supplies. Then King Ferdinand, concerned about rising food prices in Sicily, refused to let the British take grain to the Maltese. The islanders were soon starving. When Nelson begged Ferdinand to reconsider, he promised the moon but gave nothing. Emma stepped in, sending supplies of food and inveigling £10,000 from Maria Carolina to give to the Governor.^v In gratitude for her efforts, Emperor Paul I of Russia awarded her the Cross of the Knights of St John, or the Maltese Cross. When she received the solid gold cross, the Queen took it to set it

with diamonds. Emma gloated, 'I am the first Englishwoman that ever had it. Sir W. is pleased, so I *am happy*'. She was a Dame of the Order of Malta, or *dame petite croix*. It was a title that was entirely her own (she was Emma, Lady Hamilton, rather than Lady Emma Hamilton because her title was her husband's). She used Dame when she was behaving at her very grandest.

Sir William tried to pretend he was merely returning to England for a well-deserved break. After thirty-seven years in his post, he believed that he had turned a minor ambassadorial post into a major one. He thought himself essential and could not believe that the government would not accede to his request to take a sabbatical of a year or two and then resume the position when he pleased. Maria Carolina, whom Sir William had welcomed from Austria thirty-two years before, begged her husband to protest to the Foreign Office. Lazy Ferdinand did not write, but his intervention would not have carried much weight in any case. The British government wanted to distance itself from the controversial reprisals after the rebellions. The new envoy, Arthur Paget, only twenty-nine years old, had promised to represent the interests of his country, rather than those of Maria Carolina. Lord Dalkeith teased him that he should not only take Hamilton's place but 'occupy Lady Hamilton too, a place you are much better fitted to fill than the old knight'.^{vi} After fending off similar schoolboy jokes, Paget arrived in April to find that Sir William not only refused to present him at Court but also appeared to have destroyed his files. All the records and correspondence had vanished. Paget would resign within a year.

Desperate to grasp a few last moments together, Nelson and Emma planned a voyage to Syracuse and Malta on Nelson's ship, setting out on 23 April with Sir William and an assortment of English tourists. The ostensible purpose was to join the ships blockading Malta. In reality the ship on which Caracciolo had been sentenced

now hosted a honeymoon cruise of, as Nelson put it, 'days of ease and nights of pleasure'. On the journey out, Emma claimed to be suffering from palpitations. Nelson consoled her ardently. Soon her declarations of illness were excuses for them to escape the other guests and languish in the cabin. Emma celebrated her thirty-fifth birthday on the way and recovered sufficiently to throw a party, with toasts and songs.

In Syracuse, Nelson and Emma wandered around like teenage lovers, leaving Hamilton alone with the other guests. Sir William struggled with his thoughts: he hoped that the affair might wane, but he also knew that, now he was retired, keeping friendly with Nelson was his only chance of retaining some influence back in England.

Emma fell pregnant after only a few weeks of unprotected sex. The baby was conceived between late April and early May, either on the cruise or just before departure. Emma wanted to give Nelson a child, and she threw away every worldly advantage she had gained in order to do so: her respectable status as Sir William's wife, her chances of social advancement and her 'virtue'. If she had not become pregnant, no one could have proved her affair was anything other than the friendship that she and Nelson declared it to be. Emma's first baby caused her nothing but stress and heartache. Her second would change her life.

After a few days in Syracuse, the party travelled to St Paul's Bay on Malta's north coast. Now built up with high rise hotels and cafes, the bay was then a quiet fishing port. As *Foudroyant* entered, the blockading ships fired off spectacular welcoming salutes, and villages across Malta were illuminated. After a week, Nelson and Emma sailed to the capital, Valetta, hurrying off when they were fired at to join the southern blockade at the scenic Marsa Sirocco Bay. They returned on 1 June to hear that Ferdinand had pardoned all those who participated in the Neapolitan

rebellions. Sir William added to his debts by hosting a sumptuous banquet at the Palazzo Palagonia in honour of the birthday of George III. Unwilling to part with her friend, Maria Carolina decided to visit her daughter and son-in-law, the Empress and Emperor of Vienna, accompanying the Hamiltons as far as Leghorn.

When Emma had first arrived abruptly in Naples, she thought it was merely a holiday destination. Now she was about to leave her dear Queen, many close friends, and her home for thirteen years to return to London.

ⁱ *The Times*, 14 November 1799.

ⁱⁱ *The Times*, 28 November 1799.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elgin, Mary, *The Letters of Mary, Countess Elgin*, ed. Nisbet Hamilton Grant (London, 1926), pp. 17, 22, 24.

^{iv} Mary Eyre Matcham, *The Nelsons of Burnham Thorpe* (London, 1911), p. 134.

^v The supplies sent by Emma finally arrived in April 1799.

^{vi} Lord Dalkeith to Arthur Paget, 1799, Sir Augustus Paget, ed., *The Paget Papers* (London, 1896), 2 vols, I, 206.