Annals and Legends

OF

CALAIS.

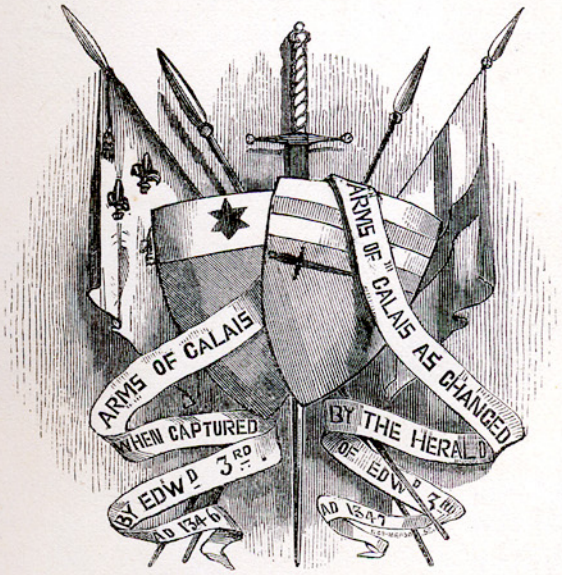
WITH

SKETCHES OF ÉMIGRÉ NOTABILITIES, AND MEMOIR OF LADY HAMILTON.

BY

ROBERT BELL CALTON,

AUTHOR OF "RAMBLES IN SWEDEN AND GOTTLAND," &c. &c.



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LONDON:

JOHN RUSSELL SMITH, 36, SOHO SQUARE.

MDCCCLII.

ANNALS AND LEGENDS OF CALAIS

BY ROBERT BELL CALTON

Chapter XXIV — Memoir of Lady Hamilton

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IN THE OFFICIAL REGISTER of births and deaths for the town of Calais, is the following entry: —"A. D. 1815, Janvier 15. Dame Emma Lyons, agée de 51 ans, née a Lancashire en Angleterre; domicilié à Calais, fille de Henry Lyons, et de Marie Kidd; Veuve de William Hamilton, est décédé le 15 Janvier, 1815, à une heure après midi au domicile du Sieur Damy, Rue Française."

And in the timber-yard, just without the fortifications, on the left hand of the stroller to St. Pierre, lie the remains of the unfortunate woman, whose death, in the language of the foreigner, is thus recorded.

The maison Damy, now Grandin, in a room of which poor Lady Hamilton breathed her last, is situated in the Rue Française, the street running parallel with the southern rampart and *fossé*, and is at present numbered 111.

From its aspect being due north, the house in question is as cheerless and dreary as can be well imagined; not a ray of sunshine ever gladdens the side of the street in which it is situated, or plays for an instant even in summer on the ever-shaded, cold-looking casements.

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From the portal of this dismal abode, or rather refuge, in the month of January, with a black silk petticoat stitched on a white curtain thrown over her coffin for a pall, and a half-pay Irish dragoon to act as chaplain over the grave in the timber-yard, were the remains of *Nelson's most adored friend* removed to their final resting-place, under the escort of a *sergent de ville* !

If an Englishman of the least heart or sentiment were told that *Nelson's dog*, — peradventure, some noble, shaggy messmate of the Victory or the Vanguard, — lay buried in the public thoroughfare across which he stepped in his walk in a foreign land, he could not fail to halt, and muse, and moralize on a spot so hallowed by the mere association of the great seaman's name.

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He might, possibly, regret that the bones of poor old "Boson" were not more congenially earthed; and that "no stone marked the spot" where the faithful friend of the victor of Trafalgar and the Nile was laid. This he might or might not do; but he *could not* pass the place with indifference.

And for Nelson's mistress — call her so if you will, — the beloved of *his* guileless and single heart, whatever the other "merits of the case," and the sharer of his undivided confidence, shall no particle of right feeling be [184] evoked as we pass her desecrated grave, and yield our thoughts to reverie and reflection ?

Shall we be told unmoved by every French gossip, that the bonne amie of the saviour of our country, the invincible chieftain of the sea, died without the common necessaries of life, and was buried at the expense of a town, every native of which had just cause to deem Nelson a mortal enemy, and be told this after reading the dying hero's last words, uttered in plaintive anguish to his friend and executor, — "Blackwood, take care of poor Lady Hamilton !"

Upon the ear of no government in the world, save our own, could such words at such a moment, and from such a man, have fallen still-born, as the town register of Calais records them to have fallen upon the adder-deaf minister, to whom they were conveyed by the gallant officer intrusted with them.

Our national humanity and respectability are so compromised through this not soon to be forgotten. episode in the annals of Calais, that we willingly refrain from further comment; and conclude with a short memoir of the luckless lady whose name and sad fate have involuntarily called forth the foregoing remarks at our hands.

Lady Hamilton was born at Preston, in Lancashire, in the year 1764, and christened by the name of Emma. Her father was a labouring man, or peasant, of the name of Lyon, or Lyons, and died whilst his daughter was in a [185] state of infancy, The widowed mother of the little Emma, shortly after the death of her husband, removed to Hawarden, in Flintshire, where she supported herself and child by the industry of her own hands, though, to afford her anything worthy the name of instruction, was utterly beyond her power.

In after years — though Lady Hamilton contrived to correspond with the most notable people of her day, — by dint of unremitting attention to her selfimprovement, joined to the gift of innate penetration and great womanly tact, she, nevertheless, felt deeply the disadvantage ever attending this loss of early schooling.

Unable to support her daughter in idleness, widow Lyons obtained for her the situation of nurserymaid in the family of Mr. Thomas, of Hawarden, the brother-in-law to Mr. Alderman Boydell. This man, Thomas, was one of those detestable domestic tyrants, who render the existence of their families and servants wretched beyond endurance; and appears to have treated the little nurse-maid with brutal harshness and cruelty.

No one in the least dependent upon him, could boast a day of uninterrupted tranquillity; and many a time the poor girl trembled in his presence, and sought relief only in her tears.

Obtaining a small sum, of money, Emma Lyons made, her way up to London in search of a more congenial situation, and found an asylum in the house of Dr. Budd, where she again performed the duties of a nursery-maid. [186]

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Dr. Budd then resided in Chatham Place, Blackfriars, and was one of the physicians to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. Emma's fellow-servant in the Doctor's establishment was a housemaid, who eventually became Mrs. Powell, the celebrated actress of Drury Lane Theatre; and when, many years afterwards, Lady Hamilton — then in the meridian of her power and beauty — visited Drury Lane with her husband, the admiration of the house was divided between the accomplished actress on the stage, and the no less fascinating one in her own box — the housemaid and nursery-girl of Chatham Place ! a coincidence in the annals of domestic servitude that may safely be asserted to be without a parallel.

Leaving the service of Dr. Budd, Emma Lyons became the servant of all-work to a dealer in St. James's market, where her appearance and superior manners attracted the attention of a lady of quality, who offered her higher duties and better wages in her own establishment — terms that were too joyfully accepted.

The little Lancashire witch had now grown into a lovely, fine-formed woman, full of energy and animation, with great powers of mimicry, an exquisite ear for music, and excellent natural voice. The rose was all but full-blown, and only needed the plucking !

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At the house of the lady with whom Emma now lived, Captain, afterwards Rear-Admiral John Willett Payne, was a frequent visitor. From constantly seeing the beautiful serving-maid, the gallant sailor soon fell over head and cars in love with her, and it being dangerous to his hopes to make her his wife, proposed that she should live with him as his acknowledged mistress - a connection at that day not looked upon with the same severe eye with which society now regards anything like an open delinquency against its code and proprieties.

Without education, and surrounded by flattery and dissipation, we must not wonder if the importuned serving-maid yielded to high-sounding overtures and solicitudes, against which her superiors in birth and attainments are not always proof.

She accordingly accepted the offer of protection from Captain Payne, though she shortly afterwards deserted him for that of Sir Harry Featherstonaugh, Bart., of Up Park, Sussex.

The baronet was a great lover of field sports, and as Emma Lyons excelled in whatever she attempted, she immediately took to riding across a country, and became one of the most expert and graceful horsewomen of the period. It was truly a sight for gods and men to see the beautiful creature, with her taper waist and beaming eye, seated firmly, yet gently bending to the gallant hunter, up to Sir Harry's weight, bounding under her at the tail of the hounds, or charging with his feather burden the rushing brook, or bullfinch fence, or flight of double posts and rails !

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But the canker was already in the rose ! Evil communication had speedily done its work; and Up Park, tinder the influence of its new mistress, soon became a scene of headlong dissipation, that only for a very brief period preceded the total ruin of its owner.

Sir Harry being himself in need of a protector, his mistress found herself thrown upon the wide world, dishonoured and friendless.

Here her perfection in form, as well as face, stood her in virtuous need; one Doctor Graham, a fashionable quack of the day, having hired her as an illustration to one of his lectures on “Health and Beauty,” and at that time he might have sought the world round for one more apt, or enchantingly

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suitable to his purpose. These lectures were delivered at the Adelphi, and there can be no doubt respecting the form that threw life and attraction upon them.

Romney, the royal academician, pronounced the living model to be perfection, and took the bust and countenance of Emma Lyons for the subject of some of his most celebrated pictures.

Thus, the lovely victim to flattery and seduction, on meeting with her first great reverse, did her utmost to maintain herself by the most creditable and honest means at her disposal. During this period of her life, Emma Lyons contrived to cultivate her taste for music, and acquired no inconsiderable know]edge of the art of painting. "In the first she attained great practical ability, and, in the latter, displayed such exquisite taste in her random sketches, as to have furnished Romney with future details, both delicate and sublime; when working at one of his, historical pictures."

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"Hayley, the friend of Cowper, was one of our heroine's admiring friends, as well as Romney, the painter, and has left many son-nets, as the latter has bequeathed us portraits, in perpetuation of the loveliness that drove them both mad."

The acquisition of these accomplishments completed the charms of the syren of Preston, and amply, in the long run, replaced the loss of Sir Harry and the Captain.

The evil communication with such men removed, the manners of the once reckless beauty became less corrupt; whilst her mind, influenced by their intellectual successors, the artist and poet, put forth its latent energies.

She resolved to improve herself by study, and to turn to advantage, as the occasion, afforded, her dearly-bought insight into the heart of man.

Pleasure and rule were still her aim and pursuit, as with the majority of her sex; but now she flew at higher game, and tasted the sweets of refinement and cultivation.

Whilst acting in the capacity of model or illustration to Dr. Graham, Emma Lyons became acquainted with a young man of birth and fortune, of the name of Charles Francis Greville, the nephew of Sir William Hamilton, and famous for his fine taste in all objects of art and *vertù*.

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Mr. Greville, like the gallant naval officer, Captain Payne, no sooner beheld the splendid example of health and beauty, than he became violently enamoured of her person. He continually hovered about her with attentions and assiduities, and finally made her an offer of his protection.

The girl liked the elegance and high fashion of her new lover, and believing the moment for selfadvancement had arrived, accepted the home he placed at her disposal. Greville did more than make love to the mistress he had found in the Doctor's lectureroom, he attempted to cultivate still further the wild luxuriance of her great natural genius, and, to a certain extent, with signal success.

He provided her the best masters in music, painting, French and Italian; so that in a short time she spoke both those languages, and sang quite as well as the very first amateur performers.

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At this time our heroine changed her name from Lyons to Harte, though for what reason we are uninformed. She also insisted -upon her widowed mother sharing her good fortune, and being permitted to reside under the same roof.

Indeed, during every phase of her chequered life, she was never wanting in undeviating affection to her parent — a holy trait in character, that may fairly be likened to a sunny ray falling on the deep shadows of her career. [191]

From all we know of the domestic history of Greville and his mistress, we may safely state their lives to have been more happy than the nature of their connection would seem to warrant; bickering and heartburning being too often the sequel to illicit love and its uncertain ties, rather than the tranquillity and mutual esteem they really seemed to have enjoyed in their household.

And yet, despite this rosy-tinted horizon, a cloud, black and threatening, loomed heavily to windward, and finally broke upon the heads of the enamoured but offending pair.

In 1789, the affairs of Mr. Greville, like those of Sir Harry Featherstonaugh, fell into disorder, when he was compelled to reduce his establishment, call his creditors together, and, as a last misfortune, to part with his mistress. This was accomplished through. a little family barter — a species of free-trade in the mart of Cupid — carried on to a considerable extent during the openly immoral eighteenth century.

It seems that Sir William Hamilton, K.B., our ambassador at the court of Naples, and uncle to Mr. G reville, had visited the house of his nephew, but to be consumed by the speaking eyes of the lady who did its honours.

Being remarkable for his fine taste and appreciation of everything relating to art, from a *cameo* to a *prima donna*, the gay virtuoso, who so long had resided on volcanic ground, coveted the fine specimen of “health and beauty” lie found in his relative's cabinet as he would have desired to possess the Carlo Dolce over his chimney-piece - if he found his entertainer in the mind to part with either. [192]

In this gentlemanlike confidential spirit, the uncle and nephew discussed " the little matter" over their *Château Margaux*, whilst the fair subject of their chat delighted them with a sonata of Mozart's from the adjoining room.

As the coffee was announced, Sir William handed his host and relative a cheque for a very large amount, and the transfer of our Lancashire witch, from the cabinet of Mr. Greville to the possession of the *Vice*-President of the Dilettanti Club was completed !

There is little doubt but that Emma Lyons, or Harte, as she now styled herself, was well aware of the impression she had made upon the guest and kinsman of her protector; or that she saw intuitively that he was the man for her purpose.

No longer young, and under the dominion of his passions, it would be her fault if she did not share the ambassador's *name* as well as fortune, for the probability of which she readily acquiesced in the negociation effected over the dining table.

Greville, too, was embarrassed, and could no longer keep his museum together; the uncle, *au contraire*, was wealthy, and still a collector of rarities; how then could the little difficulty have been more delicately or prudently solved ? [193]

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However, solved it was; and Sir William Hamilton, accompanied by his new purchase and her mother, now styled "Madame Cadogan," set out for his embassy at Naples.

"Upon the sunny and dissolute soil of Italy, Sir William and his mistress found a congenial home. The soft and southern sky seemed to give a voluptuousness to the already perfect form of the latter, and to render still more exuberant a spirit rich to overflowing in its passionate character and marvellous resources."

She was now in the midst of luxury and wealth, though still ever mindful of her studies and intellectual improvement. In this mental culture she was effectually aided by her accomplished protector, who completed the good work commenced by his nephew, Mr. Greville.

The progress, indeed, made by our heroine in every branch of the highest womanly accomplishments, under the guidance and tutelage of Sir William Hamilton, is said to have. been extraordinary, and to have hastened his fixed determination to make her his wife.

This great change in the fortunes of the erewhile "nursery-maid," "amazon," "lecturer's model," and "transferred mistress," took place on the 6th of September, 1791, at St. George's Church, Hanover,Square: the Ambassador being in his sixtieth year, and the bride, after all the phases of life enumerated, only in her 27th. [194]

Society — base worshipper of Mammon ! — welcomed the Ambassadress with open arms; though in a few short years, when bereft of every protector, and all but broken-hearted, it threw her back upon the world with disgust and virtuous indignation !

However, this is very briefly in anticipation. The "happy couple" returned to Naples, amidst the lamentations of fashionable life ! and instantly received the cordial reception of Maria Caroline, the Neapolitan Queen, whose court was deemed in every way honoured by their presence.

Lady Hamilton soon became the most intimate friend and ally of the queen, and was not unfrequently her adviser in matters of state and difficulty, that were utterly beyond the comprehension of his sapient majesty, her husband.

It is not too much to assert, that these two women — one the sister of the unhappy Marie Antoinette, the other the nursery-maid of Mr. Thomas of Hawarden ! — for years "wielded the destinies of Naples, and seriously affected the character of the wars that ended in the peace of Europe in 1815," the very year when the latter was buried in the timber-yard at Calais.

It was in the year 1793, two years after her marriage with Sir William Hamilton, that the subject of our memoir first saw Lord Nelson. [195]

He was then thirty-five years old, and Captain of the Agamemnon; his chief, Lord Hood, stationed off Toulon, having detached him from the fleet with dispatches for the English ambassador at Naples. Nelson was commissioned, moreover, to press Sir William to hasten the promised Neapolitan troops to Toulon as quickly as possible, in order to guard the works surrounding the port — a matter on which Lord Hood entertained great anxiety.

The result of Captain Nelson's mission was in every way satisfactory; 6000 troops were moved upon Toulon; the most marked attention being paid to the naval envoy by the king and his ministers.

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Sir William Hamilton, on returning to the embassy, after his first introduction to the bearer of his dispatches from Lord Hood, told his wife that he was about to introduce to her a little "thread-paper" of a man, who could not boast of being very handsome, but who would become one of the greatest men that England ever produced. "I know it," said he, "from the few words of conversation I have already had with him. I pronounce that he will one day astonish the world !"

Nelson was introduced accordingly, and seems to have been impressed by the kindness of his reception, though little dreaming of the toils into which he had already entered, when, in the fleeting moment allowed by urgent duty, he encountered the woman destined to be his *fate* !

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And *she*, after having had the Belvideres of fashion at her feet; possessing, as she now did, rank, wealth, power, and respectability — the intellectual having ever predominated over her animal inclinations — how may we account for this mysterious movement of the heart, save by giving credence to the belief, that the "little thread-paper of a man" — the thunder of whose guns had startled the very spirit of the deep ! — was intended for its true possessor by the inscrutable laws of Fatalism ?

Be this as it may, the effect produced upon Lady Hamilton, then in the bloom of youth and beauty, by the middle-aged, already care-worn, slender form of the Captain of the Agamemnon, was as instantaneous as extraordinary.

Her most cherished habits of life underwent ail immediate and permanent change; her undivided sympathy for the future being identified wholly and solely with the career of the man whose mysterious influence bound her thus unaccountably to him.

The opera and all idle or uninfluential society were alike deserted; for not even the charms of music, nor yet of the gay world — in both of which she so personally excelled — could divert her from the one great thought, how she might best spur Nelson on to victory, and turn the position she held at the court of Naples to his advantage. Nor was the day far distant ere that influence proved of vital importance to the interest of the British fleet; when Lady Hamilton, in 1798, through her own energetic intercession, when every other appeal had failed, obtained leave for it to victual and water in the Sicilian ports, in defiance of the existing treaty with France, and thus enabled Nelson to continue his pursuit of the French fleet, which he fell in with, fought, and destroyed, on the glorious first of August, in the same year.

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For five years the lovers were separated, though not for an instant did the *peasant's daughter* fail in her devotion to her absent sailor-chieftain, and his flag; for she laboured in her own peculiar sphere for their mutual advancement, with an earnestness as constant as it was impassioned.

Her personal regards for Nelson, great as they undoubtedly were, were in every way secondary to the absorbing interest she took in his deeds of gallantry and glory.

There is something so purely heroic in all this, as well as inexplicable, as to set at naught all the physiological theories extant, and to justify us in believing the mental bias of Lady Hamilton, to have inclined towards the most elevated and virtuous purposes.

The five years that had elapsed since the delivery of the dispatches from Toulon, by Captain Nelson to Sir William Hamilton, in 1793, to his return to the Neapolitan shores, ennobled and crowned with the bays of victory in 1798, were as an ordinary life-time in their startling incidents and effects.

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The second time Nelson set foot in Naples, and encountered his mistress, he was little less than a total wreck. At Calvi, in 1794, lie conducted a siege, and lost an eye. At Teneriffe, his right arm was shattered, and amputated close to the shoulder. At the battle of the Nile he was wounded severely in the head. Incessant anxiety and watchfulness for his country's honour and welfare had blanched his brow, and shattered the "little thread-paper of a man" at the outset, till, on his return in triumph to his mistress, he seemed to be on the verge of an early grave. [198]

Yet she proved herself a true woman, if an erring one, in her reception of the man she loved, and unhesitatingly and unequivocally forsook her all, to attend upon and worship him.

Sir William Hamilton appears to have been so far inoculated by the laxity of Italian morals, as to have rather countenanced than discouraged the connexion that ensued between his wife and 'Nelson; the latter having taken Lip his residence at the embassy in a very broken state of health, that was only restored by the unremitting and patient attendance of his lovely and loving nurse.

It is idle to attempt anything like a solution of the sentiments that gave root and stability to this extraordinary *liaison*, between a battered seaman devoted to his profession, and a beautiful woman of -station, who had but just arrived at the limits of her utmost desires. The sacrifice on her part, as we have just said, amounted to the forsaking of everything for the object beloved; whilst, as to Nelson himself, there is but little doubt that lie was the slave of an "overpowering infatuation." [199]

Without worldly knowledge, simple as a child, with a spirit as gentle as it was unsuspecting, lie doated upon Lady Hamilton with a passionate ardour that concealed from his own upright mind the real and culpable character of his love, and rendered him regardless of consequences, if not insensible to them.

The Neapolitan breach of faith -with France, in reference to the victualling and watering the British fleet, ultimately caused an open rupture between those countries. In the month of December, 1798, the French marched upon the capital, and compelled the king and queen to seek refuge on board Nelson's ship, the Vanguard, Sir William and Lady Hamilton accompanying them to Palermo.

In consequence of this hasty departure, the English ambassador lost property to the amount of £30,000; moveables belonging to his wife valued at £9000, being also sacrificed to lull suspicion; whilst the royal treasures and choice paintings were removed through a subterranean passage, under the direction of Lady Hamilton, and shipped on board the English men-of-war in the bay.

The royal property thus rescued literally from the fire, amounted to two millions and a half sterling in value.

Upon the return of the royal family to Naples, in the year 1799, Lady Hamilton is reproached with being concerned in the atrocious execution of the Prince Caraccioli, from the yard-arm of the Minerva frigate, though *how* she influenced the passing and carrying out of the sentence, in all the accounts we have read, we have never been able clearly to discern. The whole tenour of her life displays a disposition diametrically opposed to anything like deliberate cruelty; and we cannot but hope that the imputation of any English *woman* being admitted into the stern councils of men in matters of military execution, above all others, is as unfounded, as it reads to us *absurd*, on the face of it. [200]

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The execution of the Prince Caraccioli, caused the English government to recall its ambassador; and Nelson, more enthralled than ever, resigned his command, and returned to England with Sir William and Lady Hamilton.

The next five short years were crowded with eventful passages in the career of the subject of our memoir. In 1801, when living openly with Lord Nelson, he having separated from his wife, she gave birth to a daughter, named Horatia. In 1803, Sir William Hamilton died. In 1805, Nelson fell gloriously at Trafalgar, recording in his will the services performed by Lady Hamilton in behalf of the navy, and "leaving her as a legacy to his king and country;" the codicil being dated "on. board the Victory, the 21st day of October, 1805, then in sight of the combined fleets of France and Spain, distant about ten miles."

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With the hope of giving weight to this affecting testamentary document, the dying chieftain of the sea repeated the old plaintive words recorded at the commencement of this memoir, namely, "Take care of my dear Lady Hamilton; take care of poor Lady Hamilton !" concluding by "thanking God that he had *done his duty*."

The codicil proved waste paper; the last imploring accents of the *victor of Trafalgar*, passed into the wintry air; and Lady Hamilton, utterly bereft and unprovided for, knew not where to look for shelter or a friend.

The booming minute-guns and muffled bells 'of the Abbey and St. Paul's, announced to the lone woman that the remains of the sailor hero were being consigned to their last home; but she, who had nursed him in sickness, and inspired him to the good work, was left at her solitary hearth, with his child on her knee, uncared for and forgotten.

The *Reverend* William Nelson, the brother of the great admiral, succeeded to the title, and £120,000 of public money, and was, of course, "chief mourner;" the hue of his "cloth" forbidding everything like contact and contamination with a person who, however presentable, when protected and in fashion, was far too shocking for polite life, when in bereavement and destitution.

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Not far from the Merton turnpike, and within a few miles of London, there is to be seen a field upon which stood the home of Nelson and his mistress. It was left, with its liabilities, to Lady Hamilton, when she was obliged to take a hasty departure, and, to seek for lodgings at Richmond.

She next occupied temporary apartments in New Bond Street , whence she was chased by importunate creditors, and for a time hid herself from the world. In 1813, she was imprisoned in the King's Bench, but was charitably liberated therefrom by a city alderman.

At length, threatened with arrest by her former *coackmaker!* in sickness of heart, and without funds, the unhappy woman escaped to Calais.

The closing scene to this stirring drama of life was eminently romantic and affecting; and being described to us by the gentleman already named in these pages, Monsieur do Rheims, from whom, and the chronicles of *fact*, we have gleaned the stray "heads" in the foregoing narrative, we have every right to believe its truthfulness.

An English lady in Calais, of the name of Hunter, was in the habit of ordering meat daily for a favourite dog, and was assured by the English interpreter, the father of our informant, when lie met her in the butcher's shop, that he knew a poor gentlewoman, residing in the *Rue Française* who would be glad of the worst bit of meat provided for the pampered animal.

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To the humanity of Mrs. Hunter, Mr. De Rheims was indebted for the permission to supply the poor invalid with *bread*, till she was too ill to partake of it longer; the name of the tardy benefactress being kept in secrecy from the recipient of her bounty.

The “poor gentlewoman's” name was “Emma Hamilton,” the *bonne amie of Nelson !* as Monsieur de Rheims expressed himself, who having barely exceeded the term of middle age, and beautiful even in death, died destitute and broken-hearted, on the 15th of January, 1815, and was buried in the timberyard at Calais.

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