LETTER THE SECOND


15th.—We expected hospitality and a good reception, but certainly all our expectations have been surpassed, and the last few days have been spent in such a round of festivity, that not a moment has been left for writing. At home we have held a levee to all that is most distinguished in Havana. Counts, marquesses, and generals, with stars and crosses, have poured in and poured out ever since our arrival. I do not pretend to form any judgment of Havana. We have seen it too much en beau.

Last evening we found time to go to the theatre. The opera was "Lucia de Lammermoor." The prima donna, La Rossi, has a voice of much sweetness, sings correctly and with taste, is graceful in her movements, but sadly deficient in strength. Still she suits the character represented, and comes exactly up to my idea of poor Lucy, devoted and broken-hearted, physically and morally weak. Though the story is altered, and the interest weakened, how graceful the music is! how lovely and full of melody! The orchestra is good, and composed of blacks and whites, like the notes of a piano, mingled in harmonious confusion.

The theatre is remarkably pretty and airy, and the pit struck us as being particularly clean and respectable. All the seats are red leather arm-chairs, and all occupied by well-dressed people.

At the end of the first act, we went round to the Countess F—a’s box, to return a visit which she had made me in the morning. We found her extremely agreeable and full of intelligence, also with a very decided air of fashion. She was dressed in fawn-coloured satin, with large pearls. At the end of the second act, Lucia was taken ill, her last aria missed out, and her monument driven on the stage without further ceremony. Montresor, the Ravenswood of the piece, came in, sung, and
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stabbed himself with immense enthusiasm. It is a pity that his voice is deserting him, while his taste and feeling remain. The house has altogether a French look. The boxes are private—that is, the property of individuals, but are not shut in, which in this climate would be suffocating. We passed out through a long file of soldiers. The sudden transition from Yankee land to this military Spanish negro-land is dreamy.

The General de la Marina (Anglicè, admiral of the station) called some days ago, and informed us that there is a brig of war destined to convey us to Vera Cruz.

Amongst the ladies who have called on me, I find none more charming than the Countess de V—a. Her voice is agreeable, her manners cordial and easy, her expression beautiful from goodness, with animated eyes and fine teeth, her dress quiet and rich. She is universally beloved here. I received from her, nearly every morning, a bouquet of the loveliest flowers from her quintaroses, carnations, heliotrope, etc. The dinner at H—a’s today was a perfect feast. I sat between the Count de F—a and the Count de S—V—a, a millionaire. Everything was served in French white and gold porcelain, which looks particularly cool and pretty in this climate. The Count de P—r was there and his brother; the latter a gentlemanly and intelligent man, with a great taste for music, and whose daughter is a first-rate singer and a charming person. After dinner we rose, according to custom, and went into an adjoining room while they arranged the dessert, consisting of every imaginable and unimaginable sweetmeat, with fruit, ices, etc. The fruits I have not yet learned to like. They are certainly wonderful and delicious productions of nature; but to eat eggs and custards and butter off the trees, seems unnatural.

The heat today is terrible; with a suffocating south wind blowing, and were the houses not built as they are, would be unbearable. The dinner is served in the gallery, which is spacious and cool.

After dinner, Señor Don P—o H—a rose, and, addressing C—n, pronounced a poetical impromptu, commemorating the late victory of Espartero, and congratulating C—n on his mission to the Mexican republic. We then adjourned to the balcony, where the air was delightful, a cool evening breeze having suddenly sprung up. A large ship, full sail, and various barks, passed the
Morro. There were negroes with bare legs walking on the wall, carrying parcels, etc.; volantes passing by with their black-eyed occupants, in full dress, short sleeves, and flowers in their hair; well-dressed, martial-looking Spanish soldiers marching by, and making tolerably free remarks on the ladies in the volantes. . . . We had a visit from the Captain-General.

In the evening we went out to see the Countess de V——a, at her pretty quinta, a short way out of town, and walked in the garden by moonlight, amongst flowers and fountains. The little count is already one of the chamberlains to the Queen, and a diamond key has been sent him by Queen Christina in token of her approbation of his father’s services. These country retreats are delightful after the narrow streets and impure air of the city. . . . We saw there a good engraving of Queen Victoria, with the Duchess of Sutherland and Lady Normanby.

17th.—Yesterday we went to see the procession of the patron saint, San Cristobal, from the balconies of the Yntendencia. It is a fine spacious building, and, together with the Captain-General’s palace, stands in the Plaza de Armas, which was crowded with negroes and negresses, all dressed in white, with white muslin and blonde mantillas, framing and showing off their dusky physiognomies.

Two regiments, with excellent bands of music, conducted the procession, composed of monks and priests. San Cristobal, a large figure with thick gold legs, surrounded by gold angels with gold wings, was carried by to the music of “Suoni la tromba,” to which were adapted the words of a hymn in praise of Liberty.

We attended mass in the morning in the church of San Felipe, and entered, preceded, according to custom, by a little negro footman carrying a piece of carpet. There were few people in church, but the grouping was picturesque. The black faces of the negresses, with their white mantilla; and white satin shoes; the black silk dresses and black lace mantillas of the Havana ladies, with their white faces and black eyes, and little liveried negroes standing behind them; the officers, music, and long-bearded priests—all were very effective.

Found, on my return, an excellent Erard harp, sent me by the Marquesa de A——s, a pretty woman and female Creuxus.

A splendid entertainment was given us to-day by General
M—o. His house is large and cool; the dinner, as usual, in the gallery; and although there were ninety-seven guests, and as many negroes in waiting, the heat was not oppressive. The jewels of the ladies were superb, especially the diamonds of the M—— family; sprays, necklaces, earrings, really beautiful. The Marquesa de A—— wore a set of emeralds the size of small eggs. She had a pretty, graceful-looking daughter with her, with beautiful eyes. Even the men were well sprinkled with diamonds and rubies.

The dessert, from variety and quantity, was a real curiosity. Immense vases and candelabras of alabaster were placed at different distances on the table, and hundreds of porcelain dishes were filled with sweetmeats and fruits—sweetmeats of every description, from the little meringue called "mouthful for a queen," to the blancmanger made of suprême de volaille and milk.

After dinner our health was drank, and another poetical address pronounced. The evening concluded with music and the Havana country-dances.

20th.—Yesterday being the Queen of Spain’s birthday, a dinner was given to us at the Yntendencia. The house in size is a palace, and the apartments innumerable. The dinner very elegant, and the dessert arranged in another room, a curiosity as usual for profusion and variety. Her Majesty’s health was proposed by Don B——o H——a, and so well-timed, that all the guns of the forts fired a salute, it being sunset, just as the toast was concluded, which was drank with real enthusiasm and hearty good-will. According to Spanish custom, the aristocracy generally se tutoient, and call each other by their Christian names; indeed, they are almost all connected by intermarriages. You may guess at an inferior in rank, only by their increased respect towards him.

We stood on the balcony in the evening. The scene was beautiful, the temperature rather warm, yet delicious from the softness of the breeze. The moon rose so bright that she seemed like the sun shining through a silvery veil. Groups of figures were sauntering about in the square, under the trees, and two bands having stationed themselves with lamps and music, played alternately pieces from Mozart and Bellini. We regretted leaving so delightful a scene for the theatre, where we arrived in time to hear La Pautanelli sing an aria, dressed in helmet and
tunic, and to see La Jota Arragonesa danced by two handsome Spanish girls in good style.

One evening we went to the theatre of Tacon, to the Captain-General's box. It is certainly a splendid house, large, airy, and handsome. The play was the "Campanero de San Pablo," which, though generally liked, appears to me a complicated and unnatural composition, with one or two interesting scenes. The best actor was he who represented the blind man. The chief actress is an overgrown dame, all fat and dimples, who kept up a constant sobbing and heaving of her chest, yet never getting rid of an eternal smirk upon her face. A bolero, danced afterwards by two Spanish damsels in black and silver, was very refreshing.

23rd.—To-morrow we sail in the Jason, should the wind not prove contrary. Visits, dinners, and parties have so occupied our time, that to write has been next to impossible. Of the country we have, from the same reason, seen little, and the people we are only acquainted with in full dress, which is not the way to judge of them truly. One morning, indeed, we dedicated to viewing the works of the Yntendente, the railroad, and the water-filterers. He and the Countess, and a party of friends, accompanied us.

The country through which the railroad passes is flat and rather monotonous; nevertheless, the quantity of wild flowers, which appeared for the most part of the convolvulus species, as we glanced past them—the orange-trees, the clumps of palm and cocoa, the plantain with its gigantic leaves, the fresh green coffee-plant, the fields of sugar-cane of a still brighter green, the half-naked negroes, the low wooden huts, and, still more, the scorching sun in the month of November,—all was new to us, and sufficient to remind us of the leagues of ocean we had traversed, though this is but a halt on our voyage.

At the village where the cars stopped, we listened with much amusement to the story of a fat, comfortable-looking individual, who was cured by lightning in the following manner:—He was in the last stage of a decline, when, one hot July morning, he was knocked down by a thunderbolt, a ball of fire, which entered his side, ran all through his body, and came out at his arm. At the place where the ball made its exit, a large ulcer was formed, and when it dispersed he found himself in perfect health,
in which he has continued ever since! In such cases the "bottled lightning," demanded by Mrs. Nickleby's admirer, might be a valuable remedy.

Of course I could not leave Havana without devoting one morning to shopping. The shops have most seducing names—Hope, Wonder, Desire, etc. The French modistes seem to be wisely improving their time, by charging respectable prices for their work. The shopkeepers bring their goods out to the volante, it not being the fashion for ladies to enter the shops, though I took the privilege of a foreigner to infringe this rule occasionally. Silks and satins very dear—lace and muslin very reasonable, was, upon the whole, the result of my investigation; but as it only lasted two hours, and that my sole purchases of any consequence, were an indispensable mantilla, and a pair of earrings, I give my opinion for the present with due diffidence.

I can speak with more decision on the subject of a great ball given us by the Countess F—a, last evening, which was really superb. The whole house was thrown open—there was a splendid supper, quantities of refreshment, and the whole select aristocracy of Havana. Diamonds on all the women, jewels and orders on all the men, magnificent lustres and mirrors, and a capital band of music in the gallery.

The Captain-General was the only individual in a plain dress. He made himself very agreeable, in good French. About one hundred couple stood up in each country-dance, but the rooms are so large and so judiciously lighted, that we did not feel at all warm. Waltzes, quadrilles, and these long Spanish dances, succeeded each other. Almost all the girls have fine eyes and beautiful figures, but without colour, or much animation. The finest diamonds were those of the Countess F—a, particularly her necklace, which was undeniable.

Walking through the rooms after supper, we were amused to see the negroes and negresses helping themselves plentifully to the sweetmeats, uncorking and drinking fresh bottles of Champagne, and devouring everything on the supper tables, without the slightest concern for the presence either of their master or mistress; in fact, behaving like a multitude of spoilt children, who are sure of meeting with indulgence, and presume upon it. * * *

Towards morning we were led downstairs to a large
suite of rooms, containing a library of several thousand volumes; where coffee, cakes, etc., were prepared in beautiful Sèvres porcelain and gold plate. We left the house at last to the music of the national hymn of Spain, which struck up as we past through the gallery.

Should the north wind, the dreaded Norte, not blow, we sail to-morrow, and have spent the day in receiving farewell visits. We also went to the theatre, where every one predicts we shall not get off to-morrow. The play was “Le Gamin de Paris,” translated. After our return, I paid a very late visit to the P——r family, who live close by us, and now, at two in the morning, I finish my letter sleepily. Many beautiful souvenirs have been sent us, and amongst others, the Count de S—— V—— has just sent C—— n a model of the palace of Madrid, one of the most beautiful and ingenious pieces of workmanship possible. It is carved in wood, with astonishing accuracy and delicacy.

My next letter will be dated on board the Jason.

LETTER THE THIRD


JASON, 24th November.

This morning, at six o'clock, we breakfasted, together with Captain Estrada, the commander of the Jason, at the Casa H——a; and the wind being fair, repaired shortly after in volantes to the wharf, accompanied by our hospitable host, and several of our acquaintances; entered the boat, looked our last of the Palace and the Intendencia, and of Havana itself, where we had arrived as strangers, and which now, in fifteen days, had begun to assume a familiar aspect, and to appear interesting in our eyes, by the mere force of human sympathy; and were transported to the ship, where a line of marines, drawn up to receive us, presented arms as we entered. The morning was beautiful; little wind, but fair. We took leave of our friends, waved our handkerchiefs to the balconies in return for signals from scarcely-distinguishable