MADAME OCTAVIA WALTON LE VERT

1810 - 1877

By

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A THESIS

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CHAPTER I

The Augusta Years: 1810-1821

The marriage at Augusta in 1809[1] of Sarah Minge Walker and George Walton united two of Georgia's prominent post-Revolutionary families.

The eighteen year old[2] bride was a descendant through her mother, Elizabeth Talbot Walker, of the English earls of Shrewsbury[3]. Her great-grandfather, John Talbot, before moving from Virginia to Georgia in 1783, had been for twenty-five sessions a member of the House of Burgesses and had signed the Williamsburg Declaration of Independence[4]. After settling in Georgia, he had served for several years in the state legislature. Her father, George Walker, also an immigrant from Virginia, was a prominent lawyer and jurist of Augusta[5].

The twenty year old groom[6] was a son of that George

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1. Robert Walton Robertson, "genealogical Record of the Walton Family," manuscript volume of about 150 pages, in the possession of Mrs. J. D. Cromer of Atlanta, Georgia.

2. Born July 28, 1791. (Walker family Bible, now in the possession of Mrs. L. A. Reab of Augusta, Georgia.)

3. Robert Walton Robertson, op. cit.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Born in 1789 at Meadow Garden. (Josephine Walton, "Meadow Garden," manuscript in the possession of Miss Sarah Eve of Augusta, Georgia.)

Walton who had signed the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation for Georgia and had served as the first governor of the state under the Constitution. Young George was a graduate of Hampden Sidney and Princeton and was practicing law in Augusta at the time of his marriage.[7]

At Belle Vue, the estate of George Walker on the Sand Hills near Augusta, a first child was born to the young couple on the eighteenth of August, 1810[8]. To the baby girl Sarah Walton gave the name Octavia Celestia Valentine Walton.[9] Their second child was a son, born on the twelfth of November, 1812[10]. To him his father gave the name Robert Watkins Walton[11].

The children grew up in the aristocratic environment of Belle Vue and its neighboring estates. Most of the settlers on the Sand Hills were Virginians, and they had brought with them to Georgia the Old Dominion's tradition of gracious living. The Sand Hills cottage, of

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7. Ibid.
8. Walker family Bible.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

which Belle Vue was an example,[12] was not pretentious, but it was graceful in proportion and refined in design. Furnished with old family pieces, it was comfortable and sometimes even elegant.

The first and most important influence upon Octavia Walton was her mother. Sarah Walton was a young woman of strong character, well educated and ambitious[13]. From youth she had had a lively interest in society, and she early decided that her daughter was to be a belle[14].

It is difficult to understand now just what a career as a belle meant. In a day when almost all fields are open to women, it seems ridiculous for a mother to train a daughter only for success in society. In Octavia Walton's day, however, society was the only field in which a woman could, without unfavorable comment, make a career. It was a highly competitive field, in which procedure was ordered by strict rules, but one in which a desire for fame

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12. The writer visited Belle Vue in the summer of 1950. The house is now used as part of a girls' school, but its original form can still be seen. Many pieces of the original furniture remain in Augusta, where they are highly prized. The will of Anna Tabiatha Robinson, Sarah Walker's sister, probated in June, 1878, states that the original furniture was in Belle Vue at that time.

13. Octavia Walton Le Vert, "Diary," September 3, 1842. This manuscript volume is now in the collection of Mr. John Walton of Augusta, Georgia.

14. Ibid.

could be fulfilled.

Octavia developed into an attractive child with golden hair and blue eyes.[15] She had inherited her mother's vivacity and her father's charm of manner. At an early age she showed signs of unusual mental quickness, and she was encouraged to develop her gifts.[16] She was never in a school, but was educated by a Scotch tutor, who lived with the family and devoted his time to the instruction of the two Walton children.[17] Under his direction she learned to speak German, French, Spanish and Italian, and to read Latin and Greek.[18] By the time she was twelve years old she could compose verse in classical Greek. As she wrote later, she was considered an"eighth wonder of the world".[19]

Sarah Walton did not for a moment let her daughter lose sight of their objective. All her training was directed toward one end: belledom.[20] The training was rigorous

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15. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript in the possession of Mrs. Margie Rossignol of Augusta, Georgia. This document is very similar in wording to portions of the text of Mary Forrest's Women of the South Distinguished in Literature. The writer believes it may be the rough draft of an autobiographical sketch which Madame Le Vert prepared for Miss Forrest.

16. Ibid.

17. Mary Forrest, Women of the South Distinguished in Literature, p. 19.

18. The American Encyclopedia, Vol. X, p. 380.

19. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary", September 3, 1842.

20. Ibid.

and without let-up. Octavia learned to sing and dance, and to play the piano and guitar.[21] She also learned to paint in oils and water colors.[22] She read everything she could find: history, art, science, poetry, fiction -- and in seven languages. When her day's work was over, she dropped off to sleep pondering philosophical concepts "often too deep for one of her sex."[23]

Between Belle Vue and Augusta was Meadow Garden, the home of George Walton, the Signer. There at the time of Octavia's birth lived her grandmother, Dorothy Walton, the widow of the Signer.[24] This gentle lady was the second important influence upon the child's young life.

George Walton had died six years before Octavia's birth, closing a brilliant career at the age of fifty-five. He had been one of the first to advocate revolution in Georgia, and had served as secretary of the first provincial congress, a member of the committee of correspondence, and president of the council of safety. For six years he

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21. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript.

22. Wilfrid Dellquest to Caldwell Delaney, Los Angeles, September 22, 1948. Mr. Dellquest has in his possession landscapes and flower studies signed by Madame Le Vert, which were acquired in Augusta.

23. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," September 3, 1842.

24. Josephine Walton, "Meadow Garden;" Louis Barrington, Historic Restorations of the Daughters of the American Revolution, p. 143.

had been a member of the Continental Congress, signing both the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation.[25] He had served as a member of the committee appointed to act in the name of the congress when it was not in session, and had been chosen to meet Lafayette at Charleston and welcome him to America.[26] While still holding his seat, he had served as a colonel in the Georgia militia and had been wounded and taken prisoner in the siege of Savannah. Upon his release he had been elected governor of the state. After the Revolution he had served as chief justice of the state, first governor under the Federal Constitution, judge of the superior courts, United States senator, and several times state legislator.[27] He had been twice a United States commissioner to negotiate Indian treaties, and had been elected to the Constitutional Convention, but had not served. Along with his political duties, he had found time to assist in the establishment of the Richmond Academy of Augusta and Franklin College, now the University of Georgia.[28]

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25. Octavia Le Vert, "Biographical Sketch of George Walton," manuscript in the Rossignol collection.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Martha Brown Benton and Daisy Graham Stone, Sketch of Meadow Garden Home of George Walton, p. 5.

Dorothy Walton had been closely associated with her husband in the events of the Revolution.[29] The daughter of a wealthy Tory, she had defied her father and married the young revolutionist within a year after he signed the Declaration of Independence.[30] When her husband was wounded and taken prisoner, she left the hiding place off the coast of South Carolina to which he had sent her for safety and attempted to reach the mainland in a small boat. The boat was run down by a British warship, and she was sent to a West Indian island as a prisoner. George Walton was released first and had just taken office as governor when the wreckage of her boat was cast up on the coast. The news that the governor's young wife had supposedly died at the hands of the British sent a wave of outraged resentment through the colony.[31] They were reunited in time to be together in Philadelphia on the memorable night when the watchman called out, "Eleven oclock, and all's well -- and Cornwallis is taken!"[32]

At her grandmother's knee Octavia heard first-

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29. Lucian Lamar Knight, "The Waltons of Virginia and Georgia," p. 31. Typed manuscript in the Georgia Department of Archives and History.

30. Ibid.

31. John T. Boifeuillet, "Georgia's Most Notable Woman," The Macon News, July 8, 1920.

32. Octavia Le Vert, "Biographical Sketch of George Walton."

hand the story of the Revolution and the men who participated in it.[33] Lafayette had been her close friend, and Washington had been her guest.[34] She had known and had been associated with most of the others whose names are now great in history. The child acquired under her tutelage an ardent and personal patriotism which was carried through a long life.

George Walton became Octavia's hero, and throughout her brilliant social career the proundest of her accomplishments was that of being born his granddaughter. She wrote a warmly sympathetic sketch of his life, and late in her career won success delivering it as a lecture.[35] Throughout her married life she retained the "Walton" in her name.

This admiration of her grandfather was probably as much the result of Octavia's own reading as of the influence of Dorothy Walton. There were at Meadow Garden many letters to and from the Signer, and these were read

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33. Octavia Le Vert, "Fourth of July, 1874," manuscript in the Josephine Walton collection.

34. Mrs. J. L. Walker, "The Grave of Dorothy Walton," unidentified clipping in the Josephine Walton collection.

35. Broadside in the collection of the writer. This printed collection of excerpts from press notices was apparently distributed by Madame Le Vert as an advertisement of her lectures.

by the child many times in her early years.[36] Most of them have now been lost, but the few that survive, in the originals or in copies, paint a pleasing picture.

One was written from Williamsburg by George Walton less than a month before he signed the Declaration of Indenpendence. He had been detained there with a fever while on his way to Philadelphia, but he rejoiced that he was "not too late for the great American question, if question it may now be called."[37] The spirit of Virginia inspired him, and he exclaimed, "O, America! did this happy spirit equally animate all thy sons, the inhabitants of all Europe, transformed into devils, could not hurt thee!"

In the darkest days of the war he wrote to his brother, "One way or other, however, I doubt not we shall weather the storm, for why should we be lost in particular? I have seen the affairs of the Continent 40,000 times blacker."[38]

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36. Octavia Le Vert, "Fourth of July, 1874." There was also a miniature, which George Walton had painted in Philadelphia by James Peale. (Atlanta Constitution, November 17, 1926.)

37. George Walton to Col. Lachlan McIntosh, Williamsburg, June 17, 1776. Manuscript in the Josephine Walton collection. Miss Walton copied these letters when they were in the possession of Madame Le Vert's grandson, George Walton Reab, but their present location is not known.

38. George Walton to John Walton, December 24, 1778. No place. Manuscript copy in the Josephine Walton collection.

One of the most interesting of the letters was that which Walton wrote to his young wife when he lay seriously wounded in Savannah. Addressed to "My Dear Girl,"[39] it disparaged the gravity of his wound and reminded her that "in these troublesome times, you have no right to expect a life of tranquillity superior to your neighbors." It closed with the words: "God bless you, my dear. Remember that you are sincerely loved by a man who endeavors to make honor and reputation the rule of his actions."

There was a letter from Colonel John Laurens, aide-de-camp to Washington, who was on detached service with General Nathanael Greene in pressing the war in the south. He wrote: "If you could be spared from Congress to visit us in Georgia I think the State would speedily establish that respect both at home and abroad which her natural resources entitle her to -- as it is -- your influence and advice will have a preponderance, I hope, which the public good requires."[40]

President John Adams wrote a long letter in 1798 in which he set forth his political philosophy. One

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39. Octavia Le Vert, "Biographical Sketch of George Walton."

40. Colonel John Laurens to George Walton, On the Road to Petersburg, November 6, 1781. Manuscript copy in the Josephine Walton collection.

sentence read, "The preservation of the Union, peace and Liberty of North America, are the objects to which I have devoted my life; and I believe them to be as dear to you as to me."[41]

A long letter from Thomas Jefferson, written when Jefferson was secretary of state under Washington and Walton was for the second time governor of Georgia, has been lost.[42]

One of George Walton's letters to his wife, written at Philadelphia when he was in the Senate, described the famous fete of the French ambassador upon the Dauphin's birthday. After apologizing for his inability to give her all the details of dress that he knew she would enjoy, he continued:

> ... In general, the ladies wore muslins and white silk, the hair variously dressed, but generally ornamented with gauze and feathers, with white and pink ribbons. There were no sashes, the loose appearance of the dresses terminating at the bottom of the bosom. It was splendid, and needed this evidence to show the improved state of the times. The scene from one view was very brilliant, where under a Rotunda of ninety feet diameter, you saw ten sets dancing at once. The ladies most numerous, the whole being in a style to which we are unaccustomed. ... There was a walk around the circle, where they waltzed, observed and talked, etc. The supper tables

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41. John Adams to George Walton, New York, September 25, 1789. Manuscript copy in the Josephine Walton collection.

42. "Lost Letters" notation in the Dyer collection.

> in contiguous apartments, were loaded by an immense spread of costly variety -- upon the wines of which I supped, going home at 11 o'clock, and dreaming of those in Meadow Garden the remainder of the night, which softened my repose.[43]

About three weeks later, he wrote that he was to attend the Washington birthday ball, and that he had made arrangements for Mrs. Milledge to go with him and describe the dresses, "the communication of which to you I know would be acceptable."[44] He added, "To do anything for you will give me pleasure, and it will at least afford you a little amusement."

A letter to young George Walton from his father, written when the son was at school in Virginia, began: "I ... rejoice to hear of your good health and spirits and it will be wise for you to retain both."[45] It was full of homely news of Meadow Garden, the crops, and relatives, and closed with the words: "God bless you my dear son and may He keep you in health and Spirits and inspire you with the love of learning."

The Augusta years were formative ones -- the

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43. George Walton to Dorothy Walton, Philadelphia, January 26, 1796. In the Dyer collection.

44. George Walton to Dorothy Walton, Philadelphia, February 17, 1790. In the Dyer collection.

45. George Walton to George Walton [Jr.], Meadow Garden, July 31, 1801. Copy in the Josephine Walton collection.

first eleven of Octavia's life -- a period in which aristocratic ambition and honest patriotic pride were about equal in influence.

CHAPTER II

The Pensacola Years: 1821-1833

Young George Walton gave early promise of following in his father's footsteps. A handsome young man with twinkling blue eyes and curly brown hair,[1] he was as fond as his wife of society, and very elegant in dress and manner.[2] He entered the Georgia legislature in 1812 at the age of twenty-one, and was repeatedly returned to his seat.[3] His law practice was successful, and he amassed a fortune before he was thirty.[4]

His career might have mounted to the same heights as that of his father, had he climbed as difficult a path. The elder Walton was self-educated and self-made, rising from a penniless youth by his own efforts.[5] To the son wealth and success came too quickly, and as quickly faded away. With easy-going good humor he signed

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1. Portrait, attributed to Matthew Jewett, now in the possession of the writer. A portrait of Sarah Walton, of the same period, is also in the possession of the writer.

2. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript.

3. Varian Feare, "One Comes Along Only Every Century," The Birmingham News-Age Herald, August 15, 1937.

4. Phebe A. Hanaford, Daughters of America or Women of the Century, p. 128.

5. Mrs. Wm. C. Stubbs, "Early Records of Some of the Waltons of Virginia," The Gulf States Historical Magazine, September, 1903, p. 118.

notes for his friends, and when they defaulted he was ruined.[6] His property was lost; even Meadow Garden had to be sacrificed. Only Sarah Walton's inheritance remained between the family and actual want.[7]

It was probably this situation which moved Walton to apply for the position of Secretary of West Florida in the government which was being set up there by Andrew Jackson. On May 18, 1821,[8] he was issued a temporary commission to the office, and the Waltons moved to Pensacola.

In Florida it seemed for a while as if he would mend his broken career. He served well under Jackson in the organization of a territorial government and, upon Jackson's resignation, succeeded to the acting governorship.[9] He was very popular in the territory, and it was the consensus that he would receive appointment as the permanent governor.[10] He was passed over, however, and the appointment went to W. P. Duval. East Florida and

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6. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript.

7. Ibid.

8. Caldwell Delaney, "The Pensacola Years of Madame Octavia Walton Le Vert, p. 10. Bachelor's thesis at Springhill College.

9. Ibid., p. 14.

10. Frederick W. Dau, Florida Old and New, pp. 183-184.

West Florida were combined, and Walton was given a permanent commission as secretary of the entire territory.[11]

He appeared satisfied to serve under Duval, and he soon became the governor's most valued assistant. For some reason, however, he resigned his post and in 1830 entered the territorial legislature, where he remained for several sessions.[12]

The years between 1821 and 1835, when Walton was occupying his various positions in the territorial government, were important ones to Octavia. She was eleven years old when she arrived in Pensacola and twenty-five when she left. Within that period she made her debut in the field in which she was to win fame.

One of her most important contacts was made at the very beginning of the Pensacola stay. When the Waltons arrived, Florida was still in the hands of the Spanish. Jackson was waiting just across the border in Alabama for arrangements to be completed for delivery of the province. Mrs. Jackson was with him, but the military camp was not a suitable place for her to stay. She entered Pensacola unofficially and took up residence with the Waltons.[13] When Jackson was president and

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11. Caldwell Delaney, op. cit., p. 10.

12. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 16.

13. Caldwell Delaney, op. cit., p. 10.

Octavia was making her debut into Washington society, he showed her many courtesies in gratitude for her family's kindness to his wife.[14]

In Pensacola the Waltons occupied a house on Romana Street which had previously been the residence of Don Francisco Moreno, known in the Floridas as the "King of Pensacola."[15] The house, until a few years ago, was preserved as a museum and named in honor of Dorothy Walton.

Although the Jacksons had not taken easily to Creole society, the Waltons did, and their stay in Pensacola was a pleasant one.[16] The city was small, but aristocratic in tone, and society was governed by the strict rules of Castillian etiquette. It was a congenial atmosphere in which to rear a prospective belle.

The education of the children continued under the direction of their tutor, who moved with the family from Augusta. In Pensacola French and Spanish were as commonly spoken as English, and the children acquired natural fluency in both languages. To her other accomplishments Octavia added a store of French and Spanish

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14. Ibid., p. 37. [illegible]

15. Celia Myrover Robinson, Fabulous Families of Pensacola, p. 21.

16. Ibid., p. 40.

folk songs and ballads, which she sang as she accompanied herself on the guitar.[17]

Her proficiency in languages was put to use by her father, who had her translate official dispatches for him. She sat in his office, perched on a high stool because she could not reach the desk otherwise, and translated at sight.[18]

It was in her father's office also that she came in contact with the Seminole Indians. These were an ever present problem of the government, and many of Walton's duties were concerned with them. Delegations went annually to Pensacola to receive gifts from the governor. Neamathla, their leading chief, quickly sensed the influence Octavia had upon her father, and used it to advantage.[19] When the Indians got into trouble their petitions frequently reached Walton through his daughter. Her success as an intermediary was so great that Neamathla bestowed upon her the Indian title of "White Dove of Peace."[20]

Octavia learned to speak the Indian dialects

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17. Perceval Reniers, The Springs of Virginia, p.129.
18. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 17.
19. Ibid., p. 18.
20. Ibid.

and through her knowledge gained access to a great store of legends and tales. These primitive stories appealed to her, and she retained them in her memory. She later found that they had the same appeal to sophisticated audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, and she used them to advantage in her social career.[21] In fact, Indian legends and Creole songs contributed much to her later widely-noted ability to catch and hold the attention of any group with whom she might be thrown.

Walton was acting-governor at the time of the selection of a site for a permanent capital of Florida. The location chosen was the camping ground of Neamathla, who had called it Tallahassee -- the Beautiful Land. Octavia was given the honor of naming the new capital, and she chose the Indian name as a compliment to her Indian friend.[22]

In later years Octavia looked back upon her life in Pensacola as a "dream of Paradise."[23] She was praised and flattered by all her associates; her every whim was law. "If someone had told her she erred, she would have looked with unfeigned wonder."[24] She awoke to

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21. Octavia Le Vert, Souvenirs of Travel, Vol.I,p.2.
22. Mary Forrest, op. cit., pp. 17-18.
23. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary", September 3, 1842.
24. Ibid.

the songs of pet birds in the tree outside her window, and her days were filled with "merry races with her brother along the white sands while creamy waves broke over her feet, and the delicious breeze from the Gulf played in her hair."[25]

The most memorable event of the Pensacola years, and one of the outstanding experiences of Octavia Walton's life, was her meeting with Lafayette. Early in 1825 Dorothy Walton received a letter from Lafayette, who was on his American tour, asking her to meet him in Mobile and renew their friendship of the Revolution.[26] Age and ill health prevented her from making the tiresome journey, but she said to Octavia, "I cannot go myself to meet the friend of my husband, but I will send you, my little grand daughter, to him, and you can speak to him in French, and tell him I have not forgotten the old friendship, and show him the miniature of your grandfather."[27]

Octavia and Sarah Walton went to Mobile by a sailing vessel, and there met Lafayette on the fifth of April, 1825. Fifty years later, Octavia could remember "the roar of cannons and the beating of drums, and being

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25. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript.

26. Octavia Le Vert, "Fourth of July, 1874."

27. Ibid.

taken into a large room where an old man was seated with many officers around him."[28] She presented the miniature to the general, and then, in her words, "He took it, gave one look, then caught me up into his arms, and after kissing me, seated me on his knee."[29] He commented upon her strong resemblance to her grandfather, and, being told why Dorothy Walton could not meet him, said, "I cannot understand that she is an old woman -- she was so beautiful, and my dear friend, George Walton, so brave and noble, he too is dead. I loved him like a brother."[30]

An officer interrupted to remind the general that there were many people waiting to be presented, so Octavia slipped off his knee, although he called out, "Don't leave me yet."[31]

Octavia and Mrs. Walton attended the dinner and ball given in Lafayette's honor by the people of Mobile, and at dawn the next morning boarded a steamer with the general and his suite and sailed down the bay. In the course of the morning's conversation Lafayette said to Octavia, "When you are a young lady you shall come to

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28. Ibid.

29. Ibid. Octavia was small for her age.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

France, and everyone will love you, and say how charming and good she is."[32] To another, he said, "I predict for her a brilliant career."[33]

The Waltons disembarked at Mobile Point about noon. As the plank was being drawn in, Octavia rushed across it again, "to the great terror of those on shore,"[34] to say a last farewell to Lafayette. With good dramatic timing, she had "resolved to be the last to bid him goodbye."[35]

In 1825 Pensacola became the base of the Gulf Squadron of the United States Navy. At the same time it became the "Paradise of midshipmen." When the squadron was in port, "sighing sailors, beautiful senoritas, scowling rivals and love-sick middies filled the tropical air .... and 'music, moonlight, love, and flowers were the living inspiration."[36]

The young officers of the navy added a new and less restrained element to society in the old Spanish city. There were moonlight sails on the bay, picnics on the coastal islands, and gay dances on an old ship set aside for

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32. Ibid.
33. Erwin Craighead, From Mobile's Past, p. 143.
34. Octavia Le Vert, "Fourth of July, 1874."
35. Ibid.
36. John McIntosh Kell, Recollections of a Naval Life, p. 13.

that purpose.[37]

Octavia was a favorite among the young officers. "Even while decked in her little white apron, lovers came thronging to her."[38] The young men represented the best families of the nation, so they were acceptable to Mrs. Walton. In their company Octavia matured quickly into a poised and personable young lady.[39] Perhaps she became a bit too exuberant, a bit too certain of holding center stage, for there were some who said her vivacity shaded into vulgarity.[40]

At least one young naval officer, Lieutenant Franklin Buchanan, later to win fame as the commander of the Merrimac and the Tennessee, found nothing wrong with Octavia. To a friend he wrote of her at seventeen:

> ... Nothing could exceed the brilliancy of her eyes or the fascination of her smile. Dazzlingly beautiful, wherever she moves there is light in her path. ... She is encompassed by grace and splendor. ... Rank, talent, beauty -- all contribute to aid in the highest perfection all the tender, graceful, retiring attributes of woman. Being almost nature's masterpiece it is impossible to wish her different.[41]

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37. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript.

38. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," September 3, 1842.

39. Virginia Tatnall Peacock, Famous American Belles of the Nineteenth Century, p. 107.

40. Perceval Reniers, op. cit., p. 123.

41. Caldwell Delaney, op. cit., p. 25.

It is difficult to trace Octavia's movements in the last few years of her residence in Pensacola. She had reached the age of participation in formal society, but for some reason she delayed for about five years making the national tour which was requisite to recognition as anything more than a local belle. The reason for this may have been either Dorothy Walton's ill health or a return of the family's financial difficulties, or a combination of the two. The indications are that Octavia spent the time in "trial flights" at Mobile, New Orleans, and Augusta. At least one summer was passed at the Virginia springs, and she may have spent some time in Richmond.[42]

Octavia is known to have been in Baltimore in 1827, the same year in which Buchanan wrote so glowingly of her, for Edgar Allan Poe inscribed a poem in her album there under the date of "May the 1st, 1827."[43] The sentiment of the poem is not necessarily genuine, for it follows the set pattern of such tributes, but it suggests the interesting possibility that Poe as a young

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42. Wilfrid Dellquest to the writer, Los Angeles, April 22, 1949 (Mr. Dellquest owns the album which Octavia Walton kept at this time.); Perceval Reniers, op. cit., p. 121.

43. Thomas Ollive Mabbot ed., Tamerlane and Other Poems by Edgar Allan Poe, p. xiii.

man may have succumbed to Octavia's charms. It reads:

When wit, and wine, and friends have met
And laughter crowns the festive hour
In vain I struggle to forget
Still does my heart confess thy power
And fondly turn to thee!

But Octavia do not strive to rob
My heart, of all that soothes its pain
The mournful hope that every throb
Will make it break for thee![44]

On another page of the album Poe wrote an extract from Voltaire's Princesse de Babylone. These two entries in Octavia's album in Poe's handwriting have assumed great importance in literary history since their discovery a few years ago, for they throw light on the famous lost years of the poet's life.[45]

Dorothy Walton died on September 12, 1832,[46] leaving to Octavia the miniature of George Walton, and the letters from famous men.[47] She had lived a long and colorful life, and she was laid to rest in St. Michael's Cemetary in a tomb befitting the dignity of her position as a matriarch of the Revolution. In recent years the Daughters of the American Revolution have placed a bronze tablet upon her tomb, and the corner of St. Michael's

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44. Ibid., p. xiv.

45. Ibid., pp. xii-xvii.

46. Inscription on her tombstone.

47. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 15.

in which she rests has become one of Pensacola's proudest possessions.

The "silken ties of duty"[48] were loosed; Octavia and Mr. Walton were free to travel as far and as long as they liked. About the same time, Sarah Walton came into an inheritance which provided the money necessary for extended travel and the expenses of social display.[49] The way was clear for Octavia's formal debut into national society.

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48. Octavia Le Vert, fragmentary manuscript.

49. Caldwell Delaney, op. cit., p. 26.

CHAPTER III

The American Tour: 1833-1835

"When the full flush of womanhood smiled upon her cheek," Octavia wrote in her diary, "she left the home 'where life had been like a dream of Fairyland.'"[1] This was the beginning of the social career that was to span a generation and make itself felt on two continents.

Robert, who had just completed his law studies in the East, accompanied Octavia and Mrs. Walton as the necessary male escort. In the spring of 1833 they set out by stagecoach from Mobile, bound for Augusta.[2]

Adventure befell Octavia at the very beginning of her tour. One of the passengers in their stagecoach was a distinguished looking gentleman of great poise and dignity. Etiquette forbade any such familiarity as introductions without a mutually known third party, but when Octavia and Robert conversed in Spanish the stranger joined in the conversation. He spoke the language well, and was soon entertaining with incidents of his travels in Spain. When he described a peculiar happening at a bullfight, Octavia said, "You are Washington Irving!"[3]

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1. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary", September 3, 1842.

2. Caldwell Delaney, op. cit., p. 35.

3. This incident appears in all sketches of Madame Le Vert's life. The version here given is taken from Mary Forrest, Women of the South Distinguished in Literature, pp.

"And pray why am I Washington Irving?" the stranger replied.

"Because now I remember that Mr. Slidell, of New Orleans, told me of this identical incident, and added that Washington Irving stood by his side when he witnessed it," Octavia said.

The stranger admitted his identity. For Octavia it was the beginning of a friendship which lasted until Irving's death. He advised her to keep a journal, which she did, starting with their meeting.[4] Later in her career she was often his guest at Sunnyside, and at their last meeting there he said to her, "My dear, I feel as if the sunshine were all going away with you."[5] It was Irving who described her as "a woman such as occurs but once in the course of an empire."[6]

The early part of the summer of 1833 was spent in Augusta. There, in the place of her birth, Octavia was already a favorite. In a letter to a friend, a young

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20-21. Slidell's name, given as "S____" by Forrest, is filled in from Virginia Tatnall Peacock, Famous American Belles of the Nineteenth Century, p. 109.

4. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 21.

5. Ibid.

6. Virginia Clay-Clopton, A Belle of the Fifties, p. 13.

man of her acquaintance described some of the gaities of the season:

> Augusta has been very gay of late -- evening parties and day parties, Steamboat parties and picnic parties have been numerous as "Autumnal leaves in the Valley of Vallarbrisa." I am the only man in this place who waltzes and Miss Walton, the great Florida Belle, who is here and I have fine sport in astonishing the natives and making the men envious.[7]

Later in the summer, the Waltons moved on to the Virginia springs, the gathering place of Southern society. There Octavia was described as "perpetually in motion and continuously noisy,"[8] but with an animation so infectious that it finally overcame all objection to her lack of maidenly retirement. Sarah Walton, who was still a handsome woman, was almost as successful a belle as her daughter.[9]

In the fall, Octavia was presented to Washington society by Senator and Mrs. Clement C. Clay of Alabama.[10] Her success there was such that twenty years later she was still the yardstick by which all candidates for belledom were measured.[11] She was a particular

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7. J.V. to George Tyler Olmsted, Esq., Augusta, May 20, 1833. In the Josephine Walton collection.

8. Perceval Reniers, op. cit., p. 122.

9. Ibid.

10. Virginia Clay-Clopton, op. cit., p. 35. Senator Clay was a kinsman of Sarah Walton.

11. "A Learned and Lovely Woman of the South," The Augusta Herald, November 22, 1901.

success at the foreign legations and embassies, where her command of languages gave her an advantage that few American women of society had.[12] Jackson was president at the time, and his friendly interest assured her of invitations to state functions. The Waltons were often guests at the White House.[13]

Jackson had removed the deposits of the Federal Government from the National Bank, and the debates over the re-charter of the bank were at their highest peak of tension. It was the golden age of American oratory, with Clay, Calhoun, Webster, and Hayne clashing daily on the floor of Congress. Octavia sat in the gallery and made notes on the debates. When she complimented Clay upon a particularly fine flight of oratory and he could not remember the passage alluded to, she produced her journal and read it to him verbatim. He was delighted by the compliment, and through the winter he came to her often to have her read to him doubtful portions of his own speeches and those of his opponents.[14] Webster and Calhoun adopted the same habit. Calhoun dubbed Octavia the

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12. Virginia Clay-Clopton, op. cit., p. 35.

13. "A Learned and Lovely Woman of the South," loc. cit.

14. "Madame Le Vert", unidentified clipping from an Atlanta paper. In the possession of Mrs. J.C. Cromer of Atlanta, Georgia.

"gifted daughter of the South,"[15] and invited her to visit South Carolina. Many years later, Henry A. Wise remembered her as "the brightest of the Kaladescope of the ladies' gallery of the Capitol."[16]

Octavia's album, which she had at this time, was sold by an autograph dealer in 1939.[17] Although many of the signatures were evidently added at a later date, the dealer's description of the contents of the album throws interesting light upon her assocations in this Washington season:

> Two long autograph poems signed by President John Q. Adams, a whole page signed by Pres. W. H. Harrison, another one by Pres. Tyler, John Howard Payne, a fine musical manuscript by Ole Bull, with the words in Norwegian, also his own composition in his hand, signed. Among others -- Washington Irving, President Van Buren, Wm. Crawford, Alex. Graham, B. F. Butler, Daniel Webster, J. C.Calhoun, Henry Clay, W. C. Macready, Breckinridge, Geo. Walton, S. Gilman, Edmund P. Gaines, Drake, Henry Masson, Brown, Hall, Marcy, Woodbury, Hunt, Gadsden, Jno. Pierpont, E. P. Livingston, Olney, Baker, White, Mitchell, Selleck, Leigh, King, Poindexter, Catlin, and more than 100 others.[18]

A friend who saw the album in 1837 added David

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15. Helen Gray, "Madame Octavia Walton Le Vert A Model Type of Belle," typed manuscript in the Rossignol collection.

16. Henry A. Wise to Madame Le Vert, Richmond, May 1, 1856. In the Dyer collection.

17. American Autograph Shop to the writer, July 20, 1943.

18. Catalogue of the American Autograph Shop, February, 1939.

Crockett to the list, and added, "There is written in it complimentary pieces enough to turn the head of a dozen girls."[19]

Octavia is said to have received many offers of marriage during her winter in Washington, and to have rejected a president, but the unsuccessful distinguished suitor is not identified.[20]

The story of her continued triumphs in her American tour is best told in her own words:

> For some years she was bourne along the tide of the great world. All that the most ambitious could desire was hers. In the intellectual and brilliant circles of other climes she was gazed upon as "a bright particular star" from some sunny land. Crowds thronged round to flatter and to love. Rank, talent, wealth, all were laid at her feet. Triumphs were hers even queens do not receive: 'twas the homage of the heart. The learned man paid his tribute of praise; the politician bowed before her. The old, the young, the grave, the gay -- all joined in admiration of this one being.[21]

At the close of the Washington season the Waltons moved on to Saratoga and Newport, the most fashionable of the Eastern resorts. An account of Octavia's reception at Saratoga indicates that she did not exaggerate

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19. Delphine Weeks to Melanie Weeks, White Sulphur Springs, _____, 1838. In the collection of Mr. Percy Holt of Galveston, Texas.

20. "Madame Le Vert," unidentified clipping from an Atlanta paper. In the Cromer collection. It is not stated whether he was an ex-president or a future one.

21. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary", September 3, 1842.

in her own telling of the story. A society reporter said of her:

> Amid the charming representatives of the various states she stands the most distinguished, having no rival. Her colloquial talents, her tact, emanating from a kind heart, captivate all who approach her. She floats through the rooms, with a radiant smile for her acquaintances; now the object of admiration to a group of Americans, now with silver-toned voice and a perfect Castillian accent describing the gay scene to a Spaniard, now in conversation with a Frenchman, an Italian, and a German, speaking in his own language to each, and changing for another with lightning rapidity. Then we find her in earnest conversation with some distinguished scholar, and note the stores of erudition, the vigorous grasp of intellect, and the rich mental culture which are among her resources. We do involuntary homage to those matchless powers, such as in other lands made the undying fame of a De Stael, a De Genlis, or a Maintenon. At the same time, the grace and high-bred manner in which she receives homage remove her as far from the hackneyed every-day belle as the stars are above the earth....[22]

At Newport it was reported that "No queen could have met with a more enthusiastic reception."[23]

By the time Octavia turned homeward, she had won for herself the title of "Belle of the Union."[24] She was universally admitted to be the most successful of American belles. Her conquest of the formal society of the East had been complete, and her name was to be familiar

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22. Mrs. Ellet, Queens of American Society, pp. 412-413.

23. Ibid., p. 412.

24. National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol. VI, p. 440.

in American drawing rooms, north and south, for a generation.[25]

In December of 1834, on their return journey, the Waltons stopped at Tuscaloosa. There a young lady, later to be the wife of Governor John Gayle, made this record of their visit in her diary:

> Tuscaloosa, 1st December, 1834.
> A separate paragraph must mention the arrival of Mrs. and Miss Walton -- the admired of all eyes -- the theme of all tongues -- the admiration of all hearts -- a very witch -- a sorceress whose spells there is no resisting. She must be a remarkable girl, tho' I am not able to settle upon the particular trait that wins the admiration and love of all. She is quite low, with the round French figure -- not a pretty complexion, grey eyes, large mouth full of the finest teeth ever seen, but there is an animation, a fullness of life perfectly indescribable.
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> Her intellect seems fine and her mind is said to be well cultivated. She has traveled over the United States, spending her winters in the cities and her summers at the Lakes, the Springs, in Canada and indeed wherever nature deals in the grand, the beautiful and the wonderful, or where society could lay the brightest trophies at her feet. Withal, her natural character appears frank and friendly -- so much so that the first impression one takes is that she has taken a violent fancy to one. Tuscaloosa will require time to recover from the ecstacy into which she has thrown it.[26]

This attempt on the part of a contemporary to account for Octavia's social success moves the writer also to attempt it. It is a difficult task. All that

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25. Varian Feare, op. cit., loc. cit.

26. Lottie Porterfield Gamble, "A History of Alabama Literature to 1870," Master's thesis, University of Alabama.

Octavia Walton was died with her and vanished, leaving only the praises of those who knew her to puzzle anyone attempting to put his finger upon the source of her success.

Although she was often spoken of as being beautiful, those who described her candidly always admitted that her facial attractiveness owed more to a bright and friendly animation than to beauty.[27] Count Louis Fitzgerald Tassistro probably had this in mind when he said that she was not beautiful, but added, "her face is full of beauties."[28] When she was young, she had beautiful shoulders and arms, one reason why she played the guitar. These attractive features are well displayed in the portrait which she had painted by Thomas Sully in Philadelphia in 1833.[29] As she grew older, however, she came to have "appreciable embonpoint,"[30] although that did not stop her from displaying a little more of her person than convention allowed.[31]

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27. Perceval Reniers, op. cit., p. 122.

28. Louis Fitzgerald Tassistro, Random Shots and Southern Breezes, p. 233.

29. This portrait is now in the possession of Miss Mabel E. Greene of Kansas City, Missouri. The writer has seen it.

30. James Wood Davidson, Living Writers of the South, p. 332.

31. It is common gossip in Mobile that her gowns were a bit more decollete than was the fashion.

She had "an initiative habit of mind, with a lively fondness for display"[32] which was manifest in her handwriting and her speech mannerisms. She gesticulated freely, talking "a la francaise, with her hands."[33] Mrs. Walton had the same mannerism, which moved an associate to write, "Their manners are so Frenchified that I sometimes fancy that they are speaking French to me."[34] Another said of Octavia, "In conversation she never flags, never utters a commonplace." All this is supported by the passages already quoted, but conversation alone does not make a belle. She had an excellent classical education and a fine grasp of national affairs, but that in itself was not enough to assure social success.

She was an enigma even in her lifetime. Henry Bellows, who was her friend for thirty years, wrote to her:

> I ... have tried to think what it was that brought so many of all ages to your feet. My mature observation instructs me now that your social success is due to causes creditable alike to yourself and to human nature, and to the goodness of your heart, to the sympathetic power which enables you to fling yourself into everybody's place, or feelings, to become interested in every human being and give them that most flattering and engaging of all gifts,

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32. James Wood Davidson, op. cit., p. 333.

33. Ibid.

34. Delphine Weeks to Melanie Weeks, White Sulphur Springs, _____, 1838. loc. cit.

> your pleasant attention. We may talk of presence of mind ... but there is still a rarer quality, presence of heart.[35]

Another said:

> She flatters everybody, and everybody flatters her. She is sweet to everybody, and even the crossest and sourest endeavor to be sweet, at least to her. She, who is amiable to all, finds that all are amiable to her. She, who never allows an unkind remark or an ill-natured suggestion to intrude in her presence, has the satisfaction to know that this is repeated in her defense, when malicious persons would be less kind to her than she is to them.[36]

Two persons wrote rather lengthy biographies of her while she was still living. Mary Forrest knew her and was particularly eager to sift through the mass of praise and arrive at a clear exposition of the woman beneath. She may have been no more successful than the others, but her conclusions are interesting:

> Nature evidently planned her, on a large, comprehensive scale, a social genius, and all her good gifts are cut and polished to this end. ... She was made up without antipathies, and in place of them, has large adaptation and tolerence, which together with her womanly graces, eminently fit her for the office of social harmonizer. There are few spheres so malignant as to repel her utterly, and, if repelled, her sunny soul does not seem to receive any positive shock. She is more electric than eclectic, and something better than either -- she has never been known to speak or act an unkindness. ... her receptive nature seems to have absorbed that tropical exuberance of thought, feeling, language and presence,

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35. Henry W. Bellows to Madame Le Vert, New York, November 14, 1855. In the Dyer Collection.

36. Unidentified clipping pasted inside the cover of Madame Le Vert's "Diary". Loc.cit.

> which has made her famous; while at the same time, an early and close relation with nature, in one of her most tender and bounteous aspects, preserved intact, amid all precocious tendencies, the naive simplicity of the child, which is to this day her crowning grace. ... She is able to evolve only light and warmth from her large human heart; to bring to the surface the best qualities of all who come within her influence; to charm away detraction, and to preserve, apart from her world-woman aspect, a child-nature, as pure and undimmed as a pearl in the sea. ... That she was more than a mere belle is proved by the fact that her name was never spoken lightly, and of all who then offered her the highest tribute in the gift of man, she has never lost a friend.[37]

Mrs. Elizabeth Ellet also knew her, and wrote:

> ... Madame Le Vert is perhaps the only woman who has reigned as a belle in both hemispheres, has received the homage of chivalrous admiration, alike in the Northern and Southern sections of the United States, as well as in the courtly circles of Great Britain and Continental Europe, and who, at the same time, has never been assailed by the shafts of envy or calumny. She has had a remarkable experience in wearing the crown of beauty and genius, -- that it has been without a thorn. ... Living in the sunshine of fashionable life, and distinguished by the smiles of the fickle goddess, she never lost her tender humanity; always proving herself as genial as gay, as sweet and courteous as brilliant; as true and appreciative as fascinating.[38]

In her diary Octavia pasted a newspaper clipping which concluded with these words: "It was of such a woman Byron spoke, when he said a familiar acquaintance with her amounts to a liberal education."[39] Orestes

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37. Mary Forrest, op. cit., pp. 13-20.

38. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., pp. 396-397.

39. Not identified.

Robinson said, "I defy anybody to spend an hour in her company without rising up a wiser and better man, having a sense of musical joyance in his heart, because of her words."[40]

Another contemporary wrote: "Learning could approach her with delight and lose its stiffness in her easy, glowing and sympathetic conversation, for she was a mild yet brilliant being dispensing radiance around about her, without apparently any effort to shine."[41]

The passages quoted have been selected as the less flowery of many descriptions found. Some go to ridiculous lengths in describing her charms; none is truly critical. She is buried beneath an avalanche of platitudes from which it seems almost impossible to uncover her.

One point stands out in all accounts of her charms: she was not a biting wit. From the many accounts of her brilliance, not one bon mot has been gleaned. Therein may lie the real secret of her charm, hinted at by all, but clearly stated in her own words: "Wit only gains you the reputation of being hard-hearted, which is very well to be in reality, but not to have the reputation

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40. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 26.

41. Uncle Remus Magazine, August, 1907.

of being."[42]

She seems to have had the ability to make each person with whom she spoke feel that he was the person she was most delighted to see. A modern writer has suggested that she was "a combination of Mae West, Margaret Mitchell, Wallis Simpson, Emily Post and Mary Pickford."[43] A Mobilian, who knew her, probably came closest to an answer when he replied to his daughter's question concerning the source of Octavia's charm by saying, "When you had been with her half an hour, you left feeling flattered that such a woman would listen with so much interest to what you had to say; but when you tried to remember what you had said, you realized that she had done all the talking."[44]

This excursion into personality left Octavia, Mrs. Walton, and Robert on the way back to Pensacola. Octavia was welcomed with these lines in the Pensacola Gazette:

Lines to Miss Octavia Walton

Welcome, welcome thou bright summer flower,
That so long from our garden have fled,
We hail thee once more to thy native bower,

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42. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," November 15, 1843.

43. Varian Feare, op. cit., loc. cit.

44. George Hutchison of Mobile, quoted by his daughter, Miss Helen Hutchison, in an interview with the writer in May, 1949.

In fresh beauty more lovely arrayed.
Whither thou has wandered so far,
From the land that cherished and loved thee;

Roaming away like some brilliant star,
And shedding thy charms around thee.
When decking the halls for the rich or the great,
Midst the splendor of wealth and fashion,
Oh! say, oh!. say hast thou ever yet met
Of Friendship a more ardent passion.

Tho thousands have worshipped thy sparkling eye
And acknowledged thy magical sway,
None ever yet loved thee with half so much warmth
As the friends of thy earliest day:

Then wander no more from thy native bower,
Tis lonely and sad when thou art gone;
But stay we implore thee, thou beautiful flower,
And make glad thy long sorrowing home.[45]

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45. The Pensacola Gazette, April 6, 1835.

CHAPTER IV

The Mobile Years: 1835-1853

In 1835 the Waltons moved from Pensacola to Mobile.[1] George Walton continued the practice of law, taking Robert into his office as a partner.[2] For a while it seemed as if a fresh start would be made, and the Walton men would be successful in their new environment. In 1838 George Walton was elected Mayor of Mobile.[3] Robert, who had made a brilliant record in school, began his law practice with great promise.[4] Soon, however, George Walton took to hard drinking, and Robert neglected his practice to become a man of fashion.[5] The son imitated the father in elegance of dress and manner, and for a while both were very popular in society.[6] Robert was third lieutenant of the Mobile Rifles in 1836, but did not go with his company to the Creek War.[7] As the father's

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1. Bernard Reynolds, Sketches of Mobile from 1814 to the Present Time, p. 62.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.; Charles Grayson Summersell, Mobile; History of a Seaport Town, p. 11.

4. Bernard Reynolds, op. cit., p. 62.

5. Ibid., p. 73.

6. Ibid., p. 62.

7. Erwin Craighead, "Mobile's Military Spirit," The Mobile Register, November 15, 1931.

drinking increased and the son devoted more of his time to reading novels, their popularity declined.

The residence of the family in Mobile was on St. Anthony Street at the north-west corner of Conception Street.[8] This house was a raised cottage of the type then popular in Mobile, which was demolished in 1850 when the mansion now occupying the site was erected.

The cotton boom was well under way in Mobile when the Waltons arrived, and the city was crowded. The result was much sickness, with a scarcity of doctors and nurses. Octavia engaged in the charity work which was expected of young ladies of good family, and served as a volunteer nurse. In this activity, within a year after her arrival in the city, she met young Doctor Henry Strachey Levert.[9]

Dr. Levert was a son of Dr. Claudeus Le Vert, who had come to America from France during the Revolution as fleet surgeon under Rochambeau.[10] The elder Le Vert had remained in America after the Revolution and had married in Virginia Miss Anna Metcalf, the niece of Admiral Edward Vernon, under whom Lawrence Washington had

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8. Fay's Mobile Directory for 1839.

9. National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol. VI, p. 440.

10. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 22.

served at Cartagena anf for whom he had named Mount Vernon. After the elder Le Vert's death his widow moved with her children to Huntsville, Alabama, and there reared her family. Young Dr. Le Vert put himself through the medical college of the University of Pennsylvania by teaching school,[11] and after graduation opened an office in Mobile.

On the sixth of February, 1836, Octavia and Dr. Henry Le Vert were married.[12] Octavia Walton then acquired the name by which she is best known -- Madame Le Vert.[13]

In 1837 young Madame Le Vert bore her first child, a daughter who was named Octavia Walton Le Vert.[14] The birth of a child did not interfere with the social career, for that same year Virginia Tunstall, later Mrs. Clement C. Clay, Jr., found Madame Le Vert "the reigning

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11. James Edwards Saunders, Early Settlers of Alabama, p. 217.

12. The Mobile Register, February 8, 1836.

13. Dr. Henry Levert had anglicized his name, although other members of the family retained the "Le Vert" spelling. Octavia used the French form. The most interesting example of this difference of taste is a paper dealing with the execution of Mrs. Walton's estate (on file in the records of the Probate Court, Mobile County) in which the two signatures appear, side by side, but with different spelling.

14. Dr. Claudeus Mastin, "Memorandum," in the collection of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society. Dr. Mastin was Dr. Le Vert's nephew.

queen of every gathering at which she appeared."[15] More than sixty years later, Mrs. Clay wrote:

> I remember Mme. Le Vert's appearance on that occasion distinctly, though to describe it now seems garish. To see her then was bewildering, and all her colour was harmony. She wore a gown of golden satin, and on her hair a wreath of coral flowers, which her morocco shoes matched in hue. In the dance she moved like a bird on the wing. I can see her now in her shining robe, as she swayed and glided, holding the shimmering gown aside as she floated through the "ladies' chain." ...[16]

In 1838 a second child was born and named Claudia Anna Eugenia Le Vert.[17]

In the summer of 1838 Dr. Le Vert, Madame Le Vert, Mrs. Walton, and the two children were at the Virginia springs. In the first part of the summer, Madame Le Vert was not well, but Mrs. Walton was the "Reigning Belle of the Blue Sulphur."[18] When the party moved on to the White Sulphur, Madame Le Vert's health improved. She was again the center of an admiring circle, often "strumming her own guitar and singing the Spanish airs of Florida."[19] It was customary at the Virginia springs for a belle to

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15. Virginia Clay-Clopton, op. cit., p. 12.

16. Ibid.

17. Claudeus Mastin, "Memorandum."

18. Delphine Weeks to Melanie Weeks, White Sulphur Springs, _____1838. Loc. cit.

19. Perceval Reniers, op. cit., p. 129.

retire to the chaperone line upon her marriage, but Madame Le Vert flouted this tradition and continued to dance.[20] Mrs. Walton did also, moving a friend to write back to Mobile: "The country ladies have come 16 and 20 miles, fifteen in a stage, to see the Grand Mother dance and were not a little astonished to see Grand Mother dance as light as a girl of fifteen."[21]

It is said that Madame Le Vert kept grandmother dancing by saying to admirers, "I am engaged, but there is Mamma without a partner. She will dance with you."[22] In return, Mamma tended the children while her daughter promenaded and charmed with brilliant conversation.

In 1839 Madame Le Vert began a very personal diary,[23] evidently intended only for her own eyes, which she continued for seven years. This gives a very complete picture of her emotional life in the period it covers. The most apparent fact to be gained from its pages is that by 1839 she realized that her marriage was not a success.

The diary is very long, repetitious, and

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20. Ibid., p. 122.

21. Delphine Weeks to Melanie Weeks, White Sulphur Springs, _____ 1838, loc. cit.

22. Perceval Reniers, op. cit., p. 122.

23. Now in the collection of Mr. John Walton of Augusta, Georgia.

emotional. There are almost hysterical passages in which Madame Le Vert pours out her love for her husband and her grief at his indifference. The writer does not feel that there is any need to go into this personal matter other than to quote sample passages, from which one's own conclusions may be drawn.

The bitterness of five years of self-pity is apparent in an entry for August 23, 1844:

> ... They talk of slavery, of Egyptian bondage; what is that compared to the fine mind unvalued, to the unappreciated efforts to please, to the living death of being bound to a creature of mean earth -- to be encompassed by an atmosphere of indifference -- to have only the knowledge of one's own superiority to console one -- to check noble thoughts that rise to lips because one knows they cannot be understood -- to be fettered and bound, and yet seem to be free -- talk of bondage and slavery! This is real bondage![24]

The last reference to her unhappy marriage is found in an entry dated June 13, 1846:

> Love is surely the greatest calamity of human nature. Our happiness is taken from us and placed by our own wills in the hands of another. Destiny is arrayed against us. We waste the rich treasures of our souls upon one unworthy of us, upon one who wins, wears, then casts us away like a withered flower, when custom and time have dimmed the first blush of our loveliness.[25]

There certainly must have been two sides to the case so eloquently stated by Madame Le Vert. Dr. Le Vert

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24. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," August 23, 1844.

25. Ibid., June 13, 1846.

was by nature very reserved and dignified.[26] He was a man of deep learning, but he had no interest in fashionable society as such.[27] He seems to have been a man's man more than a woman's, serving in the military[28] and preferring tripe to the more refined dishes approved by his wife.[29] He was devoted to his profession. In 1837 he opened a private hospital,[30] which was later supplemented by one for colored patients, and he rose rapidly to become one of the leading physicians and surgeons of the city. He was associated with Dr. Josiah Nott in his early practice, and in the researches into the causes of yellow fever. Many years after his death, his works of charity were remembered and set down in a novel.[31]

The marriage was probably doomed from the beginning by the possessiveness of Mrs. Walton, who disa-

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26. Interview in Atlanta, Georgia, June 6, 1950, with Mrs. L. C. Harralson, great-grandniece of Dr. Le Vert.

27. T. C. DeLeon, Belles, Beaux and Brains of the Sixties, p. 183.

28. Erwin Craighead, "Mobile's Military Spirit," the Mobile Register, November 15, 1931.

29. Interviews with Mrs. Daisy Duval Craig of Mobile, 1941-1951.

30. Charles Grayson Summersell, op. cit., p. 36.

31. Mary A. McGill, Little Orphan Annie and Her Friends, New York, 1899.

greed with Octavia in the choice of a husband, but insisted that the young couple live with the Waltons.[32] This arrangement lasted only three years, when Dr. Le Vert took his wife to the Waverly House, then the most fashionable hotel of the city.[33] They resided there for several years -- the period covered by the intimate diary. Later they occupied a house on Dauphin Street at the corner of St. Joseph Street, opposite Bienville Square.[34]

In this period of emotional turmoil two more children were born. The third child, Sally Walton Le Vert, arrived in 1841.[35] The fourth child, a son, died in infancy in 1843.[36]

Dr. Le Vert's insistence upon his wife's attention to her duties as a mother brought her social career outside Mobile to a virtual halt. This exile from the scenes in which she had been widely admired added bitterness to the resentment she already felt. In 1839 she

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32. Interviews with Mrs. Daisy Duval Craig, 1941-1951.

33. Fay's Mobile Directory for 1839; Mobile Directory, or Strangers' Guide for 1842.

34. Rowan's Mobile Directory and Commercial Supplement for 1850-1851.

35. Claudeus Mastin, "Memorandum," loc. cit.

36. Ibid.

wrote in her diary: "I have stumbled in the beginning of life, and all the rainbow hues that gilded my young ambitious dream have long since faded away."[37]

She continued to be the social leader of Mobile. In December of 1840 Louis Fitzgerald Tassistro found her house "constantly the resort of all that had any claim to refinement or mental superiority."[38] Madame Le Vert he found "a fair specimen of those choice spirits that are to be found in enlightened communities, who, by the supremacy of their intellects, not only direct the movements of what is called the fashionable world, but exercise a most healthful influence over the interests of society."[39]

Joseph Jefferson, the great actor, in his autobiography remembered Madame Le Vert in 1842 as "the belle of the city and courted by the first in the land."[40] She sponsored a benefit performance at the theatre which saved young Jefferson and his mother from want following his father's death of yellow fever. He never forgot the kindness, and many years after her death he paid Madame Le Vert probably the highest compliment she received by

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37. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," _____, 1839.

38. Louis Fitzgerald Tassistro, op. cit., p. 232.

39. Ibid., p. 233.

40. Joseph Jefferson, The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson, p. 38.

saying, "Nothing was too high for her understanding or too lowly for her kind consideration."[41]

The fact that these local triumphs did not satisfy Madame Le Vert's ambition can be readily seen from three excerpts from her diary covering nearly the same period of time:

> The triumphs of former years come over my sad heart like "the sweet faint music of a dream." In the gay world I reign yet supreme, I move along the waltz like "a thing of light and life." Who would think ere seeking that mirthful scene I had washed away with the dew of roses the traces of bitter tears. Who would think the bright, the brilliant, the envied, the admired one sought her pillow each night with a woe-stricken heart . . .[42]

> . . . lips mock with sparkling words the dark and dreary world within.[43]

> . . . I return from scenes of gaity and my spirit feels its loneliness the deeper from the contrast. I am too proud to appear melancholy, and the effort to seem happy is a constant trial.[44]

Another factor contributing to Madame Le Vert's despondency was the unhealthfulness of Mobile. Yellow fever was a constant threat, and outbreaks of cholera were frequent. Nothing was known of epidemic control. Plagues swept through the city, carrying off hundreds at a time, with no apparent cause. All lived in dread of unknown

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41. Ibid.

42. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," July 28, 1842.

43. Ibid., November 17, 1843.

44. Ibid., October 7, 1844.

contagion. This fear is reflected in Madame Le Vert's diary in 1844:

> ... I feel as tho the spirit of death were hovering over us, ready to strike. I watch with eager pain each day the looks of those around, to see if there be an unusual pallor on the cheek, or a dimness of the eye. The tidings of disease and suffering are constantly coming to my ears. Why should we be exempt from the general doom? ... Here in this land of pestilence must my form rest.[45]

In 1846 Madame Le Vert bore her fifth and last child, who was named Henrietta Caroline Le Vert.[46]

The personal diary, which Madame Le Vert began in 1839, closed with 1846. The succeeding volume, which is now in the Alabama Department of Archives and History at Montgomery, indicates either a brightening of the lady's outlook or a realization that it was not wise to set down such things as she had in the preceding volume. It is filled with excerpts from her reading and correspondence. The most impressive single fact to be gained from it is that her wide reputation as a scholar apparently was well founded. Her reading covered a wide range of subjects, in the classics as well as current literature. Much of her social success was attributed to the ease with which she used her linguistic powers, but her diary indicates that the result was not too great a reward for the

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45. Ibid., September 5, 1844.

46. Claudeus Mastin, "Memorandum."

effort put into acquiring it. Even after she had won success she continued to study. Some idea of the earnestness of her studies can be gained from an entry for February 12, 1843:

> Yesterday for many hours I devoted myself to intense, absorbing study, in the translation of a difficult subject from one language to three others: the "Dante's Descent into Hell" first to English, then to Spanish, then to French, and again, with the characteristic of each idiom, back to Italian. It was a delightful occupation; the tracing of the different streams that all rise in the great fountain of the Latin tongue: The Spanish, so like Latin, yet embellished with the sonorous grandeur of the Moorish; the French, emphatic, concise, elegant, the language of social converse, of wily diplomacy; the Italian, soft, graceful, indolent, the type of its own delicious skies and clime; the English, vehement, expressive, grand, rich, powerful, the language of oratory, the language of declamation. Through each and all flow the noble traits of the Mother Tongue. It clings to them like the remembrance of a mother's tender care of our early years clings to us human beings. I noted not the swallow's flight that touched the hours. ... I fi ished my study; I was charmed with my effort. For many years I have been no idle or inactive seeker after the treasures of mind, and have experienced pleasure, pride, satisfaction in the pursuit. But never had I felt more delight in my own success than now. I read it again and again....[47]

Near the close of her career, Madame Le Vert looked back and, in giving advice to those who would follow in her footsteps, stated in broader terms the philosophy which had so successfully linked study and pleasure for her. She wrote:

> There is not a more useful or delightful occupation for the leisure hours of young ladies than the study

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47. Octavia Le Vert, "Diary," February 12, 1843.

of foreign languages. It is the bridge spanning the deep waters which divide our own from the rich and varied literature of other lands. When once we have passed over it, a new world of enjoyment is open to us, and we are quickly brought en rapport with the brilliant intellects that have illustrated the grand and glorious in prose and poetry.

The best translation is but a shadow of the original. We may transplant a tropical flower to our climate, and cherish it with infinite care; still its blossoms will never possess the beauty and fragrance of its own sunny clime. Thus it is with foreign literature. To enjoy perfectly the noble utterances of great minds, we must read them in the language with which Genius first draped them. The subtile charm of originality -- the delicate shades of thought, radiant and evanescent as hues of the rainbow, vanish away before the realities of translation.

A few hours, or even one hour, each day, snatched from the exigencies of society, and devoted to the study of any one of the languages of Europe, would prove a profitable investment of time, and yield a sure reward. Madam Campan did not consider the education of a young girl completed because she had left school. In one of her admirable letters of advice to a friend, she writes: "Continue still to devote daily some hours to study, that you may speak fluently in German, sing sweetly in Italian, and write charmingly in French."

Although the fashionable world may be very exacting and absorb much of the attention of our young ladies, still even in its whirl of gaity there are many weary and listless hours, which might be pleasantly occupied in learning a foreign language. The Persian poet exclaims: "Count every hour enjoyed as a treasure gained." One of those weary hours given each day to German would soon afford you the satisfaction of reading the grandly eloquent works of Goethe, of Schiller, of Jean Paul de Richter, of Heine, and other authors, to which no translation can ever render justice. ... [48]

Madame Le Vert combined her knowledge of languages

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48. Unidentified clipping in the Josephine Walton collection.

and her ability as a singer to lull her children to sleep with the love songs of Spain and Italy.[49]

She also continued to exercise her talent as an artist, for there are in existence beautiful floral water colors dated at Mobile and New Orleans in the 1840's.[50]

Although in semi-retirement, Madame Le Vert was not forgotten by those with whom she was associated earlier in her career. General Edmund Pendleton Gaines wrote to her in 1846:

> Wouldst thou contribute to the happiness and prosperity of thy friends and country?
>
> Then devote a portion of thy leisure moments to the subject of national defense -- the theory of which is as completely within thy comprehension as is the routine of fashionable amusements for a single winter, if not of the music and dancing of a single evening.[51]

Following the birth of Henrietta Caroline, she returned to national society. Again she was welcomed as a reigning belle. Her winters were spent in New Orleans, Philadelphia, or New York,[52] while Mrs. Walton, who had now donned the lace cap of an old lady,[53] tended the

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49. Virginia Tatnall Peacock, op. cit., p. 112.

50. Wildrid Dellquest to the writer, Los Angeles, April 22, 1949.

51. Edmund Pendleton Gaines to Madame Le Vert, quoted in the Augusta Herald, November 22, 1901.

52. Erwin Craighead, From Mobile's Past, p. 143.

53. Portrait, dated 1847, in the possession of Miss Mabel E. Greene of Kansas City, Missouri.

children. At Saratoga and Newport she was reported as "still wearing the chaplet of beauty, with many a fresh flower; even more lovely, more brilliant, more graceful than ever."[54] An Alabama paper carried this account, copies from the New York Herald, of her appearance at a costume ball at Saratoga in 1847:

> Mrs. Le Vert, of Mobile, a very piquante lady, whose wit and fine conversation were generally appreciated at the Springs assumed the character of Haydee of the ballet L'Almee danced by the Monplaisir troupe. Her dress was made of silver lampas, splendidly embroidered, worn over white satin; the corsage covered with an exquisite embroidery of silver rose-buds; blue scarf encircling the waist, clasped with jewels; white and silver babouches, beautiful silver anklets; a cap of silver net on one side of the head, on the other a rose and a bud; rich jewels and armlets; diamonds on the bosom, and one delicate rose; magnificent bouquet and oriental fan. This dress which was made in New York by the costumers of the Monplaisirs, was indeed very rich.[55]

At Newport in 1848, she wore a costume, said to have cost between six and eight thousand dollars,[56] which was described as the most splendid ever seen in America:

> ... At the fancy ball given at the Ocean House, she appeared as Nourmahal, the Light of the Harem. Her costume was perfect in its oriental magnificence, absolutely blazing with jewels. She wore a closely fitting bodice of silver lama, over which fell a net-work of pearls; around her waist was a girdle of glittering gems -- the topaz, amethist, emerald, and diamond mingled their splendors. Her dark glossy

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54. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 412.

55. The Daily State Guide, Wetumpka, August 23, 1947.

56. The Newport Daily News, August 31, 1848.

> hair, simply parted upon her white forehead, was gathered beneath a turban of white and silver lama, adorned with a diamond crescent of rare value. The short dress was of satin, embroidered with pearls, and the Turkish trousers, of the same material, were fastened by silver anklets. Her feet were cased in gold and crimson slippers, and long oriental sleeves shaded her beautiful arms, which were decorated with armlets, her wrists being encircled by costly bracelets; while on her neck gleamed a superb diamond necklace.[57]

Madame Le Vert had only two years in which to enjoy her return to the social whirl. In pestilence-ridden Mobile, where death had been so much upon her mind, it suddenly struck violently at her own family. In the spring of 1849, within six weeks, Robert and two of her children died, Robert late in March, Claudia and Sally within five days of each other early in May.[58] The sorrows which had been self-inflicted and largely imaginary were now real. For three years Madame Le Vert mourned without consolation.[59]

"Night has closed around me," she wrote to a friend. "As soon might one expect the rose to blossom neath the shadow of the glacier as for one ray of sparkling wit to eminate [sic] from the woe stricken soul of your blighted friend. For me, the world is hung in funeral

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57. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 412.

58. Their graves are in Magnolia Cemetary, Mobile. The tombstones have inscriptions written by Madame Le Vert.

59. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 22.

crape, and all that was bright in my nature lies buried in my children's tomb."[60]

To another she wrote:

> Persons who knew me in the bright Spring-time of life cannot realize the possibility that one so devoted to the charms of society could have relinquished them entirely. But they know not the dark caverns of Gloom into which Grief, too deep for utterance, has plunged me. The fierce Sirocco of despair has withered all the flowers of fancy and imagination, and left me with only the dead leaves of feeling darkening my soul.[61]

A year later her grief was as deep and sincere as before:

> ... Many urge me to seek in change of scene new thoughts and feelings. But all that once charmed me in the world is now valueless. What effect can change of scene have upon me? I bear with me ever those wounds of the heart, fresh and bleeding.
>
> Wherever I could go, Grief would still be my companion. Hence the isolation of my own home with its mournful associations is most congenial to me.[62]

Two years later, the weight of her grief was still upon her when she wrote:

> I spend one early hour of the morning always with my flowers, arranging and caressing them. How good is the great God in giving us sources of enjoyment in all phases of life. I who once felt such bounding delight, such radiant glee, in the brilliant throng and the gay salon, who was a creature of mirth,

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60. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," December 22, 1849.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid., March 5, 1850.

> perfectly "sans souce," now find my greatest pleasure in "silent converse" with my flowers, those "stars of earth," which I watch as beautiful unfoldings of Nature's mysteries, and every blossom speaks to me of the greatness and purity of the Mighty One. Between the world and me seems to flow an impassible gulf, and I often wish no Bridge of Circumstance may ever tempt me to wander in it again. With my books, my pen, my flowers, my own family circle, I feel no need of society. Never has the shadow of a wish assailed me to return to those scenes once so dear to me. This may seem to you like an affectation, but it is a reality. I have not the power of forgetting, and lack the current coin of small likes and dislikes which enables one to enjoy the world as it is. Altho' I strive to wear a cheerful seeming, my soul is still as desolate as when the first fierce simoon of sorrow laid low in dust the precious hopes of existence. How can I be happy or gay when my heart is encumbered with the withered leaves of past joys? The lava of time has hardened over them, but only to preserve them in all their unequalled beauty. When I endeavour to remove it I shrink back appalled to find them still fresh, still as dear as in other days. I abandon the effort to obliterate them, and say, "Others may forget, but the mother's heart knows no forgetfulness."[63]

Even ten years later, on the anniversary of her children's death, she would write: "The pall of anguish does not crush me 'neath its heavy folds now as formerly, but its shadow rests upon me, and still blights the real earnest joy the world once gave me."[64] With only two of her five children left, their safety came to be an obsession with her. In apologizing to a friend for rushing home to Mobile from Bladon Springs without taking leave,

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63. Ibid., September 7, 1852.

64. Ibid., April _____, 1859.

she said, "My almost unequaled misfortunes have made me so fearful for my children that when they are ill Reason seems to desert its throne."[65]

Dr. Le Vert was deeply sympathetic with his wife's grief over the loss of the children. To a nephew he wrote, "I fear that Octavia will never recover from the death of the children."[66] In an attempt to lift her from the moroseness into which she had sunk, he built for her an elegant mansion on Government Street. Madame Le Vert specified only a library,[67] in which to shut herself up with her books and her memories, but the house was designed for lavish entertaining.[68] The doctor evidently suspected that the career was not as firmly closed as Madame said it was.

The public markets occupied the center of Government Street at that time, and Mrs. Walton scoffed, "What do you know? The Doctor is going to build a house in the

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65. Madame Le Vert to Daniel Fowler Prout, Mobile, July 31, 1852. Typed copy in the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

66. Henry S. Levert to Claudeus Mastin, Mobile, October 8, 1849. In the collection of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society.

67. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 403.

68. The interior of the house is virtually unchanged today, and the gold and white drawing rooms are still a tourist attraction.

market!"[69] However, shortly after the house was completed in 1850, she moved next door on St. Emanuel Street.[70]

George and Sarah Walton separated at this time, he going to live out his days in the clubs of Washington on an allowance from his wife.[71] He died in Petersburg, Virginia, in 1861. Mrs. Walton had her house connected with the Le Verts' by a covered passage so Madame Le Vert could arise late and go over to have breakfast with her.[72] Twenty slaves belonging to Mrs. Walton staffed the two houses.[73]

In her period of mourning Madame Le Vert was visited by two distinguished foreign travellers. The first of these was Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, a prominent English author and journalist. Lady Emmeline, a daughter of the duke of Rutland, was from one of England's oldest and most respected noble families. Her globe-trotting,

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69. Interviews with Mrs. Daisy Duval Craig, 1941-1951.

70. Ibid.

71. George Walton to Madame Le Vert, Salem, Virginia, November 2, 1857.

72. Interviews with Mrs. Daisy Duval Craig, 1941-1951.

73. "Inventory and Appraisement of the Property of the estate of Sarah M. Walton, Deceased," on file in the office of the Probate Court of Mobile County.

unusual for a high-bred woman of that day, had already made her a figure of world notice when she arrived in Mobile. In January of 1850, she was Madame Le Vert's guest for about three weeks.

While in Mobile, Lady Emmeline witnessed the New Year's parades and visited the nearby Choctaw Indian camps. She found Madame Le Vert "one of the most delightful people in the world."[74]

Both women had lost young children, so there was a natural bond of sympathy between them. In her Travels in the United States Lady Emmeline published five stanzas which she wrote and presented to Madame Le Vert upon seeing a portrait of Sally and Claudia in the Le Vert home.[75] Madame Le Vert sent a copy of these verses to Edward Everett with the comment, "I know your kind heart sympathizes with me in the fearful affliction which has devastated my life and hung my world with funeral crape."[76]

Lady Emmeline remained with Madame Le Vert while awaiting a ship to Mexico, the next point on her tour.

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74. Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, Travels in the United States, p. 135.

75. Ibid., pp. 136-137.

76. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," February 17, 1850.

During that time, she met at the Le Vert home Robert Letcher, the new United States minister to Mexico, and Lord Mark Kerr, aide to Lord Elgin, governor general of Canada. When the regular mail steamer did not arrive, Letcher summoned a warship from Pensacola and took Lady Emmeline and Lord Mark to Vera Cruz with him as his guests.[77]

Madame Le Vert and Lady Emmeline corresponded for several years after the visit.[78] Before returning to England, Lady Emmeline published in a Quebec paper a poem of twenty-two stanzas in praise of Madame Le Vert.[79]

Following Lady Emmeline's visit, Madame Le Vert turned to her correspondence and renewed many old friendships. Her journal contains copies of many of these letters. On the twentieth of January, 1850, she copied a letter she had written to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which read, in part:

> I pass many hours among my Books, those unchanging friends -- those magicians, which close the mighty chasm that separates the Past from the Present. Amid these friends, none are more loved and valued than your own works. They have cheated many an hour of its ennui, and have whispered consolation

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77. Ibid.

78. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," April 1, 1851, passim.

79. Springfield Daily Post, undated clipping in the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

80. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," January 20, 1850.

to my still bleeding heart.[80]

Longfellow sent her a copy of By the Fireside and the Seaside, which had just been published, and accompanied it with a friendly letter.[81]

In January of 1851, Madame Le Vert was visited by Fredrika Bremer, the Swedish Novelist. Miss Bremer was at that time at the height of her fame. As the author of five well known books, which had been translated and circulated throughout Europe and America, she was greatly lionized in the United States.[82] Of Madame Le Vert she wrote:

> ... it is so strange that that little worldly lady, whom I had heard spoken of as a "belle," and as the most splendid ornament of society wherever she went, has yet become almost as dear to me as a young sister! ... We have been involuntarily and naturally attracted to each other, so that we feel as if we had always been acquainted.[83]

At Madame Le Vert's home Miss Bremer met "the grandees of Mobile."[84] She was well pleased with the high tone of local society, but was most impressed by the fact that theatrical people were considered socially

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81. Ibid. No date, but between February 17 and June 8, 1850.

82. Signe A. Rooth, "Fredrika Bremer Here a Hundred Years Ago," The American-Swedish Monthly, September, 1950, pp. 13, 25, 29.

83. Fredrika Bremer, The Homes of the New World, Vol. II, p. 220.

84. Ibid., p. 219.

acceptable and were among Madame Le Vert's guests.

At the end of a week Madame Le Vert accompanied Miss Bremer to New Orleans, where they were to take a boat to Cuba. Her friends and family had persuaded Madame that the voyage would be good for her, but it was not made. The boat was delayed, and Madame felt that she could not be away from her family as long as would be required to complete the voyage. She was staying at the St. Charles Hotel, awaiting news of the boat, at the time of the burning of that hotel, and the description of the event as set down in her journal is one of her most successful pieces of impromptu writing.[85] While in New Orleans she also sat to Miss Bremer for a portrait sketch.[86]

The first letter which Miss Bremer wrote to Madame Le Vert after returning to Sweden shows the warmth of the friendship which sprang up between them in their brief meeting. After telling of the death of her sister, Miss Bremer contines:

> ... I have begun again to live and love, and be alive, to Past and to Present. And as flowers of the Spring, the memories of my life in America are coming up to me, all fresh and full of rich beauty. Dearest Octavia! You will see that some day. Then you, one

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85. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal", January 31, 1851.

86. Miss Bremer's sketch book is now in the library of Ipsula, Sweden.

> of my dear ones, in America, and to you as to them I will return in Spirit, and show them, in a true mirror, the image they, and the days I have lived with them have left upon my mind! Tis the Homes of the New World. I shall again visit the homes of America and be with my friends at their firesides, and once more we shall be happy together. Dear little Mobile, how I enjoyed my life there with you and yours, and your kind friends who became mine. How well I know Government Street, with its orange trees. I should know your home directly. ... And the memory of you is mingled with all that your Sunny South has of sweet flowers, and fruits and fragrance -- of joyous birds, and soft influence -- and all I enjoyed as few persons ever do. Ah! it is far from Stockholm to Mobile! ...[87]

Another literary figure of the day who appears in Madame Le Vert's journal at this time is Mrs. Caroline Lee Hentz. On the eighth of March, 1851, Madame wrote a sketch of the life and writings of Mrs. Hentz, who was then one of the most successful of the Southern female novelists. In thanking Madame for the sketch, Mrs. Hentz wrote:

> I always knew you had the Graces which attract -- the genius which succeeds -- the talents all envy -- the beauty all admire -- the sensibility that pleases the eye and charms the soul. How then, could anything emenate from you, that would not please and delight.
>
> I have just finished my "Rena or the Snow Bird," and when it wings its way into the World, I trust its pinions will be folded a little while in your Boudoir.[88]

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87. Fredrika Bremer to Madame Le Vert, Stockholm, April 15, 1852. Copied in the "Journal" under the date of May 24, 1852.

88. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," March 8, 1851.

Later in the summer, Mrs. Hentz published in the Jacksonville Republican a long poem to Madame Le Vert,[89] and in 1852 she dedicated Foline or Magnolia Vale to her.[90]

In April of 1852, Mobile was visited by Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian patriot. Although his arrival was unheralded, Madame Le Vert hastily organized a welcome befitting his position. Hurrying to the boat in her open carriage, she had him enter it, and then walked beside it as he rode up Government Street receiving the cheers of the populace.[91]. She had a luncheon served at her house, to which prominent men of the city were invited, and arranged for a hall to be available that night for a speech. When the speech was delivered, she and her family occupied a stage box.[92] As a result of her activities, a large sum was raised to help the patriot in his fight for vindication of his unsuccessful revolutionary attempts.

A member of Kossuth's party wrote of her:

> ... she not only possesses the keys to the treasures of foreign literature, she has likewise made use of them, and her conversation is as entertaining as it

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89. The Jacksonville Republican, August 12, 1851.

90. Copy in the collection of the writer.

91. Erwin Craighead, "Madame Le Vert," The Mobile Register, November 16, 1924.

92. Ibid.

it is lively. She is no blue-stocking; elegance pervades not only her expression, but her whole appearance.[93]

1852 brought to a close the period of Madame Le Vert's life which I have called the "Mobile years." It is the period in which she made her home in the city as a young wife and mother and as a local society queen. Although she lived in the city fourteen years longer, her fame shortly became so great that she was no longer a local figure with close ties to the city. Before taking up her later fame, however, a chapter will be devoted to an interesting phase of the Mobile Years -- her friendship with Henry Clay.

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93. Francis and Theresa Pulszky, White, Red, Black Sketches of American Society, Vol. II, p. 111.

CHAPTER V

The Clay Friendship

Of the many famous people with whom Madame Le Vert became acquainted,[1] Henry Clay was probably her closest friend. The friendship began in Washington in 1833 and lasted until Clay's death in 1852. Many of the letters which Madame Le Vert received from Clay have been lost, but those which survive add luster to her reputation and throw an interesting sidelight upon his personality.

The date of the earliest letter[2] found is January 1, 1844. It was written from New Orleans when Clay was there on his presidential campaign of that year. It begins:

> I address you the first letter which I write in this new year, to tender you the compliments of the Season, and to acknowledge the receipt, just before my departure from home, of your friendly letter introducing and recommending Mr. Wise, the artist.

The letter goes on to state his regret at having to postpone sitting for the artist, assuring her, "The expression of your desire, that I should sit to him for my portrait, had great weight with me."

He accepts her invitation to visit her in Mobile, saying, "I remember with high pleasure that visit

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1. Octavia Le Vert, Souvenirs of Travel, Vol.I, p.vii.
2. In the Dyer Collection.

which I made last winter, and anticipate great satisfaction from again meeting you and other friends there." The letter closes with the hope that "'the little graces' are well and continue to augment their title to admiration."

The second letter[3] in the series is also dated at New Orleans, on January 6, 1844. In it Clay gives his schedule for the next six weeks and the approximate date of his visit to Mobile. "Should you visit this city, as I hope you may do," he writes, "it will afford me great pleasure to escort you to Mobile." After thanking her again for her invitation, he contines:

> ... But wherever I go I am such a disturber of the peace, that I feared you were not aware of the extent of the inconvenience which I might occasion in your house. If you can reconcile yourself to it, I have no friends whose hospitality will be more acceptable to me, or with whom I could be more happy.

The letter closes with a request that, should she visit New Orleans, she notify him of the hour of her arrival and the place of her sojourn, adding, "I stop at the house of my friend, Dr. Mercer, in Carondelet Street not very far from the St. Charles Hotel."

On the twenty-fifth of February, 1844,[4] Henry Clay arrived in Mobile and took up residence with the Le

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3. Ibid.

4. Noah M. Ludlow, Dramatic Life As I Found It, p. 591.

Verts. On the twenty-seventh the people of Mobile honored him with a grand ball.[5] On the fourth of March, the great English actor W. C. Macready played Hamlet before Clay and a large party of Madame's friends and guests, after indulging in a tantrum upon seeing Clay's name on the theatre billboards in letters as large as those of his own.[6]

Clay's sojourn in Mobile was as tumultuous as he had warned it would be. His elevation to the presidency seemed assured, and all were eager to meet and talk with him. His attentions to Madame Le Vert annoyed some gentlemen who had travelled many miles with the hope of talking politics with him.[7]

Madame Le Vert accompanied him to Montgomery, accepting a part of his applause and giving in return a more enthusiastic adulation than any of his other admirers. This moved an Alabama newspaper to refer to her as "the woman who kissed Henry Clay more than anybody else in 1844."[8] Madame LeVert remained in Montgomery to

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5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., p. 592.

7. John W. DuBose, The Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey, p. 192.

8. Daily State Guide, Wetumpka, August 23, 1847.

be feted with a reception of her own after Clay had gone on.[9]

The next letter[10] in the series is dated at Raleigh, North Carolina, on April 14, 1844. Clay describes his enthusiastic reception along the way, and chides Madame Le Vert with the words, "I have been much disappointed in not finding here any letter from Mobile. How has this happened? I have written twice to you, since we parted at Montgomery."

On May 13, 1844, Clay writes from Washington acknowledging receipt of the letters missed at Raleigh. A part of the letter[11] reads:

> I am about taking up my departure this day from this city, and write admidst perpetual interruptions of friends calling to bid me farewell. Indeed, my dear friend, no language can adequately describe the scenes of excitement, of exertion, and of crowds through which I have passed since I left you. A thousand times have I wished and sighed for the quiet of my room at your house.

The next of Clay's letters to be found is dated after the election. He writes from Ashland, on January 21, 1845, a letter[12] so warm and friendly that the greater

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9. Marie Bankhead Owen, The Story of Alabama, Vol. III, pp. 547-548.

10. In the Dyer Collection.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

part of it bears quoting.

> I am ashamed to have so long delayed expressing to you the very great gratification I received from your letter of the 6th Ulto. It confirmed, what I had never doubted, that our friendship was, on your part, as on mine, sincere and independent of adverse or prosperous fortunes, which might befal /sic/ either of us. Although one may be convinced of such a truth, it is always agreeable to be strengthened in it by additional assurances, and these you have kindly and fully given. Indeed, the unexpected result of the late Presidential election has led to demonstrations of affectionate attachment to me, of the extent of which I should have never been aware but for that event. These demonstrations have been made in the most enthusiastic form, and by both sexes (I pray you not to be jealous) in the most touching manner. I have been sometimes almost afraid to open my mail, finding in it letters couched in the most pathetic language, deploring the event as if some great National calamety /sic/ had occurred. I must, however, say that none of them has given utterance to more eloquent indignation, on account of the issue of the contest, than that which youhave so feelingly expressed. I read a part of your letter to an Author, of course without exposing your name, and he insisted upon taking an extract. You must not therefore be surprised if some day or other you see what you have so well said in print.
>
> ... And I must now, my true and excellent friend, express the anxious wish that you will continue to remember and to write to me. For believe me that your letters afford me always the greatest pleasure and that of the tyes which remain to me in this life that of your friendship is, among those, which is most prized by your faithful and affectionate friend, H. Clay.

Four months later, Clay writes, "I began, my ever dear friend, to entertain some apprehensions that I was fading from your memory,"[13] and again chides Madame

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13. Henry Clay to Madame Le Vert, Ashland, May 20, 1845. In the Dyer Collection.

for not answering all his letters. He states his regret at not having been able to make a southern visit during the winter just past, and assures her, "you can judge what a sacrifice I made in being deprived of the pleasure of meeting you."

Clay gives a long account of his financial embarrassments and the incident of the cancellation of his notes by friends, stating that they are of a personal nature "respecting which your friendship for me entitles you to a fuller explanation than you can derive from the papers." The letter continues with the words:

> I regret extremely that you are confined to Mobile -- a delightful city in the winter, but I apprehend quite unhealthy in the summer and autumn. I fondly hoped to meet you somewhere this summer, at some of the watering or other places. I pray you to take care of your health and life so dear to so many.

On the eighth of August, 1845, Clay writes of his plans to visit the Le Verts again as soon as possible, and urges Madame to accompany his party to Cuba. He states that he has received visits from many Mobilians during the summer and that "they were all able to give me some agreeable tidings of you, and were therefore very welcome guests."[14]

The next letter[15] is dated at New Orleans, March

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14. Henry Clay to Madame Le Vert, Ashland, August 8, 1845. In the Dyer Collection.

15. In the Dyer Collection.

17, 1846. Clay has been ill with influenza and has had to cancel a proposed visit to Mobile. He writes:

> I sat today to Mr. Parker, and shall give him some other sittings prior to my departure, chiefly because you desire it, and because I have an opporunity there of seeing some beautiful portraits, one of which especially interests me. ...
>
> Will you not visit the North, or our watering places in Kentucky this summer? I am sure that such a jaunt would greatly benefit you, and must be necessary to guard against the silent and insidious influence of your enervating climate.
>
> I shall be soon, my dear friend, far, far from you, but I shall never cease to feel the livliest /sic/ solicitude for your happiness, and that of all those connected with you. ...

A letter of three months later refers to the same events, but is couched in mysterious allusions. It reads in part:

> My disappointment in not going to Mobile, after your departure from N.O., was even greater than yours. It had consiituted a principal object of my visit to the south, and I had turned towards home with a sad and heavy heart. If I had received the letter which you intended to send, but which you recalled from the P. Office, I should have overcome all obstacles, and again placed myself, in my delightful chamber, under the kind auspices of Dr. L. V. and yourself. But, as we cannot recall the past, I accept the condition on which you offer to pardon my delinquency, and agree that, if I go next winter to N.O. I will certainly not neglect Mobile.[16]

The remainder of the letter is given to a discussion of the Mexican War and Clay's private life at Ashland.

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16. Henry Clay to Madame Le Vert, Ashland, June 25, 1846. In the Dyer Collection.

On November 6, 1846, Clay writes another long letter in which he discusses further the Mexican War, describing it as "begun without necessity, and in folly ... conducted without wisdom."[17] He tells of the death of his son and of other personal matters, and continues:

> ... I expect to go hence for Mississippi and Louisiana in three or four weeks, but may not reach N. Orleans until towards the last of December. It is my wish and present purpose to visit Mobile, but you know that one cannot always do what one desires. What is your plan of winter campaign? Do you operate at Mobile or on the larger theatre of the Crescent City? If I had the choice, I must confess that I should prefer seeing you at Mobile, where one may be able to <u>see you</u>. At. N. Orleans, your meteor-like movements allow only a glimpse to be caught of your eye.

On December 19, 1846, Clay writes from New Orleans that he has heard of the birth of Henrietta Caroline, and sends his congratulations. "I hope that no excitement of jealousy will arise with 'The Graces' in consequence of the little stranger,"[18] he adds. "They will soon learn that a mother's heart is capacious enough to embrace all of them. He states that, as he plans to remain in New Orleans until March, he still hopes to see Madame either there or in Mobile.

Henrietta Caroline was Henry Clay's namesake. In a letter of February 25, 1847, he acknowledges this

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17. Henry Clay to Madame Le Vert, Ashland, November 6, 1846. In the Dyer Collection.

18. In the Dyer Collection.

and sends the infant a silver cup engraved with her name. "Henrietta is an English name, Henriette the French," he writes. "I adopted the former, because it is associated with Caroline, also an English name."[19] The letter closes with the words: "Wherever I may go or be, I am affectionately your friend, H. Clay."

Almost two years elapse between the dates of the last letter and the next that has been preserved. Clay is again in New Orleans, and writes on February 6, 1849, a brief note urging Madame Le Vert to visit the Crescent City.[20]

The next letter is written from Ashland after the death of Madame Le Vert's brother and children. It tenders Clay's sympathy and speaks of the fall in the St. Charles Hotel which disabled him and prevented him from visiting Mobile when he was in New Orleans. He writes: "How cruel was fortune, when we were so near together to deprive us of the satisfaction of meeting, by our respective afflictions."[21]

No other letters of Clay to Madame Le Vert have been found. However, there is in Madame's journal a copy

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19. Henry Clay to Madame Le Vert, New Orleans, February 25, 1847. In the Dyer Collection.

20. In the Dyer Collection.

21. Henry Clay to Madame Le Vert, Ashland, April 17, 1849. In the Dyer collection.

of a portion of a letter she wrote to him upon his speech advocating the Compromise of 1850. It reads:

> I have read your noble speech, and find no words where-with to express my admiration of it. All that is most sublime in patriotism, all that is most exquisite in language are there. That speech will stand as the grand Land Mark in the Ocean of the Past, and speak to future time of the great spirit which animated your noble bosom.
>
> What a dark cloud seems to envelope the destiny of our country. May God in his mercy avert the impending ruin! If your noble efforts avail not, then nought human can save the Republic.[22]

A notation in the journal has also preserved a reference to what must have been Clay's last letter to his friend. It is contained in a copy of a letter from Madame Le Vert to an unidentified friend, dated a few months before Clay's death:

> I have recently received a letter from Mr. Clay in which he tells me he is better, but still the final issue of his malady is doubtful, altho' the physicians think him improving. I am sure you mourn with me the shadow that is drawing over his brightness. But it is the cloud that gathers around the setting sun, and is dipped in the gold of its departing beams. The friendship and affection of such a man are gifts I well may prize. Like diamonds they are indestructible, like gold imperishable.[23]

Immediately following Clay's death plans were set under way in New Orleans for the erection of a suitable monument to his memory. It was decided that this should be a bronze statue of the statesman, and that Madame Le

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22. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," March 10, 1850.

23. Ibid., March 8, 1852.

Vert, as one of his most prominent friends in the region, should be invited to prepare an address for the ceremonies to be associated with the project. This she did, and the address was read by Charles D. Dreux on April 12, 1856, when the corner stone was laid.[24]

Madame Le Vert sent copies of her address to several of her friends. Three of their replies have been preserved. Henry A. Wise wrote her on May 1, 1856:

> ... It were well worth dieing /sic/ to be brought to life again by such praise as you have distilled for the name of Clay. Whether he was in reality what your beau ideal is in description, it matters not so that woman's love of what is true manhood is and ought to be is not disturbed. Peace be to his ashes, and a blessing upon your heart.[25]

Edward Everett, who was at that time delivering his celebrated address on the Character of Washington, wrote that he had already read the "animated and graceful" address in the newspapers. He assured her, "It has the merit, rare in performances of that kind, of not carrying eulogy beyond the bounds of truth."[26]

Washington Irving took advantage of the situation to write a long and friendly personal letter,

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24. The New Orleans Times-Democrat, April 10, 1910.

25. Henry A. Wise to Madame Le Vert, Richmond, May 1, 1856. In the Dyer Collection.

26. Edward Everett to Madame Le Vert, Boston, May 8, 1856. In the Dyer Collection.

closing with the words:

> Your eulogium of Henry Clay touches a sympathetic shord in my being. When I was a young man I entertained a romantic admiration for him and formed a friendship with him which continued through life; though we met very rarely and at long intervals.[27]

Madame Le Vert's own words, entered in her journal after witnessing the unveiling of the finished statue of Clay in New Orleans, are the most fitting close to any account of their friendship:

> I have no words to pourtray the sublime emotions which swept over my soul as the flags fell away and the statue of our honoured and beloved friend was revealed to my eyes. Tears fell in torcents, tears of joy, messengers from the heart of its full delight. Far above the roar of the cannon the pealing of the bells and the music of military bands swelled loudly the enthusiastic shouts and cheers of 50,000 voices. Involuntarily I looked up to the bright heavens. I felt the spirit of our noble friend must be hovering near, and that even in his celestial home joy must thrill his soul -- joy to witness this scene. Glorious are the memories of that pageant. Like a beautiful picture, it will hang forever on the walls of memory.[28]

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27. Washington Irving to Madame Le Vert, Sunnyside, July 6, 1856. In the Dyer Collection.

28. Octavia Le Vert, "Journal," May 3, 1850.

CHAPTER VI

The Years of Fame: 1853-1860

On the eleventh of June, 1853,[1] Madame Le Vert sailed from New York for Europe. Sped on her way by five florid stanzas in the Mobile Register beginning "Pride of the South! farewell,"[2] she set out to fulfill the dream of her lifetime -- to visit the scenes and the society of the Old World. On her first visit she spent some seven months in travelling through England, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Returning to Mobile early in 1854, she passed a year at home, then sailed again early in 1855 for Cuba and Spain. She spent the greater part of the year in travel through Spain and Italy, passing in Paris as Alabama's commissioner to the exposition of that year.[3]

Madame Le Vert has left such a detailed account of her travels and social triumphs in her Souvenirs of Travels that it does not seem necessary to dwell upon them here. N. P. Willis summed up the European tours very well when he said: "There probably was never a more

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1. Octavia Le Vert, Souvenirs of Travel, Vol. I, p. 1.

2. Undated clipping from the Mobile Daily Register in the Charles Marston scrap book.

3. Octavia Le Vert, Souvenirs of Travel, passim.

signal success in the way of access to foreign society, friendly attentions from the nobility, and notice from royalty, then fell to the share of Madame Le Vert."[4]

Letters sent home to friends in America were given to the newspapers, with the result that the European triumphs were a topic of general conversation long before Madame had an opportunity to relate them herself.[5] The high point of her first tour, however, was reported as news. This was her unexpected reception by Queen Victoria. Madame Le Vert explains the circumstances in these words:

> I had arrived too late to be presented at Her Majesty's drawing room, but the Queen graciously set aside etiquette in my favor as I was the friend of one of her former ladies in waiting -- Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley. The invitation was sent to me, therefore, without my having been presented -- by her Majesty's express command.[6]

Madame Le Vert has also left a colorful account of the presentation itself:

> A few days after my arrival in London, I received, through the Lord Chamberlain, the Marquis of Bredalbain, an invitation to attend this Ball at Buckingham Palace.
>
> Our excellent Minister, and his charming niece called for me, and in our respective carriages we drove

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4. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 23.

5. Octavia Le Vert, Souvenirs of Travel, Vol. I, p. vi.

6. Octavia Le Vert, "State Ball at Buckingham Palace," manuscript in the possession of the author.

through St. James Park to the Palace. ...

> The Lord Chamberlain was introduced to me, and after some pleasant conversation, he remarked to me, "As you are the only lady here who was not at the last Drawing Room, Her Majesty has commanded me to present you to her."
>
> Of course I was delighted at this unexpected and unusual compliment, as presentations at State Balls are not frequent. The Lord Chamberlain again waved his golden wand, and the company drew back from before the throne; then I approached, and was presented to her Majesty, who advanced, greeting me in the most gracious manner as I courtsied before her and then passed on to the groupe [sic] of Royal personages, who encircled the throne.[7]

The New Orleans Picayune commented:

> The compliment thus paid to Mrs. Le Vert, and through her to her country, is of the highest and most gratifying significance. The fair recipient will easily prove to the titled and haughty aristocracy of Britain that American Southern ladies can match in extent and variety of attainments and accomplishments, and elegance of mind and manner, the proudest born and learned of any land.[8]

One southern newspaper pointed out with apparent glee that Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was in England at the same time and had also arrived too late for the drawing room, was not received by the queen. It suggested that Victoria's action was deliberate and that it was intended to show British feeling in the matter of American slavery.[9]

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7. Ibid.

8. Sumter County Whig, Livingston, Alabama, August 9, 1853.

9. Ibid.

An unidentified clipping from an old scrap book contains one of the few quotations attributed to Madame Le Vert. It gives an account of the presentation, then continues:

> ... One of the ladies of the court remarked to her afterwards upon her great composure.
>
> "You bore yourself as though you meet queens every day, Madame Le Vert," said my lady, smiling.
>
> "Why, of course," replied Madame Le Vert, emphasizing her words with a bow and a responsive smile. "Of course, you know in America we are all queens!"[10]

Godey's Lady's Book described her appearance at the ball in these words:

> A white lace robe, richly embroidered in silver, trimmed with bouquets of pink and silver convolvuluses. The hair dressed a la Marie Stuart, and ornamented with flowers of pink and silver; diamond necklace, bracelets, and brooch. It fitted her graceful form to perfection, and, amid the regal splendor around, her costume was conspicuous for its elegance and good taste.[11]

Something of the importance to Madame Le Vert's appearance can be gained from the fact that the only other dresses described were those of Queen Victoria, H.R.H. the Duchess of Cambridge, H.R.H. Princess Marie of Cambridge, H.R.H. the Duchess of Saxe Coburg-Gotha and H.R.H. the Heriditary Grand Duchess of Mecklenburg.

On her second tour, Madame Le Vert won her

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10. In the Charles Marsten scrap book.

11. Godey's Lady's Book, October, 1853, p. 375.

greatest success in Paris, where she was often escorted by ex-president Millard Fillmore.[12] When she was presented to Napoleon III and the Empress Eugenie, she was accompanied by the Countess Montijo, mother of the empress.[13] Of Madame's summer in Paris a correspondent of the New York Mirror wrote:

> As an American, I feel a national pride in this brilliant woman, celebrated in both hemispheres, not only for her beauty, genius and elegance; but also, for her solid and varied learning, -- and accomplished as one of the best linguists I have ever met.
>
> At both these soirees [a ball given by the Countess Walleweski and a reception by Prince Napoleon Bonaparte] she has been the centre of an admiring circle, composed of distinguished men and women of Europe -- literary and political.
>
> I have been more than ever charmed with her elegant and self-possessed manner -- so entirely natural and refined; and many have shared with me in the delight imparted by her conversation, sparkling with wit and originality. ...
>
> French, Spanish, English, Italians, listen to her with delight, for she addresses them with unequalled grace. ... She has enjoyed opportunities of seeing all that is best and brightest in Europe, for she has everywhere been received with kindness and distinction.[14]

A correspondent of the Mobile Tribune wrote:

> ... Amid the gathered thousands of Europe and America, this gifted woman has a position as noble

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12. Octavia Le Vert, Souvenirs of Travel, Vol. II, p. 310.

13. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 410.

14. Undated clipping in the Reeler scrap book.

> as it is elevated; and I have been charmed with the exquisite grace and tact with which she converses alike with the people of all the polished nations of Europe, in their own language.
>
> At the brilliant soiree of the Countess Wallewski, and at the reception of the Prince Napoleon Bonaparte, she was received with cordial "impressment" and with marked distinction. ...
>
> Alabama can boast of having sent the only "lady commissioner" to the Paris Exposition, and your state has reason to be proud of the choice she has made of a representative.[15]

When Madame Le Vert returned from her second tour in the fall of 1855 she was approaching the peak of her fame. A lady reporter for a New York paper, after making several futile attempts to interview her in her New York hotel, exclaimed, "What a woman! what a prodigious woman! Yesterday landed from Europe, today gone to Connecticut to dine, tonight the concert and Sontag ball. Gracious! Napoleon's campaigns were mere child's play to one of hers."[16]

Although she was much in demand socially, Madame Le Vert seems to have given first attention to the preparation of a book on her travels. This had been urged upon her in France by Lamartine, who suggested the title -- Souvenirs of Travel.[17] She called upon William Gilmore

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15. Undated clipping in the Reeler scrap book.

16. Unidentified clipping in the Rossignol collection.

17. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 26.

Simms for advice, and received it in a form which is worth quoting, since it bears upon Southern publishing in general. He wrote:

> ... I learn with great surprise that you propose to publish in Mobile. This, according to my experience, will seriously prejudice your claims and impair the success of your performance. If you are not too deeply committed to any local publisher, I beg leave most earnestly to counsel you to get it issued either in New York, Boston or Philadelphia. There, they are professed publishers, with all the mechanics for giving you large circulation. I have submitted the matter to my own publisher, W. J. V. Redfield, who authorizes me to say that he will gladly become your publisher, take all the risk upon himself, and pay you 10 per cent on the receipts. He is a good man, energetic, attentive, courteous and honorable, and capable, I think, of doing as much for your work, as any publisher in the country. There! That's all! And now, my dear Mrs. Le Vert, hold me profoundly sorry that I have to deliver myself to you, in such a bald disjointed epistle. But though out of work myself, hold me still to be at your feet, with most grateful regard.[18]

About four months later, he wrote further:

> ... I am so glad to hear that your '<u>Souvenirs</u>' are so rapidly approaching completion. Permit me to say that your friends are quite right in counselling you to a <u>single</u> volume. Should you find your materials expand more than you calculate, then make two slender volumes, under one title, both issued from the press together, rather than two separate works. ... You are quite right in publishing at the North. There are two essentials for successful publishing, both of which we lack in the South -- viz: a large city, and a regular publisher. It is because of these wants, especially, that we have so little Southern literature. ... Let me hope, that, no matter what publisher may enjoy the pleasant duty of introducing you formally to our pretty public, your book will prove

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18. William Gilmore Simms to Madame Le Vert, New York, November 24, [1856]. In the Dyer Collection.

> as welcome to the masses as you yourself have always been among the 'select, the favored few.' I beg to say that I shall watch eagerly its advent, and doubt not to enjoy its contents as greatly as any of the multitudes. ...[19]

Fillmore, Madame's companion in some of her European travels, wrote in February of 1857 that he was "looking anxîously"[20] for her book. About six months later, Souvenirs of Travel appeared and was reviewed in the leading journals. The criticisms are interesting because they show how completely her personality overshadowed all other considerations of her. The reviewers, in most cases, reviewed the woman rather than her book.

Three reviews appeared in October, 1855. The Southern Literary Messenger took a tongue-in-cheek attitude in its review:

> The flourish of trumpets with which this work is introduced to the reader's favor by the publishers, in the opening pages of the First Volume, we conceive to be in wretched taste, since there is no earthly reason why the work of a very beautiful, accomplished and gentle lady of fashion, accustomed to move in the most distinguished circles and so forth, should be received with any more consideration than the Diary of a modest governess who might have had the good fortune to visit Europe, and the industry to tell us what she had seen there. Madame Le Vert has long been admired for the graces of her person and character, and is well known as the leader of society in one of the most charming cities of the South, but to predict a gracious reception of her "Souvenirs

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19. William Gilmore Simms, to Madame Le Vert, Woodland, March 15, [1857]. In the Dyer Collection.

20. Millard Fillmore to Madame Le Vert, Buffalo, February 15, 1851. In the Dyer collection.

of Travel" upon this fact and upon her associations with great people is mere flunkey-ism. One other matter is not to our liking, in limine. Why does our gifted author style herself "Madame Le Vert?" She is the grand-daughter of one of those illustrious men whose signatures are appended to the Declaration of Independence, and she is justly proud of this lineage; -- is there any good reason why a woman of Georgia should adopt a French appelative? "Mrs. Le Vert" would have appeared to us more becoming.

These "Souvenirs of Travel" in themselves are informed by a charming enthusiasm and a perennial gayety of heart which inspire the reader with a kindly feeling for the author. Her European journeyings seem to have been the flight of a happy and beautiful butterfly from flower to flower in an enchanted garden. Perpetual sunshine brightens Madame Le Vert's pathway. Her good-humor is never tinged by melancholy nor chilled by disappointment. It is positively delightful to travel with so joyous a companion, one so universally receptive, so determined to see nothing disagreeable by the way. It is also a privilege to be made acquainted with so many elegant men and superb women as figure in her descriptions. Madame Le Vert is presented to the Queen; she meets Dukes, Marquises, Earls, Viscounts, and Barons; she sees Freiligrath, Tennyson, Douglas Jerrold, the Howitts, the Brownings, and other eminent literary people; she has an interview with the Pope -- and all have a kind word for her -- how could they help saying pleasant things to, and bestowing fragrant benedictions upon, a lady uniting so many lovely traits of character as Madame Le Vert? Even inanimate objects were glad to oblige her. We are rejoiced to know that Vesuvius went into eruption, and that the blood of St. Januarius liquefied, at her coming. ...[21]

Orestes Brownson, writing in his Quarterly Review, took much the same attitude, but with a more friendly humor:

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21. The Southern Literary Messenger, October, 1857, p. 317.

... Madame Le Vert ... is perhaps more widely known in society than any other American lady. ...

She is a lady of varied accomplishments, and highly esteemed and loved wherever known. She seems to have set out on her travels with the determination to enjoy herself, to look upon the bright side of everything, and to be pleased with every land and everybody. ... Her enjoyment exceeded all our powers of imagination, and we are puzzled to understand how one small body could survive the amount of pleasurable emotions she describes in her volumes. So much love, so much friendship, so much tenderness, so much pleasure, so much ecstacy of all sorts and kinds, was never, we are sure, crowded before into two volumes, or endured by one frail, delicate, female body. We are amazed that she could live through it, or that the monotony of pleasure did not become painful. ... It is pleasant, we grant, to meet a pure, warm, gushing heart, that speaks out from its fullness and lovingness every thought and emotion as it arises. ... Much of the pure rich feeling displayed in these volumes should have been kept sacred for the author's husband, children, and most intimate friends, for the world is so ill-natured as to believe that one who expresses so much to strangers reserves little to be expressed in the narrower but dearer circle of home. ... The volumes are, no doubt, what they profess to be, Souvenirs of Travel, and consist of hasty and often felicitous sketches of what the accomplished, intellectual, and imaginative author saw and felt. They are the souvenirs of a graceful, highly cultivated, sprightly, loving woman, determined to see all she could of men and things, and to impart and receive all the pleasure possible. She makes us her friends, wins our heart, fascinates us, and in spite of sympathies we do not share, of opinions we dislike, and errors of all kinds, historical, chronological, ethnological, topographical, and typographical, she carries us with her through her journeys, her interminable sight-seeings, everlasting visits to picture galleries, till we close her volumes with the sad feeling that there is one pleasure the less for us in the world. ... We are obliged to enjoy volumes so fresh, so genuine, so artless, so running over with kindness and affection, although they tell us little we did not know, or give us of country, person, or event, scarcely a more lively impression than we had before.

... We see no disparity of rank between Madame Le

Vert and the duchess of Southerland, or why there should be any more condescension on the part of the English lady in extending hospitality to the American, than on the part of the American lady in extending hospitality to the English lady; or why a mutual exchange of civilities and kind attentions between them should be regarded as a matter to be recorded and printed and published to the world. Is it anything remarkable, that an American lady, moving in the first circles of her own country, should move and find herself at home in the first circles of other countries, which she chooses to visit?...

... The volumes are a little gossipy, and we have given but a gossipy notice of them, yet the reader will find in them little to offend, and much to please him. They are the genuine outpourings of a fresh, unsophisticated heart of a true Southern lady, with one cannot help being charmed, if he would. They are light, sketchy, imaginative, yet contain a very large fund of information of one sort and another, and indicate a highly cultivated mind, that is not a stranger to serious thought, perhaps to sad feelings, and to solid studies. At any rate, they are two charming volumes, and we assure the author that since Hilliard's Six Months in Italy, we have read no work of travels which has pleased us so much, or which we can so warmly recommend to lovers of light reading or polite literature. The few criticisms we have allowed ourselves, distract little from their merits, which are real.[22]

Harper's New Monthly Magazine was not so kind:

... The tone of her book will strike indifferent readers as too encomiastic, too jubilant. ... They speak better for the kindness of her disposition than for the severity of her descretion. ... Her reflections and comments always betray an amiable frame of mind, but are not remarkable either for acuteness or originality.[23]

Two more reviews appeared in November. Peterson's

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22. Brownson's Quarterly Review, October, 1857, p. 528.

23. Harper's New Monthly Magazine, October, 1857, p. 691.

Magazine published a brief, sedate notice:

> ... The author of these two volumes is a lady of acknowledged social position and great personal popularity. She visited Europe at two different times, and having written numerous letters home, has, at the solicitation of her friends, digested them into a book. Mrs. Le Vert saw the most exclusive circles of European society, under the most flattering auspices; and it is no wonder, therefore, that she describes everything coleur de rose. We have been particularly interested in her accounts of Queen Victoria's State Ball and the visit of the English court to Paris.[24]

The North American Review was surprisingly enthusiastic in its notice:

> A new record of European travel would seem the last thing that the public taste could demand or tolerate. Yet we believe that Madame Le Vert will find appreciative readers, even among those who have thought themselves completely satiated with books of this description. We do not regard Madame Le Vert's descriptive talent as superior to that of cultivated and observing travellers in general. Indeed, her style is that of the viva voce narrative of a person of fine culture, mature understanding, elegant taste, and very moderate enthusiasm. She thus satisfies us the most fully in her descriptions of society and of artificial life; the least, in her sketches of Alpine and Italian scenery. But the charm of her work lies in her freedom of access, on terms of equality, to those higher circles of European and especially English society, of which we generally get only the far-off views of those who, "sovereigns" at home, are forced to be plebians abroad, or the hardly nearer views of those who, by dent of impudence, through extorted introductions, push their way where they are not so much received as tolerated. We by no means admire the inaccessibleness of English aristocratic society; nor do we deem that society one whit the better, because it sees fit to plant around itself a hedge of thorn-bushes. But still it exists, and is of old -- a

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24. Peterson's Magazine, November, 1857, p. 362.

> tradition, an institution, a sacred force; and we rejoice in the opportunity of inspecting it. Madame Le Vert was everywhere "received," and, while she has not, as we think, violated hospitality by too great license, she certainly exercises the broadest freedom consistent with good breeding in portraying persons, describing objects, relating incidents, and copying conversations. Her two European tours extended through all the portions of Europe usually visited by American travellers, and the narrative of the second commences with a residence of several weeks at Havana. From Havana she embarked for Cadiz, and in Spain she occupies a ground on which she has fewer predecessors and rivals than elsewhere, so that her chapters on the Spanish cities contain a very considerable amount of entirely fresh material.[25]

By December, reviewers seem to have sensed that the book was to be a success. Both of the reviews published that month were kind. Godey's Lady's Book said:

> These volumes are certainly more graphic and spirited in their descriptions than works of their character generally are. The author seems to have been sensibly touched by whatever she has thought in the least worthy of her notice. In this way, she reproduces what we have read of before in new and animated colors, and often fascinates the minds of her readers by her vivid portraitures of that which may be new to them. Madame Le Vert seems to possess that happy faculty which disposes her to be pleased where no offense is intended; and for this reason there is very little fault-finding or stale and peevish criticism in the details of her travels, into whatever country or court we accompany her. To this, we may add that the authoress is an American lady of the highest social position, educated and accomplished, and held at her command all the necessary facilities for free and honorable access to the highest circles of the several countries she visited in her travels. The result has been that we are not called upon to follow the guide-book impressions so often rehashed by grumbling travellers, but are

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25. The North American Review, October, 1857, p. 573.

gratified with those warm from the heart and understanding of a gifted woman who saw, judged, and has dispassionately written her own independent opinions.[26]

The Knickerbocker was enthusiastic:

> The new house whence these volumes proceed could scarcely have initiated their business with a more attractive work. There are few of our readers, we venture to affirm, but have heard of Madame Le Vert: a lady whose graces of person and manner, whose rare accomplishments, and above all, whose gentleness and goodness of heart, have made her a favorite wherever she has been. At Saratoga, at Newport, at Washington, and in our great metropolises, her name has been almost a synonym for the enviable qualities we have indicated. Common as have become books of travel in Europe, we have read Madame Le Vert's book with pleasure. No other American traveller has had such advantages. Kings and queens, emperors and empresses, earls and dukes, duchesses and baronesses, were her unsought hosts and hostesses; and somewhat of all she saw and heard she has jotted down in pleasant phrase, never doing injustice to the privilege of 'privileged guest'. Her 'powers of description' are of a high order. There is a freshness and joyousness in the style. There is humming-bird-like devotion to every attraction, and yet no wasting of words in tedious details. The reader might well imagine he heard the authoress narrating to a circle of friends what she saw, and what was most worth seeing. ...[27]

These reviews have been quoted at length because they demonstrate very forcibly Madame Le Vert's effect upon her contemporaries. The superficial and contradictory nature of most of them is apparent. There is little in them that is soundly critical. Admiration for or disapproval of the woman is the primary consider-

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26. Godey's Lady's Book, December, 1857.

27. The Knickerbocker, December, 1857, p. 615.

ation, rather than her book upon its own merit.

Those who saw in Madame's "Souvenirs" a potential "best-seller" were almost correct. The book did not reach "best-seller" status, but it did pass through four editions and remained in print fourteen years.[28] In 1858, it was reported being translated into French for publication in Paris.[29]

Probably more gratifying to Madame Le Vert than favorable reviews were the comments of her distinguished friends. Her father wrote her often from Washington and the Virginia springs enclosing clippings and quoting compliments he had overheard.[30] Several letters have been preserved which give directly the opinions, or at least the expressions, of several of her friends. Millard Fillmore wrote: "... I congratulate you most cordially upon your success. ... My Dear Friend, I rejoice most heartily at your success. ... But, oh, how I wish you could be here to read your book to me! That would be pleasure indeed."[31]

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28. S. H. Goetzel and Company, 1857; Derby and Jackson, 1859; Carleton, 1866 and 1871. Copies in the collection of the writer.

29. The Independent, Gainesville, Alabama, April 10, 1858.

30. Seven letters in the Rossignol Collection.

31. Millard Fillmore to Madame Le Vert, Buffalo, September 21, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

Washington Irving wrote:

> ... I have received the copy of your work ... which has made me once more your fellow traveller; but through much more civilized and brilliant scenes than we once witnessed together in Alabama. A veteran cosmopolitan as I am, I have well been able to keep company with you in your European travels; but as I read your bright and sparkling narrative and see what a continual fairyland your bouyant spirits and happy temper spread around you, I feel how greatly you have the advantage of me in catching the most favorable view of every picture. It is this which gives an exhuberating effect to your work and makes it worthy of being recommended as an antidote to spleen and low spirits.
>
> With best wishes for its success and for the continued happiness of the genial and joyous heart which animates its pages ... [32]

Longfellow was gay and playful in his letter of congratulation:

> ... I am quite sure that living so long near Florida, you have secretly discovered the Fountain of Perpetual Youth -- la Fontaine de Jouvence. ... Many thanks to you for this draught from it, which will quicken and refresh, among your multitudes of friends, none more than,
>
> Su seguro Servidor
> q.s.m.b.
> Henry W. Longfellow [33]

Edwin Booth wrote:

> "You make me long to see the world of which such wonders you relate."
>
> Nothing could give you as clear an idea of my

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32. Washington Irving to Madame Le Vert, Sunnyside, September 22, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

33. Henry W. Longfellow to Madame Le Vert, Nahant, September 28, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

> feelings while reading your book as the lines above quoted. After reading it twice I sent it to my sister, who, I am sure, will be enchanted with the beautiful scenes you have shown to me. ... I shall endeavor to pay a flying visit to Mobile, in order to thank you personally for the delight you have caused me.[34]

President James Buchanan wrote from Washington:

> Many thanks for your "Souvenirs of Travel"! I should have acknowledged it sooner; but I desired first to read it. This I have found impossible. It is a pleasure in reserve. Meanwhile I accept it with much pleasure as a token of your regard, feeling quite confident that any work of yours cannot fail to be sprightly agreeable and instructive.[35]

George Mifflin Dallas, who had been vice-president under James K. Polk, was minister to Great Britain when the "Souvenirs" were published. He presented a set to Queen Victoria for Madame, and wrote:

> Your beautiful volumes have gone to the Queen through the kind agency of the Earle of Malmesbury. Their receipt will, no doubt, be acknowledged; and I shall then have a second opportunity of manifesting my sincere respect for their authoress.[36]

"I perceive they honor you wherever you go,"[37]

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34. Edwin Booth to Madame Le Vert, Sain Louis, October 22, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

35. James Buchanan to Madame Le Vert, Washington, December 8, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

36. G. M. Dallas to Madame Le Vert, London, July 6, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

37. Millard Fillmore to Madame Le Vert, Buffalo, February 15, 1857. In the Dyer Collection.

Millard Fillmore wrote to Madame Le Vert when "Souvenirs" was in preparation. After its publication, the statement was even more apt. The book spread her fame even beyond its previous bounds, and she became easily the best known American woman of her day.[38]

Songs and poems were dedicated to her.[39] Wherever she went it was necessary for her to hold levees at her hotel in order to receive all who called.[40] In St. Louis she could ask for "my box" at the opera and have the repetory rearranged to suit her convenience.[41] Her home in Mobile was spoken of on the floor of Congress as "the winter resort of America's famous men."[42]

Although she was away from Mobile much of the time, the legends which remain in the city pertain to this period of her life. They are numerous and colorful, and they indicate that she was the subject of common gossip as well as open admiration.

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38. Lucian Lamar Knight, Stone Mountain or the Lay of the Gray Minstrel, p. 173.

39. Mr. Wallace Parham of Spring Hill, Alabama, has in his collection a number of songs and poems dedicated to Madame Le Vert.

40. "Letter to Dr. Nichols," unidentified clipping in the Reeler scrap book.

41. Four undated notes from Madame Le Vert to Sol Smith. In the collection of the Missouri Historical Society.

42. Mrs. Thaddeus Horton, "Madame Le Vert and Her Friends," Uncle Remus Magazine, August, 1907.

After her return from her first European tour she found it necessary to set aside a day for receiving any who wished to be presented. On Mondays her house was open from eleven in the morning until eleven at night.[43] Thomas Low Nichols found that in her drawing room "you are as likely to be introduced to an actress, a singer, an artist, or a man of letters, as a mere person of fashion, titled or otherwise."[44] It was said that, "To go away from Mobile without seeing Madame Le Vert would be absurd; and it would be impossible if you went into society at all."[45]

Madame Le Vert's "Mondays" became the first American salon.[46] They were wholly unceremonious," T. C. DeLeon wrote, "the exclusive herding together and the others intermingling as best they could."[47] No visitor of distinction failed to pay his respects, or to receive a cordial welcome.[48]

Fillmore gives an impression of the consideration

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43. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 409.

44. Thomas Low Nichols, Forty Years of American Life, p. 149.

45. "Letters to Dr. Nichols," loc. cit.

46. Erwin Craighead, Mobile: Fact and Tradition, p.328.

47. T. C. DeLeon, op. cit., p. 184.

48. Mobile Daily Item, April 26, 1903.

she enjoyed at this time:

> I wrote you a few lines the other day under the apprehension that you had left Mobile and gone to Paris. A few days after I was strongly tempted to join some friends who were going to Havanna via N. Orleans, but finally gave up and resigned myself to my fate to remain at home. I confess, however, that the temptation to go South would have been much greater, if not irresistable, had I then known that you were yet in this country, and that I might possibly see you at Havanna or in going and returning.[49]

Madame Le Vert served as the first vice-regent for Alabama of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Memorial Association, and much of her attention was given to raising funds for the restoration of Washington's home as a national shrine.[50] She set aside a portion of the income from Souvenirs of Travel for that purpose, and collected donations at her home.[51] In the winter of 1857-1858 she received in small donations more than five thousand dollars.[52] Edwin Booth turned down her request for a donation, but volunteered his services for two nights for benefit performances, the proceeds to go to the fund.[53]

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49. Millard Fillmore to Madame Le Vert, Buffalo, February 15, 1857. Loc. cit.

50. George Walton to Madame Le Vert, Petersburg, April 5, 1858. In the Rossignol collection.

51. The Southern Literary Messenger, October, 1857, p. 314.

52. The Independent, Gainesville, Alabama, March 27, 1858.

53. Edwin Booth to Madame Le Vert, Augusta, February 15, 1858. In the Dyer collection.

Letters which have survived indicate that Madame Le Vert spent much of her time in the East in the years immediately following publication of the "Souvenirs." One of these letters is from Washington Irving, stating that he would be at home to receive her visit.[54] Irving was nearing the end of his career, but his friendship for the girl of the stagecoach remained. He called on her several times at the St. Nicholas Hotel when she was in New York, and twice had her as his guest at Sunnyside.[55]

There remain also two friendly letters from N. P. Willis inviting her to Idlewild.[56]

A letter from Fillmore indicates that even the wife of an ex-president might be thrown into confusion by a visit from the famous Madame Le Vert. He wrote:

> Mrs. Fillmore and myself will be very happy to see You at any time, but as you say your time is limited we will let you fix the day yourself, only give me notice by what train you come that I may meet you at the depot.
>
> Mrs. Fillmore fears she can not give you such a reception as you would have a right to expect or she would be gratified to give, but I have assured her

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54. Washington Irving to Madame Le Vert, Sunnyside, October 12, [1857]. In the Dyer Collection.

55. Mary Forrest, op. cit., p. 21.

56. N. P. Willis to Madame Le Vert, Idlewild, November 24, 1857, October 8, 1858. In the Dyer Collection.

> that you are one of the most amiable persons in the world and will be satisfied with any thing, if you have -- what I know you will receive -- a cordial welcome.[57]

Longfellow wrote, with "great grief and much lamentation," his regrets at missing her in New York.[58]

In the fall of 1860, Madame was in New York and was invited to the ball given by Lord Renfrew to the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII of England. Invitations were so much in demand that they had to be restricted to ladies resident within New York. The only two exceptions were Miss Harriet Lane, President Buchanan's niece and mistress of the White House -- technically "first lady" of the land -- and Madame Le Vert.[59]

Within a few weeks, Madame was called home by the illness of her mother. Although she probably did not suspect it at the time, her years of fame were near their end.

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57. Millard Fillmore to Madame Le Vert, Buffalo, August 22, 1858. In the Dyer collection.

58. Henry W. Longfellow to Madame Le Vert, Nahant, August 25, 1860. In the Dyer Collection.

59. The New York World, October 10, 1860.

CHAPTER VII

The Twilight Years: 1860-1877

When Madame Le Vert returned to Mobile in the fall of 1860, war was already in the air. She was bitterly opposed to secession, but chose to cast her lot with Alabama in the coming struggle.[1] Her father wrote to her of this a short while before his death:

> ... I know how agonizingly, how intensely you suffer. The view you take was due to yourself, to your angel children and to society. I bless and worship you for it. It will prolong my days, and when I know that you are content and cheerful, I can pass off this stage without a murmur of regret.[2]

Madame Le Vert's mental suffering over the question of secession was but a prelude to another period of personal sorrow. Mrs. Walton died on the fourteenth of January, 1861;[3] Dr. Le Vert fell ill the next year[4] and, after a prolonged illness, died in 1864.[5] The war years, then, were probably a doubly sorrowful time for her.

In spite of her bereavements and her lack of

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1. New Orleans Picayune, April 16, 1877.

2. George Walton to Madame Le Vert, Petersburg, February 22, 1861. In the Rossignol collection.

3. Tombstone in Magnolia Cemetary, Mobile.

4. The Mobile Register, September 7, 1862.

5. Ellet, op. cit., p. 414.

enthusiasm for the war, Madame Le Vert remained in Mobile and worked for the Confederate cause.[6] She kept her salon open and entertained the famous of the new nation. Admiral Buchanan, an old friend of the Pensacola days, was often her guest,[7] and General Nathan Bedford Forrest was sometimes seen there.[8] George Ryder Randall and Henry Timrod recited their own works for her guests.[9] When John Newland Maffitt brought the Florida into Mobile Bay, she was one of the notables who went down in small boats to pay their respects.[10]

No diaries or journals of Madame Le Vert covering the war years have been found, but a few letters survive. These are from General G. P. T. Beauregard, and they are of interest not only in showing his friendship, but in giving information concerning his actions and views. The first was written just a week after his dismissal from command of the Army of the West. He was at Bladon Springs, where Dr. Levert was also staying for his health, and he wrote:

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6. Erwin W. Craighead, "A Hundred Years Ago," The Mobile Register, August 25, 1929.

7. T. C. DeLeon, op. cit., p. 184.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 185.

10. Emma Martin Maffitt, The Life and Services of John Newland Maffitt, p. 260.

I thank you for your kind letter of introduction to the handsome and captivating Mrs. S. whom I met on the Boat coming to this place. Unfortunately she stops at Connor's -- but I will do myself the pleasure of calling upon her soon to renew the acquaintance -- only, I shall have to be careful not to call too often, for the Drs. have recommended me perfect "mental quietude."

... I arrived here only last night, -- after having spent two days inspecting the fortifications on the Alabama and Tombigbee Rivers -- hence have not yet had the pleasure of seeing Dr. Levert, but will call on him today or tomorrow.[11]

The second letter in the series was written from Charleston, about three weeks later:

... I take the first opportunity to let you know that I am far from having forgotten my dear friend of Mobile. I can assure you that the whole staff is in the same condition -- indeed some of the members seem to think that they have no friends (amies) out of Mobile. For my part, I can say with truth, that I have never seen a place of its size with half as many handsome Ladies -- et vous savez que je suis bon connoisseur. --

I regret to hear that you are in a state of agitation at the demonstration of the Yankees in front of your bay -- they will not do much until their "ironclads" are ready -- i.e. winter -- then you will have to be on the look out -- but not to tremble; for by that time Mobile could be made next to impregnable -- especially by bringing down from Oven Bluff and Choctaw Bluff the heavy guns that are not now required there. Genl. Forney was speaking of doing so before I left Mobile, should you see him, tell him that I think it would be advisable to put some of them in the other small works on piles, commanding the channel. ...[12]

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11. General Beauregard to Madame Le Vert, Bladon, Alabama, June 30, 1862. In the Dyer collection.

12. General Beauregard to Madame Le Vert, Charleston, October 5, 1862. In the Dyer collection.

When Beauregard heard of the death of Dr. Levert, he wrote a letter which is interesting because of the glimpse it gives into the family life of the general:

> ... I heard of your great misfortune at the same that I heard of my own and I pitied you from the bottom of my heart. Altho' for nearly two years I had been expecting the fatal news of the death of Mrs. Bd. I still flattered myself with the hope that I would once more be able to press her to my heart, that heart which has been so devoted to her! but all in vain. She has gone from me for ever -- nought remains of her but the memory of her love, of her great and good qualities.
>
> To the last she expressed an undiminished faith in the success of our cause -- even when all were despondent around her, she still hoped for the best. Faith and charity were strongly developed in her organization -- her loss is indeed irreparable to me.[13]

At the close of the Civil War Madame Le Vert set to work immediately to do what she could to heal the wound of hatred. That her efforts were smiled upon is indicated by a newspaper account of a social function just two months after the fall of the city, which was attended by the officers of occupation and the elite of the city:

> Madame LeVert, the woman not only of the South but of America, was present and realized in fact more than the inventions of the novelists in the manner in which she held spell-bound the large circle around her, now with a happy anecdote felicitously told, now with some reminiscence, which her extensive travels or reading afforded -- but commanding and winning more even than by her splendor of talent, bu the gushes of tenderness which abound in her conversation

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13. General Beauregard to Madame Le Vert, Charleston, March 28, 1864. In the Dyer Collection.

> and show you her thorough goodness. Her charming and accomplished daughters accompanied her and contributed much to the social entertainment.[14]

Shortly, however, there was a strong reversal of feeling. The house on Government Street, to which invitations had been so eagerly sought, was stoned.[15] Madame was snubbed on the streets, and the cry of "Yankee spy!" was hurled at her passing carriage.[16] The entire city suddenly turned against the woman who had been its pride.[17]

Dr. Erwin Craighead investigated at length the question of whether Madame Le Vert did or did not publish anything in her defense, but could arrive at no conclusions.[18] The writer suggests that the following statement by Madame Le Vert may be the missing defense. At least, it states very plainly her side of the case:

> I have suffered much wrong from not being rightly understood. I loved, as does every American woman, the country of my birth. My noble father placed his name upon that scroll we were all taught

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14. The Mobile Daily News, June 14, 1865.

15. George Ermault, "Woman Writer Reigned Over Mobile's Society," the Mobile Press-Register, May 25, 1947.

16. Ibid.

17. The writer has been surprised in his investigations to discover how strong the feeling of hatred still is in Mobile among some of the older families.

18. Erwin W. Craighead, op. cit., pp. 146-147.

> to revere. When, however, the State of Alabama joined the "secession movement," I went with it in feeling, believing the State to be supporting principles which the constitution of the United States upheld. I still think the same, but ... when I saw my last dollar spent to give my children bread -- for although I had property, I could not dispose of it, or could I feed my family -- I received an order from an old Northern friend, whom in my flourishing days I had entertained oft times in the very parlors he then wished to rent from me. I accepted. Why should I not? He was no enemy of the South, but had many friends in the army and navy, among whom were many of the cherished friends of bygone days. Of course they had frequently visited my friends, to whom I had rented my parlors, and I again met them. They were truly gentlemen and only a few differed from my own views; they heartily desired to see the matter settled; and I was convinced the time would come when we would again be united. Every courtesy that true gentlemen can offer a lady -- their respect and esteem -- was proffered to me. Their carriages were at my disposition, and one day I rode out and passing, stopped to glance at a "review of the troops" then taking place. American ladies are always exhilerated by the shutter of arms (and I confess my weakness there <u>en passant</u>); for with the grace and precision of the manoeuvres I was charmed and in my ecstacy I waved my handkerchief in approbation, not of the cause they had espoused at that time, for had it been a Confederate review I would have done the same, but from a love for military order. Without a word in my own defense, I was "tabooed" by persons who had never sought me and my home for pleasure .... [19]

One of the charges brought against Madame Le Vert was that she went through General Beauregard's papers when he was a guest in her house. In a continuation of their correspondence, the general touched upon this, and accepted her offer of aid. He wrote:

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19. The Augusta <u>Herald</u>, January 26, _____. Clipping in the Josephine Walton collection.

> You qualify properly those idle Reports relative to yourself at the time of my visit to Mobile. "ils m'entruit par une oreille et soitent par l'autro" the best proof of which is, that I accept "sans ceremonie" your kind offer of services, by sending you the enclosed papers, which will explain themselves. I have endeavored in writing them to be as cool and collected as my temper and the nature of the outrage permitted. I would consider it a great favor if you could have without too much trouble my baggage and papers returned to me. Also, if you can procure me a pass to leave our beloved Country. I feel that I can no longer remain in it, not-withstanding my great desire to do so. Indeed, I was only waiting to hear positively that my Seniors, Generals Lee and Johnston had applied for their pardons, to do likewise, but the treatment I have received at the hands of the Federal authorities has made me change my intention and I now prefer expatriating myself, at least for a few years.[20]

Madame Le Vert interceded for General Beauregard,[21] but apparently with little success, for about six months later he wrote:

> ... I am awaiting patiently the action of the President on my Status. I am fully aware of the difficulty of his position, and am not disposed to press the matter upon him. What is the prospect of my having my private baggage and papers returned to me? I feel as anscious /sic/ about them as I do about my "absolution."[22]

In the summer of 1865 Madame Le Vert left Mobile and went north, accompanied by her two daughters.[23]

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20. General Beauregard to Madame Le Vert, New Orleans, August 15, 1865. In the possession of the writer.

21.. Virginia Clay-Clopton, op. cit., p. 368.

22. General Beauregard to Madame Le Vert, New Orleans, March 23, 1866. In the Dyer collection.

23. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 415.

To a kinswoman of Dr. Le Vert she wrote from New York:

> Will you not be surprised when I tell you that we are going to remain her (at 5th avenue Hotel) all the winter?
>
> We find we can live cheaper here than in Mobile, where the prices of every article of food is fabulously high. Here we are delightfully comfortable, have a charming circle of acquaintances, are free from the annoyances of life incidental upon the transition state of the South. We are floating on the "crest of the wave" enjoying the Present, trying to forget the painful Past and never thinking of the uncertain Future. I have suffered so fearfully during four years past that I am banqueting, if I may use the word in the actual absence of care and trouble and trial. It is really a time of Peace to me, and I enjoy it intensely, and thank the good God every day for the blessing of Peace.[24]

In Washington and New York Madame Le Vert was found to be "no less brilliant than in the days of her happy youth."[25] Although "greatly in need of money,"[26] she was not without invitations, and much of her time was spent visiting at the country houses of the friends of her more prosperous years.[27]

The last great social event of her career

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24. Madame Le Vert to Mrs. Julia Le Vert, New York, September 25, 1865. In the Harralson collection.

25. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 415.

26. Madame Le Vert to Claudeus Mastin, New York, November 4, 1868. In the Historic Mobile Preservation Society collection.

27. Madame Le Vert to Claudeus Mastin, Rochester, September 18, 1868. In the Historic Mobile Preservation Society Collection.

occurred in December of 1866 when Mrs. Joseph Acklen of Nashville honored her with what has been called "the fore-runner of a new regime of entertainments, combining intellectual and artistic enjoyment with perfect taste."[28] An invitation to this grand ball, which Madame Le Vert called "the most magnificent ever given in this country,"[29] was sent to General Beauregard, who replied:

> On my return from Canton (Miss. not China) today, I found at my office your kind letter of the 10th inst. Inclosing me an invitation to Mrs. Acklen's. I thank you for having thought of your humble servant and friend -- who is at present so busy with railroads that if you were to see him at work, you would imagine that he had done nothing else all his life. Indeed I regret sometimes that I ever did anything else -- for I have to begin life anew -- et je n'ai plus verigt aus Madame!
>
> ... The charming description you give me of Mrs. A's villa makes me desire that Paradise were mine. I would not then seek elsewhere for happiness and peace -- but ... I will have to toil on to the end of my days -- and then not reach, perhaps, the haven that I am in search of.[30]

In 1868 Cara Netta married L. A. Reab of Augusta, a cousin who lived with Sarah Walton's sister at Belle Vue.[31] From that time Madame Le Vert considered Augusta

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28. Mrs. Ellet, op. cit., p. 420.

29. Madame Le Vert to Eugene Le Vert, Belmont, December 12, 1866. In the Harralson collection.

30. General Beauregard to Madame Le Vert, New Orleans, December 18, 1866. In the Dyer collection.

31. Madame Le Vert to Claudeus Mastin, New York, November 4, 1868. In the Historic Mobile Preservation Society collection.

and Belle Vue again her home. To a friend she wrote:

> We are delightfully situated in my dear aunt's beautiful cottage. It is a perfect gem of comfort and neatness. It was the home of my grand-mother and my aunt sacredly never allowed any article of furniture to be removed from the position in which it was placed by the orders of my grand-mother. Hence you can imagine how interesting to me this abode must be. We are a joyous family, and our little re-unions are most charming.[32]

She continued to spend much time in the East, and about 1870 she began to contribute articles and reminiscences to various national magazines.[33] In 1874 she made her appearance as a public reader.[34] This debut in a new field was described by a New York paper:

> The friends of MADAME LE VERT, in New York, having invited her to give Parlor Readings under the direction of a committee of fashionable ladies, who desire thus to show their regard for this talented and estimable lady, she will give her first Reading ...[35]

Another paper gives a more lengthy description of one of her early performances:

> The most popular fashionable movement of the season is MADAME LE VERT'S Parlor Readings. Several ladies desirous to testify their regard for this highly gifted and excellent lady, arranged two Readings which were attended by crowds of the elite of New York. ... MADAME LE VERT wore a magnificent silk -- blue and grey, with a rich old point lace; and

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32. Madame Le Vert to Mary Booth, Belle Vue Cottage near Augusta, Georgia, January 20, 1870. In the Dyer Collection.

33. Augusta Chronicle, March 13, 1877. She is said to have prepared the manuscripts of two books about this time also, but the writer has found no trace of these manuscripts, or any evidence that they ever existed.

34. The American Cyclopaedia, Vol. X, p. 380.

35. The New York Herald. Quoted on a handbill which

> looked queen-like. She read most gracefully, and with admirable voice and manner, her own descriptions of thrilling scenes she had witnessed abroad. ... She was warmly congratulated by "troops of friends," and all seemed to feel that she had conferred a great deal of pleasure on them. ... As a reader MADAME LE VERT far excels Miss Faithful, Mrs. Stowe, or Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, in her fine voice, which has strength and a penetrative quality, filling the largest room. The modulation is natural and pleasing, * an appropriate to the subject. Her literary culture and taste are a guarantee for the excellence of the matter she reads. Years of foreign travel, familiarity with the courts and the nobility of the different countries, and acquaintance with persons of world-wide celebrity, have furnished her with a rich store of materials from which to select. These readings are a novelty in the drawing-rooms of our fashionables, and are varied with splendid vocal and instrumental music.[36]

In about a year Madame Le Vert's lectures ceased to be profitable in the East, and early in 1875 reports of her financial distress began to appear in the newspapers. One anecdote, first published in the Cincinnati Commercial,[37] was widely reprinted in the South:

> ... The Madame Le Vert who entertained the titled and distinguished in her Southern home -- and who, till the first year of the war, gave grand levees to the wealth and fashion of New York, wherein she would carry on sparkling conversation in half a dozen languages at the same time, and the Madame Le Vert of today, "penniless," no longer young, trudging over the long spaces of the capital on the little

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Madame Le Vert distributed as an advertisement for her performances. Copy in the collection of the writer.

36. The Daily Monitor. Ibid.

37. The Talledega Mountain Home, February 24, 1875.

> feet that, till of late, never had need to touch the ground, an umbrella for a staff, and her pockets full of tickets that are to earn her bread, are one, the same -- Nothing could be more changed than the condition of her lot, while she is utterly unchanged, unbroken, undimmed, loving, enthusiastic, and ever delightful. "I saw you lift up that little finger to stop a car," said her friend, Mrs. Paren Stevens, to her not long since. "As you got into the car you smiled as if you were perfectly happy, and I asked myself, what in this world now can she find to smile about -- this woman who has lost fortune, friends, everything that makes life delightful. Tell me. I want to know. Were you as happy as you looked? It seems impossible."
>
> "I was," said the little lady, "just as happy as I looked. It was so delightful to have just five cents left to take me home in a car."[38]

It is said that an attempt was made by her friends to draw up a list of anonymous patrons who would contribute one hundred dollars each annually to a fund for her support, but that the plan failed.[39]

In 1875 Madame Le Vert set out on a trans-continental tour in which she appeared in most of the large cities of the nation on her way west, and spent several months in California.[40] A description of her at that time appeared in a California newspaper:

> ... She is short of stature, rather heavy set, a well-preserved woman, and though fast approaching

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38. The Shelby Guide, Columbiana, Shelby County, Alabama, March 4, 1875.

39. The Mobile Daily Register, March 25, 1877.

40. The Mobile Daily Tribune, April 5, 1876.

seventy, does not use glasses, and has few gray hairs in her still abundant braids. She is at ease on the platform, and appears there to good advantage. She has a smiling and expressive countenance, and a restless but kindly eye. Her rather full features afford opportunity for facial expression in keeping with the words she utters. In her reading there is considerable formalism, accompanied by much gesticulation, though none ungraceful. Her delivery is fervid, her tones those to be expected of one of her years, marked by peculiar, precise and positive emphasis on each word.[41]

The Utah News carried an account of what appeared to be one of her typical performances:

> No higher ecomium could be conveyed to the distinguished American traveler and author than that accorded her by the presence on that occasion of so large a representation of the cultured portion of our citizens. ... Madame Le Vert ... read "An Hour with His Holiness the Pope of Rome," her first production for the lecture stand, which was received with hearty applause. Then followed her "Personal Souvenirs of Distinguished Americans," in which she gave personal recollections of Jackson, Clay, Webster, Calhoun, Preston, of South Carolina, and McDuffie; which were listened to with almost breathless interest. Her "Episode of My Early Life" was a glowing resume of her first acquaintance with one of the most distinguished literary men of America. This effort disclosed the lady's wonderful powers of description, and involved dramatic effects rare and enchanting. The evening's readings closed with "A Bull Fight in Spain" during which vividly drawn views of these horrible amusements ... transported the absorbed auditory to her side as she sat at the great arena of this bloody sport in Seville.
>
> The readings by Madame Le Vert will never be forgotten by those who listened to her last evening. Her polished, womanly dignity; the purity, elegance and sublimity of her language; the electrifying charm

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41. The Sacramento Daily Record, February 25, 1876. Quoted in the Mobile Daily Tribune, March 9, 1876.

> of her personal presence, added to attractiveness of voice, a finished diction, with perfect composure, combining grace in attitude and animation in gesture, place her at once among the foremost of lady readers in America.[42]

The lecture tour does not seem to have relieved her financial distress in any appreciable way, for she turned again to an early attempt to secure from the government compensation for the use by Federal forces of Dr. Le Vert's hospital in Mobile after the fall of the city.[43] Failing in this, she disposed of the Government Street house at far less than its actual value.[44]

This was her condition when, in December of 1876, she was called to Augusta by the serious illness of Cara Netta.[45] The death of her favorite child, all that she had left in the world, was more than she could bear. On the twelfth of March, 1877, the "most charming woman in the world" closed the circle of her life and passed away peacefully at Belle Vue, the place of her birth.[46]

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42. Quoted in the Mobile Daily Tribune, October 6, 1875.

43. Mobile Daily Tribune, June 9, 1876.

44. Deeds. No. 36 N.S. L876 Probate Court, Mobile County Court House.

45. The Atlanta Constitution, May 20, 1900.

46. The Mobile Daily Register, March 16, 1877. Octavia, Jr., died in 1889, and George Walton Reab, Cara Netta's only child, died in 1941. Both were unmarried, so with their passing the family died out, there now being no descendants of either Madame Le Vert or her grandfather, the Signer.

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