

Venice

November 28, 1831

*PERSONAL LETTER from Alexander Declouet in Venice, Italy, to his uncle, Benoit St. Clair in St. Martinville.*¹

My dear Sinclair,

When I arrived in Vienna, I received a letter from Tonton². I answered her promising her at the same time to write from all the great Italian cities. I am keeping my promise and that is to say that, as a beginning I am writing to you. Before broaching any subject, I would like to address you a thousand reproaches. But this time, I will leave them aside. From all appearances, they are useless when it comes to you. If I leave you with your own conscience, if you still have friendly feelings for me, it will bring still enough reproaches to revenge me for your forgetfulness and your neglect. When I wrote to Tonton, I gave her a short relation of my trip since I left Paris. I am going on with this account starting from the place it stopped, that is to say Vienna. As I was writing to Tonton only a few days after my arrival in this city, I could not speak about it. Since that time, two months have elapsed. The first one I spent in Vienna and the second one in Trieste. Let us start with Vienna. It is a large and beautiful city. The streets are clean and well paved and the houses are regular and well built. What you name properly the city of Vienna is only a small part of the ensemble. It is almost circular and a high wall, forty or fifty feet thick separates it completely from the suburbs. Between this wall and the suburbs, there is still a large space occupied by public promenades, parade grounds, etc. This is about all the physical description of Vienna. It is a beautiful city, I repeat it. Its planning is favorable and unique. But how can words describe it? It is impossible. How can one give an idea of all the beautiful things to be seen within a month, it is hardly sufficient. I would have so much to tell you if I spoke about its beautiful churches, its splendid gardens, its numerous suburbs, which in themselves are cities, its art galleries, its charming surroundings, I would

¹Original letter on file at the Louisiana Room, University of Louisiana at Lafayette

²Marie Louise DeBlanc Declouet

never finish. Therefore, be satisfied with the little I have just told you. Yet, my sojourn in Vienna was not the most pleasant. I had the misfortune to be there at the wrong time. On September 5, after three days of rain and wind, cholera morbus broke out in the city. On the first day, 139 persons were affected by it, 138 died. What a proportion! Then, everything changed, official buildings closed, the streets, cafes, public places of amusement were almost deserted. You hardly saw any one on the streets and the few who were there avoided you carefully and held a handkerchief on their noses. Finally, Vienna during the first days the cholera appeared was struck with a real terror. I became alarmed and my first impulse was to run away. But, on second thought, I was ashamed of my fear and I decided to leave Vienna only after I had satisfied myself with visiting it. One soon gets accustomed to the presence of danger, the first emotions of fear once over, one becomes reassured and hardly thinks about it. The disease decreased a great deal and Vienna resumed its ordinary aspect. My travelling companion who is a young doctor from Boston took time to study the cholera. We learned how to smoke the fine German pipes without finally paying any more attention to the cholera morbus. We remained in Vienna until October 12 and then left for Trieste. Going from Vienna to Trieste, you cross Styrie and Illyrie. Styrie is a charming country but sterile and wild. Its inhabitants are poor and miserable. After walking two nights and three days, we reached Trieste. But at our great vexation we found the city closed by a sanitary cordon and before entering we had to be quarantined for seven days. I don't know if you have any idea of what quarantine's regulations are and what Italians call Lazaretto. It is a building or rather a prison intended to lodge persons coming from a place where a disease reigns which is or fear makes you believe it is contagious. It is in this building called in Italian Lazaretto that people are shut in during the time supposed to be long enough for their purification time which varies more or less in length according to the more or less pestilential place they came from. Coming from Vienna where cholera reigned we had to stay 7 days in the lazaretto in order to be purified enough to enter Trieste. Seven days seem little but 7 days in quarantine (or in prison, it is the same thing) amount to centuries. The first night of our arrival, we could not even obtain a bed and we had to spend it clinging in a carriage. The next day, one was charitable enough to order for us a room and a miserable straw mattress full of fleas without any pillows nor blankets. But why should I speak of my suffering, of my deprivations in this miserable lazaretto. I am not relating to you half of it. But it is enough, the memory only of this cursed place nauseates me. At last we came out of it. It was a beautiful and happy day for me. There are no roses without thorns, so it is said. It is quite true, but I believe also that thorns add a great deal to the value of roses. Deprivation enhances enjoyment. This is what I felt when I left my prison. The first days of freedom were very sweet to me, I assure you. Moreover, Trieste was for me a pleasant sojourn and the three weeks I spent there flew by. I met there several Americans, among them a cordial American, Mr. Moore, who overwhelmed me with attentions. He owns a charming family with some young ladies. Ah! I cannot express all my admiration, perhaps you might believe me in love. But it would be difficult for me to tell you how nice it was for me to meet some fellow countrymen in a place as remote. Mr. Moore was also

obliging enough to introduce us to the ex-queen of Naples, Murat's wife, Napoleon's sister³. You may imagine how flattering it was for me. Having a son in America, she always sees Americans with much pleasure. My friend and I went to two of her receptions and she always received us with much kindness. She is a woman between 40 and 60, of an average size, her way of walking is graceful and her expression sweet and pleasant. She was pale as she had just recovered from an illness but in spite of this one could still see in her the remainder of a beauty which in her youth must have been striking. Napoleon called her his good sister. One ordinarily does not find any resemblance to him, but in her profile (especially toward the mouth and the chin) I thought I could see something of her famous brother. Her palace near Trieste is very beautiful, the apartments are extremely rich. Her manners are easy, natural and refined and she receives her guests with an amiability which attracts all hearts. An expression of melancholy is noticeable on her face and makes her still more charming. I would have liked to enter into an interesting conversation with her, but the necessity to address her according to the court etiquette and also the idea that she was the sister of famous Napoleon upset me so much that I did not find the courage to do so. I must quote for you her farewell when we took leave of her. "Goodbye, Messieurs, happy trip, but perhaps we will see each other again—God knows where—in America, I hope so?" This is, at least, as much as I can recall. But, in any case, is it not very amiable coming from a queen? Having been admitted into the company of charming ladies from my own country, having visited a queen, so, you must not be surprised if the three weeks I spent there seemed too short. At last, however, seeing that I was becoming too attached to this, I pulled myself away firmly. I boarded a steamer and within a few hours, I was in Venice. There are now ten days I have been here. I am pretty well familiar with it. I have seen about all there is to be seen. But the more I consider it, the more I am surprised. A city in the sea! Even waves coming up from its buildings and its palaces like columns of water!! It is truly marvelous. Yet, Venice is no longer what it used to be! It was formerly lively, it is now sad, yes, very sad, some beautiful palaces crumble into ruins, canals become filled up. It is not the same any longer. It belongs to a foreigner, to an Austrian. It makes you feel bad, such are the impressions of all the foreign visitors in Venice. The day after tomorrow, I shall leave. Within three or four weeks, I expect to be in Rome. From there, I shall write to one of you. So, Goodbye, try not to forget me completely. Forward this letter to Tonton⁴. It is not worthwhile, it is true, yet, she will learn from it that I have a good time and I am still big, fat and healthy. Kiss my uncle Neuville⁵, my uncle Benoit, Mr. Nee, Claire.

³NOTE: Caroline, who, after Napoleon's defeat and the loss of Murat's Naples kingdom, took refuge in Vienna, 1815

⁴Josephine Declouet de l'Homme

⁵Declouet

Farewell, in spite of your neglect, I still am your best friend and nephew.

Alexander Declouet