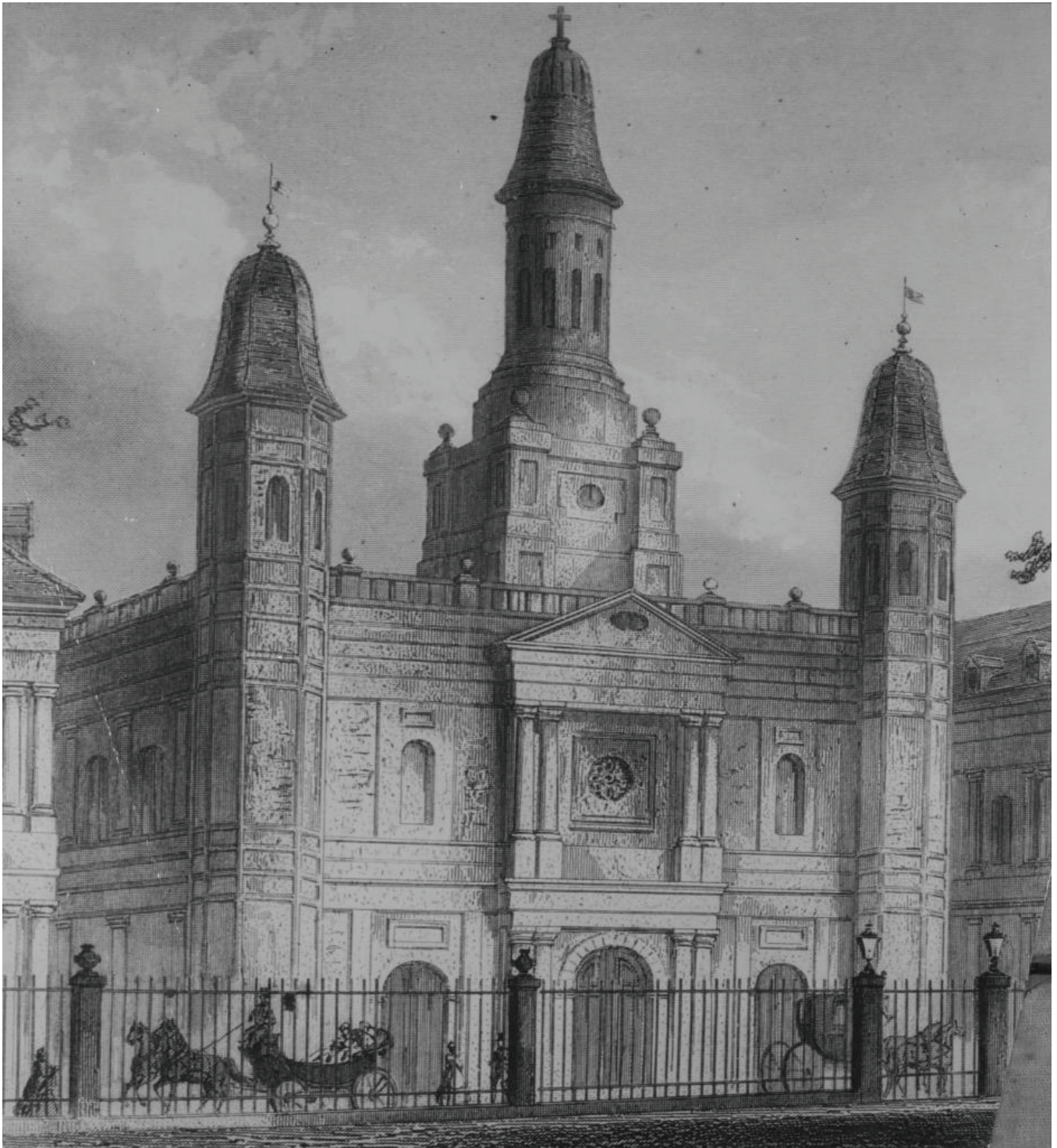


# ARMAND LANUSSE



ARMAND LANUSSE SERVED AS A CAPTAIN IN THE LOUISIANA NATIVE GUARD DURING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR. THE IMAGE DATES FROM 1861.

## A CONSCIENTIOUS MARRIAGE



SAINT-LOUIS CATHEDRAL, NEW ORLEANS, 1838

## A Conscientious marriage

One Sunday morning, after a brief absence from this city, I was haphazardly roaming the streets when the ringing of the old cathedral's bells drew me toward its sacred walls.

“Why not join the multitudes of the faithful who fill the church anew each week on the day of Lord?” I said to myself. “Why not hearken the voices of ministers praising the almighty greatness of the tolerant and merciful God? Why not go and listen to the holy and eloquent words of the scholarly priest”—a temporary substitute for the respectable pastor whom death had stolen away from us.

A few young men were gathered at the portal of the church, and, as I passed by them, the words schism, priests, church officers, caught my ear. I crossed the threshold and entered the cathedral. Much to my surprise, the crowd that I had expected to meet inside the church was nowhere to be found. I saw only two or three people kneeling on the paving stones. An absolute and unbroken silence reigned supreme and filled the inside of the massive edifice, replacing the sacred canticles and the proclamations of the Gospel that I had come to hear.

I tried to figure out why this holy place that had for so long enjoyed a great veneration among the people of Louisiana, now languished in a state of abandon. I was beginning to recall the few words that I had heard upon entering when I suddenly saw a beautiful young woman with tousled hair and disheveled clothing who entered hurriedly through one the side doors of the

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church. She passed the railing that separates the naive and the sanctuary and fell prostrate on the steps of the altar dedicated to Mary, the tender and poetic comforter of the afflicted and the mother of humanity's savoir. I approached the railing and leaned forward onto it. However, the stranger's entire mind and body were so completely absorbed by the prayer she was murmuring, that she did not notice that there was anyone near her. All of a sudden, she raised her tear-filled eyes toward the icon of the queen of martyrs and cried out:

“O holy Mary, my patron saint, have mercy on me. When the story of my miseries makes my sisters smirk, when my very own mother treats me like a lunatic when she sees me cry, O you, Virgin, full of mercy, now that I've have prayed and my heart has found some small bit of peace, please listen compassionately to the story that I must tell in the hope of easing my sufferings.”

The young woman paused a moment to collect herself and then began this story: “Until I reached the age of sixteen, my life was as peaceful as the innocent ideas that then filled my mind. Under the guidance of a pious aunt who had raised me since infancy and loved me dearly, I dutifully practiced the admirable precepts of the Christian faith. Alas, death stole this doting guardian from me, and I was forced to move in with my mother. I truly loved her, but the wild lifestyle of her household was not at all compatible with the quiet manners which I had practiced all of my life.

It had been a year since I had come to my mother's home, and I still couldn't fit into the worldly lifestyle of my older sisters who were only concerned with dances, celebrations, and fineries. They went to every soirée and wanted me to go with them. But, I resisted every temptation that came my way. However, near

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the end of the carnival season last year, my mother, who said that my stubbornness disgusted her, insisted that I venture out into this social world that was completely foreign to me.

For the sake of obeying her orders, I decided to go several of these balls. The very thought of it sent chills of terror down my spine: trapped in the middle of a crowd of men with shameless looks, daring manners, and speaking another tongue, not a single young girl could count on the protection of a brother to shelter her. Not one woman had a legitimate husband whose honorable name could lend some respect to this greedy compost of savage pleasures.

At one of these strange gatherings, I withdrew as usual to the least visible spot in the room, prepared to refuse any offers to dance that might be made to me. I had already turned down several invitations when a young man approached me whose polished manners sharply contrasted with those of the other gentlemen. He insisted, with the most utmost politeness, that I grant him the “favor” of my company for the upcoming waltz. Once again, I wanted to refuse, but, unfortunately, I didn’t have the strength. Just then, the orchestra struck up the prelude, and he grasped my hand. I fell into his arms, and we were soon lost in the crowd of waltzing couples.

Gradually, the balls became more tolerable. The fact of the matter is that I only went to see Gustave—that was the name of my attentive escort. We danced together all night, and, when I left the party, I carried away in my heart different feelings than before.

From that moment on, we saw each other frequently. The depths of my heart reverberated with a love that I thought Gustave also shared—the love that he so often professed to me.

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One day, my mother told me that my beloved, having first received her blessing, had asked her to propose to me that we be united in marriage. I made no efforts to conceal my joy from my mother and answered that I would be delighted to be Gustave's wife. But when the woman who brought me into this world tried to make me understand that this young man could not legally wed me because his social situation was superior to ours,[2] I hid my face in my hands and withdrew my indignant heart. Indeed, Gustave did not want me as a wife—only as a mistress.

I did not ever want to see his face again.

Some time had passed since I had made this resolution when my mother said to me: "But, my daughter, since you are so repulsed by a situation that so many young people in this country would envy, why don't you enter into a conscientious marriage. It's an offer from Gustave."

"What's a 'conscientious marriage?'" I asked my mother.

"It's a vow of marriage with no legal basis, but the priest officiates just like it were a legitimate wedding," she explained.

"Well then, Mother, there is nothing left for me to object to," I said. "It seems to me that a marriage contracted before the altar of God should always suffice. Who would dare to violate the sanctity of such a union? I don't see why we need legal approval here."

My mother joyously gave her consent and left right away.

A few days later, I was wed to my beloved.

My happiness was short lived. We had hardly been married a year, and Gustave, whose deceitful nature I knew all too well by then, seemed to endeavor to inflict any pang of jealousy possible on my heart. Indeed, I loved this man passionately. Sometimes

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I would follow him to the balls that I've already mentioned. I didn't go to relieve my miseries, but to make them even more heart-wrenching. At the dances, I would watch Gustave shower his affections on other women who were perhaps not as beautiful as I. I dared not speak of my suffering to anyone. I would blush to see myself scorned so by my husband and often withdrew pensively into a corner. I used to amaze myself by repeating in my head these lines of poetry that I had read somewhere. The verses had etched themselves in my memory and seemed to have been written to describe the condition of my soul:

Why speak of my suffering in the parlors?  
Each on his own gives into pleasure;  
It is the joyful waltz and the games and the dancing  
That charms everyone and no one thinks  
That I come to balls to cry and suffer...

Finally, I greeted with joy the moment that I became a mother, and I thought that this sacred status that I had just earned would win back all of the love and affection of my husband. Alas, it was merely a fleeting illusion that reality quickly erased from my mind.

I soon learned that Gustave had plans to marry another woman in spite of the vows that united us. I did not want to believe it. However, when I spoke to him about it, he swore to me that other interests forced him to form a new union. Besides, he said he would never cease to extend to me all of the kindness necessary to make a woman happy.

“Oh!” I said to him bitterly. “How can you think that I could be happy if I have to live with the knowledge that I have a rival,

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a rival declared by my own husband? Besides, you can't just abandon me like this? Didn't we take our vows before the priest? Do you have the power to nullify the indissoluble bonds that unite us for life? Are you completely ignorant of the statutory obligations of marriage?...

"You're forgetting," he said with a smile, "that we are only wed by a conscientious marriage."

"And doesn't your conscience reproach you for anything?" I asked him.

"Nothing," he replied coldly.

So, I then threw myself at his feet. In an effort to bring him back to more honorable feelings, I brought our child before him—the dear little angel who flew from my arms yesterday to join the heavenly ranks of those who eternally praise the name of the Creator. Exasperated by my groaning and sobbing, Gustave chased me from of his presence.

I have not seen him since.

A week ago I found out that his new marriage had been celebrated with great ceremony. A week ago, God took from me the little bit of sanity that I still had. And now, if I sometimes regain a bit of reason, it's only to survey the true scope of my suffering.

All of a sudden, the tears of the insane woman ceased. The frightful laugh that escaped her mouth seemed to violate the sanctity of the holy place where we stood. She once again crossed the railing, and she left the church through the door opposite the altar of Mary, just as hurriedly as she had entered.

I followed the unfortunate woman outside where she stopped on the sidewalk of the church. Just then, an elegant coach pulled



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by two feisty horses passed by on the cobble stone street. A very beautiful young woman and a well-groomed gentleman sat inside. The crazy woman stared intently inside the carriage and then cried out “It’s him!...”

I saw her run in front of the horses. “Stop,” cried people from all around. It was too late. The driver managed to regain control of the horses and halt them, but they brutally trampled the poor young woman as her body writhed under their hooves. I glanced at the couple riding in the carriage. The young lady seemed to shiver all over with pity. The face of the elegant gentleman was a livid and pale; his entire body was paralyzed with fear. The bloody corpse of the young woman was transported to the Town Hall and placed under the peristyle.

“So was she indeed crazy” asked the compassionate voice of the lady riding in the coach? “Yes ma’am,” I cried out. “She lost her mind because some despicable coward took advantage of her simplicity and ruthlessly tricked her. And this coward, ma’am, he’s...”

“Whip the horses!” the pale gentleman, suddenly recovering from his stupor, abruptly screamed at the coachman.

The coachman obeyed the order, and the horses galloped off. The young lady leaned towards me, vainly struggling to hear the last words that I had uttered.

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