

The View
from
Rampart
Street

Mary Lou Widmer

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by Mary Lou Widmer



Eloquent Books

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DEDICATION

To Al, as always,
for love and support.

New Orleans, 1840

CHAPTER 1

With each step up the curving mahogany staircase, Mariette Delon caught fuller glimpses of pastel evening gowns swirling around the dance floor. Reaching the top step, she kicked back the bottom flounce of her blue silk dress, tightened her lips, cracked open her fan, and glanced back to see if her mother had caught the gesture. Desiree Delon's frown told her she had. Following her up the stairs, her head turbaned in a crisp white tignon, her earlobes hung with golden loops, Desiree puffed from the exertion of climbing the stairs and the constraints of her stays.

Mariette looked about her. She had never been in the Quadroon Ballroom before, had vowed never to be here, but although she had fought relentlessly against coming tonight, being put up on the auction block, as she saw it, she had apparently lost the first round. She would never have admitted it to her mother, but she was curious about the place where so many connections were made, so many contracts arranged, so many lives changed forever.

The musicians, seated near the floor-length windows at the street end of the ballroom, were playing a quadrille. Dancers in four

squares of eight whirled gracefully across the polished parquet floor, and viewers kept time with gloved hands, as Mariette moved toward a lineup of brocaded chairs against the wall.

Finding two vacant chairs, she sat, and her mother sat beside her. She needed the rest. She was exhausted, exhausted from the day, from the week, from the whole preceding year, when she had daily told her mother she would *not* become a *placée*. And yet here she was, elaborately dressed and coiffed as though she planned to attract a rich Creole gentleman who would offer to be her *patron*.

Today had been the worst day ever. Maman had been appalled to find her reading in her boudoir at four o'clock, no rag curlers in her hair, no nap taken, no stays or chemise laid out. And for her part, Mariette had literally been shocked to see her mother carrying in the blue tissue silk dress she was wearing tonight, a dress made by Madame Delacroix without her knowledge, *behind her back*, so there would be no last minute excuse about not having a dress to wear. *But she has your measurements, Mariette*, her mother had said, as if that was the point of the argument. Mariette had narrowed her eyes in anger, and their voices had risen again.

It was a one-sided discussion, for Mariette had repeated her own views often enough for her mother to know them; yet, her mother would have her way. Desiree got the preparations moving, ordering Celine to bring in water for Mariette's bath, to heat the curling irons on the wood stove, to lay out her limerick gloves. And while she was being bathed and powdered, dressed and coiffed, while Celine rolled the stovepipe curls and Desiree fanned her with a huge palmetto fan, Mariette sat like a statue, her angry gaze riveted on the flagged patio outside her window, where the banana trees had wilted in the oppressive Indian summer.

On her dressing table, where brushes, buttonhooks, and hair

receivers were scattered about in abandon, two night candles, their threadlike flames unwavering in the airless room, illuminated Mariette's changing image in the looking glass. First came her hosiery, then her drawers, her stays and her chemise. Then, while still in her underclothes, she had watched the long and tedious hairdo take shape. It was parted in the middle, ornamented with ringlets and loops at the sides, and finished off with long curls that lay beside her throat. As the elaborate hairdo progressed, it was secured with hidden combs and hairpins. But when Desiree and Celine were trying to decide whether the whole affair should be topped with a tiara or a coronet, Mariette stood up abruptly, faced her mother defiantly, and declared that it was *enough!* Then Desiree, fearing that heat and anger would mar her daughter's already flushed complexion, had nodded that yes, all right, it was enough.

"You look beautiful!" she'd said, knowing it would both anger and please her daughter. The dress had come last, the tissue silk, so cloudlike Mariette could hardly feel the weight of it on her body. She would never have admitted it, but it was a gossamer thing, like a butterfly's wing; the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen.

So here she was at the ball, just as her mother had said she would be. *Plaçage* was what she had been trained for all her life, and it was going to happen. At least, that's what Desiree said. So Mariette knew that tonight, at least, there was nothing she could do about it. The afternoon debacle had progressed from arguments to tears and finally to a compromise. If Mariette went to the ball with an open mind, to dance and try to enjoy herself, Desiree would not force her to become a *placée* against her will. That was the best promise her mother had made all year; that is, if she planned to keep it.

Mariette knew her mother hoped in her secret heart that she'd meet someone tonight, someone handsome and wealthy who

would offer for her, and she'd change her mind about having a protector. But that would never happen, Mariette knew. She had better plans for her future than waiting on a Creole hand and foot and warming his bed.

She looked around. The room was oval, high-ceilinged, and magnificent. The windows were dressed in gold damask that pooled on the shining floor. Veined marble columns at the four corners of the dance floor supported the medallioned ceiling, from which hung two enormous gasoliers. Potted palms stood in shadowed corners.

To her far right, in the curve in the oval, two young men in formal attire sat on chairs like her own, sipping whiskey from shot glasses. From the time she sat down, she was aware that the taller of the two was looking her way. Now, without a word to his companion, he put his glass on a small table, stood up, and started walking in her direction. Mariette saw others in his circle doing the same, and the young man quickened his pace. Reaching her first, he bowed. "*Mademoiselle*," he said, "may I have the next dance?"

"*Oui, M'sieur*," she said. She closed her fan and opened the dance card dangling from her wrist.

"Will you sign my card?"

Without taking his gaze from her eyes, he fumbled for her card and scribbled his name. Almost at once, the quadrille ended, the dance floor cleared, and a slower dance began.

The tall Creole turned to the other admirers coming to ask the beautiful young woman for dances. "Sorry, gentlemen," he said. "This is my dance. You'll have to see *Mademoiselle* later." The men backed away resentfully. "*Mam'selle*," he said, extending his gloved hand.

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