

Abbé Prévost: Manon Lescaut

I.

The narrator happens upon a group of fallen women in Le Havre, being transported to Louisiana. Among them Manon, seeming frailer than the others, but of good birth. He meets Des Grieux, who has followed her from Paris. He explains how he did everything he could to have Manon released, including an armed rescue on the road, but his companions deserted him. The narrator gives Des Grieux a little money, and also bribes the guard to allow him access to Manon on the ship. He then describes meeting Des Grieux by chance again in Calais, upon his return from America two years later, and hearing the whole story from him, which is to follow in the remaining chapters.

II.

Des Grieux begins his story when he is 17 and a brilliant student in Amiens. He is destined for the Church, specifically in the Order of Malta [an order that received the children of noble families], and it is his intended membership of this that confers the title of Chevalier. Planning to leave Amiens, he goes to meet the coach. The other passengers go their separate ways, but one young girl remains behind as her luggage is being unloaded. This, of course, is Manon. Des Grieux, although normally quite timid, goes to talk with her and falls immediately in love.

Manon tells him that she has been sent to the convent to commence her novitiate, and gives Des Grieux to conclude that this is on account of her inclination to pleasure. Manon introduces Des Grieux to her guardian as her cousin, and proposes that she spend a night here in an inn under his protection before going into the convent. They concoct a plan to get hold of a post-chaise in the middle of the night and elope to Paris, where they might be married.

There is now a setback in which Des Grieux is intercepted by his close friend Tilberge, who wants to turn him away from the paths of wickedness. But Des Grieux puts him off with a promise to have him meet Manon the next morning, by which time they are already on their way to Paris. They stop in St. Denis, and there make love.

They take a furnished apartment in Paris, which happens to be close to the home of M. de Brétigny, a well-known tax collector. Des Grieux proposes to write to his father asking permission for their marriage. However, Manon "received the proposition with considerable coldness," suggesting instead that she contact some of her own relatives for help once their funds have run out. Des Grieux thus gives her charge of the household finances.

One day, Des Grieux, returning home unexpectedly, finds the door locked, and discovers from the servant that Manon had been entertaining M. de Brétigny. He tries to banish his jealousy with the thought that M. de Brétigny, as a man engaged in commerce, is probably the agent for her relatives to

send her money. They sit down to dinner, but Manon is crying and cannot eat. There is a knock at the door. Manon retreats to their bedroom and turns the key. Des Grieux opens, and is abducted by men who disarm him and take him to his brother waiting in a carriage below.

III.

Des Grieux wonders if Tilberge had betrayed him, but decides instead that he was more probably recognized on the street. They stop at the same inn in Amiens, where the innkeeper recognizes him and recalls Manon. When he reaches home, his father greets him not unkindly, hoping that he has learned a valuable lesson. It now becomes clear that it was M. de Brétigny who contacted him and arranged for the abduction; it is also clear that this was done with Manon's advance knowledge.. With a mixture of irony and rational debunking, Des Grieux' father tries to convince him of Manon's scheming nature, and the totally inadequate foundations of their love. Des Grieux, however, will not be dissuaded

His father, seeing his continued attachment to Manon, tells the Chevalier that, rather than having him enter the Order of Malta, he will find him a suitable wife. Des Grieux is now convinced that he has been duped and wishes only to take his revenge, but his father keeps him at home, where he finds his old interest in his studies rekindled—although the project he mentions is "an amatory commentary upon the fourth book of the *Aeneid*"!

IV.

Tilberge now comes to see Des Grieux and fills him in. He had pursued the Chevalier to Paris, but missed him there, and came upon his traces only after he had left. He reports, however, that Manon is now being kept in sumptuous style by M. de Brétigny. Tilberge himself is now studying for the priesthood and he convinces Des Grieux to do the same. The Chevalier is attracted by the thought of renunciation, but his first visions are of living quietly in a humble retreat in the country.

Tilberge, however, continues to press, and Des Grieux realizes that even this humble retreat is pointless without Manon. Accordingly, he enters the monastery of Saint Sulpice and becomes *Abbé* [the title of a cleric in minor orders, like Prévost himself] rather than *Chevalier*. He passes nearly a year in Paris without hearing of Manon, and considers her name erased from his memory.

Des Grieux invites several people to hear his public examination in theology at the Sorbonne, a trial he passes with much acclamation. When he gets back to Saint Sulpice, he finds Manon waiting for him, 18 year of age, brilliantly attired, more bewitching than ever. For a while, both are silent. Then Manon says that she knew she had earned his abhorrence, but not the cruelty of his silence for two long years. Des Grieux denounces her as "Perfidious Manon!" She makes no attempt to justify her infidelity, but tells him she would rather die than give him up. He sits and, taking her hand, agrees to give up his religious career for her.

Manon now fills him in on her own story. How she had fallen for de Brétigny, who paid handsomely for her favors. How she nonetheless felt smitten with guilt, especially after an encounter with Tilberge. How hearing him speak at the Sorbonne had filled her with a renewal of her old passion. They sneak out together and he exchanges his monastic clothes for civilian ones at a Jewish second-hand shop. She goes back to her house for all her portables of any value, and together they take a carriage to Chaillot, where they rent a small house and agree to live modestly, even setting limits on their gambling. But these are resolutions that they soon break. However, life in the country soon becomes boring; they take a second place in town and quickly go through their money. [Prévost is quite precise about these arrangements, even naming the precise sums of their working capital and anticipated budget.]

Then follows an episode in which Manon's brother, a guardsman, turns up, first abusing his sister for her loose conduct, then ingratiating himself into their household, moving with them to the country, and getting Manon to pay off his debts and buy new uniforms. While they are away in Paris, however, the house catches fire and—presumably under the cover of deliberate arson—their money box is removed. They are now penniless—but Des Grieux does not tell Manon the extent of their loss. There follows a brief philosophical disquisition on money. Des Grieux asks the brother for advice; he insults them by saying that Manon can go back to her career as a whore, or Des Grieux himself can try out as a gigolo!

Lescaut suggests to Des Grieux that they go into a gambling partnership. This idea, however, is put on hold while Des Grieux pays a visit to Tilberge. The latter treats him with the compassion that a cleric and friend might well show a penitent but this goes with the assumption that he separate from Manon, which Des Grieux is not prepared to do. Tilberge nonetheless agrees to lend him some money, on condition that he tell him where he lives, so that he can continue to visit to work on his soul.

Since Des Grieux now has money, Lescaut introduces him to some relatives and acquaintances, who are pleased to admit him to a *soirée* at the Hotel of Transylvania "where there was a *faro* table in one room, and other games of cards and dice in the gallery." Under Lescaut's tuition, Des Grieux becomes an expert card-sharper, and soon wins a good deal of money. The couple prosper, and are soon devoting themselves solely to pleasure and love. They hire a maid and a valet. But one day their country house and city apartment are both robbed simultaneously, presumably by the servants. Lescaut takes advantage of this and suggests a way out, recommending that she go to M. Guillot de Morfontaine, "an old voluptuary who paid prodigally for his pleasures." Manon writes Des Grieux a letter saying that anything she does is done only out of love for him. He then discovers from Lescaut that she has indeed gone to M. de Morfontaine.

V.

Manon introduces Des Grieux to Guillot de Morfontaine as her brother; the old man is delighted with him, no doubt with the prospect of using him for some immoral purposes also. But all this is just a distraction, and the lovers escape with the money and valuable jewelry that Guillot de Morfontaine has bestowed on Manon. When Guillot de Morfontaine realizes he has been duped, he has the lovers

arrested and sent to separate prisons. We learn that Manon is set to work as a laundress. Des Grieux, in the Lazare, is allowed several visitors, Tilberge among them, but is not released.

VI – XI.

More philosophical conversations with Tilberge. Lescaut visits Des Grieux a couple of times and smuggles him a pistol, with which he forces a guard to permit his escape. He and Lescaut work on a young man, M. de T—, to gain him admittance to where Manon is kept. Eventually, he manages to procure her escape also, and essentially the whole story begins again, until they are cornered by Guillot de Morfontaine a second time, and arrested once more. Des Grieux is released on the behest of his father, but Manon is condemned to transportation.

XII.

Des Grieux rides with the cortege escorting the prisoners to Le Havre, and pays the guards heavily to allow him access to Manon. She wants only to die with him in Le Havre, but he determines to accompany her to Louisiana.

XIII.

Des Grieux begs the Governor of Louisiana to allow them to be together. But she is given into the charge of a man who presses his attentions on her. Des Grieux kills him in a duel; they flee together into the wilderness, where she dies of exhaustion. Des Grieux returns to France.