

Synopsis

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Act I

Students at a bar watch travellers coming and going. The poet Des Grieux entertains them, but is suddenly riveted as a beautiful young woman arrives with her brother. He seizes the opportunity to speak to her, and is horrified to learn that her parents are putting her in a convent. Manon must leave tomorrow. Their conversation is interrupted by her brother, who is responsible for taking her there. Des Grieux begs her to find a way to speak to him later. An elderly but wealthy businessman, Geronte, was travelling in the same carriage, and Manon's brother Lescaut loses no time in suggesting that his attractive sister might be an interesting acquisition for Geronte. Geronte however decides to abduct her himself, but his plans have been overheard. When Des Grieux returns hoping for another glimpse of Manon, Edmondo, his friend tells him what he has heard. Manon does return to speak in secret with Des Grieux, who warns her of what is afoot, and finally persuades her to leave with him. Edmondo arranges their escape, leaving the furious Lescaut and Geronte facing the ridicule of the crowd.

Act II

However, as Lescaut predicted, everything comes right in the end for Geronte. Lescaut finds Manon and she is persuaded to exchange a life of love and poverty with Des Grieux for Geronte's sumptuous circumstances. However, she is bored without Des Grieux's passion, and Lescaut arranges for him to visit her. At first, he protests at her infidelity and fascination for wealth and opulence, but gradually he cannot resist her charms. Geronte surprises them, and reports them to the police. Manon is arrested trying to escape with armloads of compromising jewellery.

Act III

Manon has been condemned to transportation and is about to be embarked for America. Lescaut has a plot to rescue her, but this miscarries. At the last moment, Des Grieux persuades the Captain to allow him to accompany her – to "populate America", as the Captain wryly puts it.

Act IV

Misfortune continues to dog them in America, and Manon and Des Grieux are forced to flee the settlement. Exhausted and parched, Manon dies beside the pitiless road.