

MANON LESCAUT

Abbe Prevost, translated by L.W.Tancock

I must take you back to the time when I first met the Chevalier des Grieux. It was about six months before I left for Spain. At that time I lived alone and seldom stirred abroad, but now and again I went on short journeys if my daughter wanted something attended to and I made these as brief as I could. I once had to go to Rouen where she had asked me to see a case through the Law Courts relating to some land left by my maternal grandfather which I wished to hand over to her. On my way back I slept the first night at Evreux, and reached Passy, about five or six leagues further on, in time for dinner. As I came into the little town I was surprised to see all the people rushing out of their houses and gathering in a crowd outside a shabby-looking inn in front of which two covered waggons were standing. The two waggons had evidently only just arrived, for the horses were still panting and steaming in the shafts. I stopped a moment to find out the cause of the uproar, but I could get no sense out of the gaping crowd, who ignored my questions and kept on fighting their way towards the inn. But just then there appeared in the doorway a soldier, complete with bandolier and musket, and I beckoned him and asked him what all the excitement was about. 'Oh, it's nothing, Sir,' he said, 'just a dozen street-walkers that my friends and I are taking to Havre to be shipped off to America. Some of them aren't bad looking, either, and I suppose that's what these yokels want to see.' I might have left it at that and gone on my way if I had not been pulled up by the cries of an old woman who emerged from the inn wringing her hands and shouting that it was a wicked shame and enough to give anyone the horrors. 'What's the matter?' I asked. 'Oh, come and see, Sir! I tell you, it's enough to break your heart!' My curiosity was now thoroughly aroused, and I dismounted, left my horse with my man and forced my way through the crowd. It was certainly a pathetic sight that met my eyes: amongst the twelve women who were chained together by the waist in two rows of six was one whose face and bearing were so out of keeping with her present situation that in any other setting I would have taken her for a lady of the gentlest birth. She was in abject misery and her clothes were filthy, but all that had so little effect on her beauty that I felt nothing but pity and respect for her. She was trying to turn away as much as the chains would allow, so as to hide her face from us onlookers, and this effort at concealment was so natural that it seemed to come from feelings of modesty. The six guards escorting this party of outcasts were also in the room, and I took the one in charge aside and asked him to tell me something about this lovely girl. But he could give me nothing but a few bare facts. 'We picked her up from the Hopital on police orders. I don't expect she was put in there for her good behaviour. I have questioned her more than once on the road but can't get a word out of her. But although I haven't got orders to treat her any better than the others, I seem to do little things for her because she looks a cut above them, somehow. There's a young fellow over there,' he added, 'who might be able to tell you more than I can about what has brought her down to this. He has followed her all the way from Paris. Crying nearly all the time, too. He must be her brother, or else a lover.'