



Giselle, The Narrative

Act 1

A medieval Rhineland village where villagers assemble to dance and celebrate the wine harvest. Hilarion, a besotted gamekeeper, hopes to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Giselle.

Duke Albrecht too has become enamoured with the peasant girl, Giselle, and in order to pursue her, has disguised himself as a peasant named Loys and rented a cottage opposite her house. His squire, Wilfrid, is wary of Albrecht's plans as he is already betrothed.

While Albrecht is entertaining Giselle, they are admonished by Hilarion, who is angered by his love rival. He tries to separate them but is sent away by Albrecht.

The villagers arrive and encourage Giselle to join in the celebration. They are soon interrupted by the arrival of Giselle's mother, Berthe, who chastises Giselle for dancing as it threatens her weak health.

Berthe reminds Giselle of the tale of the Wilis – the spectres of virgin brides who never reached their wedding day and now rise from their graves to kill any men who wander by.

Hunting fanfares are heard in the distance. Albrecht retreats lest his identity should be discovered by the approaching Prince and his daughter Bathilde, whom Albrecht is to marry. Meanwhile Hilarion sneaks into Albrecht's cottage to find clues of his true identity and discovers that Loys is not a peasant but a nobleman.

The harvest festival continues and Albrecht returns to join in the celebration. Hilarion charges in, separating Giselle and Albrecht and reveals Albrecht's true identity – he is not Loys but the Duke in disguise. Giselle refuses to believe this. To prove his point Hilarion blows a horn to summon the hunt party. They appear and Bathilde wonders at Albrecht's strange appearance. Albrecht passes it off as a joke and takes Bathilde's hand. In disbelief Giselle breaks the two apart and declares her love for Albrecht. Bathilde announces that she is betrothed to Albrecht.

Giselle falls into a state of despair. Her emotional condition descends until a fit of madness causes her weak heart to stop beating and she dies.

Act 2

A dank and shrouded forest. This is where the Wilis gather. Any man caught here between midnight and dawn will be drawn under their spell and forced to dance until they die. Hilarion is lost in thought by Giselle's grave. Suddenly, realising it is midnight, he rushes away hoping not to be ensnared by the Wilis.

The Queen of the Wilis, Myrtha, appears. She summons her ghostly consorts up into a dance. Myrtha announces the arrival of a new Wili. Giselle rises from her grave and is inaugurated. A sound is heard nearby. The Wilis hide.

The grief- and guilt-ridden Albrecht appears and kneels down at Giselle's grave. Alone Albrecht sees the spectre of Giselle and he follows the vision. He tries to embrace her but his arms pass through her. As Giselle vanishes, Albrecht searches for her in the woods.

Hilarion, ensnared by the power of the Wilis, dances until exhausted and is thrown into the river where he drowns. Albrecht is now in Myrtha's thrall. Giselle appears suddenly and sends Albrecht to her graveside. The marble cross of her headstone dispels even the malign will of the Wilis and causes Myrtha's sceptre to break in her hand.

Myrtha uses Giselle to lure Albrecht away from her grave by compelling her to dance. Albrecht is unable to resist the allure and beauty of Giselle's dance and is tempted away from the cross. By dancing with Albrecht, Giselle attempts to prolong his ability to survive. They dance together as an expression of their love.

Just as it seems Albrecht will dance himself to his grave, the first beams of the morning sun appear. Albrecht is saved. The Wilis must depart at daybreak, but so too must Giselle.

Giselle slowly disappears into the dawn. Albrecht finds himself alone. Heartbroken and shamed, he realises that the true love between himself and Giselle has saved his life.

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