

Atala

René

François-René de
Chateaubriand

Translated by Rayner Heppenstall



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Atala

Prologue

THE FRENCH POSSESSIONS in North America once stretched from Labrador to Florida, from the shores of the Atlantic to the farthest lakes in western Canada.

This vast territory was divided by four great rivers, all rising in the same mountains: the St Lawrence which flows eastward into a gulf of the same name, the Rio Grande to the west whose estuary is unknown, the Bourbon which empties itself into Hudson Bay to the north, and the Mississippi running southward into the Gulf of Mexico.

In its course of more than a thousand leagues, this last river waters a delightful region which the inhabitants of the United States call New Eden and to which our countrymen bequeathed the gentle name of Louisiana. Countless other rivers, tributaries of the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Illinois, the Arkansas, the Ohio, the Wabash, the Tennessee, fatten this land with their silt, and it is kept green by their waters. When all these rivers are swollen by the winter floods, when storms have blown down whole patches of forest, the streams become blocked with uprooted trees. These are quickly bound together by creepers, and plants root everywhere in the mud which gradually cements them into single masses. They are washed down by foaming waves into the Mississippi. The river lays hold of them, carries them down to the Mexican gulf, runs them aground

on sandbanks and thus multiplies the number of its own mouths. Now and again, thundering between steep banks, its waters overflow and are spread about the forest colonnades and the pyramid tombs of the Indians; it is a Nile of the wilderness. But in the scenes of nature grace and magnificence always go together: while the main current drags the corpses of pines and oaks to the sea, floating islands of lotus and water lily, their yellow blooms raised like standards, are borne upstream along either bank. Green snakes, blue herons, red flamingos and young crocodiles travel as passengers on these flowering boats, and each colony, spreading its golden sails to the wind, will come to rest in its own quiet backwater.

An extraordinary picture is presented by the opposing banks of the Mississippi. On the western shore, prairies roll beyond the reach of the eye; in the distance, their green waves rise and vanish in the sky. Over this boundless savannah, herds of three or four thousand wild buffalo may be seen roving without aim. A single ancient bison, cleaving the waves, will now and then swim out to an island in the Mississippi and there lie in the tall grass. From the two crescent horns on his brow, from the antiquity of his oozing beard, you might take him for the god of this river, casting a gratified eye upon the grandeur of his waves and the shores' wild abundance.

Such is the scene on the western bank; but on the facing bank the scene changes and gives rise to an admirable contrast. Overhanging the watercourse, clustered upon the rocks and hills, dispersed about the valleys, trees of every form and every colour and every odour mingle, grow together, rise in the air to a height

which tires the gaze. Wild vines, trumpet flower, bitter apple, twine at the foot of these trees, scale the great limbs, climb out to the ends of their branches, fling themselves from maple to tulip tree, from tulip tree to hollyhock, forming countless grottoes, countless vaults and archways. Wandering from tree to tree, these lianas frequently cross smaller riverways, throwing bridges of flowers across them. The still cone of the magnolia rises above these tangled masses; its great white blossoms dominate the whole forest, unrivalled except by palms which nearby wave lightly their green fans.

Life and enchantment are spread there by a multitude of animals, placed in these retreats by the Creator. Across a clearing may be seen bears drunk on wild grapes, swaying on elm branches; caribou bathe in the lakes; grey squirrels sport amid thick foliage; mocking birds and tiny Virginia doves as small as sparrows alight on lawns red with wild strawberries; green parakeets with yellow heads, empurpled woodpeckers, fiery cardinal birds, climb and fly around the cypress trunks; humming birds flash on the Florida jasmine, and bird-catching serpents hiss in the treetops, hanging there like creeping plants.

If on the prairies of the far bank all is silence, here all is movement and murmur; beaks tapping against the oak trunks, the rustle of animals on the move, browsing and crunching fruit stones, the lapping of water, high wailings, heavy lowing, soft cooing, fill these savage deserts with a wild, tender music. But when the wind blows through these solitudes, and everything sways and swings, and the masses of white, blue, green, and red mingle, and the murmurs are all one; then from the

depth of the forest comes such a sound, and such things are seen, that I should strive in vain to describe them to those who had never visited those fields of primal nature.

When the Mississippi was first discovered by Father Marquette and the unfortunate La Salle,* the French of Biloxi and New Orleans entered into an alliance with the Natchez, an Indian nation greatly feared throughout that territory. Feuds and jealousies soon led to bloodshed in that hospitable land. There was among those savages an old man called Chactas, beloved patriarch of the wilderness by reason of his age, his wisdom and his practical understanding. Like all men, he had purchased virtue with misfortune. Not only were the forests of the New World familiar with his woes, but these were borne even to the shores of France. By cruel injustice compelled to serve in the galleys at Marseille, restored to liberty, brought before Louis XIV, he had conversed with the great men of the century and attended festivals at Versailles, heard Racine's tragedies and Bossuet's funeral orations:* in a word, the savage had observed society at its point of highest splendour.

For some years, returned to the bosom of his family, Chactas had enjoyed repose. But even for this favour Heaven made him pay dearly; the old man had become blind. A young girl went everywhere with him upon the Mississippi slopes, like Antigone guiding the steps of Oedipus on Cithaeron, or Malvina leading Ossian over the rocks of Morven.*

Despite the many injustices Chactas had endured at the hands of the French, he loved them. He remembered Fénelon,* whose guest he had been, and wished he could

do some service to the compatriots of so virtuous a man. An opportunity happily presented itself. In 1725, a Frenchman by the name of René, impelled by passion and misfortune, arrived in Louisiana. He travelled up the Mississippi as far as the Natchez country and begged to be made a warrior of their nation. Chactas, having questioned him and found his resolution unshaken, adopted him as a son, and gave him an Indian bride, called Celuta. Not long after the marriage, the savages made themselves ready for the beaver hunt.

Chactas, though blind, was designated by the Council of Elders to command this expedition, because of the respect in which the Indian tribes held him. Prayers and fasts began: dreams were interpreted by the Medicine Men; the Manitous were consulted; petun, or tobacco, was offered up; strips of moose's tongue were laid upon the fire, to see whether they crackled, and so discover the will of the spirits; eventually they set out, having eaten of the sacred dog. René was one of the band. With the help of cross-currents, the canoes sailed up the Mississippi into the tributary waters of the Ohio. It was autumn. The marvellous wilderness of Kentucky unfolded before the astonished eyes of the young Frenchman. One night, by the light of the moon, while the Natchez all lay asleep in their canoes and the Indian fleet, raising its sails of animal skins, flew before a light breeze, René, finding himself alone with Chactas, begged him to tell the story of his adventures. Chactas agreed, and seated beside René on the poop of their canoe, he began in these words:

The Story

The Hunters

“**T**HE DESTINY WHICH UNITES US, my dear son, is a strange one. In you I see the man of civilization who has become a savage; you see in me a man of the wilderness, whom the Great Spirit (with what design I know not) chose to civilize. Entering upon our courses of life at two opposite points, you have come to rest where I belong, and I once sojourned at your point of departure: we have seen the same things with a different eye. Which of us, you or I, has lost or gained most by our change of position? That is known only to the heavenly Geniuses, the least of whom knows more than all mankind.

“At the next flowery moon, it will be seven times ten snows, and three snows more, since my mother brought me into the world on the banks of the Mississippi. The Spaniards had recently established themselves in Pensacola Bay, but no white man yet lived in Louisiana. The leaves had fallen barely seventeen times when, with my father, the warrior Outalissi, I marched against the Muskogeas, a powerful nation of the two Floridas. We joined ourselves with the Spaniards our allies, and battle was given on one of the branches of the Mobile. The war god Aireskoi and the Manitous looked on us without favour. Our enemies triumphed; my father lost his life; I was twice wounded in his defence. Oh, that I had then descended to the shades! I should have escaped

the ills that awaited me on earth! The spirits ordained otherwise: the fugitives bore me away to St Augustine.

"In this town, newly built by the Spaniards, I was in danger of being sent to the mines in Mexico, when an old Castilian, called Lopez, affected by my youth and simplicity, offered me shelter in the house where he lived unmarried with his sister.

"Both formed the tenderest feeling towards me. I was brought up with great care, under many teachers. But, after thirty moons in St Augustine, I conceived a distaste for city life. I was visibly wasting away: sometimes I remained motionless for hours, gazing upon the tops of the distant forest; sometimes I was found sitting by the edge of a river, sadly watching its flow. I pictured to myself the woods it had passed through, and my soul hungered after solitude.

"No longer able to resist my desire to return to the wilderness, one morning I came before Lopez, dressed in my savage's garments, holding in one hand my bow and arrows, and in the other my European clothes. I handed these back to my generous protector, and flung myself weeping at his feet. I reproached myself with ingratitude, I called myself by infamous names: 'But, O my father,' I said, 'you can see for yourself: I shall die if I do not take up the life of an Indian once more.'

"Struck with astonishment, Lopez attempted to turn me from my intention. He reminded me of the dangers I should be running, my chances of falling again into Muskogee hands. But he saw that my mind was set on the undertaking, and then he too wept and, folding me in his arms, said: 'Go, child of nature! Take up once more the burden of man's independence, of which Lopez has

no wish to deprive you. If I myself were younger, I would go back with you to the wilderness (sweet in my memory too!) and restore you to the arms of your mother. In those forests, think sometimes of the old Spaniard who took you into his home, and remember, if you want to be loved by your own kind, that your first experience of the human heart showed it in a fair light.' Lopez ended with a prayer to the Christian God, whom I had refused to worship, and we parted with tears.

"My ingratitude did not long go unpunished. Inexperienced, I lost my way in the woods and, as Lopez had foretold, I was taken by a party of Muskogeese and Seminoles. By my costume and by the feathers on my head, I was recognized as one of the Natchez. I was put in chains, though light ones, because of my youth. Simagan, the chief of the troop, asked me my name, I replied: 'I am called Chactas, son of Outalissi, son of Misco, who between them took more than a hundred scalps from Muskogee braves.' Simagan replied: 'Chactas, son of Outalissi, son of Misco, rejoice: you will be burnt in the big village.' 'That is as it should be,' said I; and intoned my death song.

"Although I was a prisoner, I could not help, during those first days, admiring my enemies. The Muskogee, and even more so his ally the Seminole, breathes gaiety, love, contentment. His gait is light, his manner candid and easy. He speaks much and volubly; his language is musical and smooth. Even with age the Elders do not lose this joyful simplicity: as with birds in the woods, the old mingle their songs with those of the young brood.

"The womenfolk of the troop manifested a friendly inquisitiveness and a gentle pity towards my youthfulness. They asked me about my mother, and about

my first childhood; they wanted to know if my cradle of moss had been hung on the flowering branches of the maple, if I had been rocked there by the breezes, near little birds' nests. They questioned me endlessly on the state of my heart: whether I had seen a white doe in my dreams, whether in the secret valley trees had whispered love's name. Artlessly I answered the mothers, the daughters, the men's wives. I told them: 'You are daylight's graces, and night loves you as it loves the dew. Your womb gives man birth that he may cling to your breast and your lips; you know the magic words by which his griefs are lulled to sleep. That is what I was told by her who brought me into the world, and who will not see me again! Also she told me that virgins were mysterious flowers, found in solitary places.'

"The women were greatly pleased with my praise; they showered gifts upon me; they brought me pounded Brazil nuts, maple sugar, corn paste, bears' ham, beaver skins, shell necklaces, moss for my bed. They sang with me and laughed, then suddenly wept, remembering I must be burnt.

"One night when the Muskogees had encamped by the edge of a forest, I was sitting near the campfire of those on the warpath, with the hunter set to guard me. A garment rustled upon the grass, and a half-veiled woman came and sat beside me. Tears flowed from her eyes; in the gleam of the firelight a little crucifix of gold glittered upon her bosom. Her features were of regular beauty; her expression contained I know not what blend of passion and virtue, whose appeal was irresistible. It was joined with gentler graces; her looks breathed

extremes of sensibility, whereto the deepest melancholy was joined; her smile was heavenly.

“I thought her the Virgin of the Last Loves, the maiden sent to the prisoner of war to gladden his last hours. Thus persuaded, and in a perturbation which did not arise from fear of the stake, I said to her, stammering: ‘Maiden, you are worthy of the first loves, you were not made for the last. A heart which is about to beat its last would ill respond to the movements of your own. May life and death be mingled? You would bring me too much regret for the light of day. Let another be happier than I, let the ivy and the oak cleave together in a longer embrace!’

“The girl then said: ‘I am not the Virgin of the Last Loves. Are you a Christian?’ I answered that I had been faithful to the geniuses of my native hut. At these words the fair Indian drew away from me. She said: ‘I am sorry to find you a wretched idolater. My mother brought me up a Christian; I am called Atala, daughter of Simagan of the gold armlets, leader of the warriors of this troop. We return to Appalachia, where you will be burnt.’ Speaking these words, Atala rose and departed.”

Here Chactas was compelled to break off his story. The memories crowded upon his soul; from his blind eyes the tears poured over his withered cheeks: so might two springs hidden in earth’s dark night be revealed by water trickling among the rocks.

“O my son,” he continued at length, “you see how little wisdom there is in Chactas, for all that he is accounted wise. Alas, my dear child, men do not begin to learn that they may yet weep! Several days went by; the daughter

of the Chief came back each evening to speak with me. Sleep had left my eyes, and in my heart Atala was like the memory of my fathers' couch.

"After seventeen days on the march, at the time when the mayfly emerges from the waters, we entered upon the great prairie of Alachua. It was surrounded by slopes, which rising one behind another to the height of the clouds bear upward terraced forests of copal, lemon, magnolia and green oak. The chief gave the arrival call, and the party encamped in the foothills. I was placed some way off, on the edge of one of those natural springs, so famous in Florida. I was bound to the bole of a tree; one of the braves watched impatiently by me. I had been there no more than a few moments, when Atala appeared under the liquidambars beside the pool. 'Huntsman,' she said to the Muskogee brave, 'if you want to join the deer hunt, I will watch the prisoner.' The warrior leapt with joy at these words from the daughter of his chief; he plunged down from the summit of the hill and lengthened his step on the plain.

"How contradictory is man's heart! I had so much desired to speak the words of mystery to her whom I already loved as the sunlight, and now, struck dumb with confusion, I think I would rather have been thrown to the crocodiles in the pool than find myself alone with Atala. The daughter of the wilderness was no less perturbed than her prisoner; we looked at each other in silence; the Guardian Spirits of love had deprived us of speech. At length, effortfully, Atala said this: 'Warrior, the bonds are weak; it would be easy for you to escape.' At these words, my tongue was emboldened, and I answered: 'O woman, these bonds

may be weak!...' I did not know how to go on. Atala paused for a moment; then she said: 'Begone.' And she untied me from the tree trunk. I picked up the rope; I placed it in the hands of this girl who was not of my tribe, forcing her delicate fingers to close on the instrument of my bondage. 'Keep hold! Keep hold!' I cried. 'You are a madman,' said Atala, with emotion. 'Wretch! Do you not know that you are to be burnt? Am I not the daughter of a powerful Sachem?' 'Time was,' I answered in tears, 'when I was borne in a beaver skin on my mother's shoulders. My father too lived in a chief's hut, and his deer drank of a thousand streams; but now I am a man without a country. When I am dead, no friend will strew grass on my body to keep off the flies. The body of a stranger goes unattended.'

"Atala was moved by these words. Her tears mingled with the stream. 'Ah!' I pursued vigorously. 'If your heart spoke with the same voice as mine! Does the wilderness not belong to all men? Are there no forest glades where you and I might hide? The children of the bark lodge need little enough to make them happy! O daughter fairer than the bridegroom's first dream! O my beloved! Join your steps with mine.' Such were my words. Atala replied with tenderness in her voice: 'My young friend, you have learnt the language of white men, it is easy to deceive an Indian maid.' 'What!' I cried. "You call me your young friend! Ah, that a poor slave!..." 'Well, then,' she said, inclining over me, 'a poor slave...' Ardently I pursued: 'Let him be assured of your faith with a kiss!' Atala listened to my prayer. As a fawn, upon the mountain steep, seizing with delicate tongue the red flowers of some creeper, seems to hang there, so hung I upon the lips of my beloved.

“Alas, dear son! Pleasure and pain are never far removed. Who could have believed that the moment at which Atala gave me her first pledge of love should be the same as that in which she destroyed my hope? White hair of old Chactas, what was your astonishment when the Sachem’s daughter uttered these words! ‘Madly have I yielded to your desire, handsome prisoner; but where could this passion lead us? My religion severs me from you for ever... Mother, what have you done?...’ Atala was suddenly silent, holding back I knew not what fatal secret from her lips. Her words plunged me into despair. ‘Why, then!’ I cried. ‘I shall equal you in cruelty; I will not flee. You shall see me ringed with fire; you shall hear my flesh cry out, and it will give you joy.’ Atala seized my hands between hers. ‘Poor, idolatrous youth,’ she cried, ‘truly I pity you! Must I then weep forth all my heart? Oh, pity, that I cannot fly with you! Unhappy was thy mother’s womb, O Atala! Why dost thou not fling thyself to the crocodile of the fountain!’

“At that very moment, with the approach of sunset, the roaring of the alligators was heard. Atala said to me: ‘Let us begone from this place.’ I drew the daughter of Simagan towards the foothills and the bowered greenery between them as they advanced their promontories to the savannah. All was proud and calm in the wilderness. The cricket cried from his nest, the woods resounded to the unbroken song of the quails, the parakeet’s whistling, the lowing of bison and the neighing of Seminole steeds.

“We barely spoke during our walk together. I strode beside Atala; her fingers held the rope I had made her take back. Now our tears flowed; now we attempted to smile. Our glances one moment raised towards heaven,