

# RENÉ

François-René de Chateaubriand

*A Translation into English by*

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Originally published  
in  
*Atala & René*  
([www.poetryintranslation.com](http://www.poetryintranslation.com))  
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ONCE among the Natchez, René was obliged to take a wife, to conform to the ways of that American Indian people; but chose not to live with her. A tendency to melancholy drew him into the woods; he spent whole days there alone, and seemed a savage among the savages. Except for Chactas, his adopted father, and Père Souël, the missionary at Fort-Rosalie he renounced all relations with mankind. These two elderly men had won much influence over his feelings: the former by his friendly indulgence, the latter, in contrast, by his unrelenting severity. Since the beaver-hunt, during which the blind Sachem had told his story to René, the latter had not wished to speak of his own. However Chactas and the missionary had a strong desire to know by what misfortune a European nobleman had been led to the strange resolution of burying himself in the wilds of Louisiana. René had always given as justification for his refusal, the limited interest to be found in his history which was confined, he said, to that of his thoughts and feelings. 'As for the events which led me to sail for America', he added, 'I would wish to bury them in eternal oblivion.'

Some years passed by in this regard, without the two old men being able to wrest his secret from him. A letter he received from Europe, through the Society of Foreign Missions, added to his sadness to such a degree that he fled to his two old friends. They were only the more eager in exhorting him to open his heart to them. They showed so much discretion, tenderness and authority, that he was forced in the end to satisfy their desire. He therefore spent time with them, not in recounting the story of his life, since he had experienced little, but the secret sentiments of his soul.

On the twenty-first of that month, which the Savages call *the moon of flowers* (May), René took himself to Chactas's hut. He gave his arm to the Sachem, and led him beneath a sassafras tree on the banks of the Mississippi. Père Souël was not long in arriving at the rendezvous. Dawn was breaking: some distance away in the plain, the village of the Natchez could be seen, with its grove of mulberries and its huts resembling bee-hives. The French colony and Fort Rosalie were visible to the right, along the river-banks. Tents, half-built houses, the foundations of fortifications, clearings full of Negroes, clusters of Whites and Indians, served to provide a contrast between the social and savage ways of life, in the one small space. Towards the east, in the background, the sun was rising among the jagged peaks of the Appalachians, drawn like figures of azure on the golden reaches of sky; in the west, the Mississippi's waves rolled by in magnificent silence, and with inconceivable grandeur formed a boundary to the picture.

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The young man and the missionary spent a while admiring this striking scene, the Sachem lamenting his inability to enjoy it; then Père Souël and Chactas seated themselves on the grass at the foot of the tree; René took his place between them, and after a moment's silence, he spoke to his companions as follows:

'In beginning my tale, I cannot avoid a brief moment of shame. The tranquillity in your hearts, that of venerable men, and the calm of nature around me make me blush for the turmoil and agitation within my soul.

How you must pity me! How wretched my eternal disquiet must seem to you! You who have exhausted all the sorrows of life, what can you think of young man without strength or virtue, who finds his own torment in himself, and can only complain of ills he himself has engendered? Oh, do not condemn him; he has been punished more than enough!

I cost my mother her life in bringing me into the world; I was cut from her womb. I had a brother whom my father blessed, because he was the eldest son. As for me, delivered at the outset to the hands of strangers, I was raised far from the paternal roof.

By temperament I was impetuous, my character inconsistent. By turns loud and joyful, silent and sad, I gathered young companions round me; then, abandoning them suddenly, would sit in solitude, contemplating the fugitive clouds, or listening to the rain falling on the leaves.

Every autumn, I returned to the paternal chateau, situated among forests, beside a lake, in a remote province.

Timid and constrained in front of my father, I found ease and contentment only with my sister Amélie. A similar gentleness in temperament and taste bound me closely to that sister; she was a little older than me. We loved to climb the hills together, sail the lake, and traverse the woods when the leaves were falling; walks whose memory still fills my soul with delight. O you enchantments of childhood and its haunts, will you ever lose your sweetness?

Sometimes we walked in silence, giving ear to the dull sighing of autumn, or the sound of the dead leaves, which we trod sadly under our feet; sometimes, in our innocent games, we pursued the swallows over the meadows or the rainbow on the glistening hills; sometimes too we murmured verses inspired by the spectacle of nature. Young, I cultivated the Muses; there is nothing more poetic, in the freshness of its passions, than a sixteen year old heart. The dawn of life is like the dawn of day, full of purity, visions and harmonies.

On Sundays and holidays, in the vast woods, I often heard the sound of distant bells through the trees, calling the toilers in the fields to prayer. Leaning against the trunk of an elm, I listened in silence to their pious reverberations. Each quiver of the bronze carried to my naïve soul the innocence of rustic manners, the calm of solitude, the charm of religion, and the delightful melancholy of the

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memories of early childhood. Oh who, however ill constituted, has not shivered as the bells of his birthplace sounded; those bells which trembled with joy over his cradle, which announced his arrival in this world, which attended the first beats of his heart, which announced his father's sacred happiness to the whole neighbourhood, the yet more ineffable sorrows and joys of his mother! All is there in the enchanted reveries into which the sounds of those bells of home plunge us: religion, family, country, the cradle and the grave, the past and the future.

It is true that Amélie and I enjoyed more of these solemn and tender ideas than others, because we both possessed a degree of sadness in the depths of our hearts: we inherited that from our mother, or from God.

However my father was suffering from an illness which not long after led him to the grave. He expired in my arms. I learnt to know death from the lips of him who gave me life. The impression was powerful; it still endures. It was the first occasion on which the soul's immortality presented itself clearly to my eyes. I could not believe that inanimate body was the creator of thought within me; I felt it must have reached me from another source; and in a state of holy sorrow almost akin to joy, I hoped one day to rejoin my father's spirit.

Another phenomenon confirmed that exalted idea in me. My father's features in the coffin had taken on something of the sublime. Why should that astounding mystery not be an indication of our immortality? Why should death, that knows all, not etch on the brow of its victim the secrets of another universe? Why should there not be, in the grave, some vast vision of eternity?

Amélie, overcome with grief, retired to the confines of a turret, where beneath the arches of the Gothic chateau she heard the chanting of the priests as they walked in procession, echoing with the sound of the funeral bell.

I accompanied my father to his last refuge; the earth closed over his remains; eternity and oblivion bore down on him with all their weight; by evening indifferent feet passed his grave; except for the memories of his daughter and his son it was already as though he had never existed.

It was necessary to quit the paternal roof, now part of my brother's inheritance: I went with Amélie to live with elderly relatives.

Hesitating, at the threshold of various illusory paths of life, I considered them one by one, without daring to pursue any one of them. Amélie often spoke to me of the virtues of the religious life; she told me I was the sole tie that bound her to the world, and she fixed her sad gaze on me.

My heart moved by these conversations full of piety, I often wandered towards a monastery, close to my new residence; for a time I was even tempted to hide my life away there. Happy are

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those who have ended their voyage without leaving port, and have not, as I have, dragged out useless days on this earth!

We Europeans endlessly agitated are forced to build solitudes for ourselves. The more turbulent and noise-filled our hearts, the more silence and calm attract us. Those hospices in my land, which are open to the poor and weak, are often hidden in valleys which inspire in the heart vague feelings of distress and hope of shelter; sometimes one finds them placed on the heights where the religious soul, like a mountain plant, seems lifted to the sky to offer up its fragrance.

I can still see the majestic blend of woods and water around that ancient abbey where I thought of ridding my life of the vagaries of fate; at twilight I still inhabit those solitary echoing cloisters. When the moon half-lit the pillars of the arcades, and threw their shadows on the opposite walls, I would stop to contemplate the cross which marked the cemetery, and the long grass which grew between the tombstones. O men who, having lived far from the world, had passed from the silence of life to the silence of death, with what disgust for this earth did your graves not fill my heart!

Either a temperamental restlessness, or a prejudice against the monastic life, led me to alter my intentions; I resolved to travel. I said farewell to my sister; she grasped me in her arms with an emotion that resembled joy, as if she were pleased to see me leave; I could not help reflecting bitterly on the frailty of human relationships.

Nevertheless, full of eagerness, I hurled myself into the stormy ocean of this world, knowing nothing of its harbours or its hazards. I first visited those nations that no longer exist; I went to sit among the ruins of Greece and Rome: places long-remembered for human strength and ingenuity, where palaces are buried in dust, and the mausoleums of kings and emperors are lost among briars. The forces of nature and the feebleness of man: a weed often pierces the solid marble of those tombs, that all the dead, once so powerful, cannot now remove!

Sometimes a tall pillar appeared standing solitary in the wilderness, as a mighty thought rises, at intervals, in a soul that time and misfortune have devastated.

I meditated on those monuments among all the incidents, and at every hour, of the day. Sometimes the same sun that had seen the foundations of those cities laid, set majestically, to my view, among their ruins; sometimes the moon rising in a clear sky, between two half-shattered cinerary urns, showed me pale tombstones. Often by the light of that star that feeds our reveries, I thought I saw the Spirit of Memory, sitting pensively by my side.

But I grew tired of rummaging among coffins, where many a time I disturbed only the ashes of crime.

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I wanted to see if living races might reveal to me more of virtue, or less of vice, than those which had vanished. As I was wandering one day in a great city, passing behind a palace, I saw, in a secluded and deserted courtyard, a statue (that of Charles I, in London, behind Whitehall Palace) which pointed a finger towards the site of its notorious martyrdom. I was struck by the silence of the surroundings; only the wind moaned round that tragic figure of marble. Workmen were idling at the base of the statue, or whistling as they cut stone. I asked them whom the statue portrayed: one explained, with difficulty, the others proving ignorant of the tragedy he recalled. Nothing could have convinced me more of the true measure of events, and of our insignificance. What has become of those who once made so much noise? Time has moved on, and the face of the earth has altered.

I particularly sought in my travels the artists and those divinities who on their lyre sing the gods and the happiness of nations that honour law, religion and the dead.

Those singers are of a divine race, they possess the only incontestable gift that heaven has granted to earth. Their life is at once naïve and sublime; they celebrate the Gods with golden tongues, and are the simplest of men; they speak like immortals or little children; they explain the laws of the universe, and yet cannot understand the most innocent affairs of life; they have marvellous ideas concerning death, and dying, without being aware of it, like infants.

In the mountains of Caledonia, the last bard to be heard among those wilds sang those poems to me with which a hero once solaced his old age. We were seated on a quartet of stones eaten away by lichen; a torrent flowed at our feet; deer grazed some distance away among the ruins of a tower, and the wind from the sea whistled over the heather of Glencoe. Now the Christian religion, also the daughter of high mountains, has placed crosses over the graves of the heroes of Morven, and sounded David's harp beside the very stream where Ossian made his harp moan. As peaceful as the divinities of Selma (Fingal's palace) were warlike, she guards the flocks in places to which Fingal brought conflict, and she has spread angels of peace among the clouds inhabited by murderous phantoms.

Ancient smiling Italy offered me her host of masterpieces. With what holy and poetic awe I wandered among those vast edifices consecrated by art to religion! What a labyrinth of columns! What a train of arches and vaults! How beautiful are the sounds we hear among the domes, like the sigh of Ocean waves, the murmur of forest winds, or the voice of God in his Temple! The architect builds, so to speak, with the poet's ideas and makes them tangible to the senses.

But what had I learned thus far with so much effort? Nothing certain among the ancients; nothing beautiful among the moderns. The past and the present are two unfinished statues: the one has

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been rescued, all mutilated, from the ruin of the ages; the other has not yet been perfected by the future.

But are you surprised perhaps, my old friends, you especially, inhabitants of the wilderness, that in the tale of my travels I have not once spoken of the wonders of nature?

One day, I climbed to Etna's summit, a volcano burning in an island's midst. I saw the sun rise in the immensity of horizon below me, Sicily narrowing to a point at my feet, and the sea stretching into distant space. In this perpendicular view of the scene, the waves seemed to me no more than geographic lines traced on a map; but while my gaze perceived these things on one side, on the other it plunged into Etna's crater, whose burning innards I could see amongst black clouds of vapour.

A young man full of passion, seated on the rim of a volcano, and weeping over the mortals whose dwellings he can barely see at his feet, is he not, venerable fathers, truly an object worthy of your pity; yet, whatever you may think of René, this scene offers you an image of his character and his existence; it is thus that throughout my life I have had before my eyes a creation, at once immense and subtle, an abyss yawning at my side.'

On pronouncing these final words René fell silent, and lapsed suddenly into reverie. Père Souël gazed at him in astonishment; and the old blind Sachem, hearing the young man no longer, knew not what to think of his silence.

René's eyes were fixed on a group of Indians travelling cheerfully over the plain. Suddenly his expression softened and, tears rolling from his eyes, he cried:

'Oh: happy Savages! Why can I not enjoy the peace that ever accompanies you! While I traversed so many countries, and so fruitlessly, you sat in tranquillity beneath your oak-trees, letting the days flow by without counting them. Your *raison d'être* is simply your needs, and you arrive, more surely than I, at the state of wisdom, like children dividing their time between play and sleep. If that melancholy which is engendered by a surfeit of happiness sometimes seized your souls, you soon emerged from that sorrowful pass, and gazing at the Heavens, sought out with emotion the unknown entity that takes pity on a poor Savage.'

Here René's voice again faded, and the young man lowered his head on his chest. Chactas, extending his arm from the shadow, and taking the arm of his son, called to him movingly: 'My son, my dear son!' At the sound, Amélie's brother regained his self-possession, and blushing with embarrassment, begged his father to forgive him.

Then the old Savage said: 'My young friend. The impulses of a heart like yours know not how to find the level; only moderate that temperament which has already done you so much harm. If you suffer the events of life more deeply than others, that should not surprise you; a great soul must of its nature contain more sorrow

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than a small one. Continue your story. You have made us traverse a portion of Europe: let us know something of your country. You know I have seen France, and what ties bind me to her: I would like to hear tell of that great Chief (Louis XIV) who is no more, and whose superb dwelling I visited. My child, I only see with the aid of memory. An old man with his memories resembles some decrepit oak-tree in our woods: the oak no longer adorns itself with its own foliage, but it sometimes clothes its nakedness with alien plants that grow among its ancient branches.'

Amélie's brother, calmed by these words, once more took up the history of his heart: 'Alas: my father! I cannot speak to you of this great century of which in my childhood I have only seen the end, and which was no more by the time I returned to my native land. Never did a more astonishing or more sudden change affect a nation. From the heights of genius, religious tolerance, moral virtue, everything suddenly plunged into spiritual instability, impiety and corruption.

Truly it was vain to have hoped to find in my own country whatever might calm that unrest, that ardent yearning which dogs my every step. The study of the world had taught me nothing, and yet I had lost the purity of ignorance.

My sister, her conduct inexplicable, seemed to take delight in increasing my troubles; she had left Paris a few days before my arrival. I wrote to her saying that I intended to rejoin her: she hastened to reply deterring me from such a project, on the pretext that she was unsure to what place her affairs might summon her. What sad reflections did not occur to me then concerning friendship, which is warmed by presence, effaced by absence, and cannot withstand misfortune, far less prosperity!

I found myself more solitary in my own land than I had been on foreign soil. I sought for some time to throw myself into a society which had nothing to say to me and would hear nothing from me. My soul, which no passion had yet employed, sought an object to which it might attach itself; but I saw that I gave more than I received. Neither elevated language, nor profound sentiment was asked of me. I was simply occupied with tailoring myself to society's standard. Treated everywhere as a romantic, ashamed of the role I played, more and more disgusted with men and things, I resolved to retire to the suburbs, and live there totally ignored.

At first I took pleasure enough in this obscure and independent way of life. Unknown, I mingled with the crowd: the vast wilderness of human beings!

Often seating myself in some ill-frequented church, I spent whole hours in meditation. I saw poor women who came to prostrate themselves before the Lord, or sinners who came to kneel at the bar of the confessional. No one left such places without serenity in their expression, and the muffled clamour that was heard emanat-

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ing from outside, seemed like passion's wave and the world's storm expiring at the foot of the Lord's temple. You know, Almighty God, you who saw my secret tears flow in these sacred retreats, how many times I threw myself at your feet, begging you to relieve me of the weight of existence, or to alter the primal man in me! Oh, who has not sometimes felt the need to recreate himself; to renew himself in the waters of the stream; to fortify himself at the fountain of life? Who is not overwhelmed sometimes by the burden of his own corruption, and incapable of achieving anything great, noble, or just?

When evening came, taking to the paths of my retreat once more, I would halt on some bridge to watch the sun setting. That star, inflaming the city mists, seemed to sway slowly from side to side in a golden fluid, as if it were the pendulum of some clock of the centuries. I retired then, with the night, to a labyrinth of deserted streets. Gazing at the lights shining within the houses, I entered in thought into the scenes of sorrow and joy that they illuminated, and reflected that beneath all those roofs I had not a single friend. In the midst of my reflections, the hour would strike in measured chimes from the tower of the Gothic cathedral; the sound would be repeated from church to church, in every tone, at every distance. Alas! Every hour spent in the world opened a grave and made tears flow.

That life, which had at first delighted me, soon became unbearable. I grew tired of repeating the same scenes and ideas. I began to sound my heart, asking myself what I desired. I did not know, but I suddenly felt that a woodland life would delight me. There and then I promptly resolved to end, in rural exile, a career scarcely begun, in which I had already consumed centuries.

I embraced this project with the enthusiasm with which I invested all my plans; I departed as precipitately to bury myself in some cottage as I had once left to tour the world.

I am accused of possessing tastes that are fickle, of being unable to take pleasure in any one dream for long, of being prey to an imagination that seeks to plunge into the depths of pleasure, as if overcome by its transience: I am accused of forever aiming beyond any goal I might achieve. Alas! I only search for an unknown good, an instinct for which pursues me. Is it my fault, if I find limits everywhere, if what is finished has no value for me? Yet I feel that I love predictability in the affairs of life, and if I were still so foolish as to believe in goodness, I would seek it in the exercise of habit.

Absolute solitude, the vision of nature, soon plunged me into a state well nigh impossible to describe. Without parents, without friends, alone on earth, so to speak, and not yet having loved, I was overwhelmed by the superabundance of life. I was subject to sudden blushes, and felt as if rivers of molten lava flowed through my heart; I would give out involuntary cries, and night was as troubled by my dreams as my waking. I needed something to fill the abyss of my existence: I descended valleys, climbed mountains, summoning with

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all the strength of my desire the ideal object of some future affection; I embraced it in the winds; I thought I heard it in the sighing of the waters: all things became that phantom of imagination, both the stars in the sky and the very principle of life in the universe.

However this state of calm and disturbance, poverty and wealth, was not without its charms. On one occasion I took pleasure in stripping the leaves from a willow branch above a stream, and granting an identity to each leaf that the current carried onwards. A king who fears to lose his crown in a sudden revolution felt anguish no deeper than mine, at each accident that menaced those remnants of my action. O mortal frailty! O infancy of the human heart that never ages! See then to what childishness our proud reason can stoop! And yet true it is that many men pin their destiny to things as worthless as my willow leaves.

But how to express that crowd of fugitive feelings I experienced in my wanderings. The sounds that render passion in the void of a solitary heart resemble the murmurs the winds and water produce in the silence of a desert; one experiences them, but cannot describe them.

Autumn surprised me in the midst of these uncertainties; I entered with delight on the months of storms. Sometimes I wanted to be a warrior wandering among those winds, clouds, phantoms; sometimes I went so far as to envy the shepherd's lot, whom I saw warming his hands at a humble brushwood fire which he had lit at the corner of a wood. I listened to his melancholy songs, which reminded me that in every country the natural human singing voice is sad, even when it expresses happiness. Our heart is an unfinished instrument, a lyre lacking some of its strings, on which we are forced to render the accents of joy in a tone dedicated to sighs.

By day I wandered on a vast heath bordered by forests. How little was needed to prompt my reveries: a dry leaf that the wind drove before me, a hut from which smoke rose into the bare summits of the trees, a patch of moss on the trunk of an oak shivering in the north wind's breath, an isolated rock, a deserted pond where withered reeds sighed! The village steeple, rising far off in the valley, often drew my gaze; and often my eyes would follow the migrating birds that flew above my head. I thought of the unknown shores, the distant climes to which they travelled; I wished to fly with wings like theirs. A buried instinct tormented me; I felt that I myself was only passing through; but a voice from above seemed to say: "Man, it is not yet your season for migration; wait until the wind of death rises, then you will take flight towards those unknown regions your heart desires."

Rise, swiftly longed-for storms that will bear René into the realms of another life! So saying, I strode along, my face burning, the wind whistling through my hair, feeling neither rain nor frost, bewitched, tormented, as if possessed by the demon in my heart.

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At night, while the north wind shook my cottage, while the rain fell in torrents on the roof, while I watched the moon from my window ploughing through banks of cloud, like a pale ship labouring among the waves, it seemed to me that life beat twice as strongly in the depths of my heart, that I had the power to create worlds. Oh, if I had been able to share the strong emotions I experienced with another! If only, my God, you had granted me the woman of my desires, and led by the hand to me, as to our first ancestor, an Eve created from my own being. . . . celestial Beauty, I would have prostrated myself before you; then, clasping you in my arms, I would have begged the Eternal One to have granted you to me for the remainder of my life.

Alas, I was alone, alone on this earth! A hidden languor overpowered my body. That distaste for life I had felt since childhood, returned with new force. Soon my heart, no longer provided nourishment for my thoughts, and I perceived existence as no more than a profound feeling of ennui.

I struggled for a time against this sickness, but with indifference, lacking the firm resolve to vanquish it. At last, finding myself unable to heal this strange wound in my heart, which was nowhere and everywhere, I decided to end my life.

Priest of the Almighty, you who hear me, forgive a wretch whom Heaven had almost deprived of reason. I was filled by religion, and yet reasoned impiously; my heart loved God, yet my mind failed to know Him; my conduct, speech, feelings, thoughts were mere contradiction, darkness, lies. But does a man always know what he wishes; is he always certain of his thoughts?

Everything slipped from my grasp at the same moment, friendship, the world, my sanctuary. I had attempted everything, and all had proved fatal to me. Repulsed by society, abandoned by Amélie, if solitude failed me what remained? It was the last plank with which I had hoped to save myself, and yet I felt it sinking into the abyss!

Resolved to rid myself of the burden of life, I decided to fix all my thoughts on that senseless final act. Nothing drove me to it: I set no specific time for my departure, in order to taste in long draughts the last moments of existence, and to gather my whole strength, like some ancient, for the moment when I would feel my soul escape.

Nevertheless, I thought it necessary to make arrangements with regard to my possessions, and I felt obliged to write to Amélie. A few complaints regarding her forgetfulness escaped me, and doubtless I revealed something of the emotion that was gradually overwhelming my heart. I still believed I had hidden my secret successfully, but my sister, accustomed to read the depths of my soul, easily divined it. She was alarmed at the constrained tone of my letter, and at the questions I posed concerning my affairs, affairs with which I had never before concerned myself. Instead of replying she surprised me by suddenly arriving to see me.

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To understand the profound bitterness of my later sorrow, and my first transports of joy on viewing Amélie once more, you must realise that she was the only person in the world I loved, that all my feelings were compounded in her with the sweetness of childhood memories. I welcomed Amélie, therefore, in a kind of heart's ecstasy. It was so long since I had met anyone who understood me, and before whom I could reveal my soul!

Amélie threw herself into my arms, crying: "Wretch, you wish to die, while your sister still lives! You suspect her feelings! Do not explain, do not apologise, I know all; I understand it all, as if I had been with you. Can I be mistaken, I who witnessed the birth of your first feelings? It is all your flawed temperament; your disdain; your injustice. Swear, as I press you to my heart, swear that this is the last time you will give yourself up to such folly; swear an oath never to attempt your life."

In pronouncing these words, Amélie gazed at me with compassion and tenderness, and covered my forehead with kisses; almost like a mother, or even more tenderly. Alas, my heart opened again to all those delights; like a child, I wished only to be consoled; I yielded to Amélie's power: she extracted a solemn oath; I gave it without hesitation, not even suspecting that from then on I might be unhappy.

It took more than a month for us to accustom ourselves to being together. When in the morning, instead of finding myself alone, I heard my sister's voice I experienced a thrill of joy and contentment. Amélie had received from nature something of the divine; her soul possessed the same innocent graces as her body; the tenderness of her sentiments was infinite; in her mind she had only sweetness and a propensity to dream; you might say her heart, her thought and her voice sighed in concert; she had the modesty and lovingness of woman, combined with the purity and harmony of the angels.

The moment had come when I would atone for all my vagaries. In my delirium I had almost desired to experience misfortune, in order to have a real reason for suffering at least: a terrible wish that God, in his wrath, has granted only too well!

What shall I reveal to you, O my friends! See the tears which flow from my eyes. How is it I dare speak. . . a few days ago nothing could wrest this secret from me. . . Now, all is over!

Yet, O venerable fathers, let this history be forever buried in silence: let it only be related here, beneath a tree in the wilderness.

Winter was ending, when I perceived that Amélie had lost the repose and health she had first shown. She grew thin and hollow-eyed; her walk was languid, and her voice agitated. One day I surprised her in tears at the foot of a crucifix. Society, solitude, my absence, my presence, night, day, everything alarmed her. Involuntary sighs expired on her lips; sometimes she endured a long journey without tiring; sometimes she could scarcely drag herself about; she

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would pick up her embroidery and let it drop; open a book without the power to read; begin a sentence she could not complete; burst into tears suddenly; and retire to pray.

I tried in vain to discover her secret. When I questioned her, clasping her in my arms, she replied, with a smile, that she was like me: she did not know what ailed her.

Three months passed in this manner, and her condition worsened each day. A mysterious correspondence seemed to be the cause of her tears, for she seemed more tranquil, or more troubled, according to the letters she received. Finally, one morning, the hour at which we ate together having passed, I went to her apartment; I knocked, but no one replied; I opened the door. I saw on the mantelpiece a letter addressed to me. I seized it, trembling, opened it, and read what follows, words which prevent me from taking any joy in the future:

*To René*

*“Heaven is my witness, dear brother that I would give my life for you a thousand times over if that would spare you a moment’s pain; but, wretch that I am I can do nothing to promote your happiness. You must forgive me then for hiding from you like a criminal; I would be unable to resist your prayers, and yet we must part. . . May God have pity on me!*

*You know, René, that I have always had a leaning towards the religious life: it is time for me to profit from Heaven’s warnings. Why have I left it so late? God punishes me for it. I remained in the world because of you. . .Forgive me; I am troubled so by the grief that possesses me on leaving you.*

*It is now, my dear brother, I feel the need of that sanctuary, against which you have so often railed. Misfortune separates us from mankind forever; what is to become then of poor wretches? . . . I am convinced that you yourself, my brother, would find repose in religious retreat: the world offers nothing that is worthy of you.*

*I will not remind you of your oath: I know your fidelity when you have once given your word. You have sworn you will live for my sake. Is there anything more wretched than always to be thinking of quitting life? For a man with your strength of character, it is all too easy to die! Believe your sister; it is more difficult to live.*

*But, my brother, be swift to emerge from a solitude which does you no good; seek some occupation. I know you mock bitterly at the necessity one is under in France of seeking a trade. Don’t despise the wisdom and experience of your elders. It would be better, my dear René, to be a little more like other men, and thereby experience less unhappiness.*

*Perhaps you will find that marriage eases your troubles. A wife, and children, would occupy your days. And what woman is there who would not seek to render you happy? The ardour of your soul,*

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*the beauty of your spirit, your noble and passionate air, that proud yet tender gaze, all would guarantee you her love and loyalty. Oh, with what delight she would clasp you in her arms, and to her heart! How all her thoughts and glances would be fixed on you, to prevent your least distress! She would be all love, and innocence before you; you would think you had found a sister once more.*

*I am leaving for the convent of . . . That institution, built by the sea shore, suits the state of my soul. At night, in the depths of my cell, I will hear the murmur of the waves bathing the convent walls; I will think of the walks I took with you in the woods, when we thought to discover the sounds of the sea in the agitation of the pine trees' summits. Kind companion of my childhood, shall I see you no more? Scarcely older than you I rocked you in your cradle; we often fell asleep together. Oh, if only the one grave would reunite us some day! But no: I must sleep alone under the icy marble floor of that sanctuary where those who have lived unloved rest forever.*

*I do not know if you will be able to read these lines half-effaced by my tears. After all, my friend, sooner or later would we not be forced to part? What need have I to speak to you of the uncertainty and worthlessness of this life? You recall young M. . . he who was shipwrecked off Mauritius. When you received his last letter, some months after his death, his earthly remains no longer existed, and the very moment you commenced grieving for him in Europe was the same moment when they ended their mourning in the Indies. What is man then, whose memory perishes so swiftly? One group of his friends knows nothing of his death, while the other is already consoled for it! Ah, my dear, too dear, René, shall my memory be effaced as swiftly from your heart? Oh, my brother, if I tear myself away from you in time, it is in order not to be parted from you in eternity."*

*Amélie*

*"P.S. I enclose a deed of gift of my property; I hope you will not refuse me this mark of friendship."*

A bolt of lightning falling at my feet could not have caused me more alarm than this letter. What secret was Amélie concealing from me? What drove her to embrace the religious life so suddenly? Had she not reconciled me to life by the charm of her friendship only to abandon me in an instant? Oh, why had she turned me from my purpose? A feeling of pity had recalled her to me but, quickly wearied by painful duty, she had hastened to quit a wretch who possessed no one but her on earth. She considered she had done all that was needed in preventing a man from dying! Such were my thoughts. Then turning again to myself: 'Ungrateful girl,' I complained, 'if you, Amélie, had been in my place, if, like me, you had been lost in the desert of life, oh, you would not have been abandoned by your brother!'

Yet, when I re-read the letter, I found something so sad and tender there, that my heart melted utterly. Suddenly an idea struck me that gave me a little hope: I imagined that Amélie might have conceived a passion for some man which she had not dared to confess. This idea might explain her melancholy, her mysterious correspondence, and the passionate tone which breathed in her letter. I wrote to her at once begging her to open her heart to me.

She was not slow to reply, but without revealing her secret: she merely informed me that she had obtained exemption from the novitiate, and would take her vows.

I was appalled by Amélie's obstinacy, the mystery contained in her words, and her lack of confidence in my friendship.

After hesitating a while over what course I should take, I decided to travel to B— in order to make a last effort with regard to my sister. The countryside where I was raised lay on my route. When I saw the woods in which I had spent the only happy moments of my life, I could not restrain my tears, and I was impossible for me to resist the temptation of wishing them a last adieu.

My elder brother had sold the paternal estate, and the new proprietor was not yet in residence. I reached the chateau via the long avenue of fir-trees; I crossed the deserted courtyards on foot; I stopped to look at the shuttered or half-broken windows, the thistles growing at the foot of the walls, the leaves littering the doorsteps, and the solitary porch where I had so often seen my father standing among his faithful servants. The steps were already covered with moss; yellow wallflowers grew between their cracked and uneven stones. A caretaker, unknown to me, opened the doors brusquely. I hesitated to cross the threshold; the man called out: 'Well now, are you going to behave as that strange lady did who was here a few days ago? When she was about to enter, she fainted, and I was obliged to help her return to her carriage.' It was easy for me to recognise this *strange lady* who, like me, had come here to search for tears and memories!

Covering my eyes for a moment with my handkerchief, I stepped beneath my ancestral roof. I traversed echoing apartments where nothing was heard but the sound of my footsteps. The rooms were barely illuminated by the feeble light that penetrated the closed shutters: I visited that in which my mother had yielded her life while bringing me into the world, that to which my father used to retreat, that in which I slept in my cradle, and finally that in which friendship received my first vows in a sister's arms. All the rooms were in disarray, and spiders spun their webs over the abandoned debris. I rushed precipitously from the place; I hurried away without daring to turn my head. How sweet, but how swiftly fled, are those moments that brothers and sisters share in their childhood, gathered beneath the wings of their older parents! The family of man endures but a day; the breath of God disperses it like smoke. Sons scarcely

know their fathers, fathers their sons, brothers their sisters, sisters their brothers! The oak sees its acorns germinate all around: it is not thus with the children of men!

Arriving at B—, I was guided to the convent; I asked to speak with my sister. They said she would receive no one. I wrote her a note: she replied, saying that, on the point of consecrating herself to God, she was not allowed to spare a thought for the world; that if I loved her, I would avoid overwhelming her with grief. She added: “However if you intend to appear at the altar on the day of my vows, please condescend to play the role of my father; that is the only one worthy of your courage, the only one conducive to our friendship, and my repose.”

That cold steadfastness contrasted with the ardour of my friendship, caused me to experience a violent emotion. At one moment I was close to retracing my journey; at another I wished to remain, if only to disturb the proceedings. That hellish state even prompted the thought that I might stab myself in church, and mingle my dying breath with the vows that would snatch my sister from me. The superior of the convent informed me that they had allocated a bench for me in the sanctuary, and invited me to attend the ceremony which would take place the following day.

At daybreak I heard the first sound of bells. . . about ten o'clock, in a species of agony, I dragged myself to the convent. Nothing is more tragic than to witness such a spectacle, nothing more painful than to survive it.

An immense crowd filled the church. They led me to the bench in the sanctuary; I threw myself on my knees without knowing where I was, or what I might do. The priest was already waiting at the altar; suddenly the mysterious metal gate opened, and Amélie appeared, adorned by all of the world's display. She was so beautiful; there was something so divine in her expression; that her appearance excited a feeling of surprise and admiration. Conquered by the glorious sadness of that saintly being, defeated by the grandeur of religion, all my violent intentions vanished; my strength left me; I felt myself restrained by an all-powerful hand and, instead of blasphemies and threats, I found only profound adoration in my heart mingled with sighs of humility.

Amélie stood beneath the canopy. The ritual began by the light of torches, in the midst of flowers and perfumes, intended to render the sacrifice agreeable. At the offertory, the priest removed his ornate robes, retaining only a linen garment, ascended the pulpit, and in a simple sermon full of pathos, depicted the happiness of the virgin who consecrates herself to the Lord. When he pronounced the words: “She seemed like incense consumed in the fire” a vast calm and heavenly fragrance seemed to spread through the audience; it felt as though one was sheltering beneath the wings of the mystic dove; and one might have thought angels with perfumes and gar-

lands were descending towards the altar, and mounting again to the heavens.

The priest finished his sermon, donned his vestments once more, and continued the rite. Amélie, supported by two young nuns, knelt on the highest step of the altar. I was summoned to fulfil the paternal role. At the sound of my nervous steps in the sanctuary, Amélie was ready to faint. I was placed next to the priest, in order to pass him the scissors. At that moment I again felt violent emotion; I was about to give vent to my frustration, when Amélie, summoning her courage once more, gave me a look so full of reproach and sorrow that I was dismayed. Religion triumphed. My sister profited from my confusion; she bowed her head bravely. Her beautiful tresses fell to the ground around her, beneath the sacred blades; a long muslin robe replaced her fashionable dress, without rendering her appearance less touching; her troubled brow was hidden by a linen band; and the mysterious veil, double symbol of virginity and religion, covered her shorn head. She had never seemed more beautiful. The gaze of the penitent was fixed on the dust of this world, yet her soul was in Heaven.

However Amélie had not yet uttered her vows; and to die to the world it was necessary for her to experience the tomb. My sister lay on the marble flagstones; a shroud was draped over her; four torches lit the four corners. The priest, his stole round his neck, book in hand, commenced to read the Office of the Dead; the young virgins continued it. O the joys of religion, how great you are, yet how terrible! I was constrained to kneel beside this dismal spectacle. Suddenly a vague murmur arose from beneath the sepulchral veil; I leant forward and these dreadful words (which I alone heard) struck my ear: "God of Mercy: let me never rise from this funeral bier, yet bless my brother who shared no aspect of my illicit passion!"

At these words, as if escaping from the grave, the awful truth struck me; my wits wandered, I collapsed onto that shroud, I clasped my sister in my arms, I cried out: "Chaste bride of Christ, receive my last embrace across the icy wastes of death, and the depths of eternity, that separate you now from your brother!"

My movement, that cry, our tears, disturbed the ceremony, the priest halted the rite, the nuns closed the metal gate, the onlookers stirred and pressed towards the altar; I was borne away unconscious. How little I thanked those who recalled me to life! I learned, on opening my eyes, that the sacrifice had been consummated, and that my sister had been seized by a burning fever. She begged me not to seek to see her. O wretched life: a sister afraid to speak with her brother and a brother fearful of allowing his sister to hear his voice! I left the convent as if it were that place of expiation whose flames prepare us for the celestial life, where one has lost all, as if in the fires of hell, except hope.

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One can find the strength within one's soul to fight against personal misfortune; but to become the involuntary cause of another's, that is almost unbearable. Enlightened as to my sister's wretchedness, I understood how she must have suffered. Now several things were obvious to me that I had previously been unable to comprehend: that mixture of joy and sadness, which Amélie had exhibited at the moment when I left on my travels, the care she took to avoid me on my return, and yet the weakness that prevented her for so long from entering the convent; undoubtedly the unhappy girl had believed she was cured! Her intention to take the veil, her exemption from the novitiate, her disposition of her property in my favour, had apparently generated that secret correspondence which served to deceive me.

Oh my friends, I knew then what it was to shed tears, for an evil that was in no way imaginary! My passions, for long so indeterminate, threw themselves with fury on their prey at last. I even found an unexpected species of satisfaction in the fullness of my grief, and I perceived, with a secret feeling of joy, that pain is not a malady one exhausts as quickly as one exhausts pleasure.

I had desired to quit the earth before the Almighty permitted; it was a great crime: God had sent Amélie both to save and to punish me. Thus all guilty thought, all illicit action brings with it wretchedness and disorder. Amélie had begged me to live, and I owed it to her not to aggravate her sorrows. Besides (strangely enough!), I had no desire to die now that I was truly wretched. My grief occupied every moment: so filled was my heart, in the natural course of things, with trouble and misery!

It was then that I made another sudden resolution; I decided to leave Europe, and travel to America.

At that very instant, a convoy was being fitted out, at the port of B—, bound for Louisiana; I made my arrangements with the captain of one of its vessels; I made my intention known to Amélie, and occupied myself with my departure.

My sister had been close to the gates of death; but God, who granted her the virgin's palm, refused to call her to Him as yet; her ordeal down here was extended. Descending for a second time into the painful journey of life, the heroine, bowed beneath the cross, advanced courageously to the station of suffering, foreseeing only victory in that struggle, and in an excess of sorrow an excess of glory.

The sale of some property I yet retained, which I ceded to my brother, the lengthy preparations made by the convoy, and contrary winds, kept me for a long time in port. Every morning I went to seek news of Amélie, and always returned with new tokens of admiration and tears.

I wandered ceaselessly around that convent built by the sea shore. At a small barred window which overlooked a deserted strand, I often saw a nun sitting in a pensive attitude; she contem-

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plated the face of the ocean on which some vessel would appear, sailing to the ends of the earth. Several times, by the light of the moon, I saw that same nun at the same barred window; she gazed at the sea, lit by night's luminary, and seemed to be listening to the sound of the waves which broke mournfully on that solitary shore.

I believe I can still hear the bell that, during the night, called the nuns to prayer and vigil. While it slowly rang, and the nuns went silently to the altar of the Almighty, I hastened to the convent: there, alone at the foot of the walls, I would listen, in holy ecstasy, to the last sound of their hymns, mingling beneath the vaults of the chapel with the faint sound of the waves.

I do not know to what extent all these things, which ought to have fed my suffering, achieved the opposite by blunting its sting. My tears seemed less bitter when I shed them over the rocks and among the winds. My very sorrow, by its extraordinary nature, brought with it its own remedy: we delight in that which is uncommon, even when it proves a misfortune. I even conceived the hope that my sister in turn would feel less wretched.

A letter I received from her before my departure seemed to confirm this idea. Amélie complained tenderly of my sorrow, and assured me that time would lessen hers. "I do not despair of happiness," she wrote. "The very excess of sacrifice, now that the sacrifice has been consummated, serves to bring me a little peace. The innocence of my companions, the purity of their wishes, the regularity of their life, all provides a balm to my days. When I hear the storm's roar, and the seabirds beating their wings at my window, I, a poor celestial dove, think of the blessing I have been granted in finding a shelter from the tempest. Here is the holy mountain, the high summit from which we hear the last sounds of Earth, and the first harmonies of Heaven; it is here that religion gently lulls the sensitive soul: for the most violent of passions it substitutes a kind of burning chastity in which the lover and the virgin are united; it purifies our sighs; it changes a perishable flame to an incorruptible one; it mingles divinely both tranquillity and innocence with the remains of a troubled sensuality, in the heart that seeks repose, and the life that seeks retreat."

I had no idea what Heaven held in store for me, other than to warn me perhaps that storms would accompany my every step. The order was given for the flotilla's departure; several vessels had already set sail at sunset; I had arranged to spend the last night on shore, in order to pen a farewell missive to Amélie. About midnight, while I was occupied with this duty, moistening the paper with my tears, I was struck by the sound of the wind. I listened; and above the storm I heard the guns firing a warning, mingled with the tolling of the convent bell. I flew to the shore where all was deserted, and nothing could be heard but the roaring of the waves. I seated myself on a rock. On one side lay the gleaming waves, on the other the

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sombre walls of the convent vague against the sky. A little light shone from the barred window. Were you there, oh, my Amélie, prostrate at the foot of the cross, praying that storms would spare your unfortunate brother? The tempest over the sea, the tranquillity of your retreat; men broken on the reefs, at the foot of your sanctuary that nothing could trouble; infinity the other side of a cell wall; the flickering lights of the ships, the motionless lighthouse of the convent; the uncertainty of the voyager's future, the vestal recognising in a single day all the future days of her life; without, a soul such as yours, oh Amélie, as stormy as the ocean, a shipwreck more dreadful than that of the mariner; that whole tableau is yet engraved, profoundly, on my memory. Sun of this New World witness now to my tears, echo of the American shore that repeats René's voice, this was the aftermath of that dreadful night: leaning on the forecastle of my vessel, I saw my native land vanishing forever from my sight! I gazed for a long while at the last swaying trees lining the shores of my homeland, and the roofs of the convent sinking below the horizon.'

When René had finished telling his story, he drew a paper from his breast, and gave it to Père Souël; then throwing himself into Chactas' arms and stifling his sighs, he left the missionary to peruse the letter he had just handed him.

It was from the Mother Superior of —. It contained an account of the last moments of Amélie, of the Order of the Sisters of Mercy, who died as a result of her zeal and compassion, while caring for her companions who had been attacked by a contagious disease. The whole community was inconsolable, and Amélie was considered a saint. The Mother Superior added that, during the twenty years she had headed her convent, she had never known a nun of so sweet and equable a temperament or one who was more content at having forsaken the tribulations of the world.

Chactas clasped René in his arms; and the old man wept. 'My child,' he said to his adopted son, 'I would that Père Aubrey were here, he radiates a kind of tranquillity from the depths of his heart, that, while calming others, seems no stranger to tempests; it appears as the moon does on a stormy night; the wandering clouds fail to carry it with them in their flight; pure and unalterable, it sails on tranquilly above them. Alas, for me, everything troubles me and drags me along with it!'

Until that moment, Père Souël had listened, with an austere expression and without proffering a word, to René's story. He bore within him a compassionate heart, but maintained an inflexible manner to the outside world; the Sachem's emotion led him to break his silence:

'Nothing,' he said, addressing Amélie's brother, 'nothing of this history merits the pity you show here. I see a young man, intoxicated by chimaeras, displeased with everything, who has abandoned his

duty to society in order to engage in idle reverie. One is not, my dear sir, a superior man merely because one sees the world in an odious light. One only hates mankind and life itself through failing to look deeply enough. Extend your gaze a little farther, and you will soon be convinced that all the ills of which you complain are mere nothings. But how shameful that you cannot recall the one real tragedy of your life, without being forced to blush! All the purity; all the virtue; all the religiosity; all the haloes of a saintly woman, render the mere idea of your sorrows barely tolerable. Your sister has expiated her fault; but, if I must speak my mind here, I am afraid that, through a dreadful injustice, that confession emerging from the depths of the tomb has not affected your soul deeply enough in its turn. Why are you here, alone, in the depths of these woods where you spend your days, neglecting your whole duty? Saints, you will tell me, buried themselves in their deserts. They were accompanied by tears and employed those hours in extinguishing their passions that you spend perhaps in inflaming yours. Presumptuous youth, to believe that Mankind is self-sufficient! Solitude is an evil to one who does not view it under the auspices of God; it redoubles the soul's power, at the same time as it deprives it of any object on which to spend that power. Whoever has been gifted with strength, must consecrate it to the service of his fellow-creatures; if he fails to use it, he is first punished by a secret unhappiness, and then sooner or later Heaven inflicts on him some dreadful punishment.'

Troubled by these words, René, humiliated, raised his head from Chactas's breast. The blind Sachem began to smile; and that smile of those lips, unmarried to a corresponding expression of the eyes, had about it something mysterious and celestial. 'My son,' said Atala's former lover, 'he speaks sternly to us; he corrects both young and old, and he is right. Yes, you must renounce this unorthodox life which is filled with nothing but sorrow: there is no virtue except in the paths that others take.

One day, the Mississippi, as yet close to its source, grew weary of being no more than a limpid stream. It demanded mountain snows, water from the torrents, and floods of rain, and overflowed its banks, making desolate its delightful shores. At first the proud river revelled in its strength; but seeing that all was turned to wasteland by its passage; that it rolled along lonely in its solitude; that its waters were always troubled; it regretted the loss of the humble course that nature had prepared for it, and those birds, flowers, trees and rivulets, once the humble companions of its peaceful flow.'

As Chactas ceased to speak, the call of a flamingo, hidden in the reeds of the Mississippi, was heard heralding a midday storm. The three friends made their way back to their huts: René, in silence, walked along between the missionary praying to God and the blind Sachem feeling out his path. They say that, urged by these two old men, he returned to his native wife, but without finding happiness

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with her. He perished a short while later, along with Chactas and Père Souël, in that massacre of both the French and the Natchez Indians which took place in Louisiana. A rocky seat is still pointed out, from which he used to gaze at the setting sun.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

François-Rene, Vicomte de Chateaubriand, was born at Saint-Malo in Brittany in 1768. Antipathetic to the French Revolution, he travelled to North America in 1791. Two later works derived from that period, *René*, and *Atala*, evidencing the new sensibility, greatly influenced the development of the Romantic Movement in France. On his return to France in 1792 he married, fought for the Bourbon army, was wounded at Thionville, and subsequently lived in exile in England. He returned to France in 1800, and it was a substantial literary defence of Christianity which attracted Napoleon's notice and led to his employment by the Emperor at Rome and in Switzerland. Ultimately however Napoleon's actions led to Chateaubriand's resignation in 1804, after the execution of the Duc d'Enghien.

He travelled widely from 1806, in Europe and the Middle East, and highly critical of Napoleon followed the King into exile in 1815 in Ghent during the Hundred Days. Raised to the peerage at the Restoration, he entered into a complex relationship with the monarchy which led to him supporting the future Charles X. He subsequently served as ambassador to Prussia and the United Kingdom, and was Minister of Foreign affairs from 1822 to 1824.