



# *Atala*

Romantic drama from the wilderness, after René de Châteaubriand

by Christian Lanciai (2005)

*The Characters:*

a bartender  
an Indian  
drunks  
Lopez  
Chief of the Muscogans  
seven Muscogon Indians  
Atala  
Father Aubry  
3 cowboys

The action takes place in the early part of the 19th century  
in Saint-Augustine, Florida, and in the wild regions north of Louisiana.

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Ackt I scene 1. A saloon.

Drunks, cowboys, alcoholic Indians, gamblers and ladies of doubtful reputation.

*bartender* You have had enough, Uncas.

*Indian* I can never get enough.

*drunk 1* Let him drink, Mac, so that he may drink himself to death.

*Indian* That's right, buddy. Only a dead Indian is a good Indian.

*drunk 1* Give him what he takes, Mac. He is my guest.

*bartender* I advise against it, Uncas.

*Indian* I am used to constantly being more humiliated. What else can you whites do with us once so free Indians? You came here with your licentious culture of sex, rape and violence, the purpose of which was only to cleanse the country from its free and natural inhabitants, in order to be able to exploit it to death yourselves. What else can we do then than to get drunk? The fire water is the only positive thing you brought with you, for at least it deafens and makes us forget.

*drunk 1* Refill his glass, Mac. He can take anything.

*bartender* As long as you pay...

*drunk 1* Of course I pay.

*Lopez (has followed the scene, now comes up to join them next to the Indian)*

My friend, what are you doing here in town who should be with your brothers out in the wild?

*Indian* They are all lost.

*Lopez* Is it us the whites who have exterminated you?

*Indian* Not only. A disaster never comes alone. First it was the small pox. Then we were chased away from our homeland by the whites. Then there were tribal wars which forced us to move on. No one wants to have anything to do with exiled Indians. So we were all scattered and are dying. That's how I stranded in town, for here at least there is liquor.

*Drunk 1* Get him drunk! Let him perform! Let him sparkle with his pathetic pathos! Let him make us laugh at him!

*Another drunk* It's not just only all dead Indians who are the only good Indians. There are also ridiculous Indians who are funny when they get drunk and fall around. They can't take alcohol.

*Lopez (to the Indian)* Come with me, my friend. You don't belong here.

*Indian* What can you do to soften my destiny, my good man?

*Lopez* I have had plenty to do with Indians. I know them. I can listen to you, and we could perhaps learn something from each other.

*Indian* Do you speak our language?

*Lopez* I lived for several years with the Natchez Indians and speak both their language and the gesture language.

*Indian* Then you are one of us and could understand us. I would like to hear your story.

*Lopez* Perhaps you know some people I used to know. Come, let's get away from here. Let's leave these drunks to drink up their own medicine themselves.

*Indianen* I will follow you, my good man, since you don't seem completely unnatural. What is your name?

*Lopez* Call me Lopez. What is yours?

*Indian* My name is Chactas.

*Lopez* Welcome to my home, brother Chactas. All that is mine shall be yours.

*Indian* You speak like an Indian.

*Lopez* Come, let's go.

*(They leave the joint.)*

## Scene 2. Lopez' apartment.

*Chactas* You good man, you have been like a father to me and brought me back to life and restored to me my faith in the worth of living. Only your Christian religion I will never be able to embrace.

*Lopez* What then is wrong about it? What do you have against the love and suffering of Jesus Christ?

*Chactas* Nothing, but I don't like the result of your religion. In the name of it you have invaded our country and stolen it away from us without right and caused us natives unsurveyable sufferings. With your religion you preach love but only cause hatred by your presumptions of power and self-sufficiency and your ruthlessness, which is the absolute contrary to love. We Indians don't understand and don't like your Christian double standards, my good father Lopez.

*Lopez* I understand you. I have lived with the Indians. We whites have committed unforgivable crimes against you Indians, but no one is more aware of that than I, for I have loved you. But it is not the fault of the Christian religion. It is only good in itself and only means well by its exclusively peaceful and loving intentions.

*Chactas* Why then does it cause so much suffering? Father Lopez, I can't consider you Christians as anything else than deceived and brainwashed by a sham system of indoctrination.

*Lopez* I am sorry, my son. Are we then all liars?

*Chactas* No, father Lopez, only clueless victims. But the worst thing is that it seems to be incurable. Therefore I must leave you, beloved father. You have helped me to get away from the temptations of the fire water, for that I am infinitely grateful, but I must return to my own life and find my brothers in the wilderness, if I still have any. Perhaps there are still some uprooted tribal friends erring about in the forests of the north.

*Lopez* You do as you wish, my friend. You are born free and have the right of a free life. And I can only wish you the best of luck.

*Chactas* Thank you, father. I value your blessing higher than your entire religion.

*Lopez* Go in peace, my son, and find your freedom and your happiness.

*Chactas* Thank you, father. I will do my best. (*leaves*)

*Lopez* A wild native, but perhaps wiser and at least freer than any Christian. Perhaps he will one day return and let me know if he found anything on his wayward journey.

### Scene 3. In the forest.

*Chactas* Where are you, my brothers? I have searched for you all over the continent in these wild forests but only been led astray by random rumours. Am I then the only survivor of an entire tribe and people? I only know that I am lonelier than ever, since there is no way out of the Indian death trap of the unprotected ethnic minority in the hands of the whites.

*Indian 1 (suddenly appearing with a spear)* Surrender!

*Chactas* Who are you?

*Indian 1 (yells wildly; several warlike Indians appear surrounding Chactas, who has no chance.)* It doesn't matter! But you are a Natchez Indian! It shows from afar! And you were our mortal enemies!

*Chactas* Then you must be Muscogans or Siminolans.

*Indian 2* Right! No Natchez Indian can expect any mercy from us!

*Chactas* My father and grandfather have taken more than a hundred scalps of the Muscogan heroes.

*Indian 3* Don't you think we know? That's why a Natchez is more abominable to us than all the whites!

*Indian 1* You will have the great honour of getting burned alive in our greatest village!

*Chactas* I thank you for that honour and have no fear of death, since you have already killed all my relatives.

*Indian 2* The last one shall be our noblest victim!

*Indian 3* We will exult in performing our wildest war dance around your funeral pyre, which is the last thing you will see in life while you slowly die in atrocious pains!

*Chactas* I am deeply honoured and thankful for it.

*Indian 1* Take him away! (*Chactas is bound and taken away.*)

Act II scen 1. The camp.

*Chief* Tie him up with hands and feet! Put a noose around his neck as well, and put five warriors on guard of him each one by his rope's end, and let them pull hard if he makes trouble!

*Indian 1* He has tried to erscape several times and will surely try again.

*Chief* Show no mercy! He is a Natchez and has even been living with the whites, so he is contaminated by their posisonous civisation!

*Indian 2* I knew it! He is poisonous!

*Indian 3* More than that! He is mortal!

*Chief* Watch him carefully! None of our five warriors may leave any of his fettering ropes until the council has decided the best way to sacrifice him and send him to his forefathers who caused us such irreparable damage through the centuries!

*Indian 1* Let him vanish up in smoke! Send him to the Great Spirit!

*Chactas* You will never get rid of me, for we will all meet with the Great Spirit sooner or later.

*Chief* If you dare to quarrel as well, you cursed worm's fry of the poisonous tribe of Natchez, we could gag you as well.

*Chactas* You are welcome to torture me to death, I promise not to cry out until I have come out of reach of you on the other side of death, for physical pain means nothing to me, especially if it is caused by my deadliest enemies out of sheer sadistic vanity.

*Chief* You are brave and you shall live long enough to be able to experience a long and painful death, and just because you promise not to complain of whatever extreme pains we propose to treat you with, we will make a sport of torturing you to death as slowly and carefully as possible. If you still complain we shall laugh at your weakness.

*Chactas* It will be me who will laugh at you after death.

*Chief* That's enough! Execute the sentence!

(*Chactas is stretched out on the ground with five warriors at the end of each rope tied around his hands, feet and throat, in a square.*)

*Indian 2* Thus you can't move without any of your guards being awakened and the rope being tightened!

*Chactas* You are just playing games. It's always the victim that triumphs.

*Indian 3* Your way to triumph after death will be long and difficult, and on that way you will fall and wail and give in to your deadly pains many times.

*Chactas* Just torture me to death. I will only laugh at you.

*Indian 1* Your laughter will get stuck in your throat since the least spiteful noise from your throat will be throttled immediately! (*pulls the rope of the noose*)

*Indian 2* Don't strangle him! We have to see him flounder first! (*pulls a rope around one of Chactas' feet*)

*Indian 3* Not only flounder but also fence! (*pulls a rope around Chactas' hand*)

*Indian 4* (*pulls another rope around Chactas' other foot*) Fence and flounder now until you get quartered!

*Indian 1* In five parts! The head belongs to me! (*pulls*)

*Atala* (*enters*) No, my friends, wait with the torture until he will be put to death. Let him flourish until then, so that his death struggle will be as prolonged as possible. Drink and live, brave warrior, as long as you can. (*gives him something to drink from a jug.*)

*Chactas* Who are you, lovely maid, from another and better world?

*Atala* Just an Indian, like yourself.

*Indian 1* She is the daughter of the chief and is called Atala.

*Chactas* Pardon me, sweet Atala, but your impression as an Indian is not quite convincing, since you are too light for this dark and warlike world.

*Atala* Every woman is that in the face of a warrior who is about to meet his death. It's only natural of you to see me in that light.

*Indian 2* You offer something to drink to a doomed prisoner who has been slave with the whites and there acquired his canine madness as the dog he is, but not to us.

*Atala* Then I must fetch some more, if you all want to drink.

*Indian 3* Do so, good princess, and we shall sleep better afterwards.

*Atala* I will do so. (*leaves with her jug*)

*Chactas* (*aside*) An angelic beauty like from a higher world and not at all like ordinary Indian women. If she wasn't the chief's own daughter, I would say she was of some mixed blood, but I dare not express my suspicion concerning her possible intentions...

*Indian 4* Keep still, you monkey, or we will break your bones! (*pulls the rope*)

*Chactas* Lie still yourself, you wriggling snake, so that I at least could have some sleep my last night of living!

*Indian 1* No risk. Your fate will be settled before dawn. The council is having a meeting now to immediately decide what kind of running the gauntlet into death you shall have.

*Chactas* The sooner, the better, so that I will be rid of you.

*Indian 1* We will make sure enough that you will not get away so easily. (*pulls the rope*)

*Chactas* You humbugs, you can torture me but not kill me as long as the council just keeps ranting away my case!

*Indian 1* Yes, we can torture you, and we enjoy it and will go on enjoying it as long as we may. (*pulls his rope*)

(*The stage is slightly moved to the right showing the Indians at the council.*)

*Chief* I think that we should burn him slowly, so that he is charred from the feet upwards hanging tied by his arms from a tree.

*Indian 5* I must insist on his running the gauntlet first, so that we may test him and see what he can take, just to first make him soft enough.

*Indian 6* Grease him with honey and hang him from a tree with ants and bees, so that he gets eaten in the same time that he gets charred.

*Indian 7* Before he dies in that manner we should throw him into a bag with two wild cats, so that he wakes up first.

*Chief* Then no one will see him die.

*Atala* (*has come up behind her father, takes him softly round his neck from behind*) Why not let him live and become one of us? He has been with the whites and could be of great help by his experience as a spy.

*Chief* You don't know the Natchez, my daughter. They will never lose their stripes but remain lethal to everyone else for the rest of their lives.

*Atala* The risk is that he will survive whatever you do, since you really don't want to kill him.

*Chief* We have to kill him. The question is how we shall do it but still acquire his spirit.

*Indian 5* It won't work unless he dies within our sight.

*Indian 6* Exactly.

*Atala* I leave you to your council, but don't let it go on all night. Then you might get sleepy and forget all about it.

*indian 7* There is something in what Atala says. We are already tired and have heavy eyelids.

*Chief* It will pass if we just reach an agreement.

*Atala* The longer you go on, the wiser you will get.

*Indian 5* My view exactly.

*Indian 6* So let's just carry on.

*Chief* Where were we now? How far had we reached?

*Indian 7* Half way.

*Chief* No further?

*Indian 7* We know the sum but not the formula.

*Indian 6* You mean we know what weather we'll have but not how we'll get it.

*Indian 5* Yes, we understand the message but not the meaning.

*Indian 6* That's the same thing.

*Indian 5* That's what I mean.

(*Atala has passed on to Chactas and the warriors, and the scene is turned back.*)

Atala            You must be tired of being so on edge of guarding a chained bear. Here I have brought you something to drink. (*offers them something to drink*)

Indian 1        You bestow life and joy on us, princess.

2                More than that. We get more than death to live for.

3                More than that. You make us relax,

4                The eternal womanly makes us feel like real men.

Atala            Yes, you are really brave who dare to guard so mortally dangerous a prisoner as this Natchez.

Indian 1        Give us some more to drink, princess!

2                Yes, it really tastes delicious.

3                You don't need to save anything for our doomed prisoner.

4                What does the council say?

Atala            They just keep on discussing and will soon be asleep.

4                That's how board meetings always end.

3                It's infallible. You get sleepy just by thinking of it.

2                You said it. (*yawns*)

1                Did you have anything left for us to drink, princess?

Atala            I am sure it's enough. (*intends to serve him when he falls asleep*)

Chactas        You seduce them to sleep by your soft drink, princess.

Atala            That's the point. Soon the whole camp will be asleep.

Chactas        Is it thanks to you?

Atala            No, it is only natural.

Chactas        My brave guards seem to completely have forgotten their important plight.

Atala (*comes quickly up to him*) They are now all asleep. Quickly. Take the opportunity. (*cuts one of his ropes and gives him another knife.*)

Chactas        Why, princess?

Atala            Don't ask such a stupid question. (*He is liberated.*)

Chactas        Can you do this and get away with it?

Atala            Only if I get away with you.

Chactas        You are then risking everything for me.

Atala            I have to. (*reveals a small crucifix around her neck*) I am a Christian.

Chactas        Sweet virgin! Then you are the very one I thought!

Atala            I can't see the last member of his tribe being sacrificed without reason. Then I'd rather sacrifice myself.

Chactas        Sweet princess, so you want to follow me out into the wilderness?

Atala            I have to.

Chactas        What will your father say?

Atala            You are getting more stupid all the time. If I stay and you run away he will be dishonoured. If we run away together he can blame you for having seduced me and will get high for all the rest of his life on his implacable fury against you.

Chactas        So we have to run away together.

*Atala* Come now. The entire camp is asleep. Only we know what is happening.

*Chactas* And the moon who mirror us and lead our escape away from people and their nothingness.

*Atala* Exactly. Hurry on. (*She takes his hand, and they hurry away from the camp, where everybody is asleep.*)

### Act III scene 1.

*Chactas* How strange your wandering is, *Atala*, away from reality and its unbearable oppression and tragedies out to freedom in this world without limits of life and love in nature. We have wandered through dream landscapes from the black night of death out into the limitlessness of light and beauty and only by your guidance. *Atala*, you are to me almost like a higher form of being that the Great Spirit himself has brought in my way to give me a chance to forget the abyss of terrors and misfortunes which all my life has only been so far.

*Atala* God sent you in my way to offer me a chance of testing my wings myself although not without test and trial.

*Chactas* You have abandoned your tribe, your family, your position and your father the chief only to share the destiny of an outcast and doomed devil without a future. Was it really worth it?

*Atala* That's what is worth finding out. Don't forget that I am a Christian. I am marked by the cross around my neck, and it was the Christian compassion that overcame me to show you mercy and save you from death, since you were innocent.

*Chactas* My fathers were not innocent of slaughtering many of your relatives.

*Atala* No child is punishable for his fathers' crimes. If that happens it is the supreme inhuman injustice.

*Chactas* But how could you become a Christian if you still are born and raised in nature as an Indian?

*Atala* My father the chief was not my real father.

*Chactas* Does that mean your real father was white? Has your father the chief then still adopted you?

*Atala* Exactly. Long ago there was a white Spaniard living with us who had learned to loathe his civilisation and the white man's methodical extermination war against the Indians, wherefore he broke with civilisation and shared a life with us and defended us against his brothers.

*Chactas* So he begot you with an Indian but still maintained his Christendom?

*Atala* Yes. That was the problem. He insisted on me being made a Christian, and he really taught me only what was good about that religion, but this caused some controversy in the tribe. The council demanded of my father to either become wholly an Indian or to return to his Christian brothers.

*Chactas* How could you then maintain his Christianity?

*Atala* Our most difficult problems and councils usually end up in a compromise. He promised to obey the council and be off on his way on the condition that I was to retain the religion he had given me. The chief saved the situation and stepped between, for my mother was his sister. He found my father's terms fair enough and promised to bring me up and protect me as his own daughter, and my father promised never to return.

*Chactas* Where did he go?

*Atala* He returned to the city of Saint-Augustine of the whites and there found himself in great demand as an adviser in connection with Indians, since he spoke our language and was highly appreciated by all Indians as their friend.

*Chactas* Do you remember his name?

*Atala* His name was Lopez.

*Chactas* It's the same man! He took care of me in Saint-Augustine and brought me away from the road to perdition by the bottle. A strange destiny has truly brought you in my way. That means, dear beloved Atala, that we are actually brother and sister as fosterlings.

*Atala* His name was Lopez and the friend of the Indians and about double our age?

*Chactas* Yes.

*Atala* Then it's really the same man. So my father took care of you. A strange destiny has united us. Did he tell about his life?

*Chactas* Yes, he told me much about it. Most of all he told me about an admirable hermit who lived completely alone far away in the wilderness beyond all civilisation whose acquaintance he had made. His name was father Aubry, and when I left him he hoped that I would encounter him some day.

*Atala* We are on our way to him.

*Chactas* Do you know him?

*Atala* I always heard about him and know where he lives. He has a small Christian community as far away from the civilisation of the whites as you could possibly get.

*Chactas* Then you really know the ways we have been following.

*Atala* We ought to be almost there. Look! (*A cross raised up on a hill suggests Christian vicinities.*) Then the hermit's hut should be close enough. (*They reach a cave.*) Look! This is the sacred dwelling.

*Chactas (peeps inside)* No one seems to be here.

*Aubry (coming surprisingly up to them from behind)* Looking for someone?

*Atala* We are looking for the holy father Aubry, who manages a Christian community here in the forest.

*Aubry* Then you have come to the right place. It's me. But who are you?

*Atala (falling on her knees to him)* I am Atala of the Muscogan Indians, whose chief is my father, but I am a Christian. This Indian of the Natchez I saved from getting murdered without reason.

*Aubry* And you have found each other and love each other and are eloping trying to find protection with me.

*Chactas* Yes.

*Aubry* You are not alone. The pattern is familiar. Of course you are welcome, and I could also marry you if you wish.

*Atala* Not yet, father.

*Aubry* Do you want your husband to be christened first?

*Atala* No, that's not it.

*Aubry* What is it then?

*Atala (hesitates)*

*Chactas* Speak, Atala!

*Atala* Only alone with father Aubry.

*Chactas* If it concerns religion I have nothing to do with it.

*Atala* Yes, it concerns religion.

*Chactas* Then I had better leave. Call on me when you are ready. (*removes himself*)

*Aubry* Well, my daughter, what is the problem?

*Atala* I haven't told my friend the whole truth.

*Aubry* What didn't you tell?

*Atala* My mother was an Indian and took my father's religion more seriously than he himself and devoted my life already as a child to the service of the holy virgin.

*Aubry* She had no right to do that.

*Atala* But she did.

*Aubry* Do you mean to say that she promised your virginity to the higher powers?

*Atala* Yes. I would always remain a virgin as an insurance that I would always belong to my father's Christian faith. I would never be allowed to taste the earthal love, and if I would try it anyway I would die.

*Aubry* A terrible promise. Only an Indian could become that fanatical.

*Atala* What is done is done, and I can't get away from it. I am ordained to the holy virgin once and for all and cannot fail my own mother.

*Aubry* But you do love your Indian, don't you?

*Atala* If I do! I adore him! He is the most beautiful and tender man in the world and couldn't be more ideal. I fell in love for the first time in my life when I first saw him.

*Aubry* Then we must release you from your mother's arbitrariness.

*Atala* How? She is dead and can't take it back.

*Aubry* We must apply to the church for a pardon, absolution and release.

*Atala* There is no church here. Its only authority here is you.

*Aubry* I am not consecrated and also lack the authority.

*Atala* So it's deadlocked, and if I give in to our love I am dead.

*Aubry* Life cannot be that cruel. Nature has its own laws, and no church has any authority over them.

*Atala* A promise is a promise, father. I cannot break my mother's vows.

*Chactas (reappears suddenly)* You will have to excuse me, but I have overheard everything. What kind of an inhuman religion do you belong to, that preaches love but forbids it?

*Aubry* My son, calm down. There is always a way out.

*Chactas (raises Atala by force)* I love you, Atala, with a passion more irresistible than any tropical storm in the wilderness! It can tear up trees, but with my love I could smash and crush your entire church of lies and falsity by the truth and sincerity of my feelings! I could never love anyone but you! Even if you would die from me by your mother's curse, I would then never be able to adore anyone but you! Let us have each other, Atala, for our own sake and for the sake of life!

*Atala* My mother is dead, my beloved handsome Chactas. You can't spite the last will of the dead or challenge their spirits. Then they will only prove their higher power over your destiny and mortal life.

*Chactas* Atala, be sensible! Your folly is against all nature! You can't strive against it! I am yours and you are mine, and no stupid ordinations from others could ever separate us. You must allow me to love you!

*Atala* Handsome noble Chactas, if you take me you lose me, and I will lose you!

*Aubry* Here the laws of both the church and nature are powerless.

*Chactas* There you are! The church means nothing! Love means everything!

*Aubry* My friend, the church cannot take responsibility for your love. It is too wild.

*Chactas* So it is free to be sacred in its sincerity forever. Come, my beloved Atala, and let me take you once and for all with an eternal burning kiss! (*embraces her and kisses her wildly*)

*Atala* Chactas, not even you can touch my destiny. We all have our destinies to follow, you your family tragedy with the misfortunes of your tribe and your exile, and I with the enforced virginity of my Christendom.

*Chactas* Do you mean to say that you don't want my love?

*Atala* Our wills are powerless against our destinies, Chactas.

*Chactas* What are you trying to say? That you don't love me?

*Aubry* Chactas, love can never be enforced. Let it speak when so it wills itself, but don't force it to subjection.

*Chactas* I am only following my nature, but Atala seems to make resistance against nature.

*Atala* Alas, don't break my sore heart, my beloved Chactas! Then you will only harm yourself!

*Chactas* All I want is to love you! What law of nature could forbid my own natural urge?

*Atala* Wait, Chactas, and be patient! Let love speak when it so wills itself, but if you don't allow it some space to breathe, it will not have enough air to be able to speak and live! Father Aubry is right!

*Chactas (sullen)* You could as well command nature not to live.

*Atala* A promise is a promise, Chactas. I have to consider it.

*Chactas* And remain a virgin all your life? Who ever heard of anything so unnatural and absurd?

*Aubry* Many live according to that law of chastity, Chactas, and save the powers of their soul for eternity.

*Chactas* I want to live now while I am young and beautiful and have someone to love and not for some uncertain life after death!

*Atala* Show me forbearance and patience, Chactas, for the sake of my female capriciousness!

*Chactas* Is that all what this is all about?

*Atala* No, it's the word and law of life itself given to me by my mother when I was born and which nothing can break, not even you!

*Chactas* You are only tormenting me and playing with me in the name of the whims of your deranged and unsound religion.

*Aubry* A promise is a promise, Chactas. No one can escape his destiny.

*Chactas* I don't understand your clinging to your mad superstition as a law of life when it is nothing but death! (*leaves in fury*)

*Aubry* He is angry.

*Atala* He is right and will never give in. Then there is only one thing to do.

*Aubry* What are you thinking of?

*Atala* Subordinating myself to my destiny.

*Aubry* That we must all do.

*Atala* That's what I mean.

*Aubry* Let's sleep on the matter as sensible beings. Tomorrow is another day. Everything will pass and also the disappointment, frustration and wrath of Chactas.

*Atala* No. It will never pass, but it will burn in my heart forever.

*Aubry* He must have time to calm down and come to his senses.

*Atala* Do you think you could stop the flow of the Mississippi?

*Aubry* No, but there the issue is not a matter of human passions. All human passions and feelings can be controlled and ruled, and it is man's sacred obligation to rise above nature and the animals and rule himself and all feelings.

*Atala* That's what my mother used to say. But I can't make Chactas disappointed and defeated.

*Aubry* He will recover, like the Mississippi.

*Atala* I hope so, father Aubry. If I cannot solace him, you must do it.

*Aubry* I am sure we can do it together.

*Atala* We shall see, father Aubry. Now I am tired and must have a rest.

*Aubry* We all are. (*They retire back into the cave.*)

*Chactas (crying in the background, in despair)* Atala! Atala!

How much can I love you  
without perishing?  
How far can I drive me on  
in the bolting downhill race of love  
without breaking down and falling?  
How far can I drive  
my own self torture  
in the irresistible drive of fury and madness  
of the boundlessness of love?  
That's the infernal crux, that love has no limits,  
but it must hold on forever  
or not at all.

*(falls down exhausted and asleep.  
Darkness increases and turns to night,  
then light returns, and father Aubry enters and finds him.*

*Aubry* Wake up, my son.  
*Chactas* What is the matter?  
*Aubry* You can't lie here.  
*Chactas* That's what I have been doing.  
*Aubry* You had better come back with me to the cave.  
*Chactas (sits up)* Has anything happened?  
*Aubry* I am afraid she is not quite well.  
*Chactas* Has she eaten something inappropriate?  
*Aubry* If only it were that simple.  
*Chactas* Holy man, you drive me crazy by your incomplete answers.  
*Aubry* I don't have the complete answer. No one has it.  
*Chactas* But what has happened?  
*Aubry* Atala had best explain herself. *(They reach the cave,  
Atala lies still outstretched in white but very pale.)*  
*Chactas* Atala! Are you ill?  
*Atala* I am afraid so, my prince of the wild.  
*Chactas* What has happened?  
*Atala* I am afraid that my mother is calling for me.  
*Chactas* Atala, don't joke!  
*Atala* You see how pale and weak I am. It's my own fault. I could no longer  
bear my own conscience.  
*Chactas (terrified)* What have you done?  
*Aubry* Atala, don't tell us you have done something stupid?  
*Atala* My friends and my lover, I have done what I could to fulfill my  
obligations to everyone. I could not live without loving you, my dear handsome  
husband, and thereby I could not live without violating my mother. So I could not  
live. That's how simple it is.  
*Chactas* You are constantly growing more pale! What have you done!

*Atala* I have taken the only possible medicine against my ailment, but it works slowly. I still have strength enough to talk.

*Aubry* She is poisoned. She has done the worst possible thing and worsened her problems a thousand times. Didn't you know, *Atala*, that suicide is what your Christian religion condemns most of all?

*Chactas* (*can't understand it*) Suicide?

*Atala* Am I then condemned for having kept my Christian promise to my mother?

*Aubry* Suicide is worse than murder!

*Atala* I have a good conscience, father. There was no other way to keep my faith to both my mother and my brother in my love. I die of love.

*Chactas* (*starts to understand gradually*) It is not fair!

*Aubry* Yes, my daughter, you have done the greatest possible injustice to yourself. What kind of medicine was it?

*Atala* A herb that my mother gave me for all eventualities and which I kept ready and safe in my crucifix. You just fall asleep without pains. You might feel somewhat cold.

*Chactas* *Atala!*

*Aubry* Alas, then I know what it is, and then there is no remedy. Wretched daughter, you are given your life to administer it and make the best of it. To then bereave yourself of it is to misunderstand the whole meaning of life.

*Atala* Forgive me my folly, father. All I did was to love.

*Chactas* Our love was sacred, and I never touched you. Only the more then can I love you for having sacrificed your life for your fidelity. Yes, *Atala*, if you had been permitted to live, we could naught else but to have loved each other unto madness. Now that love is remitted instead to the realm of the Great Spirit.

*Atala* We'll meet again in eternity.

*Chactas* Where we all meet again, but where the two of us always will be able to recognize each other.

*Atala* Can you forgive me, *Chactas*? Can you forgive me, father?

*Aubry* You did not know what you were doing.

*Atala* Yes, I knew what I was doing, it was perfectly premeditated, and my mother has already forgiven me.

*Aubry* I am not so sure of that. Under the circumstances I think she would have preferred that you had broken your promise to her.

*Chactas* You are innocent, *Atala*. I forgive you, but I will never forgive your religion, which allowed this and in which name this could have happened.

*Atala* Thank you. All I need is your forgiveness. By my action I am released from all promises and also from my religion, which blocked our love. Perhaps I will find another better religion beyond death.

*Chactas* You would have found a better religion in our love.

*Atala* I already have it, and I will keep it. Thank you, my dear *Chactas*, for having given me this as a present for all eternity.

*Chactas* You gave me my life, my love. Alas, if only I could give it back to you, so that you could live!

*Atala* The life we found and made together will never die. So much I know for certain.

*Aubry* My daughter, I am short of words, but in the name of eternity I forgive you.

*Atala* And in the name of eternity I love you both. Farewell. (*dies*)

*Chactas* (*starts bellowing immediately in despair, is completely distraught, tears himself away from her side in desperation, climbs up beside the cave to the top and cries:* )

If a religion thus can make itself guilty of the greatest possible cruelty, what right does such a religion then have to exist? (*disappears*)

*Aubry* (*brings forth his rosary, mumbles his prayers and crosses himself. More thoughtfully:*)

Is this tragedy a sign from the Great Spirit or from God or from both? And what would then be the meaning of it? All I can find is a dense forest of question marks. (*crosses himself, closes Atala's eyes and pulls the cover over her face.*)

#### Act IV scene 1.

Like act I scene 1, only worse – more drunkenness, dirtier sluts, more decayed bums, everything more shabby and vulgar.

*cowboy 1* Soon we will at last have every single damned indian and nigger exterminated from this country.

*2* If it only were so bloody simple. We need the niggers for our slaves, damn it!

*3* If only those plantation-owners had the sense to waste the niggers instead of multiplying them.

*1* They are thinking of their money, you know. Slaves who breed slaves provide extra labour potentials free of charge.

*3* But trees and slaves take time to grow up.

*1* Most of them can be used for labour already at 13. Children work more efficiently than grown-ups.

*2* What we need in this country is more and more efficient slavers.

*1 and 3* Exactly!

*2* Let's suggest it to the president.

*1* He could that way win the elections and overrun the abolitionists.

*Lopez* Is that all you are good for, yankees? Enslave people and drive them hard to death?

*1* You bloody dego should shut up!

*2* Mexicans are not welcome here. You are just illegal immigrants and parasites.

*Lopez* I have lived longer in this country than you and was even born here.

3 I think I know this bloke. Wasn't he the one who defended the red-skins?

1 Yes, I'll be damned if it isn't that fucking Indian lover!

2 What the devil are you doing here, you anti-American? Why haven't you been lynched long ago?

Lopez Because I never did anything to deserve it.

1 Listen to him! (*pulls his gun*) Get out of the way of decent people, or I will fill you up with holes!

Lopez I thought this was a free country.

2 It was until you came along.

3 It will never be free enough until it is free from all niggers and indians!

1 Precisely!

*bartender (interferes)* Don't touch Lopez, boys. If you do, I will set the sheriff on to you, and he will hang you at once. Lopez never harmed as much as a fly.

1 Come on, boys. Let's scam. There is a stench of antiracism here.

2 Worse than that. The foreigners have taken over.

3 As if we didn't have enough shitbags all over the country already!

1 (*applies his glass to pour its contents in the pants of Lopez*) You seem to have pissed your pants. (*leaves*)

2 You are lucky not to be completely a nigger. (*leaves*)

3 You should introduce fried niggers and scalped indians on your menu, Mac! (*leaves*)

*bartender* I am sorry about their behaviour, Lopez. They are shitbags all three of them.

Lopez (*hasn't moved a muscle during the incident*) Unfortunately, Mac, I have been obliged to get used to them all over the country.

Chactas (*very much aged, has kept apart and hardly been seen, but now treads forth*) I thought I would never see you again, father Lopez.

Lopez I recognize that voice. But you have aged, my son. What was your name again?

Chactas Chactas.

Lopez Chactas! You left me and abandoned society to search for your murdered kin. Did you find them?

Chactas No, father Lopez. I only found another death.

Lopez But obviously you survived.

Chactas I shouldn't have.

Lopez What happened?

Chactas I have spent the last three years erring about the desert lands of the north constantly screaming and crying as far as the Niagara, where I wanted to throw myself down the falls. But someone called on me. My past was still alive. I couldn't get away from it. I remembered father Aubry's words, that I always had to give life another chance. He was the one who called on me. Then I understood that

he was dead. Then I decided to revisit his and my beloved's graves, to bid life a last farewell by making a pilgrimage to the only beautiful memory it had given me.

*Lopez* So you met father Aubry in the wilderness?

*Chactas* Yes, father Lopez. Your daughter led me to him.

*Lopez* My daughter?

*Chactas* Atala.

*(Lopez falls silent in deep thought, then gives a sign to the bartender, who immediately serves two drinks.)*

*Lopez* My friend, you must tell me more about this. So you have known my daughter?

*Chactas* She rescued me from death, and we escaped together from her tribe out into the wilderness. There we found father Aubry, who took care of us until she died.

*Lopez* So you have known her and loved her. Why did she die?

*Chactas* She was a Christian.

*Lopez* You make it sound like a disease.

*Chactas* It was a mortal disease that spread to me and almost cost me my mind.

*Lopez* But you have returned here to Sodom and Gomorrah, to the civilisation of violence and to the crass world of ruthlessness and licensed egoism running wild. Was it in an effort to try to look me up?

*Chactas* Yes, father Lopez. I wanted to see you once more in life to be able to tell you how much I loved your daughter.

*Lopez* Those were my happiest days, when I lived with the Indians to learn from them and engaged myself so deeply in their lives that I took an Indian woman for my wife. But I couldn't let go of Christianity, my only contact with my origin. They couldn't accept my religion, why I had to depart from them, since I had scandalized the family of their chief, but I succeeded in making my wife preserve my christianity and give it for my sole legacy to my daughter.

*Chactas* It cost her life.

*Lopez* How so?

*Chactas* Her mother promised her to the holy virgin as a nun.

*Lopez* Why?

*Chactas* To make sure she would remain Christian.

*Lopez* Your story upsets me to the core. So my Indian wife always remained faithful to me although I had ruined her life. And my ruination went on to my daughter. Alas, what a mess have we whites really made here of a paradisaical and virgin world, which never needed us and which now forever has been lost?

*Chactas* Yes, father Lopez, but those whites who realize their accountability are very few. You are the only exception I have met so far.

*Lopez* What will you do now, my poor wild Chactas?

*Chactas* Revisit the graves of my beloved and father Aubry. Then I will throw myself out of the Niagara. I don't belong to your religion, so I will not be condemned for doing so.

*Lopez* Thanks for returning to tell me all this, my son. It utterly shakes me up, my whole life is devastated, but perhaps it did some good. In any way, I am grateful to you.

*Chactas* Forgive me, father Lopez.

*Lopez* No, Chactas, it's all we whites who should ask forgiveness of you. Now leave me alone. I have much to consider.

*Chactas* Yes, father Lopez. (*leaves discreetly.*)

*Lopez (after a moment's thought)* One more, Mac. A double.

(*Mac serves.*)

### Act V scene 1.

*Chactas (enters tottering, worn out to exhaustion, almost old, back to the cave)*

Is there nothing left then except the abyssal emptiness of memories? Here an entire eternity took place in the form of love and the most intensive togetherness, but not a trace remains except the ineffaceable carvings thereof in my heart and soul, that bleeds to death at the mere reminder; but if I have any part in eternity at all it consists of all the burning tears of melting floods of lava that drown all hell by the glowing pains of their unspeakable sufferings...

Atala, I have come to a last time evoke your spirit to then be able to relinquish my own, for I have nothing else to live for than my immortal longing for you in constantly sighing your eternally desirable name...

My father Aubry, what part did you play in the drama of my destiny? I always wondered about that. Did you aid Atala in her act of desperation, or did she actually implement it all by herself and alone without your influence? Alas, shadows, if you are still there as spirits, then answer my questions or release me by letting me instantly die! (*prostates himself on the ground*)

*Father Aubry (comes forth)* My son, rise from this unworthy position, for your despair could move a forever sleeping heart of stone to compassion. Have pity with us Christians, that's the only advice I can give you, for I was a Christian myself and did not understand better than to just keep quiet, obey and work. We worked together here in our wilderness to create a small Christian community, which nevertheless after my death was completely scattered. So ignominious is the vanity of leaders, that after having drawn their last sigh they vanish completely without a trace. I was innocent in your beloved's death. On the contrary, I would gladly have seen you together and regarded your union as naturally self-evident. But, alas, the problem was not that she was a Christian but that you were free.

*Chactas* Free?

*Aubry* Free from all infectuous considerations that aren't natural.

*Chactas* How should I understand this, a poor uneducated savage?

*Aubry* My dear son, you were too independent to ever be able to be fettered to the human world of only vanity and aberration.

*Chactas* Do you then admit that Christianity was wrong?

*Aubry* It was not wrong, but it was completely misunderstood from the beginning and utterly derailed by its establishment. That's why I sought my way out into the wilderness in an effort to find its original purity. Thereby I never became more than a searcher. But I think I feel Atala in the vicinity.

*Chactas* Atala! My beloved! Reappear to me just once so that I then could find peace and die!

*Atala* My friend, don't you know then that death is a lie, and that I only died to make sure to have you forever?

*Chactas* Do you suggest that your death was our wedding?

*Atala* Of course.

*Chactas* Was then your sworn virginity and all your Christian arguments just roundabout means to have me?

*Atala* Of course.

*Chactas* Explain yourself, my beloved, for you appear to me more inexplicable than ever!

*Atala* Not until you die you will understand everything, but then it is too late. You will see then.

*Chactas* You avoid me after death even worse than in life, although you in your reappearance are more real than in life...

*Atala* Everything is double and has two sides, where the other side always contradicts the first and eliminates its meaning, like death outweighs and dissolves life but only to give life a deeper sense and meaning.

*Chactas* I understand nothing of your weird instruction.

*Atala* Thanks for revisiting me, Chactas. Only because of that I could return one last time to our camp and our love. And instead of putting an end to your life by our reunion, I would ask you to return to life and to preserve it, maybe mostly because I couldn't do it myself. Live in my stead, Chactas, for both of us, and I will remain faithful to you for eternity.

*Chactas* My beloved! You condemn me to a lifetime of unspeakable pains and unfathomable melancholy! Let me rather at last be reunited with you in eternity!

*Atala* You already are.

*Chactas* What do you mean?

*Atala* You will never be rid of me, and I will never be rid of you. That's how friendship works. It is above love and spites eternity. I denied myself my mundane love to have you instead for my only friend in eternity.

*Chactas* So all your Christian talk was just smokescreen ceremonies for a wedding of higher significance than any earthly wedding could have been?

*Atala* Exactly.

*Chactas* My beloved Atala, stay with my spirit forever!

*Atala* You give me no choice.

*Chactas* May I then go on loving you?

*Atala* Forever.

*Chactas* Thank you, Atala. I can believe in that kind of love, for it is neither Christian nor anything else than just purest love which only the sincerest faith could sustain forever. Then come with me into eternity.

*Atala* I was just about to say the same to you.

*Chactas* Then I am ready.

*Atala* Come, *(takes him by the hand and leads him away,)* my handsome Indian, my wild lover and my own brother.

*(They go away and vanish.)*

*Aubry* If I succeeded in doing anything good in life, this must have been it. I will therefore follow Chactas and Atala, for only they could show me the right way.

*(walks out after them.)*

*The End.*

*(Virhamn, Midsummer 2005,  
translated in June 2021)*