

Translated from Camille Desmoulins, "Troisième et dernière lettre de Camille à son épouse.", Correspondance inédite de Camille Desmoulins, 1836

August 20, 2026

The Last Letter of Camille Desmoulins

Duodi germinal, 3 a.m. (April 1st)

Sleep has mercifully suspended my suffering. In sleep, one is free, unaware of captivity. Heaven has shown me mercy. Just moments ago, I saw you in a dream: I embraced you, Horace, and Daronnen ^[1], who was at home. But our little one had lost an eye to some fury that had attacked him, and the pain of this vision woke me. I found myself back in my dungeon. It was daylight. Though I could neither see you nor hear your replies, even as you and your mother spoke to me, I rose to write to you at least.

But opening the windows, the thought of my solitude, the dreadful bars and bolts that part me from you, vanquished all the strength of my soul. I melted into tears, or rather, I sobbed, crying out in this tomb: **Lucile! Lucile! O my dearest Lucile, where are you?**

(here, we notice the trace of a tear).

Yesterday evening I experienced a similar moment, and my heart broke anew when I saw your mother in the garden. A reflexive movement drove me to my knees against the bars; I clasped my hands together as if begging for her pity, she who must be weeping now in your embrace.

Yesterday I saw her sorrow

(here again a trace of tears)

In her handkerchief and veil, lowered as if she could not bear the sight. When you come again, let her sit a little nearer to you, so that I might see you both more clearly ^[2].

It is not dangerous, as far as I can tell. My spectacles are no good. I'd like you to buy me a pair like I had six months ago, not silver but steel, with two arms that attach to the head. Ask for number 15; the merchant will know.

But above all, I implore you, Lolotte ^[3], by our eternal love, send me your portrait. Let your painter take pity on me, I who suffer only for having shown too much compassion for others. Let him grant you two sittings each day. In the horror of this prison, the day I receive your likeness would be a day of celebration, of pure rapture and intoxication.

In the meantime, send me a lock of your hair that I may press it to my heart. My dear Lucile! Here I am, back in the days of my first love, when I was interested in someone merely because they had come from your house. Yesterday, when the citizen who brought you my letter returned, I asked him “Well, have you seen her?”, just as I used to ask Abbé Landreville. I found myself studying him as if something of you had lingered on his clothes, on his very person.

He is a charitable soul, for he delivered my letter intact ^[4]. It seems I shall see him twice daily, morning and evening. This messenger of our sorrows has become as dear to me as a bearer of joys once would have been.

I discovered a crack in my cell; I pressed my ear to it, and heard a groaning. I hazarded some words, and a voice answered: a sick man in suffering. He asked my name. I gave it. “**O my God!**” he cried at hearing it, falling back upon his bed, and I distinctly recognised the voice of Fabre d’Églantine ^[5].

(Yes, I am Fabre, he told me; but you, in here! Has the counter-revolution succeeded?)

Yet we dare not speak further, for fear that hatred might deprive us of even this small consolation. Should we be heard, we would surely be separated and confined more strictly. He has a room with a fireplace; mine would be a fair chamber... if a dungeon could ever be called fair.

But, dear friend! You cannot imagine what it means to be held in secret, not knowing why, never interrogated, never receiving a single journal. It is to live and be dead at once, existing only to feel oneself buried in a tomb. They say innocence is calm and courageous.

Ah!

My dearest Lucile! My beloved! Often, my innocence is weak like that of a husband, that of a father, that of a son ^[6]! If it were Pitt or Coburg who treated me thus...! But my *colleagues*! Robespierre, who signed the order of my imprisonment! The Republic, after all I have done for her! Is this the reward for so many virtues and sacrifices?

When I first arrived, I saw Hérault-Séchelles, Simon, Ferroux, Chaumette, and Antonelle ^[7]. They suffer less than I do, at least they are not held incommunicado.

And I, who for five years devoted myself to hatred and peril in the name of the Republic. I who kept my poverty through the Revolution ^[8]. I who have none to ask forgiveness but you, **my dear Lolotte**, and to whom you granted it, knowing my heart, despite its frailty, was not unworthy of you. I am cast into a dungeon, in secret, as though I were a conspirator! Even Socrates was allowed to see his friends and wife in prison when he drank the hemlock ^[9].

How much harder to be torn from you! Even the worst criminal would suffer too cruelly if separated from a Lucile by anything except death—which at least makes one feel such agony for but a moment. But a criminal could never have been your husband, and you loved me because I lived solely for the happiness of my fellow citizens... They call me...

Just now, the commissioners of the Revolutionary Tribunal have questioned me. One question only: “Have you conspired against the Republic?” What derision! Is it thus they insult the purest republicanism?

I see the fate that awaits me. Farewell, my Lucile, my dear Lolotte, my good little wolf, say farewell to my father. In me, you see the example of man's barbarity and ingratitude. My final moments will not disgrace you. You see that my fears were justified, that my presentiments were always true.

I married a woman heavenly in her virtue. I was a good husband and a good son; I would have been a good father. I carry with me the esteem and the regrets of all true republicans, of all men, of virtue and of liberty.

I die at thirty-four, yet it is a marvel that I have survived these past five years and so many revolutionary precipices without falling into them. That I still exist and rest my head in calm upon the pillow of my writings; too numerous, perhaps, but all breathing the same philanthropy, the same desire to make my fellow citizens happy and free, writings that the tyrants' axe shall never strike down.

I see now that power intoxicates almost all men, that they all speak as Dionysius of Syracuse ^[10]:

"Tyranny is a fine epitaph."

But take comfort, desolate widow! The epitaph of your poor Camille is nobler still: it is that of the Brutuses and the Catos, the slayers of tyrants ^[11]. O my dearest Lucile! I was born to write verse, to defend the wretched, to make you happy, to compose, with your mother, with my father, and a few souls after our own hearts, a little Tahiti ^[12].

I had dreamed of a Republic that all mankind would adore. I could not believe men were so savage and so unjust. How could I think a few jests in my writings, aimed at colleagues who had provoked me, would erase the memory of all my services?

I do not deceive myself: I die a victim of those jests ^[13] and of my friendship with Danton ^[14].

I thank my assassins for letting me die with him and with Philippeaux ^[15]. Since my colleagues were cowardly enough to abandon us, to lend an ear to slanders, of which I know nothing, save that they must be vile, I may say we die martyrs of our courage in denouncing traitors and of our love for the truth.

We can at least take with us this testimony: we perish as the last true republicans.

Forgive me, dear friend, my true life, which I lost the moment we were parted. I find myself dwelling on my legacy when I should focus only on helping you forget.

My Lucile! My good Loulou! My hen of Cachant ^[16]! I beseech you, do not linger on the branch, do not call to me with your cries; they would tear me to pieces in the depths of the grave. Go scratch the earth for your little one, live for my Horace ^[17]; speak to him of me. Will you tell him, though he cannot yet understand, that I would have loved him dearly?

Despite my torment, I believe there is a God. My blood shall wash away my faults, the weaknesses of humanity, and God will reward what was good in me: my virtues, my love of liberty. One day, I shall see you again, O Lucile! O Annette!

Sensitive as I was, is death, which delivers me from witnessing so many crimes, so terrible a fate? Farewell, Loulou; farewell, my life, my soul, my goddess on earth! I leave you good friends, all men of virtue and feeling.

Farewell, Lucile, my Lucile! My dear Lucile! Farewell, Horace, Annette, Adèle ^[18]! Farewell, my father! I feel the shore of life receding before me.

I still see Lucile! I see her, my beloved! My Lucile! My bound hands embrace you still, and my severed head rests its dying eyes upon you.



Translator's Notes

1

Daronne was a nickname Camille had for his mother-in-law

2

Camille was imprisoned in the Luxembourg. Families of prisoners would gather in the prison garden so their imprisoned relatives could see them from the jail cells above.

3

Lolotte was Lucile's nickname

4

"Intact" in this case means uncensored, as prisoners' letters were routinely read and censored..

5

Fabre d'Églantine (1750–1794) was a playwright, poet, and revolutionary politician, best known for creating the names of the months in the French Republican Calendar and for his close association with Danton.

6

The phrasing is a bit awkward in English, but what Camille is trying to say is that human bonds make him vulnerable. He's not admitting guilt; he's defending his innocence, but he's acknowledging that emotional attachments can make one act from the heart rather than from strict principle or legality.

7

Hérault-Séchelles was a member of the Committee of Public Safety and played a key role in drafting the constitution. Though not strictly aligned with the Dantonists, he was executed alongside them on April 5th. Simion most likely refers to Jean-Baptiste Simon, less prominent, but known as a journalist and moderate revolutionary Ferroux's identity is problematic. While there was a Ferroux imprisoned at that time, little is known about him as he wasn't a prominent figure. Some editions of the letter suggest this is a misrendering of either Philippeaux's name or refers to Jean-Pierre-André Amar. Chaumette is Pierre-Gaspard Chaumette a leading figure of the Hébertist faction; radical dechristianiser; President of the Commune of Paris Antonelle is François-Joseph-Marie Fayolle d'Antonelle A moderate republican, journalist, editor of *Le Républicain*, and supporter of the Girondins.

8

Camille is very much stretching the truth here ...

9

Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenian court in 399 BCE and died by drinking a cup of hemlock, a poisonous plant, as punishment for impiety and corrupting the youth.

10

Dionysius I, tyrant of Syracuse in Sicily during the 4th century BCE, known for his authoritarian rule and for transforming Syracuse into a major military power. He became a symbol of despotism in classical literature and later political thought, often cited as an emblem of how power corrupts and tyranny can be glorified despite its brutality.

11

Brutus and Cato the tyrannicides refer to Marcus Junius Brutus and Marcus Porcius Cato the Younger, two influential figures of the late Roman Republic who stood against dictatorship. Brutus helped kill Julius Caesar in 44 BCE to protect Rome's freedom, while Cato opposed Caesar through political means and chose suicide rather than live under his rule.

12

The original is "composer, avec ta mère et mon père, et quelques personnes selon notre cœur, un Otaïti." Camille is referring to Tahiti (Otaïti being the 18th-century French spelling). After Bougainville's 1768 voyage, Tahiti captured the European imagination as an idyllic paradise, a place of natural abundance, innocence, and harmony, untouched by civilization's corruption.

13

To see the jests he is referring to, I recommend you take a look at Camille's last publication, *Le Vieux Cordelier*. The first two issues aligned with Jacobin's sentiment, but from the third onward, he diverged from the party line and called for moderation. His tone, satirical, accusatory, and morally urgent, was perceived by many as politically subversive and ultimately led to his arrest.

- 14 Georges Danton (1759–1794) was a leading figure of the French Revolution, known for his oratory, role in founding the Revolutionary Tribunal, and early leadership of the Jacobin movement. He and Camille Desmoulins were close friends and political allies... their relationship is far too involved and complicated to explain in a short note.
- 15 Pierre Philippeaux (1754–1794) was a Convention member sent on mission to the West. His detailed report exposed the brutal repression in the Vendée, especially atrocities by Republican forces under Jean-Baptiste Carrier. Camille used this report in *Le Vieux Cordelier* to support his plea for clemency. Philippeaux's testimony provided concrete, documented evidence of revolutionary excesses, strengthening Camille's argument that the Revolution had strayed from its principles.
- 16 Translation from the original notes of the 1835 edition of the letter: Cachant is a small village near Paris, on the road to Bourg-la-Reine, where Madame Duplessis owned a country house. During their visits to Mme Duplessis, Camille and Lucile had often observed a hen in Cachant that, grief-stricken at the loss of her rooster, perched day and night on the same branch. She would emit heart-rending cries, refuse all food, and seemed to long for death. This is the hen to which Camille alludes here.
- 17 Horace was the young son of Camille Desmoulins and Lucile Duplessis, born in 1792 and just a toddler at the time of his parents' execution in 1794.
- 18 Translation from the original notes of the 1835 edition of the letter: Lucile's sister, who never married and lived with her mother, became her sole consolation after the deaths of Camille, Lucile, and M. Duplessis.

How to cite this translation

Desmoulins, Camille. "The Last Letter of Camille Desmoulins." Translated by Alexandra Lam from "Troisième et dernière lettre de Camille à son épouse.", *Correspondance inédite de Camille Desmoulins* (Paris: Ébrard, 1836). *Amateur Voltaire*, August 20, 2026.
www.amateurvoltaire.com/translations/the-last-letter-of-camille-desmoulins/.

Amateur Voltaire

Translation & notes © 2026 Alexandra Lam.
Free for personal and classroom use.

www.amateurvoltaire.com/translations/the-last-letter-of-camille-desmoulins/