

HÉLOÏSE , PETER ABELARD

**THE LOVE  
LETTERS OF  
ABELARD AND  
HELOISE**

Peter Abelard

**The love letters of Abelard and Heloise**

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**Abelard P.**

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# The love letters of Abelard and Heloise

## THE STORY OF ABELARD AND HELOISE

It sometimes happens that Love is little esteemed by those who choose rather to think of other affairs, and in requital He strongly manifests His power in unthought ways. Need is to think of Abelard and Heloise: how now his treatises and works are memories only, and how the love of her (who in lifetime received little comfort therefor) has been crowned with the violet crown of Grecian Sappho and the homage of all lovers.

The world itself was learning a new love when these two met; was beginning to heed the quiet call of the spirit of the Renaissance, which, at its consummation, brought forth the glories of the Quattrocento.

It was among the stone-walled, rose-covered gardens and clustered homes of ecclesiastics, who served the ancient Roman builded pile of Notre Dame, that Abelard found Heloise.

From his noble father's home in Brittany, Abelard, gifted and ambitious, came to study with William of Champeaux in Paris. His advancement was rapid, and time brought him the acknowledged leadership of the Philosophic School of the city, a prestige which received added lustre from his controversies with his later instructor in theology, Anselm of Laon.

His career at this time was brilliant. Adulation and flattery, added to the respect given his great and genuine ability, made sweet a life which we can imagine was in most respects to his liking. Among the students who flocked to him came the beautiful maiden, Heloise, to learn of philosophy. Her uncle Fulbert, living in retired ease near Notre Dame, offered in exchange for such instruction both bed and board; and Abelard, having already seen and resolved to win her, undertook the contract.

Many quiet hours these two spent on the green, river-watered isle, studying old philosophies, and Time, swift and silent as the Seine, sped on, until when days had changed to months they became aware of the deeper knowledge of Love. Heloise responded wholly to this new influence, and Abelard, forgetting his ambition, desired their marriage. Yet as this would have injured his opportunities for advancement in the Church Heloise steadfastly refused this formal sanction of her passion. Their love becoming known in time to Fulbert, his grief and anger were uncontrollable. In fear the two fled to the country and there their child was born. Abelard still urged marriage, and at last, outwearied with importunities, she consented, only insisting that it be kept a secret. Such a course was considered best to pacify her uncle, who, in fact, promised reconciliation as a reward. Yet, upon its accomplishment he openly declared the marriage. Unwilling that this be known lest the knowledge hurt her lover, Heloise strenuously denied the truth. The two had returned, confident of Fulbert's reaffirmed regard, and he, now deeply troubled and revengeful, determined to inflict that punishment and indignity on Abelard, which, in its accomplishment, shocked even that ruder civilization to horror and to reprisal.

The shamed and mortified victim, caring only for solitude in which to hide and rest, retired into the wilderness; returning after a time to take the vows of monasticism. Unwilling to leave his love where by chance she could become another's, he demanded that she become a nun. She yielded obedience, and, although but twenty-two years of age, entered the convent of Argenteuil.

Abelard's mind was still virile and, perhaps to his surprise, the world again sought him out, anxious still to listen to his masterful logic. But with his renewed influence came fierce persecution, and the following years of life were filled with trials and sorrows. Sixteen years passed after the lovers parted and then Heloise, prioress of the Paraclete, found a letter of consolation, written by Abelard to a friend, recounting his sad career. Her response is a letter of passion and complaining, an equal to which it is hard to find in all literature. To his cold and formal reply she wrote a second, questioning

and confused, and a third, constrained and resigned. These three constitute the record of a soul vainly seeking in spiritual consolation rest from love.

Abelard, with little heart for love or ambition, still stubbornly contested with his foes. On a journey to Rome, where he had appealed from a judgment of heresy against his teachings, he, overweary, turned aside to rest in the monastery of Cluni, in Burgundy, and there died. Heloise begged his body for burial in the Paraclete. Twenty years later, and at the same age as her lover, she, too, passed to rest.

It is said that he whose arms had one time yielded her a too sweet comfort, raised them again to greet her as she came to rest beside him in their narrow tomb.

Love never yet was held by arms alone, nor its mysterious ministries constrained to forms or qualities. Like water sweet in barren land it lies within our lives, ever by its unsolved formula awakening us to fuller freedom.

## THE LOVE LETTERS OF ABELARD AND HELOISE

*Wherein are written how the scholar Peter Abelard forgot his learning and became a lover, altho the price he paid was great: and how the beautiful Heloise in desiring to acquire knowledge from Abelard learned of all lessons the greatest, from the greatest master of all, to wit, Love: and how she prized it most highly, altho it brought her both shame and sorrow*

## LETTER I

### Heloise to Abelard

*To her Lord, her Father, her Husband, her Brother; his Servant, his Child, his Wife, his Sister, and to express all that is humble, respectful and loving to her Abelard, Heloise writes this.*

A consolatory letter of yours to a friend happened some days since to fall into my hands; my knowledge of the writing and my love of the hand gave me the curiosity to open it. In justification of the liberty I took, I flattered myself I might claim a sovereign privilege over everything which came from you. Nor was I scrupulous to break through the rules of good breeding when I was to hear news of Abelard. But how dear did my curiosity cost me! What disturbance did it occasion, and how surprised I was to find the whole letter filled with a particular and melancholy account of our misfortunes! I met with my name a hundred times; I never saw it without fear, some heavy calamity always followed it. I saw yours too, equally unhappy. These mournful but dear remembrances put my heart into such violent motion that I thought it was too much to offer comfort to a friend for a few slight disgraces, but such extraordinary means as the representation of our sufferings and revolutions. What reflections did I not make! I began to consider the whole afresh, and perceived myself pressed with the same weight of grief as when we first began to be miserable. Though length of time ought to have closed up my wounds, yet the seeing them described by your hand was sufficient to make them all open and bleed afresh. Nothing can ever blot from my memory what you have suffered in defence of your writings. I cannot help thinking of the rancorous malice of Alberic and Lotulf. A cruel Uncle and an injured Lover will always be present to my aching sight. I shall never forget what enemies your learning, and what envy your glory raised against you. I shall never forget your reputation, so justly acquired, torn to pieces and blasted by the inexorable cruelty of pseudo pretenders to science. Was not your treatise of Divinity condemned to be burnt? Were you not threatened with perpetual imprisonment? In vain you urged in your defence that your enemies imposed upon you opinions quite different from your meanings. In vain you condemned those opinions; all was of no effect towards your justification, 'twas resolved you should be a heretic! What did not those two false prophets accuse you of who declaimed so severely against you before the Council of Sens? What scandals were vented on occasion of the name of Paraclete given to your chapel! What a storm was raised against you by the treacherous monks when you did them the honour to be called their brother! This history of our numerous misfortunes, related in so true and moving a manner, made my heart bleed within me. My tears, which I could not refrain, have blotted half your letter; I wish they had effaced the whole, and that I had returned it to you in that condition; I should then have been satisfied with the little time I kept it; but it was demanded of me too soon.

I must confess I was much easier in my mind before I read your letter. Surely all the misfortunes of lovers are conveyed to them through the eyes: upon reading your letter I feel all mine renewed. I reproached myself for having been so long without venting my sorrows, when the rage of our unrelenting enemies still burns with the same fury. Since length of time, which disarms the strongest hatred, seems but to aggravate theirs; since it is decreed that your virtue shall be persecuted till it takes refuge in the grave – and even then, perhaps, your ashes will not be allowed to rest in peace! – let me always meditate on your calamities, let me publish them through all the world, if possible, to shame an age that has not known how to value you. I will spare no one since no one would interest himself to protect you, and your enemies are never weary of oppressing your innocence. Alas! my memory is perpetually filled with bitter remembrances of passed evils; and are there more to be feared still? Shall my Abelard never be mentioned without tears? Shall the dear name never be spoken but with sighs? Observe, I beseech you, to what a wretched condition you have reduced me; sad, afflicted,



without any possible comfort unless it proceed from you. Be not then unkind, nor deny me, I beg of you, that little relief which you only can give. Let me have a faithful account of all that concerns you; I would know everything, be it ever so unfortunate. Perhaps by mingling my sighs with yours I may make your sufferings less, for it is said that all sorrows divided are made lighter.

Tell me not by way of excuse you will spare me tears; the tears of women shut up in a melancholy place and devoted to penitence are not to be spared. And if you wait for an opportunity to write pleasant and agreeable things to us, you will delay writing too long. Prosperity seldom chooses the side of the virtuous, and fortune is so blind that in a crowd in which there is perhaps but one wise and brave man it is not to be expected that she should single him out. Write to me then immediately and wait not for miracles; they are too scarce, and we too much accustomed to misfortunes to expect a happy turn. I shall always have this, if you please, and this will always be agreeable to me, that when I receive any letter from you I shall know you still remember me. Seneca (with whose writings you made me acquainted), though he was a Stoic, seemed to be so very sensible to this kind of pleasure, that upon opening any letters from Lucilius he imagined he felt the same delight as when they conversed together.

I have made it an observation since our absence, that we are much fonder of the pictures of those we love when they are at a great distance than when they are near us. It seems to me as if the farther they are removed their pictures grow the more finished, and acquire a greater resemblance; or at least our imagination, which perpetually figures them to us by the desire we have of seeing them again, makes us think so. By a peculiar power love can make that seem life itself which, as soon as the loved object returns, is nothing but a little canvas and flat colour. I have your picture in my room; I never pass it without stopping to look at it; and yet when you are present with me I scarce ever cast my eyes on it. If a picture, which is but a mute representation of an object, can give such pleasure, what cannot letters inspire? They have souls; they can speak; they have in them all that force which expresses the transports of the heart; they have all the fire of our passions, they can raise them as much as if the persons themselves were present; they have all the tenderness and the delicacy of speech, and sometimes even a boldness of expression beyond it.

We may write to each other; so innocent a pleasure is not denied us. Let us not lose through negligence the only happiness which is left us, and the only one perhaps which the malice of our enemies can never ravish from us. I shall read that you are my husband and you shall see me sign myself your wife. In spite of all our misfortunes you may be what you please in your letter. Letters were first invented for consoling such solitary wretches as myself. Having lost the substantial pleasures of seeing and possessing you, I shall in some measure compensate this loss by the satisfaction I shall find in your writing. There I shall read your most sacred thoughts; I shall carry them always about with me, I shall kiss them every moment; if you can be capable of any jealousy let it be for the fond caresses I shall bestow upon your letters, and envy only the happiness of those rivals. That writing may be no trouble to you, write always to me carelessly and without study; I had rather read the dictates of the heart than of the brain. I cannot live if you will not tell me that you still love me; but that language ought to be so natural to you, that I believe you cannot speak otherwise to me without violence to yourself. And since by this melancholy relation to your friend you have awakened all my sorrows, 'tis but reasonable you should allay them by some tokens of your unchanging love.

I do not however reproach you for the innocent artifice you made use of to comfort a person in affliction by comparing his misfortune to another far greater. Charity is ingenious in finding out such pious plans, and to be commended for using them. But do you owe nothing more to us than to that friend – be the friendship between you ever so intimate? We are called your Sisters; we call ourselves your children, and if it were possible to think of any expression which could signify a dearer relation, or a more affectionate regard and mutual obligation between us, we should use it. If we could be so ungrateful as not to speak our just acknowledgments to you, this church, these altars, these walls, would reproach our silence and speak for us. But without leaving it to that, it will always be a pleasure

to me to say that you only are the founder of this house, 'tis wholly your work. You, by inhabiting here, have given fame and holiness to a place known before only for robberies and murders. You have in a literal sense made the den of thieves into a house of prayer. These cloisters owe nothing to public charities; our walls were not raised by the usuries of publicans, nor their foundations laid in base extortion. The God whom we serve sees nothing but innocent riches and harmless votaries whom you have placed here. Whatever this young vineyard is, is owing only to you, and it is your part to employ your whole care to cultivate and improve it; this ought to be one of the principal affairs of your life. Though our holy renunciation, our vows and our manner of life seem to secure us from all temptation; though our walls and gates prohibit all approaches, yet it is the outside only, the bark of the tree, that is protected from injuries; the sap of the original corruption may imperceptibly spread within, even to the heart, and prove fatal to the most promising plantation, unless continual care be taken to cultivate and secure it. Virtue in us is grafted upon nature and the woman; the one is changeable, the other is weak. To plant the Lord's vineyard is a work of no little labour; but after it is planted it will require great application and diligence to dress it. The Apostle of the Gentiles, great labourer as he was, says he hath planted, Apollos hath watered, but it is God that gives the increase. Paul had planted the Gospel amongst the Corinthians, Apollos, his zealous disciple, continued to cultivate it by frequent exhortations; and the grace of God, which their constant prayers implored for that church, made the work of both be fruitful.

This ought to be an example for your conduct towards us. I know you are not slothful, yet your labours are not directed towards us; your cares are wasted upon a set of men whose thoughts are only earthly, and you refuse to reach out your hand to support those who are weak and staggering in their way to heaven, and who with all their endeavours can scarcely prevent themselves from falling. You fling the pearls of the Gospel before swine when you speak to those who are filled with the good things of this world and nourished with the fatness of the earth; and you neglect the innocent sheep, who, tender as they are, would yet follow you over deserts and mountains. Why are such pains thrown away upon the ungrateful, while not a thought is bestowed upon your children, whose souls would be filled with a sense of your goodness? But why should I entreat you in the name of your children? Is it possible I should fear obtaining anything of you when I ask it in my own name? And must I use any other prayers than my own in order to prevail upon you? The St. Austins, Tertullians and Jeromes have written to the Eudoxias, Paulas and Melanias; and can you read those names, though of saints, and not remember mine? Can it be criminal for you to imitate St. Jerome and discourse with me concerning the Scriptures; or Tertullian and preach mortification; or St. Austin and explain to me the nature of grace? Why should I alone not reap the advantage of your learning? When you write to me you will write to your wife; marriage has made such a correspondence lawful, and since you can without the least scandal satisfy me, why will you not? I am not only engaged by my vows, but I have the fear of my Uncle before me. There is nothing, then, that you need dread; you need not fly to conquer. You may see me, hear my sighs, and be a witness of all my sorrows without incurring any danger, since you can only relieve me with tears and words. If I have put myself into a cloister with reason, persuade me to stay in it with devotion. You have been the occasion of all my misfortunes, you therefore must be the instrument of all my comfort.

You cannot but remember (for lovers cannot forget) with what pleasure I have passed whole days in hearing your discourse. How when you were absent I shut myself from everyone to write to you; how uneasy I was till my letter had come to your hands; what artful management it required to engage messengers. This detail perhaps surprises you, and you are in pain for what may follow. But I am no longer ashamed that my passion had no bounds for you, for I have done more than all this. I have hated myself that I might love you; I came hither to ruin myself in a perpetual imprisonment that I might make you live quietly and at ease. Nothing but virtue, joined to a love perfectly disengaged from the senses, could have produced such effects. Vice never inspires anything like this, it is too much enslaved to the body. When we love pleasures we love the living and not the dead. We leave

off burning with desire for those who can no longer burn for us. This was my cruel Uncle's notion; he measured my virtue by the frailty of my sex, and thought it was the man and not the person I loved. But he has been guilty to no purpose. I love you more than ever; and so revenge myself on him. I will still love you with all the tenderness of my soul till the last moment of my life. If, formerly, my affection for you was not so pure, if in those days both mind and body loved you, I often told you even then that I was more pleased with possessing your heart than with any other happiness, and the man was the thing I least valued in you.

You cannot but be entirely persuaded of this by the extreme unwillingness I showed to marry you, though I knew that the name of wife was honourable in the world and holy in religion; yet the name of your mistress had greater charms because it was more free. The bonds of matrimony, however honourable, still bear with them a necessary engagement, and I was very unwilling to be necessitated to love always a man who would perhaps not always love me. I despised the name of wife that I might live happy with that of mistress; and I find by your letter to your friend you have not forgot that delicacy of passion which loved you always with the utmost tenderness – and yet wished to love you more! You have very justly observed in your letter that I esteemed those public engagements insipid which form alliances only to be dissolved by death, and which put life and love under the same unhappy necessity. But you have not added how often I have protested that it was infinitely preferable to me to live with Abelard as his mistress than with any other as Empress of the World. I was more happy in obeying you than I should have been as lawful spouse of the King of the Earth. Riches and pomp are not the charm of love. True tenderness makes us separate the lover from all that is external to him, and setting aside his position, fortune or employments, consider him merely as himself.

It is not love, but the desire of riches and position which makes a woman run into the embraces of an indolent husband. Ambition, and not affection, forms such marriages. I believe indeed they may be followed with some honours and advantages, but I can never think that this is the way to experience the pleasures of affectionate union, nor to feel those subtle and charming joys when hearts long parted are at last united. These martyrs of marriage pine always for larger fortunes which they think they have missed. The wife sees husbands richer than her own, and the husband wives better portioned than his. Their mercenary vows occasion regret, and regret produces hatred. Soon they part – or else desire to. This restless and tormenting passion for gold punishes them for aiming at other advantages by love than love itself.

If there is anything that may properly be called happiness here below, I am persuaded it is the union of two persons who love each other with perfect liberty, who are united by a secret inclination, and satisfied with each other's merits. Their hearts are full and leave no vacancy for any other passion; they enjoy perpetual tranquillity because they enjoy content.

If I could believe you as truly persuaded of my merit as I am of yours, I might say there has been a time when we were such a pair. Alas! how was it possible I should not be certain of your mind? If I could ever have doubted it, the universal esteem would have made me decide in your favour. What country, what city, has not desired your presence? Could you ever retire but you drew the eyes and hearts of all after you? Did not everyone rejoice in having seen you? Even women, breaking through the laws of decorum which custom had imposed upon them, showed they felt more for you than mere esteem. I have known some who have been profuse in their husbands' praises who have yet envied me my happiness. But what could resist you? Your reputation, which so much attracts the vanity of our sex, your air, your manner, that light in your eyes which expresses the vivacity of your mind, your conversation so easy and elegant that it gave everything you said an agreeable turn; in short, everything spoke for you! Very different from those mere scholars who with all their learning have not the capacity to keep up an ordinary conversation, and who with all their wit cannot win a woman who has much less share of brains than themselves.

With what ease did you compose verses! And yet those ingenious trifles, which were but a recreation to you, are still the entertainment and delight of persons of the best taste. The smallest

song, the least sketch of anything you made for me, had a thousand beauties capable of making it last as long as there are lovers in the world. Thus those songs will be sung in honour of other women which you designed only for me, and those tender and natural expressions which spoke your love will help others to explain their passion with much more advantage than they themselves are capable of.

What rivalries did your gallantries of this kind occasion me! How many ladies lay claim to them? 'Twas a tribute their self-love paid to their beauty. How many have I seen with sighs declare their passion for you when, after some common visit you had made them, they chanced to be complimented for the Sylvia of your poems. Others in despair and envy have reproached me that I had no charms but what your wit bestowed on me, nor in anything the advantage over them but in being beloved by you. Can you believe me if I tell you, that notwithstanding my sex, I thought myself peculiarly happy in having a lover to whom I was obliged for my charms; and took a secret pleasure in being admired by a man who, when he pleased, could raise his mistress to the character of a goddess. Pleased with your glory only, I read with delight all those praises you offered me, and without reflecting how little I deserved, I believed myself such as you described, that I might be more certain that I pleased you.

But oh! where is that happy time? I now lament my lover, and of all my joys have nothing but the painful memory that they are past. Now learn, all you my rivals who once viewed my happiness with jealous eyes, that he you once envied me can never more be mine. I loved him; my love was his crime and the cause of his punishment. My beauty once charmed him; pleased with each other we passed our brightest days in tranquillity and happiness. If that were a crime, 'tis a crime I am yet fond of, and I have no other regret save that against my will I must now be innocent. But what do I say? My misfortune was to have cruel relatives whose malice destroyed the calm we enjoyed; had they been reasonable I had now been happy in the enjoyment of my dear husband. Oh! how cruel were they when their blind fury urged a villain to surprise you in your sleep! Where was I – where was your Heloise then? What joy should I have had in defending my lover; I would have guarded you from violence at the expense of my life. Oh! whither does this excess of passion hurry me? Here love is shocked and modesty deprives me of words.

But tell me whence proceeds your neglect of me since my being professed? You know nothing moved me to it but your disgrace, nor did I give my consent, but yours. Let me hear what is the occasion of your coldness, or give me leave to tell you now my opinion. Was it not the sole thought of pleasure which engaged you to me? And has not my tenderness, by leaving you nothing to wish for, extinguished your desires? Wretched Heloise! you could please when you wished to avoid it; you merited incense when you could remove to a distance the hand that offered it: but since your heart has been softened and has yielded, since you have devoted and sacrificed yourself, you are deserted and forgotten! I am convinced by a sad experience that it is natural to avoid those to whom we have been too much obliged, and that uncommon generosity causes neglect rather than gratitude. My heart surrendered too soon to gain the esteem of the conqueror; you took it without difficulty and throw it aside with ease. But ungrateful as you are I am no consenting party to this, and though I ought not to retain a wish of my own, yet I still preserve secretly the desire to be loved by you. When I pronounced my sad vow I then had about me your last letters in which you protested your whole being wholly mine, and would never live but to love me. It is to you therefore I have offered myself; you had my heart and I had yours; do not demand anything back. You must bear with my passion as a thing which of right belongs to you, and from which you can be no ways disengaged.

Alas! what folly it is to talk in this way! I see nothing here but marks of the Deity, and I speak of nothing but man! You have been the cruel occasion of this by your conduct, Unfaithful One! Ought you at once to break off loving me! Why did you not deceive me for a while rather than immediately abandon me? If you had given me at least some faint signs of a dying passion I would have favoured the deception. But in vain do I flatter myself that you could be constant; you have left no vestige of an excuse for you. I am earnestly desirous to see you, but if that be impossible I will content myself

with a few lines from your hand. Is it so hard for one who loves to write? I ask for none of your letters filled with learning and writ for your reputation; all I desire is such letters as the heart dictates, and which the hand cannot transcribe fast enough. How did I deceive myself with hopes that you would be wholly mine when I took the veil, and engage myself to live for ever under your laws? For in being professed I vowed no more than to be yours only, and I forced myself voluntarily to a confinement which you desired for me. Death only then can make me leave the cloister where you have placed me; and then my ashes shall rest here and wait for yours in order to show to the very last my obedience and devotion to you.

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