

On the *Fame of Abelard*

HELOISE

Twelfth century

A LETTER of consolation you had written to a Mend, my dearest Abelard, was lately as by chance put into my hands. The superscription in a moment told me from whom it came, and the sentiments I felt for the writer compelled me to read it more eagerly. I had lost the reality; I hoped therefore from his words, a faint image of himself, to draw some comfort. But alas! for I well remember it, almost every line was marked with

gall and wormwood. It related the lamentable story of our conversion, and the long list of your own unabated sufferings.

Indeed, you amply fulfilled the promises you there made to your friend, that, in comparison of your own, is misfortunes should appear as nothing, or as light as air. Having exposed the persecutions you had suffered from your masters, and the cruel deed of my uncle, you were naturally led to a recital of the hateful and invidious conduct of Albericus of Reims, and Lotulphus of Lombardy. By their suggestions, your admirable work on the Trinity was condemned to the flames, and yourself were thrown into confinement. This you did not omit to mention. The machinations of the abbot of St. Denys and of your false brethren are there brought forward; but chiefly—for from them you had most to suffer—the calumnious aspersions of those false apostles, Norbert and Bernard, whom envy had roused against you.

It was even, you say, imputed as a crime to you to have given the name of Paraclete, contrary to the common practice, to the oratory you had erected. In fine, the incessant persecutions of that cruel tyrant of St. Gildas, and of those execrable monks, whom yet you call your children and to which at this moment you are exposed, close the melancholy tale of a life of sorrow.

Who, think you, could read or hear these things and not be moved to tears? What then must be my situation? The singular precision with which each event is stated could but more strongly renew my sorrows. I was doubly agitated, because I perceived the tide of danger was still rising against you. Are we then to despair of your life? And must our breasts, trembling at every sound, be hourly alarmed by the rumours of that terrible event?

For Christ's sake, my Abelard—and He, I trust, as yet protects you—do inform us, and that repeatedly, of each

circumstance of your present dangers. I and my sisters are the sole remains of all your friends. Let us, at least, partake of your joys and sorrows. The condolence of others is used to bring some relief to the sufferer, and a load laid on many shoulders is more easily supported. But should the storm subside a little, then be even more solicitous to inform us, for your letters will be messengers of joy. In short, whatever be their contents, to us they must always bring comfort; because this at least they will tell us, that we are remembered by you. . . .

My Abelard, you well know how much I lost in losing you; and that infamous act of treachery which, by a cruelty before unheard-of, deprived me of you, even tore me from myself. The loss was great, indeed, but the manner of it was doubly excruciating. When the cause of grief is most pungent, then should consolation apply her strongest medicines. But it is you only can administer relief: by you I was wounded, and by you I must be healed. It is in your power alone to give me pain, to give me joy, and to give me comfort. And it is you only that are obliged to do it. I have obeyed the last title of your commands; and so far was I unable to oppose them, that, to comply with your wishes, I could bear to sacrifice myself. One thing remains which is still greater, and will hardly be credited; my love for you had risen to such a degree of frenzy, that to please you, it even deprived itself of what alone in the universe it valued, and that forever. No sooner did I receive your commands than I quitted at once the habit of the world, and with it all the reluctance of my nature. I meant that you should be the sole possessor of whatever I had once a right to call my own.

Heaven knows! in all my love it was you, and you only I sought for. I looked for no dowry, no alliances of mar-

riage. I was even insensible to my own pleasures; nor had I a will to gratify. All was absorbed in you. I call Abelard to witness. In the name of wife there may be something more holy, more imposing; but the name of mistress was ever to me a more charming sound. The more I humbled myself before you, the greater right I thought I should have to your favour; and thus also I hoped the less to injure the splendid reputation you had acquired.

This circumstance, on your own account, you did not quite forget to mention in the letter to your friend. You related also some of the arguments I then urged to deter you from that fatal marriage; but you suppressed the greater part, by which I was induced to prefer love to matrimony and liberty to chains. I call Heaven to witness! Should Augustus, master of the world, offer me his hand in marriage, and secure to me the uninterrupted command of the universe, I should deem it at once more eligible and more honourable to be called the mistress of Abelard than the wife of Caesar. The source of merit is not in riches or in power; these are the gifts of fortune; but virtue only gives worth and excellence. . . .

But that happiness which in others is sometimes the effect of fancy, in me was the child of evidence. They might think their husbands perfect, and were happy in the idea, but I knew that you were such, and the universe knew the same. Thus, the more my affection was secured from all possible error, the more steady became its flame. Where was found the Icing or the philosopher that had emulated your reputation? Was there a village, a city, a kingdom, that did not ardently wish even to see you? When you appeared in public, who did not run to behold you? And when you withdrew, every neck was stretched, every eye sprang forward to pursue you. The

880 THE HOUSE OF FAME

married and the unmarried women, when Abelard was away, longed for his company; and when he was present, every bosom was on fire. No lady of distinction, no princess, that did not envy Heloise the possession of her Abelard.

You possessed, *indeed*, two qualifications—a tone of voice and a grace in singing—which gave you the control over every female heart. These powers were peculiarly yours; for I do not know that they ever fell to the share of any other philosopher. To soften, by playful amusement, the stern labours of philosophy, you composed several sonnets on love and on similar subjects. These you were often heard to sing, when the harmony of your voice gave new charms to the expression. In all circles nothing was talked of but Abelard; *even* the most ignorant, who could not judge of composition, were enchanted by the melody of your voice. Female hearts were unable to resist the impression. Thus was my name soon carried to distant nations; for the loves of Heloise and Abelard were the constant theme of all your songs. What wonder if I became the subject of general envy?

You possessed, besides, every endowment of mind and body. But, alas! if my happiness then raised the envy of others, will they not now be compelled to pity me? And *surely* even she who was then my enemy will now drop a tear at my sad reverse of fortune.

You know, Abelard, I was the great cause of your misfortunes; but *yet* I was not guilty. It is the motive with which we act, and not the event of things, that makes us criminal. Equity weighs the intention, and not the mere actions we may have done. What, at all times, *were* my dispositions in your regard, you, who knew them, can only judge. To you I refer all my actions, and on your decision I rest my cause. I call no other witness. . . .

ON THE FAME OF ABELARD

831

By that God, then, to whom your life is consecrated, I conjure you, give me so much of yourself as is at your disposal; that is, send me some lines of consolation. Do it with this design, at least; that, my mind being more *at ease*, I may serve God with more alacrity. When formerly the love of pleasure was your pursuit, how often did I hear from you? In your songs the name of Heloise was made familiar to every tongue: it was heard in every street; the walls of every house repeated it. With how much greater propriety might you now call me to God, than you did then to pleasure? Weigh your obligations; think on my petition.

I have written you a long letter, but the conclusion shall be short: My only friend, farewell.

From Abelard and Heloise, trans. A. S. Richardson (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 2884).

Heloise and Abelard: The Later Years

PETER THE VENERABLE

Twelfth century

N I received your affectionate letters, which *W*hen you sent to me earlier by my son Theobald, I was delighted, and I embraced them as friends for the sake of their sender. I wanted to write immediately what was in my mind, but I could not, because I was hindered by the troublesome demands of my cares, to which very often, indeed, almost always, I am compelled to yield. I have only just snatched what I could seize from *a* day interrupted by confusions.

It seems that I should have hastened to make at least the recompense of words for your affection towards me,

which I have recognized both at that time from your letters and earlier from the gifts you sent me, and *that* I should have shown how large a place of love for you *in* the Lord I keep in my heart. For truly I do not now *first* begin to love a person whom I remember that I have loved for a long time. I had not yet completely passed out of adolescence, I had not yet attained young manhood, when the fame, not yet indeed of your religion, but of your distinguished and praiseworthy studies became known to me.

I heard then that a woman, although she was not yet disentangled from the bonds of the world, devoted the highest zeal to literary studies, which is very unusual, and to the pursuit of wisdom, although it was that of the world. I heard that she could not be hindered by pleasures, frivolities, and delights from this useful purpose of learning the arts. And when almost everyone is kept from these studies by detestable sloth, and when the progress of wisdom can come to a standstill, I do not say among women, by whom it is entirely rejected, but it is scarcely able to find virile minds among men, you, by your praiseworthy zeal, completely excelled all women, and surpassed almost all men.

Soon, indeed, according to the words of the apostle, *as* it pleased Him who brought you forth from your mother's womb to call you by His grace, you exchanged this devotion to studies for a far better one. Now completely and truly a woman of wisdom, you chose the Gospel instead of logic, the apostle in place of physics, Christ instead of Plato, the cloister *instead* of the Academy. You snatched the spoils from the defeated enemy, and passing through the desert of this pilgrimage, with the treasures of the Egyptians, you built a precious tabernacle to God in your heart. You sang a song of praise with Miriam, when Pharaoh was drowned; and

HELOISE AND ABELARD: THE LATER YEARS 333

carrying in your hands the timbrel of holy mortification, as she did formerly, you sent forth with skilled musicianship a new melody to the very ears of God. Now in beginning that which, by divine grace, you will continue well, you have trampled underfoot the ancient serpent always lying in wait for women, and you have so driven it out, that it will never dare to tempt you further. . . .

I say these things, dearest sister in the Lord, not indeed to flatter you, but to encourage you, so that, devoting your attention to that great good in which you have for a long time persevered, you may the more ardently continue to preserve it carefully, and that you may inflame both by words and by example, according to the grace granted to you by God, those holy women who serve the Lord with you, so that they may strive anxiously in this same contest. For you, although you are a woman, are one of those creatures whom the prophet Ezechiel saw, who should not only burn like coals of fire, but should glow and shine like lamps. You are truly a disciple of truth, but you are also by that very obligation, inasmuch as it behooves you for those entrusted to you, a mistress of humility. The complete mastery of humility and of all celestial discipline has been imposed on you by God. Wherefore you ought to take care not only for yourself, but also for the flock entrusted to you, and on behalf of all, you should in all things receive a greater reward. Surely the reward of victory awaits you above all, since, as you know best, as many times as the world and the prince of the world have been overcome by your leadership, so many *triumphs*, so many glorious trophies, will be prepared for you with the eternal King and Judge.

But it is not altogether unusual among mortals that women should be ruled by women, and not wholly strange also that they should fight in battle, and more-

334 THE HOUSE OF FAME

over, accompany men themselves to battle. For if the saying is true that it is lawful also to be taught by the enemy, it is written that, among the Gentiles, Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons, with her Amazons, not men but women, often fought in battle at the time of the Trojan War, and that, among the people of God also, the prophetess Deborah inspired Barach, the judge of Israel, against the heathen. Why then should it not be permitted that women of courage, going forth to battle against a strong army, should be made leaders of the army of the Lord, since that Deborah fought against the enemy with her own hand, which indeed seemed unbecoming? Why should not this Deborah of ours lead, arm, and inspire men themselves to the divine warfare? When King Jabin had been defeated, and the leader Sisera slain, and the godless army destroyed, that other Deborah immediately sang a song, and she sang it devoutly in praise of God. By the grace of God, you shall be doing this, after the victory over enemies stronger by far has been given to you and yours, and you shall never cease to sing, far more gloriously, that song of yours, which thus rejoicing you shall sing, just as you shall never cease rejoicing. Meanwhile you shall be with the handmaidens of God, that is, the celestial army, as that other Deborah was with her own Jewish people, and you shall never rest from so gainful a contest, at any time or in any case, except in victory.

And since the name, Deborah, as your learning knows, means "bee," in the Hebrew tongue, you shall also be in this another Deborah, that is, a bee. For you shall make honey, but not for yourself alone, since whatever good you have gathered, in different ways and from various sources, you shall pour it all forth, by example, by word, and in every possible way, upon the sisters of your house and upon all others. In this short span of

HELOISE AND ABELARD: THE LATER YEARS 335

mortal life, you shall satisfy yourself with the secret sweetness of sacred learning, and the blessed sisters with public preaching, so that, according to the words of the prophet: "It shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk and honey." For although this may be said concerning this time of grace, nothing prevents its being understood concerning the time of glory; in fact, it is even sweeter. It would be sweet to me to continue discussing this longer with you, because I am both delighted by your renowned learning and, far more, attracted by your religion, which is praised by many. Would that our order of Cluny had you! Would that the pleasant prison of Marcigny embraced you, with the other handmaidens of Christ awaiting celestial freedom there! I should prefer the riches of religion and learning to the greatest treasures of any kings whatsoever, and I should rejoice to see that illustrious body of sisters shine more brilliantly with you dwelling there. . . .

But although this may be denied to us concerning you, by the providence of God which disposes all things, it has been granted concerning that one of yours, concerning that Master Peter, I say, often and always to be named with honour, the servant and truly the philosopher of Christ, whom, in the last years of his life, that same divine providence brought to Cluny. And he enriched her in and from that gift more precious than gold and topazes. A brief word cannot tell of his holy, humble, and devout way of life among us, as Cluny bears strong witness. For, unless I am mistaken, **I do** not recollect that I have seen his like, in the appearance and actions of humility, so much so that, to the very discerning, neither St. Germain would appear more abject, nor St. Martin himself poorer. And when, at my command, he took a superior rank in that great as-

sembly of our brothers, he seemed the least in the plainness of his apparel.

I wondered often, as he preceded me in processions with the others, according to custom, nay, I was almost astounded that a man of so great and so famous a name could thus belittle himself, could thus humble himself. And while there are certain of those who profess religion, who desire that the religious garments which they wear should be exceedingly sumptuous, he was completely sparing in these, and, content with *a* simple garment of any kind, he asked for nothing more. He observed this practice also in food, and in drink, and in all *care* of his own body, and he condemned in his words and in his life, I do not say the superfluous only, but everything except what was really necessary, both for himself and for everyone. His reading was continual, his prayer frequent, his silence perpetual, except when familiar intercourse with the brothers or public discussion in their assembly pressed him to speak to them about divine things. He frequented the divine sacraments as much as he was able, offering the sacrifice of the immortal Lamb to God; and indeed, after the apostolic favour had been granted, by letters and through my effort, he frequented them almost constantly.

And what more can I say? His mind, his tongue, his labour, always serving God, always philosophical, ever more learned, he meditated, taught, and spoke. Living thus with us for some time, this simple and upright man, fearing God, and withdrawing from evil, consecrated the last days of his life to God, and to end them (for more than usual, he was troubled by scabies and certain discomforts of body), he was sent by me to [St. Marcellès] Chalons. For because of the pleasant situation of that place, which surpasses almost all regions of our

Burgundy, I thought to provide a suitable place for him, near the city indeed, but yet near where the Saone flows. There, as much as his illness permitted, he renewed his former studies, and was always bending over his books, and he did not, as Gregory the Great wrote, allow a single moment to be wasted, but always he prayed, or read, or wrote, or dictated. In these holy exercises, the coming of that angelic visitor found him, and discovered him not sleeping, like many, but vigilant. It found him truly watchful, and summoned him, not as the foolish, but as the wise virgin, to the marriage feast of eternity. For he brought with him a lamp full of oil, that is, a conscience filled with the testimony of a holy *life*. For, in order that the common debt of mortal life should be paid, he was seized by illness, and suffering in it, he was in a short time brought to his end. Then, truly, how holy, how devout, how Catholic, was the confession he made, first, of his faith, and then of his sins. With what longing of his loving heart he received the last repast of the journey, and the pledge of eternal life, the body of the Lord our Redeemer, how faithfully he commended to Him his body and soul here and forever, the brothers are witnesses, and all the members of that monastery where the body of the holy martyr Marcellus lies. Thus Master Peter brought his days to a close, and he who was known throughout almost the whole world for his unique mastery of knowledge, and was everywhere famous, persevering, meek, and humble, in the discipleship of Him who said: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart," thus passed over to Him, as it should be believed. Him then, venerable and dearest sister in the Lord, to whom you clung in the bonds of the flesh, and later in the so much stronger and better bond of divine love, with whom and under whom you have long served the Lord; him, I say, in your place,

and as another you, Christ cherishes in His own embrace, and He preserves him to be restored to you by His grace, at the coming of the Lord, when He descends from heaven, with the singing of archangels and the sound of the trumpet. Be *mindful* of him, then, in the Lord; be mindful also of me, if it pleases you, and solicitously commend to those holy sisters who serve the Lord with you, the brothers of our congregation, and the sisters, who everywhere in the world, as much as they can, are serving the same Lord as you do.

"Letter to Heloise," Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 1891, trans. M.M.M.