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*The Letters of
Abelard and Heloise*

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TRANSLATED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY BETTY RADICE



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

Most people have heard of Abelard and Heloise as a pair of lovers as famous as Dante and Beatrice or Romeo and Juliet, and many know that their story is told in the letters they exchanged. If we are interested in what is generally called the Twelfth-Century Renaissance we soon find that Abelard is a key figure, one of the most original minds of his day, that the medieval university of Paris arose out of his fame as a teacher, and that his theological views brought him into conflict with St Bernard of Clairvaux. Heloise too was more than a girl deeply in love and a pupil avid for learning; she was the widely respected abbess of a famous convent and its daughter foundations. The two are representative of the best of their time in their classical knowledge and the way they express themselves, in their passionate interest in problems of faith and morality, and in their devotion to the Christian Church which ruled their lives. At the same time their dilemma is of timeless interest, created less by circumstances than by the relations between two highly complex personalities.

Peter Abelard was born into the minor Breton nobility in 1079, and his career to the age of about fifty-four is set out in a remarkable piece of autobiographical writing, the *Historia calamitatum* or *Story of His Misfortunes*. His father served the Count of Brittany and wished his sons to have some education before following the same career. Abelard soon decided to renounce his rights as the eldest son and to become a real scholar. 'I preferred the weapons of dialectic to all the other teachings of philosophy, and armed with these I chose the conflicts of disputation instead of the trophies of war. I began to travel about in several provinces, disputing like a true peripatetic philosopher wherever I had heard there was keen interest in the art of dialectic.' (p. 58)

Abelard is writing rather formally in Latin and using semi-technical expressions which would be more readily understood by his contemporaries than they are today, but these

two sentences take us straight into the intellectual ferment of the early twelfth century and the revolution in teaching in which Abelard played a leading part. The accepted course for higher education at this time (and for a long time to come) was that of the seven liberal arts: the *trivium*, consisting of grammar and rhetoric, which were the study of classical (Latin) language and literature, and logic, or dialectic as it was called, followed by the *quadrivium*, the sciences of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and music. Beyond these lay the highest studies of theology, canon law and medicine. Abelard never shows much interest in science, and his knowledge of mathematics was elementary. He evidently decided at the start to concentrate on the *trivium* and, in particular, on logic (dialectic). The Greeks had been masters of logic, but at this time there was very little knowledge of their work. Abelard is not thought to have known any Greek, and what he knew of Aristotle was mainly from Porphyry's Introduction to Aristotle's *Categories* and Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, both in a Latin translation by the sixth-century Roman scholar Boethius. Logic covered both linguistic logic, or theory of meaning of words and sentences, and formal logic, the theory of the correct manner to systemize known facts and to draw conclusions. It was 'an instrument of order in a chaotic world', and in Abelard's hands it could provide a genuine intellectual education for his students. His unwavering determination to apply the rules of logic to all fields of thought was to dominate his life.

Secondly, Abelard speaks of himself as moving from place to place wherever he heard that there was the teaching he wanted. This is the period of the 'wandering scholars'. All teaching was in the hands of the Church, in some form, but the Cathedral schools were becoming more prominent and beginning to replace the monastic schools such as those of Bec and Cluny; out of them would develop the medieval universities. Abelard's movements and his own career show

1. R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, p. 172. See further his chapter 'The Tradition of Thought'.

that in these early days a teacher could set up a school of his own wherever he knew he could muster sufficient pupils, and the success or failure of a school rested on the teacher's popularity and skill. His own pupils sought him out wherever he settled, and were even prepared to camp out in the remote countryside to be near him. One tends today to think of logic as something dry and scholastic, perhaps by contrast with renaissance humanism, but Abelard can make it sound new and invigorating, the opening of a door on to wider horizons.

Abelard also speaks of himself as 'disputing', and here again he shows himself in the vanguard of a new movement. By *disputatio* is meant a new technique to replace the traditional *lectio*, a lecture by a teacher on a selected passage of Scripture which was read aloud sentence by sentence and then expounded by glosses on the grammar and commentaries on the meaning drawn from the writings of the early Fathers of the Church. Disputation adopted a more conversational method, posing a problem and discussing it by means of question and answer, by setting out the difficulties and attempting to resolve conflicts. One method of teaching should not exclude the other, but Abelard was never anything but impatient with the orthodox lecture - witness his unjustified attack on Anselm of Laon (p. 62). He must have been a thorn in his teachers' flesh, conscious as he was of his own intellectual superiority, no respecter of persons and revelling in the cut-and-thrust of debate. So William of Champeaux found when Abelard arrived in Paris about 1100 and joined the Cloister School of Notre Dame. Tension increased until Abelard set up his own school, first at Melun, then at Corbeil, with the intention of destroying William's reputation. There was a respite when his health broke down through overwork, and he spent about six years in Brittany. How he spent the time he does not say, but he returned to the fray to find that William had joined the Order of Canons Regular, but was still teaching at the Abbey of St Victor. Abelard started to attend his lectures again, this time on the subject of rhetoric, and soon made his position impossible.

Letter I. Heloise to Abelard

To her master, or rather her father, husband, or rather brother; his handmaid, or rather his daughter, wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, Heloise.

Not long ago, my beloved, by chance someone brought me the letter of consolation you had sent to a friend. I saw at once from the superscription that it was yours, and was all the more eager to read it since the writer is so dear to my heart. I hoped for renewal of strength, at least from the writer's words which would picture for me the reality I have lost. But nearly every line of this letter was filled, I remember, with gall and wormwood, as it told the pitiful story of our entry into religion and the cross of unending suffering which you, my only love, continue to bear.

In that letter you did indeed carry out the promise you made your friend at the beginning, that he would think his own troubles insignificant or nothing, in comparison with your own. First you revealed the persecution you suffered from your teachers, then the supreme treachery of the mutilation of your person, and then described the abominable jealousy and violent attacks of your fellow-students, Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Lombardy.¹ You did not gloss over what at their instigation was done to your distinguished theological work or what amounted to a prison sentence passed on yourself. Then you went on to the plotting against you by your abbot and false brethren, the serious slanders from those two pseudo-apostles, spread against you by the same rivals, and the scandal stirred up among many people because you had acted contrary to custom in naming your oratory after the Paraclete. You went on to the incessant, intolerable persecutions which you still endure at the hands of that cruel tyrant and the evil monks you call your sons, and so brought your sad story to an end.

1. See *Historia calamitatum*, p. 79.

No one, I think, could read or hear it dry-eyed; my own sorrows are renewed by the detail in which you have told it, and redoubled because you say your perils are still increasing. All of us here are driven to despair of your life, and every day we await in fear and trembling the final word of your death. And so in the name of Christ, who is still giving you some protection for his service, we beseech you to write as often as you think fit to us who are his handmaids and yours, with news of the perils in which you are still storm-tossed. We are all that are left you, so at least you should let us share your sorrow or your joy.

It is always some consolation in sorrow to feel that it is shared, and any burden laid on several is carried more lightly, or removed. And if this storm has quietened down for a while, you must be all the more prompt to send us a letter which will be the more gladly received. But whatever you write about will bring us no small relief in the mere proof that you have us in mind. Letters from absent friends are welcome indeed, as Seneca himself shows us by his own example when he writes these words in a passage of a letter to his friend Lucilius:¹

Thank you for writing to me often, the one way in which you can make your presence felt, for I never have a letter from you without the immediate feeling that we are together. If pictures of absent friends give us pleasure, renewing our memories and relieving the pain of separation even if they cheat us with empty comfort, how much more welcome is a letter which comes to us in the very handwriting of an absent friend.

Thank God that here at least is a way of restoring your presence to us which no malice can prevent, nor any obstacle hinder; then do not, I beseech you, allow any negligence to hold you back.

You wrote your friend a long letter of consolation, prompted no doubt by his misfortunes, but really telling of your own. The detailed account you gave of these may have been intended for his comfort, but it also greatly increased

1. *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, 40. 1.

our own feeling of desolation; in your desire to heal his wounds you have dealt us fresh wounds of grief as well as re-opening the old. I beg you, then, as you set about tending the wounds which others have dealt, heal the wounds you have yourself inflicted. You have done your duty to a friend and comrade, discharged your debt to friendship and comradeship, but it is a greater debt which binds you in obligation to us who can properly be called not friends so much as dearest friends, not comrades but daughters, or any other conceivable name more tender and holy. How great the debt by which you have bound yourself to us needs neither proof nor witness, were it in any doubt; if the whole world kept silent, the facts themselves would cry out.¹ For you after God are the sole founder of this place, the sole builder of this oratory, the sole creator of this community. You have built nothing here upon another man's foundation.² Everything here is your own creation. This was a wilderness open to wild beasts and brigands, a place which had known no home nor habitation of men. In the very lairs of wild beasts and lurking-places of robbers, where the name of God was never heard, you built a sanctuary to God and dedicated a shrine in the name of the Holy Spirit. To build it you drew nothing from the riches of kings and princes, though their wealth was great and could have been yours for the asking; whatever was done, the credit was to be yours alone. Clerks and scholars came flocking here, eager for your teaching, and ministered to all your needs; and even those who had lived on the benefices of the Church and knew only how to receive offerings, not to make them, whose hands were held out to take but not to give, became pressing in their lavish offers of assistance.

And so it is yours, truly your own, this new plantation for God's purpose, but it is sown with plants which are still very tender and need watering if they are to thrive. Through its feminine nature this plantation would be weak and frail even if it were not new; and so it needs a more careful and regular cultivation, according to the words of the Apostle:

1. Cf. Cicero, *In Catalinam*, 1. 8.

2. Cf. Romans xv, 20.

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street and house echoed with my name. Is it not far better now to summon me to God than it was then to satisfy our lust? I beg you, think what you owe me, give ear to my pleas, and I will finish a long letter with a brief ending: farewell, my only love.

Letter 2. Abelard to Heloise

To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, Abelard her brother in Christ.

If since our conversion from the world to God I have not yet written you any word of comfort or advice, it must not be attributed to indifference on my part but to your own good sense, in which I have always had such confidence that I did not think anything was needed; God's grace has bestowed on you all essentials to enable you to instruct the erring, comfort the weak and encourage the fainthearted, both by word and example, as, indeed, you have been doing since you first held the office of prioress under your abbess. So if you still watch over your daughters as carefully as you did previously over your sisters, it is sufficient to make me believe that any teaching or exhortation from me would now be wholly superfluous. If, on the other hand, in your humility you think differently, and you feel that you have need of my instruction and writings in matters pertaining to God, write to me what you want, so that I may answer as God permits me. Meanwhile thanks be to God who has filled all your hearts with anxiety for my desperate, unceasing perils, and made you share in my affliction; may divine mercy protect me through the support of your prayers and quickly crush Satan beneath our feet. To this end in particular, I hasten to send the psalter you earnestly begged from me,¹ my sister once dear in the world and now dearest in Christ, so that you may offer a perpetual sacrifice of

1. *Psalterium*. Heloise's letter does not mention this, but the request could have been made in person at the time when Abelard was still visiting the Paraclete: the tense (*requisisti*) suggests it was not very recent (*requiris* would be more natural for a request just received). Possibly the bearer of the letter was told to ask for it. Muckle (*Medieval Studies*, Vol. XV, pp. 58-9) suggests that the word refers not to a psalter, or Book of Psalms, which the convent would surely already have, but to a 'Chant', that is, the arrangement of versicles and responses at the end of this letter which are to be used in the prayers on his behalf.

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Historia calamitatum:

Abelard to a Friend: The Story of His Misfortunes

There are times when example is better than precept for stirring or soothing human passions; and so I propose to follow up the words of consolation I gave you in person with the history of my own misfortunes, hoping thereby to give you comfort in absence. In comparison with my trials you will see that your own are nothing, or only slight, and will find them easier to bear.¹

I was born on the borders of Brittany, about eight miles I think to the east of Nantes, in a town called Le Pallet.² I owe my volatile temperament to my native soil and ancestry and also my natural ability for learning. My father had acquired some knowledge of letters before he was a soldier, and later on his passion for learning was such that he intended all his sons to have instruction in letters before they were trained to arms. His purpose was fulfilled. I was his first-born,³ and being specially dear to him had the greatest care taken over

1. The traditional title of *Historia calamitatum* and the third-person chapter-headings (omitted in this translation) were well known by Petrarch's time, though the best of the early manuscripts read *Abelardi ad amicum suum consolatoria* (<epistula> ('Abelard's letter of consolation to his friend')). This version of the title and the opening paragraph indicate that however personal in content, this letter falls into one of the categories recognized by the art of rhetoric. The 'friend' who reappears as a fellow-monk in the closing paragraphs may be wholly imaginary, as part of the convention.

2. In fact Le Pallet is about twelve miles east and a little south of Nantes, on the way to Poitiers. The ruins to be seen on a hill behind the church are said to be the walls of the castle belonging to Abelard's father Berengar (Berengarius), a member of the minor Breton nobility. Abelard was born in 1079; his mother was Lucie (Lucia).

3. A sister, Denise (Dionisia), appears in the necrology of the Paraclete, and there is documentary evidence of three possible brothers, Dagobert, Porcarius and Radulphus. See Muckle, *Medieval Studies*, Vol. XII, note 16, p. 175. Abelard mentions visiting a brother in Nantes on p. 103.

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my education. For my part, the more rapid and easy my progress in my studies, the more eagerly I applied myself, until I was so carried away by my love of learning that I renounced the glory of a soldier's life, made over my inheritance and rights of the eldest son to my brothers, and withdrew from the court of Mars in order to kneel at the feet of Minerva. I preferred the weapons of dialectic to all the other teachings of philosophy, and armed with these I chose the conflicts of disputation instead of the trophies of war. I began to travel about in several provinces disputing, like a true peripatetic philosopher, wherever I had heard there was keen interest in the art of dialectic.¹

At last I came to Paris, where dialectic had long been particularly flourishing, and joined William of Champeaux² who at the time was the supreme master of the subject, both in reputation and in fact. I stayed in his school for a time, but though he welcomed me at first he soon took a violent dislike to me because I set out to refute some of his arguments and frequently reasoned against him. On several occasions I proved myself his superior in debate. Those who were considered the leaders among my fellow students were also annoyed, and the more so as they looked on me as the youngest and most recent pupil. This was the beginning of

1. There were schools for grammar and rhetoric available at Nantes, Vannes, Redon, Angers and Chartres, and at Loches Abelard must have been taught logic by the famous Nominalist dialectician Jean Roscelin, who is not named here because of his condemnation in 1093 for denying the unity of the Trinity. He was exiled in England, but later allowed to resume teaching at Loches. Abelard afterwards disassociated himself from Roscelin's teaching, and wrote at some unknown date to the bishop of Meaux demanding a confrontation with Roscelin who had attacked him (P.L. 178, 355 ff.; Cousin, Vol. II, pp. 150-51). An abusive letter by Roscelin to Abelard in which there are distasteful taunts about his mutilation is also extant (P.L. 178, 358 ff.; Cousin, Vol. II, p. 792 ff.).

The Peripatetic philosophers were the followers of Aristotle, so named because of the arcade (*peripatos*) for 'walking about' in which he taught in Athens.

2. William of Champeaux (c. 1070-c.1120), Realist philosopher, archdeacon of Paris, head of the Cloister School of Notre Dame, and then at the Abbey of St Victor; in 1112 or 1113 bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne. He installed Bernard as abbot of Clairvaux and became a close friend.

the misfortunes which have dogged me to this day, and as my reputation grew, so other men's jealousy was aroused.

It ended by my setting my heart on founding a school of my own, young as I was and estimating my capacities too highly for my years; and I had my eye on a site suited to my purpose - Melun, an important town at that time and a royal residence.¹ My master suspected my intentions, and in an attempt to remove my school as far as possible from his own, before I could leave him he secretly used every means he could to thwart my plans and keep me from the place I had chosen. But among the powers in the land he had several enemies, and these men helped me to obtain my desire. I also won considerable support simply through his unconcealed jealousy. Thus my school had its start and my reputation for dialectic began to spread, with the result that the fame of my old fellow-students and even that of the master himself gradually declined and came to an end. Consequently my self-confidence rose still higher, and I made haste to transfer my school to Corbeil, a town nearer Paris, where I could embarrass him through more frequent encounters in disputation.

However, I was not there long before I fell ill through overwork and was obliged to return home. For some time I remained absent from France,² sorely missed by those eager for instruction in dialectic. A few years later, when I had long since recovered my health, my teacher William, archdeacon of Paris, changed his former status and joined the order of the Canons Regular,³ with the intention, it was said, of gaining promotion to a higher prelacy through a reputation for increased piety. He was soon successful when he was made

1. Melun, one of the residences of Philip I. None of Abelard's dates is precise; his school may have been set up in 1102. Corbeil was also a royal fief.

2. About six years. Brittany was an independent duchy, not part of France until the late fifteenth century.

3. The Rule of the Canons Regular was based on that drawn up by St Augustine for secular clergy. It was intended to reform the cathedral clergy and to bridge the growing gap between scholars and monks. The Abbey of St Victor became famous under Hugh of St Victor, who taught there from 1125 to 1141.

bishop of Châlons. But this change in his way of life did not oblige him either to leave Paris or to give up his study of philosophy, and he soon resumed his public teaching in his usual manner in the very monastery to which he had retired to follow the religious life. I returned to him to hear his lectures on rhetoric, and in the course of our philosophic disputes I produced a sequence of clear logical arguments to make him amend, or rather abandon, his previous attitude to universals. He had maintained that in the common existence of universals, the whole species was essentially the same in each of its individuals, and among these there was no essential difference, but only variety due to multiplicity of accidents. Now he modified his view in order to say that it was the same not in essence but through non-difference.¹ This has always been the dialectician's chief problem concerning universals, so much so that even Porphyry did not venture to settle it when he deals with universals in his *Isagoge*,² but only mentioned it as a 'very serious difficulty'. Consequently, when William had modified or rather been forced to give up his original position, his lectures fell into such contempt that he was scarcely accepted on any other points of dialectic, as if the whole subject rested solely on the question of universals.

My own teaching gained so much prestige and authority from this that the strongest supporters of my master who had hitherto been the most violent among my attackers now flocked to join my school. Even William's successor³ as head of the Paris school offered me his chair so that he could join the others as my pupil, in the place where his master and mine had won fame. Within a few days of my taking over the teaching of dialectic, William was eaten up with jealousy and consumed with anger to an extent it is difficult to convey, and being unable to control the violence of his resentment for long, he made another artful attempt to banish me. I had done

1. See Introduction, p. 12.

2. Porphyry, a Greek Neoplatonist of the third century A.D. and pupil of Plotinus, had written an Introduction (*Isagoge*) to the *Categories* of Aristotle which was known at this time through a translation by Boethius.

3. Not identified.

nothing to justify his acting openly against me, so he launched an infamous attack on the man who had put me in his chair, in order to remove the school from him and put it in the hands of one of my rivals. I then returned to Melun and set up my school there as before; and the more his jealousy pursued me, the more widely my reputation spread, for, as the poet says:

Envy seeks the heights, the winds sweep the summits.¹

But not long after when he heard that there was considerable doubt about his piety amongst the majority of thoughtful men, and a good deal of gossip about his conversion, as it had not led to his departure from Paris, he removed himself and his little community, along with his school, to a village some distance from the city. I promptly returned to Paris from Melun, hoping for peace henceforth from him, but since he had filled my place there, as I said, by one of my rivals, I took my school outside the city to Mont Ste Geneviève,² and set up camp there in order to lay siege to my usurper. The news brought William back to Paris in unseemly haste to restore such scholars as remained to him and his community to their former monastery, apparently to deliver from my siege the soldier whom he had abandoned. But his good intentions did the man very serious harm. He had previously had a few pupils of a sort, largely because of his lectures on Priscian,³ for which he had some reputation, but as soon as his master arrived he lost them all and had to retire from keeping a school. Soon afterwards he appeared to lose hope of future worldly fame, and he too was converted to the monastic life. The bouts of argument which followed William's return to the city between my pupils and him and his followers, and the successes in these encounters which fortune gave my people (myself among them) are facts which you

1. Ovid, *De remedio amoris*, 1. 369.

2. The site of the present University of Paris. It was outside the bounds of the city of Paris until the beginning of the next century.

3. The famous Latin grammarian of the early sixth century A.D., teaching at Constantinople, whose eighteen-book treatise on grammar (*Institutiones grammaticae*) was widely used in the Middle Ages.

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have long known. And I shall not go too far if I boldly say with Ajax that

If you demand the issue of this fight,
I was not vanquished by my enemy.¹

Should I keep silence, the facts cry out and tell the outcome.

Meanwhile my dearest mother Lucie begged me to return to Brittany, for after my father Berengar's entry into monastic life she was preparing to do the same. When she had done so I returned to France, with the special purpose of studying theology, to find my master William (whom I have often mentioned) already installed as bishop of Châlons. However, in this field his own master, Anselm of Laon,² was then the greatest authority because of his great age.

I therefore approached this old man, who owed his reputation more to long practice than to intelligence or memory. Anyone who knocked at his door to seek an answer to some question went away more uncertain than he came. Anselm could win the admiration of an audience, but he was useless when put to the question. He had a remarkable command of words but their meaning was worthless and devoid of all sense. The fire he kindled filled his house with smoke but did not light it up; he was a tree in full leaf which could be seen from afar, but on closer and more careful inspection proved to be barren. I had come to this tree to gather fruit, but I found it was the fig tree which the Lord cursed, or the ancient oak to which Lucan compares Pompey:

There stands the shadow of a noble name,
Like a tall oak in a field of corn.³

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13. 89-90.

2. Anselm of Laon (died c. 1117) probably studied under St Anselm at Bec, and taught theology at Laon for many years with far greater distinction than Abelard is willing to allow. He and his brother Ralph conducted the school there and made it famous for theology; but his teaching was based on accepted authorities, while Abelard believed that dialectic offered the proper equipment for arriving at a better understanding of theological problems. Anselm's school produced the standard *Ordinary Gloss* on the Bible; see Introduction, p. 13.

3. Cf. Matthew xxi, 18 ff. (the barren fig tree); Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1. 135-6.

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Once I discovered this I did not lie idle in his shade for long. My attendance at his lectures gradually became more and more irregular, to the annoyance of some of his leading pupils, who took it as a sign of contempt for so great a master. They began secretly to turn him against me, until their base insinuations succeeded in rousing his jealousy. One day it happened that after a session of *Sentences*¹ we students were joking amongst ourselves, when someone rounded on me and asked what I thought of the reading of the Holy Scriptures, when I had hitherto studied only philosophy. I replied that concentration on such reading was most beneficial for the salvation of the soul, but that I found it most surprising that for educated men the writings or glosses of the Fathers themselves were not sufficient for interpreting their commentaries without further instruction. There was general laughter, and I was asked by many of those present if I could or would venture to tackle this myself. I said I was ready to try if they wished. Still laughing, they shouted 'Right, that's settled! Take some commentary on a little-known text and we'll test what you say.' Then they all agreed on an extremely obscure prophecy of Ezekiel. I took the commentary and promptly invited them all to hear my interpretation the very next day. They then pressed unwanted advice on me, telling me not to hurry over something so important but to remember my inexperience and give longer thought to working out and confirming my exposition. I replied indignantly that it was not my custom to benefit by practice, but I relied on my own intelligence, and either they must come to my lecture at the time of my choosing or I should abandon it altogether.

1. Anselm's teaching followed the traditional lines of study of the Scriptures (*lectio divina*), as prescribed by St Benedict in *Regula* 48, with an exposition verse by verse from the teachings of the Fathers of the Church (*glossae*). *Sentences* (*sententiae*) were the deeper truths of Revelation to be arrived at after a study of the letter and sense of the text; these were stated by the teacher and then expounded and proved through citation from the Bible and the Fathers. Abelard's view was that an educated man should be able to study the Scriptures alone with the aid of a commentary. (He was of course a mature student of thirty-four amongst much younger men.)

At my first lecture there were certainly not many people present, for everyone thought it absurd that I could attempt this so soon, when up to now I had made no study at all of the Scriptures. But all those who came approved, so that they commended the lecture warmly, and urged me to comment on the text on the same lines as my lecture. The news brought people who had missed my first lecture flocking to the second and third ones, all alike most eager to make copies of the glosses which I had begun with on the first day.

Anselm was now wildly jealous, and being already set against me by the suggestions of some of his pupils, as I said before, he began to attack me for lecturing on the Scriptures in the same way as my master William had done previously over philosophy. There were at this time two outstanding students in the old man's school, Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Lombardy,¹ whose hostility to me was intensified by the good opinion they had of themselves. It was largely through their insinuations, as was afterwards proved, that Anselm lost his head and curtly forbade me to continue my work of interpretation in the place where he taught,² on the pretext that any mistake which I might write down through lack of training in the subject would be attributed to him. When this reached the ears of the students, their indignation knew no bounds – this was an act of sheer spite and calumny, such as had never been directed at anyone before; but the more open it was, the more it brought me renown, and through persecution my fame increased.

A few days after this I returned to Paris, to the school which had long ago been intended for and offered to me,³ and

1. Very little is known of Lotulf, who came from Novara. Alberic became archdeacon of Rheims in 1113 and ran the school there with Lotulf; in 1137 he was elected archbishop of Bourges. They were two of Abelard's main opponents at the Council of Soissons: see p. 79.

2. Evidently a man could be forbidden to teach by a *magister scholarum*, though at this date it was not yet necessary for him to acquire a licence (*licentia docendi*) to do so from the official responsible for the schools in a diocese or city.

3. As *magister scholarum* at Notre Dame Abelard would be adopted into the Chapter as a canon but this did not mean that he was ordained a priest.

from which I had been expelled at the start. I held my position there in peace for several years, and as soon as I began my course of teaching I set myself to complete the commentaries on Ezekiel which I had started at Laon. These proved so popular with their readers that they judged my reputation to stand as high for my interpretation of the Scriptures as it had previously done for philosophy. The numbers in the school increased enormously as the students gathered there eager for instruction in both subjects, and the wealth and fame this brought me must be well known to you.

But success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit's resolution and easily destroys it through carnal temptations. I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and so I yielded to the lusts of the flesh. Hitherto I had been entirely continent, but now the further I advanced in philosophy and theology, the further I fell behind the philosophers and holy Fathers in the impurity of my life. It is well known that the philosophers, and still more the Fathers, by which is meant those who have devoted themselves to the teachings of Holy Scripture, were especially glorified by their chastity. Since therefore I was wholly enslaved to pride and lechery, God's grace provided a remedy for both these evils, though not one of my choosing: first for my lechery by depriving me of those organs with which I practised it, and then for the pride which had grown in me through my learning – for in the words of the Apostle, 'Knowledge breeds conceit' – when I was humiliated by the burning of the book of which I was so proud.²

The true story of both these episodes I now want you to

He was already *clericus* – 'clerk' rather than 'cleric' – for at this time *clerici* and *scholares* were synonymous, as the schools were all Church institutions. Masters and students were tonsured and wore clerical habits.

1. 1 Corinthians viii, 1. Abelard and Heloise both quote from the Bible very freely. Their own words have been translated when they are only approximate to the Latin of the Vulgate; otherwise the N.E.B., Knox or Jerusalem Bible has been used.

2. His treatise *On the Unity and Trinity of God*, burnt by order of the Council of Soissons. See p. 83.

know from the facts, in their proper order, instead of from hearsay. I had always held myself aloof from unclean association with prostitutes, and constant application to my studies had prevented me from frequenting the society of gentlemen: indeed, I knew little of the secular way of life. Perverse Fortune flattered me, as the saying goes, and found an easy way to bring me toppling down from my pedestal, or rather, despite my overbearing pride and heedlessness of the grace granted me, God's compassion claimed me humbled for Himself.

There was in Paris at the time a young girl named Heloise,¹ the niece of Fulbert, one of the canons, and so much loved by him that he had done everything in his power to advance her education in letters. In looks she did not rank lowest, while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme. A gift for letters is so rare in women that it added greatly to her charm and had won her renown throughout the realm. I considered all the usual attractions for a lover and decided she was the one to bring to my bed, confident that I should have an easy success; for at that time I had youth and exceptional good looks as well as my great reputation to recommend me, and feared no rebuff from any woman I might choose to honour with my love. Knowing the girl's knowledge and love of letters I thought she would be all the more ready to consent, and that even when separated we could enjoy each other's presence by exchange of written messages in which we could speak more openly than in person, and so need never lack the pleasures of conversation.

All on fire with desire for this girl I sought an opportunity of getting to know her through private daily meetings and so

1. None of the conjectures about Heloise's birth and parentage can be proved, and as she was a young girl (*adolescentula*), it can only be assumed that she was about seventeen at this time, and born in 1100 or 1101. Her mother's name appears in the necrology of the Paraclete as Hersinde; her father is unknown. It is possible that she was illegitimate, and twice in her letters (p. 129 and p. 130) she implies that her social status was lower than Abelard's. See further McLeod, *op. cit.*, p. 8 ff. and note 219, p. 287 ff. Fulbert presumably lived in the cathedral close, north-east of Notre Dame, traditionally in a house on the *Quai aux Fleurs*.

more easily winning her over; and with this end in view I came to an arrangement with her uncle, with the help of some of his friends, whereby he should take me into his house, which was very near my school, for whatever sum he liked to ask. As a pretext I said that my household cares were hindering my studies and the expense was more than I could afford. Fulbert ~~dearly loved money, and was~~ moreover always ambitious to further his niece's education in letters, two weaknesses which made it easy for me to gain his consent and obtain my desire: he was all eagerness for my money and confident that his niece would profit from my teaching. This led him to make an urgent request which furthered my love and fell in with my wishes more than I had dared to hope; he gave me complete charge over the girl, so that I could devote all the leisure time left me by my school to teaching her by day and night, and if I found her idle I was to punish her severely. I was amazed by his simplicity – if he had entrusted a tender lamb to a ravening wolf it would not have surprised me more. In handing her over to me to punish as well as to teach, what else was he doing but giving me complete freedom to realize my desires, and providing an opportunity, even if I did not make use of it, for me to bend her to my will by threats and blows if persuasion failed? But there were two special reasons for his freedom from base suspicion: his love for his niece and my previous reputation for continence.

Need I say more? We were united, first under one roof, then in heart; and so with our lessons as a pretext we abandoned ourselves entirely to love. Her studies allowed us to withdraw in private, as love desired, and then with our books open before us, more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts. To avert suspicion I sometimes struck her, but these blows were prompted by love and tender feeling rather than anger and irritation, and were sweeter than any balm could be. In short, our desires left no stage of love-making untried,