

Letters of Abelard and Heloise

The letters selected here are from a 1901 edition, available online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/aah/>

- you can print them, or read them online.

Intro, by J.B., Hare, from the website, above.

Some have it that romantic love was an invention of the Middle Ages. If so, then the true story of Pierre Abelard and Heloise is one of the templates of this narrative. Both Abelard and Heloise were prominent intellectuals of twelfth century France. Abelard, of noble birth and eighteen years the senior of Heloise, was a prominent lecturer in philosophy. Abelard was an adventurous thinker, and was constantly at odds with the Church. On several occasions he was forced to recant and burn his writings.

Heloise was a strong-willed and gifted woman who was fluent in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and came from a lower social standing than Abelard. At age 19, and living under her uncle Fulbert's roof, Heloise fell in love with Abelard, who she was studying under. Not only did they have a clandestine affair of a sexual nature, they had a child, Astrolabe, out of wedlock. Discovered by the Fulbert (who was a Church official), Abelard was assaulted by a hired thug and castrated, and Heloise entered a convent. Abelard was exiled to Brittany, where he lived as monk. Eventually Heloise became abbess of the Oratory of the Paraclete, an abbey which Abelard had founded.

It was at this time that they exchanged their famous letters, presented in this book. The letters, originally written in Latin, are passionate both in the remembrance of lost love, and the attempt to reconcile that love with their respective monastic duty to remain chaste. The tension between these two poles generates a huge amount of emotional electricity.

This is the first web posting of the letters of Abelard and Heloise. This includes a long poem by Alexander Pope about the lovers, notable for the phrase 'eternal sunshine of the spotless mind,' ([p. 104](#), in reference to Heloise) which was recently used for a movie title.

--J.B. Hare, September 18th, 2006

LETTER II

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.

Mournful remembrances

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.

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The sorrows of Abelard

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

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Heloise weeps

[paragraph continues]

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

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She bids Abelard write

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

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The power of letters

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

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His duty to her nuns

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

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Woman needs support

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

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The friendships of saints

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

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Love still lives

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

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The liberty of love

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

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The martyrs of marriage

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

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Abelard's attractions

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

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She is not jealous

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

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She reproaches him for neglect

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

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Between God and man

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

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She confesses her sin

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.

Why should I conceal from you the secret of my call? You know it was neither zeal nor devotion that brought me here. Your conscience is too faithful a witness to permit you to disown it. Yet here I am, and here I will remain; to this place an unfortunate love and a cruel relation have condemned me. But if you do not continue your concern for me, if I lose your affection, what have I gained by my imprisonment? What recompense can I hope for? The unhappy consequences of our love and your disgrace have made me put on the habit of chastity, but I am not penitent of the past. Thus I strive and labour in vain. Among those who are wedded to God I am wedded to a man; among the heroic supporters of the Cross I am the slave of a human desire; at the head of a religious community I am devoted to Abelard alone. What a monster am I! Enlighten me, O Lord, for I know not if my despair or Thy grace draws these words from me! I am, I confess, a sinner, but one who, far from weeping for her sins, weeps only for her lover; far from abhorring her crimes, longs only to add to them; and who, with a weakness unbecoming my state, please myself

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But yields to her passion

continually with the remembrance of past delights when it is impossible to renew them.

Good God! What is all this? I reproach myself for my own faults, I accuse you for yours, and to what purpose? Veiled as I am, behold in what a disorder you have plunged me! How difficult it is to fight for duty against inclination. I know what obligations this veil lays upon me, but I feel more strongly what power an old passion has over my heart. I am conquered by my feelings; love troubles my mind and disorders my will. Sometimes I am swayed by the sentiment of piety which arises within me, and then the next moment I yield up my imagination to all that is amorous and tender. I tell you to-day what I would not have said to you yesterday. I had resolved to love you no more; I considered I had made a vow, taken a veil, and am as it were dead and buried, yet there rises unexpectedly from the bottom of my heart a passion which triumphs over all these thoughts, and darkens alike my reason and my religion. You reign in such inward retreats of my soul that I know not where to attack you; when I endeavour to break those chains by which I am bound to you I only deceive myself, and all my efforts but serve to bind them faster.

Oh, for pity's sake help a wretch to renounce her desires--her self--and if possible even to renounce you! If you are a lover--a father, help a mistress, comfort a child! These tender names must surely move you; yield either to pity or to love. If you gratify my request I shall continue a religious, and without longer profaning my calling. I am ready to

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Further reproaches

humble myself with you to the wonderful goodness of God, Who does all things for our sanctification, Who by His grace purifies all that is vicious and corrupt, and by the great riches of His mercy draws us against our wishes, and by degrees opens our eyes to behold His bounty which at first we could not perceive.

I thought to end my letter here, but now I am complaining against you I must unload my heart and tell you all its jealousies and reproaches. Indeed I thought it somewhat bard that when we had both engaged to consecrate ourselves to Heaven you should insist upon my doing it first. 'Does Abelard then,' said I, 'suspect that, like Lot's wife, I shall look back?' If my youth and sex might give occasion of fear that I should return to the world, could not my behaviour, my fidelity, and this heart which you ought to know, banish such ungenerous apprehensions? This distrust hurt me; I said to myself, 'There was a time when he could rely upon my bare word, and does he now want vows to secure himself to me? What occasion have I given him in the whole course of my life to admit the least suspicion? I could meet him at all his assignations, and would I decline to follow him to the Seats of Holiness? I, who have not refused to be the victim of pleasure in order to gratify him, can he think I would refuse to be a sacrifice of honour when he desired it?' Has vice such charms to refined natures, that when once we have drunk of the cup of sinners it is with such difficulty we accept the chalice of saints? Or did you believe yourself to be more competent to teach vice than virtue,

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The Purity of her love

or me more ready to learn the first than the latter? No; this suspicion would be injurious to us both: Virtue is too beautiful not to be embraced when you reveal her charms, and Vice too hideous not to be abhorred when you display her deformities. Nay, when you please, anything seems

lovely to me, and nothing is ugly when you are by. I am only weak when I am alone and unsupported by you, and therefore it depends on you alone to make me such as you desire. I wish to Heaven you had not such a power over me! If you had any occasion to fear you would be less negligent. But what is there for you to fear? I have done too much, and now have nothing more to do but to triumph over your ingratitude. When we lived happily together you might have doubted whether pleasure or affection united me more to you, but the place from whence I write to you must surely have dissolved all doubt. Even here I love you as much as ever I did in the world. If I had loved pleasures could I not

have found means to gratify myself? I was not more than twenty-two years old, and there were other men left though I was deprived of Abelard. And yet I buried myself alive in a nunnery, and triumphed over life at an age capable of enjoying it to its full latitude. It is to you I sacrifice these remains of a transitory beauty, these widowed nights and tedious days; and since you cannot possess them I take them from you to offer them to Heaven, and so make, alas! but a secondary oblation of my heart, my days, my life!

I am sensible I have dwelt too long on this subject; I ought to speak less to you of your

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The strength of her love

misfortunes and of my sufferings. We tarnish the lustre of our most beautiful actions when we applaud them ourselves. This is true, and yet there is a time when we may with decency commend ourselves; when we have to do with those whom base ingratitude has stupefied we cannot too much praise our own actions. Now if you were this sort of creature this would be a home reflection on you. Irresolute as I am I still love you, and yet I must hope for nothing. I have renounced life, and stript myself of everything, but I find I neither have nor can renounce my Abelard. Though I have lost my lover I still preserve my love. O vows! O convent! I have not lost my humanity under your inexorable discipline! You have not turned me to marble by changing my habit; my heart is not hardened by my imprisonment; I am still sensible to what has touched me, though, alas! I ought not to be! Without offending your commands permit a lover to exhort me to live in obedience to your rigorous rules. Your yoke will be lighter if that hand support me under it; your exercises will be pleasant if he show me their advantage. Retirement and solitude will no longer seem terrible if I may know that I still have a place in his memory. A heart which has loved as mine cannot soon be indifferent. We fluctuate long between love and hatred before we can arrive at tranquillity, and we always flatter ourselves with some forlorn hope that we shall not be utterly forgotten.

Yes, Abelard, I conjure you by the chains I bear here to ease the weight of them, and make them as agreeable as I would they were to me.

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The human or the divine

[paragraph continues]

Teach me the maxims of Divine Love; since you have forsaken me I would glory in being wedded to Heaven. My heart adores that title and disdains any other; tell me how this Divine Love is nourished, how it works, how it purifies. When we were tossed on the ocean of the world we could hear of nothing but your verses, which published everywhere our joys and pleasures. Now we are in the haven of grace is it not fit you should discourse to me of this new happiness, and teach me everything that might heighten or improve it? Show me the same complaisance in my present condition as you did when we were in the world. Without changing the ardour of our affections let us

change their objects; let us leave our songs and sing hymns; let us lift up our hearts to God and have no transports but for His glory!

I expect this from you as a thing you cannot refuse me. God has a peculiar right over the hearts of great men He has created. When He pleases to touch them He ravishes them, and lets them not speak nor breathe but for His glory. Till that moment of grace arrives, O think of me--do not forget me--remember my love and fidelity and constancy: love me as your mistress, cherish me as your child, your sister, your wife! Remember I still love you, and yet strive to avoid loving you. What a terrible saying is this! I shake with horror, and my heart revolts against what I say. I shall blot all my paper with tears. I end my long letter wishing you, if you desire it (would to Heaven I could!), for ever adieu!

LETTER III

Abelard to Heloise

Abelard confesses

COULD I have imagined that a letter not written to yourself would fall into your hands, I had been more cautious not to have inserted anything in it which might awaken the memory of our past misfortunes. I described with boldness the series of my disgraces to a friend, in order to make him less sensible to a loss he had sustained. If by this well-meaning device I have disturbed you, I purpose now to dry up those tears which the sad description occasioned you to shed; I intend to mix my grief with yours, and pour out my heart before you: in short, to lay open before your eyes all my trouble, and the secret of my soul, which my vanity has hitherto made me conceal from the rest of the world, and which you now force from me, in spite of my resolutions to the contrary.

It is true, that in a sense of the afflictions which have befallen us, and observing that no change of our condition could be expected; that those prosperous days which had seduced us were now past, and there remained nothing but to erase from our minds, by painful endeavours, all marks and remembrances of them. I had wished to find in philosophy and religion a remedy for my disgrace; I searched out an asylum to secure me from love. I was come to the sad experiment

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The greater the silence, the louder speaks love

of making vows to harden my heart. But what have I gained by this? If my passion has been put under a restraint my thoughts yet run free. I promise myself that I will forget you, and yet cannot think of it without loving you. My love is not at all lessened by those reflections I make in order to free myself. The silence I am surrounded by makes me more sensible to its impressions, and while I am unemployed with any other things, this makes itself the business of my whole vacation. Till after a multitude of useless endeavours I begin to persuade myself that it is a superfluous trouble to strive to free myself; and that it is sufficient wisdom to conceal from all but you how confused and weak I am.

I remove to a distance from your person with an intention of avoiding you as an enemy; and yet I incessantly seek for you in my mind; I recall your image in my memory, and in different inquietudes I betray and contradict myself. I hate you! I love you! Shame presses me on all sides. I am at this moment afraid I should seem more indifferent than you fare, and yet I am ashamed to discover my trouble. How weak are we in ourselves if we do not support ourselves on the Cross of Christ. Shall we have so little courage, and shall that uncertainty of serving two masters which afflicts your heart affect mine too? You see the confusion I am in, how I blame myself and how I suffer. Religion commands me to pursue virtue since I have nothing to hope for from love. But love still preserves its dominion over my fancies and entertains itself with past pleasures. Memory supplies the

place of a

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The cloister cannot kill love

mistress. Piety and duty are not always the fruits of retirement; even in deserts, when the dew of heaven falls not on us, we love what we ought no longer to love. The passions, stirred up by solitude, fill these regions of death and silence; it is very seldom that what ought to be is truly followed here and that God only is loved and served. Had I known this before I had instructed you better. You call me your master; it is true you were entrusted to my care. I saw you, I was earnest to teach you vain sciences; it cost you your innocence and me my liberty. Your Uncle, who was fond of you, became my enemy and revenged himself on me. If now having lost the power of satisfying my passion I had also lost that of loving you, I should have some consolation. My enemies would have given me that tranquillity which Origen purchased with a crime. How miserable am I! I find myself much more guilty in my thoughts of you, even amidst my tears, than in possessing you when I was in full liberty. I continually think of you; I continually call to mind your tenderness. In this condition, O Lord! if I run to prostrate myself before your altar, if I beseech you to pity me, why does not the pure flame of the Spirit consume the sacrifice that is offered? Cannot this habit of penitence which I wear interest Heaven to treat me more favourably? But Heaven is still inexorable because my passion still lives in me; the fire is only covered over with deceitful ashes, and cannot be extinguished but by extraordinary grace. We deceive men, but nothing is hid from God.

You tell me that it is for me you live under

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Her image ever before him

that veil which covers you; why do you profane your vocation with such words? Why provoke a jealous God with a blasphemy? I hoped after our separation you would have changed your sentiments; I hoped too that God would have delivered me from the tumult of my senses. We commonly die to the affections of those we see no more, and they to ours; absence is the tomb of love. But to me absence is an unquiet remembrance of what I once loved which continually torments me. I flattered myself that when I should see you no more you would rest in my memory without troubling my mind; that Brittany and the sea would suggest other thoughts; that my fasts and studies would by degrees delete you from my heart. But in spite of severe fasts and redoubled studies, in spite of the distance of three hundred miles which separates us, your image, as you describe yourself in your veil, appears to me and confounds all my resolutions.

What means have I not used! I have armed my hands against myself; I have exhausted my strength in constant exercises; I comment upon St. Paul; I contend with Aristotle: in short, I do all I used to do before I loved you, but all in vain; nothing can be successful that opposes you. Oh! do not add to my miseries by your constancy; forget, if you can,

your favours and that right which they claim over me; allow me to be indifferent. I envy their happiness who have never loved; how quiet and easy are they! But the tide of pleasure has always a reflux of bitterness; I am but too much convinced now of this: but though I am no longer deceived by

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He struggles for forgetfulness

love, I am not cured. While my reason condemns it my heart declares for it. I am deplorable that I have not the ability to free myself from a passion which so many circumstances, this place, my person and my disgraces tend to destroy; I yield without considering that a resistance would wipe out my past offences, and procure me in their stead both merit and repose. Why use your eloquence to reproach me for my flight and for my silence? Spare the recital of our assignations and your constant exactness to them; without calling up such disturbing thoughts I have enough to suffer. What great advantages would philosophy give us over other men, if by studying it we could learn to govern our passions? What efforts, what relapses, what agitations do we undergo! And how long are we lost in this confusion, unable to exert our reason, to possess our souls, or to rule our affections?

What a troublesome employment is love! And how valuable is virtue even upon consideration of our own ease! Recollect your extravagancies of passion, guess at my distractions; number up our cares, our griefs; throw these things out of the account and let love have all the remaining tenderness and pleasure. How little is that! And yet for such shadows of enjoyments which at first appeared to us are we so weak our whole lives that we cannot now help writing to each other, covered as we are with sackcloth and ashes. How much happier should we be if by our humiliation and tears we could make our repentance sure. The love of pleasure is not eradicated out of the soul save by extraordinary efforts; it has

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And asks her help

so powerful an advocate in our breasts that we find it difficult to condemn it ourselves. What abhorrence can I be said to have of my sins if the objects of them are always amiable to me? How can I separate from the person I love the passion I should detest? Will the tears I shed be sufficient to render it odious to me? I know not how it happens, there is always a pleasure in weeping for a beloved object. It is difficult in our sorrow to distinguish penitence from love. The memory of the crime and the memory of the object which has charmed us are too nearly related to be immediately separated. And the love of God in its beginning does not wholly annihilate the love of the creature.

But what excuses could I not find in you if the crime were excusable? Unprofitable honour, troublesome riches, could never tempt me: but those charms, that beauty, that air, which I yet behold at this instant, have occasioned my fall. Your looks were the

beginning of my guilt; your eyes, your discourse, pierced my heart; and in spite of that ambition and glory which tried to make a defence, love was soon the master. God, in order to punish me, forsook me. You are no longer of the world; you have renounced it: I am a religious devoted to solitude; shall we not take advantage of our condition? Would you destroy my piety in its infant state? Would you have me forsake the abbey into which I am but newly entered? Must I renounce my vows? I have made them in the presence of God; whither shall I fly from His wrath should I violate them? Suffer me to seek ease in my duty: though difficult

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He is ashamed

it is to procure it. I pass whole days and nights alone in this cloister without closing my eyes. My love burns fiercer amidst the happy indifference of those who surround me, and my heart is alike pierced with your sorrows and my own. Oh, what a loss have I sustained when I consider your constancy! What pleasures have I missed enjoying! I ought not to confess this weakness to you; I am sensible I commit a fault. If I could show more firmness of mind I might provoke your resentment against me and your anger might work that effect in you which your virtue could not. If in the world I published my weakness in love-songs and verses, ought not the dark cells of this house at least to conceal that same weakness under an appearance of piety? Alas! I am still the same! Or if I avoid the evil, I cannot do the good. Duty, reason and decency, which upon other occasions have some power over me, are here useless. The Gospel is a language I do not understand when it opposes my passion. Those vows I have taken before the altar are feeble when opposed to thoughts of you. Amidst so many voices which bid me do my duty, I hear and obey nothing but the secret cry of a desperate passion. Void of all relish for virtue, without concern for my condition or any application to my studies, I am continually present by my imagination where I ought not to be, and I find I have no power to correct myself. I feel a perpetual strife between inclination and duty. I find myself a distracted lover, unquiet in the midst of silence, and restless in the midst of peace. How shameful is such a condition!

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He would give her to God

Regard me no more, I entreat you, as a founder or any great personage; your praises ill agree with my many weaknesses. I am a miserable sinner, prostrate before my Judge, and with my face pressed to the earth I mix my tears with the earth. Can you see me in this posture and solicit me to love you? Come, if you think fit, and in your holy habit thrust yourself between my God and me, and be a wall of separation. Come and force from me those sighs and thoughts and vows I owe to Him alone. Assist the evil spirits and be the instrument of their malice. What cannot you induce a heart to do whose weakness you so perfectly know? Nay, withdraw yourself and contribute to my salvation. Suffer me to avoid destruction, I entreat you by our former tender affection and by our now common misfortune. It will always to show none; I here release you from all your oaths and engagements. Be God's wholly, to whom you are appropriated; I will never oppose so

pious a design. How happy shall I be if I thus lose you! Then shall I indeed be a religious and you a perfect example of an abbess.

Make yourself amends by so glorious a choice; make your virtue a spectacle worthy of men and angels. Be humble among your children, assiduous in your choir, exact in your discipline, diligent in your reading; make even your recreations useful. Have you purchased your vocation at so light a rate that you should not turn it to the best advantage? Since you have permitted yourself to be abused by false doctrine and criminal instruction, resist not those good counsels which

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The chalice of saints

grace and religion inspire me with. I will confess to you I have thought myself hitherto an abler master to instil vice than to teach virtue. My false eloquence has only set off false good. My heart, drunk with voluptuousness, could only suggest terms proper and moving to recommend that. The cup of sinners overflows with so enchanting a 'sweetness, and we are naturally so much inclined to taste it, that it needs only to be offered to us. On the other hand the chalice of saints is filled with a bitter draught and nature starts from it. And yet you reproach me with cowardice for giving it to you first. I willingly submit to these accusations. I cannot enough admire the readiness you showed to accept the religious habit; bear therefore with courage the Cross you so resolutely took up. Drink of the chalice of saints, even to the bottom, without turning your eyes with uncertainty upon me; let me remove far from you and obey the Apostle who hath said '*Fly!*'.

You entreat me to return under a pretence of devotion. Your earnestness in this point creates a suspicion in me and makes me doubtful how to answer you. Should I commit an error here my words would blush, if I may say so, after the history of our misfortunes. The Church is jealous of its honour, and commands that her children should be induced to the practice of virtue by virtuous means. When we approach God in a blameless manner then we may with boldness invite others to Him. But to forget Heloise, to see her no more, is what Heaven demands of Abelard; and to expect nothing from Abelard, to I forget him even as an idea, is what Heaven enjoins

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His former jealousy

on Heloise. To forget, in the case of love, is the most necessary penance, and the most difficult. It is easy to recount our faults; how many, through indiscretion, have made themselves a second pleasure of this instead of confessing them with humility. The only way to return to God is by neglecting the creature we have adored, and adoring the God whom we have neglected. This may appear harsh, but it must be done if we would be saved.

To make it more easy consider why I pressed you to your vow before I took mine; and

pardon my sincerity and the design I have of meriting your neglect and hatred if I conceal nothing from you. When I saw myself oppressed by my misfortune I was furiously jealous, and regarded all men as my rivals. Love has more of distrust than assurance. I was apprehensive of many things because of my many defects, and being tormented with fear because of my own example I imagined your heart so accustomed to love that it could not be long without entering on a new engagement. Jealousy can easily believe the most terrible things. I was desirous to make it impossible for me to doubt you. I was very urgent to persuade you that propriety demanded your withdrawal from the eyes of the world; that modesty and our friendship required it; and that your own safety obliged it. After such a revenge taken on me you could expect to be secure nowhere but in a convent.

I will do you justice, you were very easily persuaded. My jealousy secretly rejoiced in your innocent compliance; and yet, triumphant as I was, I yielded you up to God with an unwilling heart.

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His selfish doubt

[paragraph continues]

I still kept my gift as much as was possible, and only parted with it in order to keep it out of the power of other men. I did not persuade you to religion out of any regard to your happiness, but condemned you to it like an enemy who destroys what he cannot carry off. And yet you heard my discourses with kindness, you sometimes interrupted me with tears, and pressed me to acquaint you with those convents I held in the highest esteem. What a comfort I felt in seeing you shut up. I was now at ease and took a satisfaction in considering that you continued no longer in the world after my disgrace, and that you would return to it no more.

But still I was doubtful. I imagined women were incapable of steadfast resolutions unless they were forced by the necessity of vows. I wanted those vows, and Heaven itself for your security, that I might no longer distrust you. Ye holy mansions and impenetrable retreats! from what innumerable apprehensions have ye freed me? Religion and piety keep a strict guard round your grates and walls. What a haven of rest this is to a jealous mind! And with what impatience did I endeavour after it! I went every day trembling to exhort you to this sacrifice; I admired, without daring to mention it then, a brightness in your beauty which I had never observed before. Whether it was the bloom of a rising virtue, or an anticipation of the great loss I was to suffer, I was not curious in examining the cause, but only hastened your being professed. I engaged your prioress in my guilt by a criminal bribe with which I purchased the right of burying you. The professed

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Her sacrifice

of the house were alike bribed and concealed from you, at my directions, all their

scruples and disgusts. I omitted nothing, either little or great; and if you had escaped my snares I myself would not have retired; I was resolved to follow you everywhere. The shadow of myself would always have pursued your steps and continually have occasioned either your confusion or your fear, which would have been a sensible gratification to me.

But, thanks to Heaven, you resolved to take the vows. I accompanied you to the foot of the altar, and while you stretched out your hand to touch the sacred cloth I heard you distinctly pronounce those fatal words that for ever separated you from man. Till then I thought your youth and beauty would foil my design and force your return to the world. Might not a small temptation have changed you? Is it possible to renounce oneself entirely at the age of two-and-twenty? At an age which claims the utmost liberty could you think the world no longer worth your regard? How much did I wrong you, and what weakness did I impute to you? You were in my imagination both light and inconstant. Would not a woman at the noise of the flames and the fall of Sodom involuntarily look back in pity on some person? I watched your eyes, your every movement, your air; I trembled at everything. You may call such self-interested conduct treachery, perfidy, murder. A love so like to hatred should provoke the utmost contempt and anger.

It is fit you should know that the very moment when I was convinced of your being entirely

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His double guilt

devoted to me, when I saw you were infinitely worthy of all my love, I imagined I could love you no more. I thought it time to leave off giving you marks of my affection, and I considered that by your Holy Espousals you were now the peculiar care of Heaven, and no longer a charge on me as my wife. My jealousy seemed to be extinguished. When God only is our rival we have nothing to fear; and being in greater tranquillity than ever before I even dared to pray to Him to take you away from my eyes. But it was not a time to make rash prayers, and my faith did not warrant them being heard. Necessity and despair were at the root of my proceedings, and thus I offered an insult to Heaven rather than a sacrifice. God rejected my offering and my prayer, and continued my punishment by suffering me to continue my love. Thus I bear alike the guilt of your vows and of the passion that preceded them, and must be tormented all the days of my life.

If God spoke to your heart as to that of a religious whose innocence had first asked him for favours, I should have matter of comfort; but to see both of us the victims of a guilty love, to see this love insult us in our very habits and spoil our devotions, fills me with horror and trembling. Is this a state of reprobation? Or are these the consequences of a long drunkenness in profane love? We cannot say love is a poison and a drunkenness till we are illuminated by Grace; in the meantime it is an evil we doat on. When we are under such a mistake, the knowledge of our misery is the first step towards amendment.

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The assistance of God

[paragraph continues]

Who does not know that 'tis for the glory of God to find no other reason in man for His mercy than man's very weakness? When He has shown us this weakness and we have bewailed it, He is ready to put forth His Omnipotence and assist us. Let us say for our comfort that what we suffer is one of those terrible temptations which have sometimes disturbed the vocations of the most holy.

God can grant His presence to men in order to soften their calamities whenever He shall think fit. It was His pleasure when you took the veil to draw you to Him by His grace. I saw your eyes, when you spoke your last farewell, fixed upon the Cross. It was more than six months before you wrote me a letter, nor during all that time did I receive a message from you. I admired this silence, which I durst not blame, but could not imitate. I wrote to you, and you returned me no answer: your heart was then shut, but this garden of the spouse is now opened; He is withdrawn from it and has left you alone. By removing from you He has made trial of you; call Him back and strive to regain Him. We must have the assistance of God, that we may break our chains; we are too deeply in love to free ourselves. Our follies have penetrated into the sacred places; our amours have been a scandal to the whole kingdom. They are read and admired; love which produced them has caused them to be described. We shall be a consolation to the failings of youth for ever; those who offend after us will think themselves less guilty. We are criminals whose repentance is late; oh, let it be sincere! Let us repair as far as is possible the

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He bids her strive

evils we have done, and let France, which has been the witness of our crimes, be amazed at our repentance. Let us confound all who would imitate our guilt; let us take the side of God against ourselves, and by so doing prevent His judgment. Our former lapses require tears, shame and sorrow to expiate them. Let us offer up these sacrifices from our hearts, let us blush and let us weep. If in these feeble beginnings, O Lord, our hearts are not entirely Thine, let them at least feel that they ought to be so.

Deliver yourself, Heloise, from the shameful remains of a passion which has taken too deep root. Remember that the least thought for any other than God is an adultery. If you could see me here with my meagre face and melancholy air, surrounded with numbers of persecuting monks, who are alarmed at my reputation for learning and offended at my lean visage, as if I threatened them with a reformation, what would you say of my base sighs and of those unprofitable tears which deceive these credulous men? Alas! I am humbled under love, and not under the Cross. Pity me and free yourself. If your vocation be, as you say, my work, deprive me not of the merit of it by your continual inquietudes. Tell me you will be true to the habit which covers you by an inward retirement. Fear God, that you may be delivered from your frailties; love Him that you may advance in

virtue. Be not restless in the cloister for it is the peace of saints. Embrace your bands, they are the chains of Christ Jesus; He will lighten them and bear them with you, if you will but accept them with humility.

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And reach repentance

Without growing severe to a passion that still possesses you, learn from your own misery to succour your weak sisters; pity them upon consideration of your own faults. And if any thoughts too natural should importune you, fly to the foot of the Cross and there beg for mercy--there are wounds open for healing; lament them before the dying Deity. At the head of a religious society be not a slave, and having rule over queens, begin to govern yourself. Blush at the least revolt of your senses. Remember that even at the foot of the altar we often sacrifice to lying spirits, and that no incense can be more agreeable to them than the earthly passion that still burns in the heart of a religious. If during your abode in the world your soul has acquired a habit of loving, feel it now no more save for Jesus Christ. Repent of all the moments of your life which you have wasted in the world and on pleasure; demand them of me, 'tis a robbery of which I am guilty; take courage and boldly reproach me with it.

I have been indeed your master, but it was only to teach sin. You call me your father; before I had any claim to the title, I deserved that of parricide. I am your brother, but it is the affinity of sin that brings me that distinction. I am called your husband, but it is after a public scandal. If you have abused the sanctity of so many holy terms in the superscription of your letter to do me honour and flatter your own passion, blot them out and replace them with those of murderer, villain and enemy, who has conspired against your honour, troubled your quiet, and betrayed

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God saves by suffering

your innocence. You would have perished through my means but for an extraordinary act of grace which, that you might be saved, has thrown me down in the middle of my course.

This is the thought you ought to have of a fugitive who desires to deprive you of the hope of ever seeing him again. But when love has once been sincere how difficult it is to determine to love no more! 'Tis a thousand times more easy to renounce the world than love. I hate this deceitful, faithless world; I think no more of it; but my wandering heart still eternally seeks you, and is filled with anguish at having lost you, in spite of all the powers of my reason. In the meantime, though I should be so cowardly as to retract what you have read, do not suffer me to offer myself to your thoughts save in this last fashion. Remember my last worldly endeavours were to seduce your heart; you perished by my means and I with you: the same waves swallowed us up. We waited for death with indifference, and the same death had carried us headlong to the same punishments. But

Providence warded off the blow, and our shipwreck has thrown us into a haven. There are some whom God saves by suffering. Let my salvation be the fruit of your prayers; let me owe it to your tears and your exemplary holiness. Though my heart, Lord, be filled with the love of Thy creature, Thy hand can, when it pleases, empty me of all love save for Thee. To love Heloise truly is to leave her to that quiet which retirement and virtue afford. I have resolved it: this letter shall be my last fault. Adieu. If I die here I will give orders that my

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In death not divided

body be carried to the House of the Paraclete. You shall see me in that condition, to demand tears from you, for it will be too late; weep rather for me now and extinguish the fire which burns me. You shall see me in order that your piety may be strengthened by horror of this carcase, and my death be eloquent to tell you what you brave when you love a man. I hope you will be willing, when you have finished this mortal life, to be buried near me. Your cold ashes need then fear nothing, and my tomb shall be the more rich and renowned.