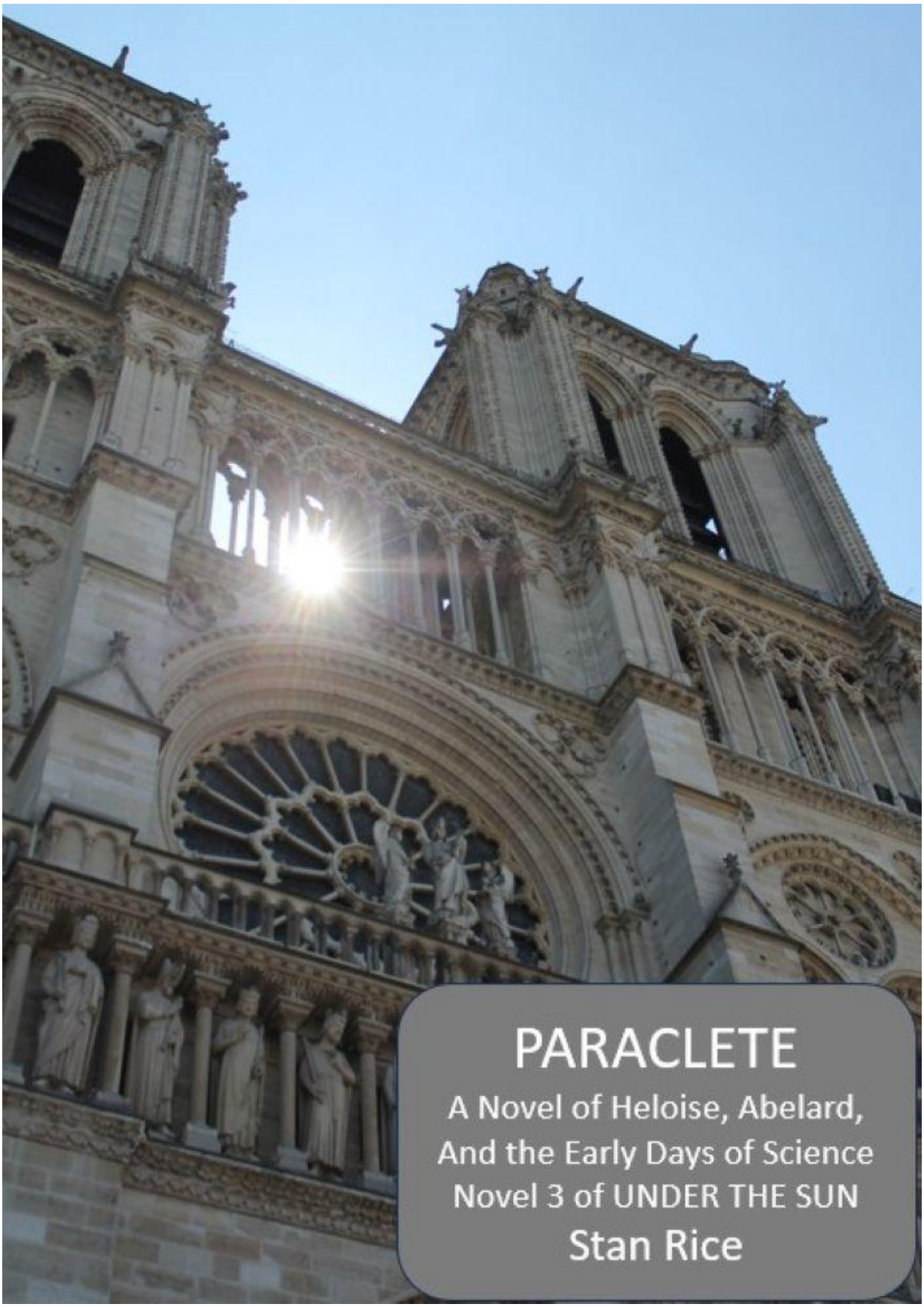

PARACLETE
A Novel of Heloise, Abelard,
And the Early Days of Science
Novel 3 of UNDER THE SUN
Stan Rice

PARACLETE

A novel of Heloïse, Abélard, and the Early days of Science
Part three of the series *Under the Sun*

Stan Rice

By doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we come to truth.—Peter Abélard, c. 1115

Our freedom to doubt was born of a struggle against authority in the early days of science. It was a very deep and strong struggle. Permit us to question—to doubt, that's all—not to be sure. And I think it is important that we do not forget the importance of this struggle and thus perhaps lose what we have gained. Here lies a responsibility to society.—Richard Feynman, 1988

Prior to the Renaissance, we lived in a cozy little hut of a cosmos, and our place within it seemed secure.—Timothy Ferris, 1997

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Novel series UNDER THE SUN by Stan Rice

Among the Lilies

The Almond Branch

Paraclete

Blue Wild Indigo

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Summary of Paraclete

The story of Heloïse and Abélard may be the most intense love story in all of history, but it was also the focus of how humans understand—or fail to understand—the work of God—if any—in the world of nature, or man, under the sun.

After an adventurous youth in the eleventh century, Peter Abélard becomes a philosopher, the closest any medieval person could be to a scientist. So sharp and delightful is his mind that, after joining the priesthood, he becomes Magister of Notre Dame in Paris. His dedication to fearless inquiry gets him in a lot of trouble, especially with his rival cleric Bernard of Clairvaux, who spends his life trying to undermine Abélard. But Abélard is so popular that it takes decades to silence him.

When Abélard meets Heloïse, a young woman whose mind is even sharper than his, they fall deeply in love and take every increasingly heedless risk to have sexual intimacy. When Heloïse's uncle Fulbert discovers this, he gets Abélard fired, then plots to have him castrated. Their love child, Astralabe, is taken from them.

Abélard lives out his years in a run-down country abbey, Paraclete, directed by Heloïse, but even here the Church will not leave him at peace.

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Paraclete

Chapter 1
Heloïse

People have told me that Peter Abélard's writings would cross oceans and leap over the alps. It is true that many scholars have venerated his writings—to an extent he could not have imagined in his lifetime—but I will not live to see whether their fame will persist or will fade away. And me? Who will remember me? But I do not care. My happiness consists of having had a brief opportunity to bask in his brilliance and, to an extent even he did not admit, contribute to it. That is what I am going to tell you about. I did not create any of his insights, but he thought of most of his ideas in response to our conversation, both physical and spiritual. He might otherwise have simply been one of the forgotten scholars of the church.

Our first meeting certainly did not suggest that he—that is, we—would become a powerhouse of thought in our world, the eleventh century after the life of our Lord and Savior, of the Son of God who created the human spirit, the human mind, the human body. Our first meeting had much more of the body to it than the Church leaders would have permitted, had they known.

*

Someone is singing his song. My lover's song. One of his many songs. It is the song that he was singing when I first laid eyes on him. Now as after so many years I hear the song again, the cosmos begins to whirl around me. In my chest, my heart shakes in pain, and I lean against the wall as it pounds inside my ribs. My loins begin to hurt. I thought I would never experience that feeling again, now that I am old, and Peter has been long dead. The full power of youthful desire grasps me, and my body doubles over in a cramp. I begin to feel the nausea that I have felt only a few times before, always when the cosmos builds up my desire then dashes it cruelly to the ground. It is as if the cosmos, and whatever God there may or may not be behind it, were like one of those leering gargoyles that project assertively from the loins of churches, inflicting pain.

The tears begin to flow silently from my eyes as I crouch near the ground next to a stone wall. The song is floating along with the heavy scent of broiling chicken from a tavern, and mixing with the scent of shit in the street. I am in town and am heading back to my abbey, The Paraclete, which is nestled in the nearby countryside. The shit of city streets is a scent I had never noticed until Peter took me out in the vineyard and the fields and I discovered how different the smell of the springtime flowers was from that of the city.

The song is a powerful cry against the cruelty of the world, but how subtle was Peter's art in writing it: the song is slow and beautiful, as if commenting upon the cruelty of God were the last thing that he had in mind. God himself would smile until he suddenly realized that Peter was ridiculing him.

The song is about a swan, recalling his carefree, youthful days gliding along the surface of a lake. Peter just keeps piling on the irony. The swan lifts his wings into the sunlight and ascends into the blue sky with his mate and cygnets. But now—and there was no change in the hauntingly beautiful melody—he is shot with an arrow, plucked, and is dangling over a brazier, with glowing coals underneath him. A stick has been thrust through his mouth and gut and right out of his anus. He is being slowly turned on a rotisserie, and drops of oil fall from him and create greasy clouds of smoke. Oh my God, that's just the first half of the song! Next the poor swan looks around him in the tavern where he is roasting, with melting eyes, and what does he see coming toward him? Jaws with chomping teeth, grinning mouths with spittle dripping from them, greasy faces wild with ignorance. And it doesn't stop there! The next thing that happens is…exactly what you would expect to happen when animal flesh is eaten. As I crouch in the mud, waves of laughter begin to pour from me, just as they did on that first night.

On that night many years ago, I heard Peter sing, through the open window of a tavern, "*Once, I was free, a cob sailing smoothly on the waters of a vast blue lake…*"

"Who is that man?" I asked Margarethe. Margarethe and I had both been raised in the same abbey, Argenteuil, just downriver from Paris. She was a foundling. I was the daughter of a nun who had had carnal relations with a father whose name I never knew. Then my uncle Fulbert, a canon at the Cathedral of Notre Dame, invited me to live with him in Paris. Margarethe came up the river to visit me often. It was past sunset and we were rushing back to Fulbert's apartment attached to the cathedral of Notre Dame.

The man's voice continued, *"And sailing by my side, the finest pen in the lake…"*

"And why is he singing about a female swan?" I asked Margarethe.

"You're the one living in Paris, and you ask *me* who he is?" she asked with the gentleness that has never departed from her.

Peter's song continued, *"And behind us, in our wakes, a perfect clutch of cygnets…"*

"I'm just a little girl from the nunnery. How should I know who he is?" There was something in Margarethe's voice that told me that she knew very well who it was.

I said, "He is taking the male swan's point of view. Very creative. What is that song?"

The man's voice continued.

Then I launched into the air, into the depths of blue deeper than the lake below,
And swirled across the sky, as all the other swans watched me
And the sun spangled my back with jewels.
All the cobs wished they had my pen,
All of the pens wished they were mine,
And all swooned with envy when they saw our cygnets.

"What a voice he has!" I said of the man I did not yet know. "His use of words. What is that song?"

"It is a rather notorious song," said Margarethe. "The Swan Song, of course. Many troubadours try to sing it, but they cannot master the intricate Latin. They cannot even remember all of the words. Only the composer can do it right."

The singer continued, *"And I flew through a rainbow…"*

I said to Margarethe, "Very well, he must be the composer. But who is he? And why is the song notorious?"

The singer continued.

Then I heard a swooshing sound. It was an arrow,
It pierced my wing, it tangled my wing,
I fell into the dead, muddy water,
The dogs splashed around me, and brought me to their masters.

"How sad," I said to Margarethe. "Something in this man's voice has created empathy. Margarethe, I am nearly crying for the fate of that stupid swan!"

He continued.

And now I am on a spit, rotating
Above the charcoals of Hades,
With grease dripping from the orbits of my eyes
Creating little puffs of smoke below.
The spit is stuck up through my anus…

The crowd inside the tavern laughed heartily.

And protrudes out through my mouth
With my gizzard dangling from it, most unseemly…

I said, "So *that's* why it is notorious. I suppose good girls like us should not be listening to it."

"Then, perhaps we should go?" said Margarethe.

"I want to hear the rest of it," I said. Margarethe pretended not to listen. I slipped up to a window and looked inside the tavern. When I saw the singer, I could not help but say, "My, he is handsome as well."

Margarethe responded, "An opinion shared by all: by women with admiration, by men with resentment. That, my friend, is Abélard."

I was stunned. "Peter of Le Pallet, Peter the Breton, Abélard? The Master of the School of Notre Dame?"

"The same," answered Margarethe.

I added quickly, "The great philosopher! The smartest man in the world!"

Margarethe responded, “I’m sure he, at least, would agree.”

“But why,” I asked, “is he singing in a tavern? Isn’t that a bit disreputable for a scholar?”

Margarethe explained. “I’m sure your Uncle Fulbert would think so. But Abélard’s students admire him. I’ll bet half of them are in the tavern right now. They’re probably the only ones who understand the Latin.”

Then Abélard’s voice became dramatic, almost angry. This is the part to which I refer when I say he was ridiculing God.

What justice is there in the world?
What God? What mercy?
For I was praising God with my beauty
And in return for this resplendent praise
I am now a hunk of meat.

I asked Margarethe, “If the commonfolk cannot understand it, why are they laughing also?” I recognized them as the ones with frayed clothing and mud on the hems.

Abélard’s voice began to swell.

But oh! Oh! OH! The worst is yet to come!
Here they came, they saw, they conquered…

I turned to Margarethe. “Veni, vidi, vici, he said. I’m sure the commoners cannot know the reference to Julius Caesar.”

Abélard continued.

Even now they approach! Dozens of chomping teeth clattering,
Teeth with gaping holes like fœtid cesspools,
Scampering like a herd of deer
Ready to sink themselves into my flesh…

I began to laugh so hard that I had to clutch my chest and turn away from the window. My laughter was almost breathless, and was painful. I think Margarethe smiled a little, as Peter sang,

And soon I will be passing through the lubricious guts
Of all you stupid men,
You stupid common men, You stupid students too,
And before long I will be…

Peter reached a high note and held it out. *“A pile of shit!”*

I almost fainted. Margarethe had to hold me up. I had to embrace the jamb of a door until the pain and convulsions of laughter stopped. Tears were dripping from my face.

"How does he get away with this?" I asked, wiping tears of mirth from my eyes. "I mean, a master teacher, who is supposed to respect the dignity of the great philosophers!"

"There is much you do not know, dear Heloise," said Margarethe. "Abélard doesn't care what previous philosophers think."

"Why does he do it? Singing in a tavern. He certainly cannot need the money," I said.

Margarethe answered, "Don't be too sure. He hails from Brittany. Can't you detect a slight Breton accent?"

I stopped in utter wonder and tried to remember. "No. I can't," I told her. "His Latin is perfect. It must be your imagination."

"His family is very prominent, such as it is in Brittany," continued Margarethe, "but that does not make him a wealthy man here in Paris. Besides, the way he gets around, from what I've heard, he might need to spend a little money here and there."

I looked in the window again. I could not take my eyes off of him.

"I will meet him," I announced.

Margarethe said, "I have to return to the abbey at Argenteuil. You and your Uncle Fulbert live right around the block from Abélard's school. How convenient. But, despite such luck, you won't meet him."

"I will meet him, I repeated.

Margarethe tried to explain, "The teachers do not accept female..."

I did not let her finish her sentence. "I will meet him."

And, God in Heaven, I did.

And that was the night that I decided that I would do anything to listen to the wisdom of this man Abélard. I could not, of course, let Uncle Fulbert know. Uncle Fulbert officially disapproved of Abelard's teaching, but secretly admired it.

*

That was so long ago. That was back before the first of Peter's several deaths. But now I must pull myself up from the ground and continue back to the abbey. Laughing and crying at the same time, I can hardly see my way to walk. I must look crazy to the other people in the street. They know who I am. Everybody knows who I am. The abbess. And what must they think of my abbey? Might they think that the nuns are as foolish as I am? Right now, I do not care what they think. I should, because the survival of my abbey depends entirely on their respect and reverence and beneficence, and my ability to act holy and talk money out of them. Maybe they think I am drunk, as people thought Jesus' disciples on Pentecost morning were drunk. Of course, they know all about my past. Yes, they knew all about it even as they open their purses and their hearts to me and the sisters. As I stumble down the road, I hear a little rumble of laughter from the tavern. The song is old now, and the men have heard it many times, and still laugh at it, but

they have forgotten how funny it was when they first heard it. To me it is not old, it is as eternal as Peter's spirit of challenge, and I am not bored with it because I have not allowed myself to think about it. It had not entered my mind for years.

I am just in time for the evening prayers and meal. My pain and nausea have grown worse, and I bend over as I stumble into the abbey. Margarethe—yes, the same Margarethe, now my second in command—does not have time to speak to me as I tell her to take over my duties, as I would not be leaving my chamber. Oh, and to bring me some food. Through my walls and heavy door, I hear the sisters' songs; I hope they heard neither my rills of laughter or waves of grief.

Chapter 2
Abélard

It was only my second term of teaching at the School of Notre Dame in Paris, the leading school of philosophy in the kingdom of France. There was no better school anywhere—not in Champagne, or Burgundy, and certainly not in Brittany, where I was born. I spent several years at minor schools, and even spent time as a free-lance philosopher. I never despaired of having employment; the fields of human curiosity are endless, and a philosopher will always be able to find a job. But only one person can be the Magister of the School of Notre Dame! My students followed me whenever I moved to a new school and when I, briefly, started my own. I thought about calling my school Olympus, but decided in the end just to call it the Lyceum. But finally my fame was great enough that I received the call to Notre Dame. I was not yet old—only thirty-five years of age—but they could not deny that I was the premiere philosopher in, for anything they or I knew to the contrary, the world. The pay was not much better than at the minor schools, but the prestige was my best compensation. And I could still earn money singing in taverns.

The students were all in their places when I walked into the classroom. I always got a thrill when I walked into class. The students' admiration for me lifted me up and I strode like Hector or Odysseus. They fell silent as I began to speak with the wisdom of Mentor on the first day of class. But today, on the second day of class, I decided to open up the big picture before them, to challenge them with questions that I did not know the answers to either. Furthermore, starting today I wanted them to challenge *me,* even if their fate was to be humbled politely by my wisdom. I glanced up at one of the gargoyle carvings, a little demon with a little brain who cannot understand his own evil, with big eyes that see everything and nothing. I smiled grandly and grasped the podium with both arms as if it were an intimate friend.

"I begin today with a fundamental proposition about the nature of truth," I said.

One student immediately responded, "Shouldn't we begin with prayer?"

This was, in fact, the rule at the School of Notre Dame, but I said, "Time enough for that later."

As I was speaking, I could see a face in the back of the room, hiding behind the last row of benches. At first I thought it was just another gargoyle, but I then realized it was a woman's face. It was instantly gone, and I assumed I had imagined it. It was too beautiful to be the face of an actual woman. It must be my mind creating in me an awareness of just how much sexual energy I have and how little chance I have to fulfill it. Maybe I should stop being so picky. There are lots of prostitutes around. Ah, but this would bring me no joy. I want a female whose mind is as lustaceous as her breasts. A woman who would actually be a student in my class, were women allowed. Of course, no such woman exists, I told myself.

But that face actually made me forget what I was saying. I said, "I begin today with a fundamental proposition about the nature of knowledge." They looked at one another in

confusion. I knew I must have contradicted myself, but I could not remember at that time what I had said moments before.

And then it happened again. That face. And there went my second proposition, lost to the winds that Odysseus let out of his bag. Two propositions, important ones, left to float in the ocean of forgetting. So I began speaking the first thing that came to my mind. “Yes. Let us begin. Nature is silent. It is for us, using the power of the mind, to extract answers to…”

Before I got any further, the student whom I knew would be the brightest in the class said, “Master Abélard, that is what you told us yesterday.”

I knew he was right, of course. But I said, “Oh, yes, so it is. And you claim to fully understand it? Perhaps we should go over it again.”

Then a second student said something that really irritated me. That is, irritated me almost as much as seeing and not-seeing that face behind the benches. He said, “Are you going to become as repetitious as Brother Bernard of Clairvaux?”

Bernard was a young monk who had started his own monastery out in the country. He called his order the Cistercians. His little soft face was hard, his mouth was a bloodless slit that never smiled or frowned very much, his eyes saw everything through their little slits. He demanded, for himself as much as for his followers, complete poverty and discipline. He followed the Order of St. Benedict, except when he didn’t. He seldom argued, or presented reasons for what he said. He just said that his beliefs were what God wanted, and that we all knew it. I saw him once from a distance. I had never met him but I already hated him. Well, not in the sense of wanting him to fry in hell forever; I didn’t hate anyone that much, and I didn’t even really believe in the images of hell that the early church fathers created. The blessed souls watching forever from their clouds the suffering of the damned. I didn’t want to see him suffer; nor did I want to engage him in debate, which he would probably refuse to do; I just wanted to splash a cup of blood red wine on that bloodless face and see what would happen.

“Of course not,” I growled, then told myself to relax. I was master of this classroom; let Bernard sulk in his shabby abbey. “Let us begin with the big picture. There is one God, therefore one truth. If we understand one proposition, then all others must be connected with it, and they can be revealed by reason.” I stepped out in front of the lectern and raised my arms. “I will embrace the world! And it will tender to me its intimate secrets! I do not know everything,” I said. “In fact, I know very little. I have not the key to the land of full understanding. But I know how to get there. Who will come with me?”

Every student stood and said, “I will! I will!” I felt like Judas Maccabeus or Spartacus before the crowds. And I thought I heard a high voice sailing above the others. I assumed it must have been from one of the younger men whose voice had not finished changing. But it could have been the voice of that woman.

“But,” I explained to them, “the only way to do this is to be absolutely sure what we mean by our words. Each word must correspond to one concept. Just as we must use no meaningless words, we should use no words that have multiple meanings.

"For example," I continued, "I have three brothers: Dagoburtus, Porcarius, and Radolphus."

A third student, one who would prove to not be the brightest flame in the class, called out, "I have a brother Radolphus also!" The others laughed at him for his childish interjection. But I used it for instruction.

"Indeed, how odd that there should be two Radolphi in the world. Now, what does it mean, to be a Radolphus?"

The student took up my challenge. "It means to be the droppings of a rat."

The class laughed with me. "No, my good man. *That* is a Dagoburtus, not a Radolphus. So you see, is there really such a thing as a Radolphus? Or is it just a name we happen to give somebody—a good brother, in my case, and a rodent brother, in yours?

"But at least," I continued, "we can admit that both Radolphi, and perhaps even Dagoburtus, are humans. But is 'human' a general category, or is it something that these three men, and many others—as well as women—just happen to be? Is there a true category known as human? Then, it must be possible to define it. You, there," I said, pointing to the first student. "Tell me one of the characteristics of a human."

Bright student he may be, but predictable. He looked straight at me and said, "The ability to reason."

"Then," I answered, "there are few humans. We in this room, and perhaps some others." I looked upward at the ceiling and towards the offices of the church officials above us. The students must have gotten the point, for they laughed. Or else they felt they had to laugh. Which brings up the question, what is a laugh? Right. I have to get on with this lecture. "And did God create humans to be rational creatures? If so, is the relative rarity of rational humans a sign of God's failure? What about the men with small skulls? Are they human? And if not, why do we give them alms?"

"The ability to use language," said the second student.

"And the mute man? He is not human?" I threw back at him.

The third student was looking down at his hands, and spoke quietly in a brief space between noises. "Five fingers," he said.

The rest of the class chimed in, "You idiot!" I didn't need to say anything. They got it. Then I continued. "And what makes a man different from a woman?"

"Are you serious?" asked the first student.

"Define serious," I said.

"A man has, you know, manhood," he said.

"Go ahead and say it," I said, looking straight at him.

"A man has testicles, and a woman doesn't," he said, embarrassed.

I stopped and seriously thought, for enough seconds that the class grew uneasy. I finally said, "Good point. A castrated man—is he still a man, or is he a separate human category?"

I really didn't know what to say next, because I was thinking about my own sexuality, and about the woman's face that I was sure that I saw once again. Once again, I forgot what I was talking about, except that I started to feel the swelling of my manhood. But I was rescued from my confusion when I saw a fly sitting warily on the lectern. I pulled a handkerchief out of my pocket, but the fly did not move. I pulled the handkerchief taut and swatted the fly. A perfect hit. I picked it up off of the floor. It was dead, but nearly intact. I held it up for the cheering students.

"Now this fly," I said, "is physically identical, as far as we can see, to the living fly that was on the lectern a moment ago. Can we, in fact, call them both flies? If so, then the ability to move, the ability to seek out new piles of excrement or dead rats, or dead or even living Radolphi, cannot be part of the definition. Therefore, this being the case, how can one kill a fly, if by fly we mean something that can be either alive or dead?"

The bell began to ring, calling the students to chapel assembly. But I did not stop, even as they began to leave. "And the sound of that bell. Whenever the bell rings, it is the same sound. But it has different meanings at different times. Is each clap of the bell a unique thing, or is there a category known as bell claps? And if a heathen rings it in ignorance of its function, does it still have the same meaning?"

As they were leaving, I said quietly, so that only a few could hear, "Perhaps you should quiet your brains awhile, while you are in the church."

Here was my chance to find out if woman or spirit of woman was actually in the back of the room. I pretended to leave with the students, but shuffled off to the side and went down the aisle. I crouched behind the back bench. Sure enough, when the room appeared to be empty, a woman arose from behind the back bench on the other side of the room and began to walk toward my side of the room. At first all I could see was her feet. Her footsteps were quiet, firm, and perfectly regular. I had seen many women. I have seen faces more fair, and bosoms more ample, and hair more lustrous. But those eyes, large and dark, astonished me. Most women I had met had eyes glazed over with ignorance, but hers burned with what I can only call wisdom.

She started, just slightly, when she saw me. She stood still and looked down at me. I realized I was not comfortable with somebody, especially a woman, looking down on me. So I started to get up, but slipped and landed on my butt. I scrambled to my feet, eager to regain the Magister's position.

"What are you doing here?" I predictably asked.

"I have heard that you are the wisest man in the world, and I wanted to see for myself," she said. Her voice was mead—firm, calm, clear, light, piquant.

"I am," I said, "the wisest man within earshot."

Her voice was mead with ice in it, honey and stings. "I do not flatter. I speak honestly."

"And your conclusion is?" I asked.

"The rumors may indeed be true," she said. "I saw nothing to make me think otherwise. Of course, there are many wise men we shall never know about. In Constantinople? In the realms

of Islam? ‘Wise man’ is a category, whereof we have incomplete knowledge. But you are obviously very wise, and can consider the question I have prepared for you.”

“I can,” I said.

“You said that we can reason out all propositions, and arrive at all truth, because there is one God.”

“I did. If there were many gods, there would be many truths, warring with one another. Olympus comes to mind in this connection. Or if there was one framework of truth within which the gods all operated, then that framework would be God.”

“One God is not the only alternative to many gods,” she pointed out.

“You mean, perhaps there is no God?” I asked.

“It is a proposition worthy of consideration,” she stated.

“No, it is not,” I said. “There is one truth, and one framework that makes the pursuit of truth possible. That framework cannot inhere in an absence, but only in a presence.” I felt triumphant, because even I seldom get a chance to use the word *inhere.*

“Oh, bra*v-oh*. But,” she said. “But so much of what happens in the world makes no sense. How can everything be part of a framework of truth…”

“We philosophers are still working on that problem,” I shut her off.

“Oh,” she said, unconvinced.

She had answered me more courageously than any of my male students. But I could see that she was trembling. “My students,” I said, “pay me. By listening to my wisdom, you might as well be snatching my moneybags.”

I could see the fear in her eyes. I was using my position as master of the school to overwhelm her. I did not actually enjoy this, since I only enjoy prevailing over another person by reason. I particularly do not like to think about what I did next. I decided to shock and offend her, something that when it is done to me I consider to be an act of desperation by an unreasoning brute. “You are comely,” I said, “not bad at all. Not bad. I’ve seen worse. If you explored me, perhaps you would find my moneybags to be of substantial size.”

I thought I had undermined her, and she would run away. And for a moment she seemed about to fail. Then she stopped trembling and looked at me directly, not quite smiling. “And if I did explore you, I would find not only moneybags but also a little man, yes, a little man, with a head but with no brain. And—admit it—he is right now standing at attention.”

She was looking right into my eyes, so I know that she could not have seen any evidence of my erection. Right then I knew she was my goddess of wisdom. So what could I say? I said, “What do you want?”

I had not asked her what she wanted most in the world, but that is what she told me. “What I want most in the world is to be your student.”

“A woman?”

“Why not?”

“Women cannot pursue logic,” I said. “What passes for reason is just the sloshing of waves that change with every phase of the moon.”

"And is the little brainless man between your legs any better?" she said. Before I could stop myself, I winced. She had beaten me, and her slight smile told me that she knew it. "Who says," she insisted, "that women cannot reason, or lead?"

"Well," I should not have said, "everybody knows it."

She pushed her face toward me and spoke loudly. "Ha! I knew it! You go by popular opinion! The ideas of the plebeians, taken out of the oven too soon, mashed by their few teeth into something easy to swallow!"

In her passion, she had pushed her bosom against my chest. Only then did she realize it, glancing down, starting to pull back. But she stood firm, and did soften her voice. "Actually, I did not know it. I had no idea that you would make a crass appeal to popular ideas. I am disappointed. And just how much do you know about us women?"

I tried one more sexual advance. I placed my hand ever so gently on the curve of her hip. "Perhaps, after all, I should get to know you."

"Beware of what you ask," she said in a whisper. "You will find in me a mind that is a flashing sword, sparring with your own."

I sighed, but did not move away from her. I was close enough to smell her sweet breath, so different from the fœtid breaths of other women, or men, even my own. "Very well. There is nothing wanting in your mind. But the fact remains, an educated woman is an inconvenient woman, according to our regrettably ignorant society."

"Too late," she said. "I am already inconvenient. I already know how to read Latin and have practically memorized the classical poets."

"In a perfect world," I continued, "I would accept you into my folds in an instant. But you will someday be a wife, of some man who does not want an intelligent wife. Or you may be a nun…"

"Spare me, O God," she whispered.

"…a nun who keeps chanting all day so that her mind may remain inert. If I taught you to pursue wisdom, would I not be running your prospects?"

"You didn't ask me," she said, "if I care. We each have one life, before we go off to Heaven to chant mindlessly forever—one chance to pursue the truth, while we are alive once upon the Earth."

She had convinced me she was right, but I still did not know what to do. "Notre Dame will not allow you to be my student."

"But," she said, "perhaps Uncle Fulbert would allow you to be my tutor."

I pulled away from her. "You mean, Canon Fulbert?"

"Yes," she said. "I am Heloïse."

"I think I have heard of you," I told her. "And have you seen me before today?"

Heloise relaxed and smiled. "Oh, yes. Many times. Everyone in the street knows who you are. But I saw you first when you were…" She started to laugh, quietly at first, then she bent over, her face touching my shoulder. When she looked up, her eyes were closed with the power of her laughter. Those big wise eyes. She tried several times to talk, but managed only to squeak.

She was stamping her feet. Finally she said, "…when you were singing that ridiculous song about the swan!"

I began laughing also. We were in each other's arms without having planned it. Or, at least I had not. I must ask her someday when I visit whether she had planned it. I am sure she remembers each detail of our meeting. I know this because she eventually told me.

"Yes," I said. "I have heard of you before. You know where? At the beginning of the book of Proverbs, Solomon describes the goddess of wisdom. That's where I have heard of you before." I held her face against my chest. Then I kissed the top of her hair. "God bless this mind," I said.

While the perfectly-tuned chants came through the window, both Heloïse and I started singing the song about the swan, completely out of tune.

Chapter 3
Heloïse

I waited for him almost breathlessly. I was awake and had finished breakfast absurdly early, earlier than he could possibly arrive. Like Penelope, I would undo everything I had done and then redo it, while waiting for wind and fate to bring him to me. But while Penelope waited for years, I waited only minutes that seemed like years. I had bathed and wore clean clothes, but I was so nervous that I was sweating inside them, new sweat, not old rancid sweat, but still enough to perhaps frighten him, a wary buck, away. But, I had seen it in his eyes, the fire of love, and I knew, or told myself that I knew, that he would cleave to me unless forced to let go. But until he actually did so, how could I be sure?

I had asked Uncle Fulbert for a tutor in philosophy, and his opinion about who the best tutor would be. He had mentioned Abélard, but noted that, although Abelard was the greatest philosopher in France, and for ought he knew the world, Abélard was an inconvenient man. He started to go on down his mental list, but I stopped him. *Difficult? Perhaps he would want too much money?* I asked my uncle, even though I knew, or thought I knew, that Abélard would give his fortune, such as it may have been, to be with me. *No, that isn't it,* said my uncle. *Then perhaps he is so busy that he could not be bothered?* I asked. *No, that isn't it; we would have to ask him.* My uncle explained, *He is very bold, and questions everything. Everything.* So I asked, *Is this not what a philosopher is supposed to do? What is the point of philosophy otherwise?* My uncle had hemmed and hawed and said that he did not want Abélard's questions to drive me from the beliefs that he and the teachers had so carefully cultivated in me. Then I stood my ground before him and said, *Do you doubt the truth of what you have taught me? Are you afraid that sincere questions might shatter the foundations of the doctrines?* Fulbert hemmed and hawed some more and left the room.

I felt that there was little chance for Fulbert to hire Abélard as my tutor. Because yes, Fulbert could not be so naïve as to doubt that Abélard's questions would undermine the foundation of any person's faith. Abélard could argue the ground out from underneath the Vatican, had he the chance. I asked myself why I had been so reckless in telling my uncle that I wanted Abélard to help me question everything.

And then last night Uncle Fulbert told me that Abélard would be by to meet me in the morning. I could hardly sleep during the night. No position brought me or my mind rest. I looked at my naked body by the light of the small candle in my room, and tortured myself with wondering whether there was some flaw in my body or mind that Abélard would ultimately find. I was nearly ready to faint when Uncle Fulbert led Abélard in to the sitting room and introduced him to me. Apparently we had both convinced him that we had not previously met.

Just to make sure, Abélard added, "I have heard about you, Heloïse." He took the chair across from me at the small table.

"Yes," said Uncle Fulbert, pulling up another chair. "Did you know she has learned Latin not only perfectly but beautifully?"

"Imagine that! She can read the poets?" Abélard asked, looking Fulbert shamelessly in the eye, as if I had not already told him these things.

"She can write, I believe, as well as they," said Uncle Fulbert. "Of course, that is probably just the proud uncle talking." Then, in perfect reasonableness and friendliness, Uncle Fulbert said something that made my heart almost stop. "Say, Abélard. You are such a great philosopher, maybe I could learn a thing or two from you. Do you suppose I could listen in on some of your lessons with Heloïse?"

Abelard did not look at me, but I believe that he sensed my peril, or perhaps he felt his own peril. For, to me and I imagined for him, the whole point was for us to be alone together. Abélard immediately responded, "Canon Fulbert, the purpose of my being a tutor for this brilliant young girl is that she learn to think for herself. Is it not enough that I will be glowering at her, intimidating her with wisdom while she tries to create her own, without having you hover over her also?"

My relief was as immediate as my uncle's response. "That makes sense, Abélard. Very well. I will ask her to tell me what she has learned from you, but I will not disturb your sessions with her." And he left, after bidding farewell to Abélard. And we were alone. We looked boldly into one another's eyes. For several minutes neither of us could speak.

Then I said, "Glowering over me and intimidating me? Who do you think you are?"

I immediately regretted saying this—it was an insult, perhaps—but he smiled and laughed. Almost that jarring guffaw for which he was famous, but he stopped himself before going too far. "Well," he said, "I had to say something. I couldn't say, *She probably already knows everything I might try to teach her. Or at least she thinks she does. I might need to give her a little corporal punishment along the way if that is the case. But teach her? I just wanted to be with her, and your sorry mule-face is interfering with that.* Would you have preferred that—damn! Why did I say that? Have I offended you?"

I laughed quietly but showed all my teeth—I have all of them and am proud of it. And from that moment we were entirely comfortable in one another's presence, comfortable enough to insult Uncle Fulbert and to ridicule one another.

"Very well," said Abelard. "It appears that we will, during our study sessions, teach things to one another. We will travel where the winds of conversation and the currents of unexpected insight take us. So much for any lesson plan."

"We need something," I said, "something in writing, if only to show Uncle Fulbert that we have been taking our studies seriously."

"Oh, I will be taking them very seriously, my dear. Compared with the time I spend with you, everything else I think about is likely to be no more than the mental equivalent of what men, that is, I could say, I mean…"

"Gracious!" I said, still holding his gaze. "Scarcely a few minutes, and your conversation has already broken down."

"Well, it is just…" Abélard began. "It is just that the image I was about to use was crude."

"It couldn't have been any cruder than what you sing in taverns," I reminded him. "And don't forget I have read the Song of Solomon a little more closely than other young ladies of my age and station."

"Very well. Compared to the time I spend in conversation with you, it is likely that the other things I do with my mind will be like the stimulations that men use when they are deprived of women."

"Thank you," I said. "I knew that's what you meant. I'm glad you said it. Don't be afraid to say anything to me, Abélard. I mean, *Master* Abélard."

"Abélard is fine. Use the *Master* stuff when Fulbert is around. And I like to hear it from my students in the school. But from you, *Master* makes me feel like I am made of granite and am on a pedestal, about ready to fall off."

"For some men, *Master* makes them feel as if they are the great bull in charge of the cows," I said.

"It makes me feel that way, also, when young women say it. That is, except you. It sounds fake coming from your mouth. Please, just *Abélard,* or *Peter.*"

"*Abélard,*" I said. "There are too many other *Peters* around."

"Not that many," he said.

"There is more than one Peter, but there is only one Abélard," I said, finally looking down. Then, I began to cry, just a little. Abélard reached across the table and touched my face, letting the tear of its own accord, by its own volition, climb onto his finger. I continued. "I have to admit that, while I am fully able to spar with you, as balanced as Hector and Agamemnon, I always fear that I will make one slip and make myself silly in your eyes."

When I looked up, he had touched the finger with the tear on it against the tip of his tongue. He smiled. "And if you slip, I will extend my hand to help you up."

And we smiled at one another for a few minutes.

"And to think that words…" Abélard began.

"I won," I said, grinning. "I knew you would be the one to have to start talking first."

He ignored me. "And to think that words are necessary when such communication can occur without them." He touched my hand, which rested on the table, then sat down. "Words are what your uncle is paying me for. Now, Heloïse—by the way, that is the prettiest name I have ever heard…"

"But?" I prompted him.

"But if you were named something like Bovina or Ovina I would still praise your beauty."

Even if I had been named after a cow or a sheep. My beauty? Yes, I have often looked at myself in the brass mirror. I am not ugly. But my eyes don't quite line up, my cheeks are puffy, and I have buck teeth. I knew he spoke with emotion, not analysis, about my beauty. And was he handsome? He, like me, has all his teeth, I'll give him that. His face is round, and his well-

groomed beard could not hide his double-chin. He was large—not fat, but I knew that very soon he would engulf me powerfully.

There we were, caught again in wordless fascination with one another. I had to break the spell somehow; if I did not, I knew I would probably stand up and throw myself at him. So I started making exaggerated chewing motions, and then I said, *moo.*

He guffawed loudly and briefly, then hid his mouth behind his hands. His eyes popped out with pleasure and tears of mirth ran from them. Then he said, "Please, Heloïse, we have to try to get some work done here, or else your uncle will fire me. Students always want to play, and I, alas, must bring them back to the real world of work and structured ideas.

"And so," he continued, wiping his eyes with a small kerchief he drew from inside his sleeve. "What shall we employ our impressive powers of logic against? I mean, upon. There are all of those church doctrines that we could examine, as even your uncle admitted we would at some point have to do."

"Does anybody really care?" I challenged him.

"Bernard does," he said. He referred to the young monk Bernard of Clairvaux, who was younger than Abelard and, in a word, grim. Everything was serious to Bernard. Nobody was serious enough for Bernard, except the Cistercian monks of the order that he had just recently founded. Certainly Abelard wasn't serious enough, nor Abelard's patron, the rich and high-living Stephen de Garlande.

"Spare me," I said. "Bernard? Talk about glowering!"

This time Abelard emitted only one guffaw before bringing himself under control. "Bernard. He would be happy if all wild things would just quit being wild and submit to the orderly discipline of his, well, that's why they call them orders. The Knights of the Bunnies, which have miraculously managed to keep themselves from humping. The Sisters of the Mourning Doves, who coo all day because they are sad at not having sex. The Regiment of the Oaks, which walk up to his door and offer themselves as pilasters and beams for his new Cistercian chapels. The…"

He stopped because I was laughing uncontrollably. "Yes," I said, as tears squeezed from my eyes. "Yes, Abélard, let's leave the doctrines to Bernard. He won't share them with us anyway. Say, Abélard," I said, grabbing his kerchief to wipe away my own tears, and lingering just a moment over the scent of his. The kerchief was otherwise clean. Was I just imagining that he had cleansed himself as I had, just in case our first meeting at Fulbert's house became intimate? "Abélard, in the few moments between all of your scholarly disquisitions about logic, have you read the book of Ecclesiastes?"

"Of course," he said. "My favorite book, except for Solomon's Song."

"And in that book," I said, finally able to talk normally, "the writer—who claims to have been Solomon—simply brushes aside all of the things that the priests of his day or ours worried about. He did not use logic to dismiss them; he was just weary of talking about them. About ephods and breastpieces and mixed fibers and how to make the pokers for the altar and what

exactly happened when the priests put their hands on the goats' heads before sending them into the wilderness. Why should we be any more serious about them?"

"That is the Old Testament," said Abélard. "The New Testament is pretty serious."

"Not so!" I said, rising just a little from my seat. "I grant you that the Apostle Paul could be pretty grim sometimes. In the letter to the Corinthians—one of the letters—he was addressing detailed rules about what was supposed to happen during a church meeting, back before there were any masses. But right in the middle of his legal treatise, he just stopped, stopped, and started writing about what love is. He was writing his epistle to set the rules straight, but even he couldn't keep his mind on the job. Even he was more interested in love."

"We could always study the Song of Solomon," said Abélard.

"Yes," I said in utter seriousness, sitting back down. "But I can't show my homework papers to Uncle Fulbert if that is the text. Maybe we could do Ecclesiastes."

"I don't think Uncle Fulbert, I mean Canon Fulbert, would be much more pleased with that than with the other," said Abélard. "Look, I will send you a list of homework questions about something or other, I don't know, how about the seven sacraments, everybody likes those…"

"Except marriage," I said. "Bernard doesn't like that one. I even heard that, when he gets horny…" This was not a word I was expecting to ever use, certainly not in our first session, with Abélard. But he had just made reference to humping rabbits, so what harm could it do? "…he jumps into the river so that cold water will, you now, make the little man relax."

Abelard became suddenly serious. "This would sound like a joke if it weren't true. Bernard, and other priests like him, actually think that the Song of Songs is an allegory about the love between Christ and the Church. Which it cannot be, unless you like to fantasize about having sex with Jesus Christ." Even I was shocked, and giggled nervously. "Which, of course, you do not.

"No wonder," Abélard continued, "that almost none of the priests or church officials that I have ever met actually *enjoy* talking about doctrines. All of the things that men might enjoy talking about, and which are actually in the Bible, they dismiss as being of less importance than such things as the correct protocol for those sacraments. Oh, they'll force themselves to enjoy the doctrines, but I get the feeling when I am with them that their great minds are actually thinking about dinner."

"And drinking," I added.

"Get some paper," he said.

"Now?" I asked.

"We'd better start. Only this won't be the homework you will show to Fulbert. I can justify this little exercise on the basis of wanting to know how well you know Latin." He waited for me to find a piece of parchment, quill, and ink. "So, you say everybody drinks? Everybody? Well, except for babies and children. With this theme in mind, let us begin. I will write down two words, then you write two more on the same line in response. Then you write two words on the

next line, and I respond to them, only it has to rhyme. And so we can see how long we can keep the couplets coming. Are you ready?"

"Yes," I said.

He wrote, *Bibit hera.* The wife drinks.

I completed the line, *Bibit herus.* The husband drinks. Well, what else would have fit there? Then I started the next line, *Bibit miles*—the soldier drinks.

He completed the line, *Bibit clerus.* The priest drinks. It rhymed. And it was not logically required. Of course, soldier and cleric made a nice balance of types of men. Then he wrote on the third line, *Bibit ille.* He drinks.

What else could I write but, *Bibit illa,* she drinks. Then I wrote on the fourth line, *Bibit servus.* The servant drinks.

He wrote, *cum ancilla.* As well as the maid. And it rhymed.

Bibit velox, the quick person drinks. *Bibit piger,* the lazy person drinks.

Bibit albus, bibit niger. The white man drinks, the black man drinks. Rhymed again.

Bibit constans, bibit vagus. The trustworthy man drinks, the wanderer drinks.

Bibit rudus, bibit magus. The beginner drinks, the wise man drinks.

We laughed.

"Very good," said Abélard. "I knew it when we met, and now I know it by direct verification. I get the feeling, dear Heloïse, that you want to do some of the rhymes. Ah, I was right. So, this time, you start."

The servant girl came in and approached us. "Master Fulbert wants to know if everything is going well."

"He heard us laughing," I said. "Yes. Tell him Master Abélard is surprised at how much I already know. When he encounters ignorance, he grumbles. When he encounters wisdom, he laughs. And the more wisdom, the louder he laughs."

"I'll tell him, Lady Heloïse," said the servant as she left.

"That should keep him occupied," I said.

"I could smell the wine on her breath! *Bibit servus cum ancilla!"* said Abelard. We kept our laughter quiet.

Then I wrote, *Bibit pauper.* The poor man drinks.

He wrote, *et egrotus.* And the lame man. Then, *Bibit exul.* The exile drinks.

I wrote, *et ignotus.* The unknown man drinks.

Bibit puer, Bibit canus. The boy drinks, the old man drinks.

Bibit presul et decanus. The head man drinks, and so does the deacon.

Bibit soror, Bibit frater. The sister drinks, the brother drinks. Of course.

Bibit anus, Bibit mater. The old man drinks, the mother drinks.

Bibit iste, Bibit ille. That woman drinks, this man drinks.

Bibunt centum, he wrote. A hundred drink. I had to think about this before writing, *Bibunt mille*—a thousand drink.

He grabbed the paper and read it, in our alternating scripts. But he could not read the last two words that I wrote, very small. He came over to my side of the table to point to them and ask me what I had written. He let me press my bosom against his arm and touch his shoulder with my hair as I read the words to him.

"Of course," he turned his face to me. "That's what it had to be, I guess." He saw me glower, just slightly. "Or not. Heloïse, we have created a masterpiece here. And on our first day together!" He lingered over the word together. Our breaths mingled.

"And you," I whispered. "What do you like to drink?"

"The sweetness of your breath," he answered. "And you?"

"You," I said.

Chapter 4
Heloïse

I couldn't believe how Abelard and I had slipped together, our lives conjoining, just as if our partnership had been planned for all time. This was not what I was expecting. How often I had read in Ecclesiastes that the sun goes round and round, the wind goes round and round, the waters never fill the sea. How could wind and water, which throw trees like sticks and sticks like trees into huge piles of flotsam along the rivers, possibly have fashioned two things that fit together as perfectly as Abélard and myself? I was not surprised that I found him desirable as a man, and he found me desirable as a woman. A random coupling of men and women brought together by the winds and rivers of the world might produce such a result. Sex is sex is sex. But ours was not just a sexual attraction, or even sex reinforced by friendship, or even by the closest camaraderie. It was perfection.

There remained this problem: we could never be alone together except in the sitting room. This did not entirely stop us, of course. When the servant girl left us alone in the sitting room, Abelard asked to see my homework. I pulled a parchment out of the outside pocket on my robe and handed it to him. It was the paper he had given me with meaningless questions about doctrines on them, to which I had supplied equally meaningless answers. What is the Trinity? God is three in one. Why is three a special number? Because of the Trinity. What is the sacramental wine? The blood of Christ. What is the blood of Christ? Sacramental wine. You get the point. I worried that, if Fulbert saw them, even he would be smart enough to see that they could not have been the subject matter that consumed our so obvious attention.

"Not that one," he said.

"The other one," I said, "is in my inner pocket." And I opened my robe for him, just enough that he could see inside but that nobody could see it from the door. I had cleansed myself, and my lotion had just enough scent that no one would suspect me of carnality. "You see the inner pocket?" I said. He stood looking at my breast as if in a trance. I enjoyed watching him for what seemed like several minutes. Then I said, "Well, reach in and get it." And he did, with a trembling hand that brushed against my breast. Just barely.

He unfolded the little parchment that was slightly stained with my lotion. His questions asked for Biblical references. His first question was about the "sea" which was a big bronze bowl in Solomon's Temple. I made reference to a passage in the Song of Songs about my navel being a bowl never lacking in wine. Next he asked what kind of fruits decorated the tops of the pillars in the Temple. I made reference to clusters of dates, which my lover would grasp when he climbed the tree. He asked whether gazelles were clean or unclean meat. I answered that they were clean, holy, perfect, and that my breasts were fawns, twins of a gazelle, feeding among the lilies.

We then decided to stop the pretense of scholarship. We kept the meaningless parchment about trinities and sacramental wine just in case we ever needed it. We sensed that Fulbert had other things to think about, and that he was caught somehow in a power struggle between Bernard and Stephen for the king's attention.

Chapter 5
Abélard

About the third time I saw her, I brought a long, narrow scroll, entirely blank except for the poem I had written at the top. I hesitated before writing it for her. Here I was, I realized, making myself utterly vulnerable to her. I had never been vulnerable before, especially with women. But here I was, in this first poem, admitting my weakness.

Come, come, my mistress,
I beg you in agony,
I beg you in agony,
Come, my mistress.
Sweet lips like roses
Come and heal my distress,
Come and heal my distress,
Sweet lips like roses.

It was a passionate poem, and its ink was splotched with my tears. I had spent hours upon it. But it was hardly the craftsmanship of a great mind. Sweet lips like roses, as if that has never been written before. And I wrote it twice. Come, my mistress. Well, she wasn't my mistress yet, except for the groping of my hands inside her robe where she made me dig for her parchment. And then, my admission of agony and distress? Begging her? But I knew I could trust her. I knew she desired me as much as I her.

When I gave her the poem, she read it silently, then hid it in a box that she kept under her pillow. It was a tight fit to get the scroll in there. And then, what could we talk about? We did not want to talk. But then she said, "Is what we are about to do wrong?"

"The answer to that question," I said, "is entirely irrelevant."

"Would God," she said, "have created carnal desire if it were evil? Or, would carnal desire be evil if God created it?"

"People like Bernard," I said, "probably think the Devil created it."

"Which is ridiculous," she said.

"Of course," I responded.

"According to the scriptures," she said, "the Devil is stupid. He could not have created all of the structures and sensations connected with carnal desire. He's not smart enough."

"Maybe God made them holy, and the Devil modified them," I said, then added, "in theory."

"The Devil isn't even smart enough to do that," she told me. "Remember the Gadarene swine?"

"Of course," I said. "It's a really funny story, which people like Bernard manage to read with a straight, grim face. When Jesus cast out multitudes of demons…into swine, which thundered down the hill and drowned themselves in the lake."

"Now, does jumping into a pig and drowning yourself in a lake sound very smart to you?" she said, turning her face up to mine. "No, it is obvious that God, not a stupid creature named Satan, created sexual desire."

"To be used within matrimony," I said.

"Then why did he pour it out upon the human race so indiscriminately? We are drowning in the stuff. We are like pigs in Lake Gennessaret. At least, you men are." She looked at me coldly. "You men are so full of sexual desire that you would not notice that you were running over caltrops to reach the object of your lust. You would starve to death rather than to stop looking at a bosom. You would take any risk. You would offend any foe. It is your ultimate weakness."

My heart sank. She had, in her box, a very incriminating document in my own handwriting. And she knew she had me. I could no more escape from the threads of her beauty than I could from chains in a dungeon. I had confessed to this on that scroll. Why did I write that?

Then she continued. "And though you are older, you would impose yourself upon a young girl." She looked at me with a power in her eyes. I knew that she could ruin me. "Nobody would believe that I invited you to have me."

I grabbed her shoulders. "Heloïse, my life is in your hands."

"And this is only our third meeting!" she smiled. "What power I feel! I am magister of the magister!"

"You are! Damn it, you are! You know it! You could tell me to bow before you, you could tell me to…"

"Go on," she said.

"No. I'll just say, nothing disgusting comes from your body. I would do anything you request."

"Are you ready to prove it?" she challenged.

Where do nineteen-year-old girls learn such things? I said, "You are the Empress of the World, *Imperatrix Mundi.* At least, to me. And I would fight anyone who might challenge your hegemony. Just tell me what to do, and I will do it."

"Bring me the head of John the Baptist on a platter," she said, making reference to the request that Salome made to a besotted, leering King Herod.

When I looked into her eyes again, I saw that she could no longer keep up her pretense of control over me. I saw a tear with an inverted world in it. And she said, "I am *Imperatrix Mundi Petri?* But you are my ruler as well. Carnal desire consumes women, also. It's just that we are not allowed to admit it. My own soul is overwhelmed by desire for you, as yours is for me. I am your master, and your slave. Is that logical? Can we be, at once, one another's master and slave? Our coupling will be holy. God approves of it. We just have to keep God's chamberlains, who

try to keep God hidden inside of a dark room away from the very light that he himself created, from finding out."

We sat side by side. Her robe was loose. She drew my left hand between her thighs and slipped them into her moisture. She found a particular location, and said, "There. Can you feel it?"

"My love, you have drawn my hand into your holiest intimacy and you ask me if I can feel it? Of course I can feel it." My voice was trembling. My body was trembling.

"I mean, that little bump. Women have a little man down in there too. He is smaller than yours, but just as yours does for you, ours also enslaves us to carnal desire. That, my dear Abélard, is the place you must stimulate to make us burn with desire. It is a holy place; my woman's bush is Moses' burning bush, creating a fire between the legs. There, I have revealed my secret. Control that little man and you control me."

I started to feel it. Yes, there it was. I tried to remember if I had ever noticed it in other women I had bedded. Heloïse closed her eyes and began to breathe deeply. I massaged the spot more, and pretty soon she was leaning back and forth and gasping. I put my right arm around her shoulders and pressed my lips to her cheek. She started kicking her legs a little. From my experience with women, I knew exactly what was happening. But I had never known about the little man, or about the holiness of the grotto. To keep herself from screaming, she bit her hair and cried. When she relaxed utterly, I wiped her eyes with her robe.

"You see," she said, "I am as helpless as you are. And what we are going to do had better be good in the eyes of God, because we are going to do it." She stood up, grabbed my hand, and led me to a closet. Around the corner of the closet, she pressed her back against the wall and let her robe fall open. We made love for the first time standing up in her closet.

And we were still standing, tasting one another's mouths, when she breathed into my ear, "You have just deflowered the sole heir of the Canon of Notre Dame. What we have started, we cannot stop."

"I would sooner die than stop," I mumbled back.

And the next time I saw her, she had added a poem to the scroll. Now her handwriting convicted her as much as mine did me.

Love fills the air,
Cupid is overwhelmed by lust.
It is good
That young men and young women
Couple together.
The girl without a lover
Foregoes all pleasure
She is like a night watchman
Imprisoning her own heart.

Right about that time, the last warmth of autumn vanished and winter suddenly came. The stones of the walls and the furniture retained a little bit of heat, but soon everyplace was cold, except for the blankets upon the chairs on which we sat and the blankets that covered our laps and hid our mutual explorations.

I added a poem to the scroll:

When I hear the chatter of maidens
It reminds me only that I am away from you.
In my illness I know
That one kiss from you would heal me.

Then she wrote one directly after it, as I watched her.

A girl stood like a single rosebud
Trembling in the wind.

The last of the rosebuds were, indeed, shaking in the cold wind outside the window. Another time, I brought this poem:

I sigh for your beauty
Its absence is achingly all around me.
You ravished me with a single glance of your eyes.
I am pitifully wounded by your love: you are not here.
Your eyes are like lightning in darkness: you are not here.

I glory in you
Redder than the rose
Whiter than the lily
The tresses of your hair
The glance of your eyes
Oh, what a glorious creature you are!

She looked at me, pointed at the third line, and said, “That one, Abélard, is not original. I know exactly where that came from. You took that one from Song of Solomon.” She rolled up the scroll, hid it, and said, “Well, come then! Come and feed among the lilies! My nard is giving forth its fragrance!” And she flung blankets upon the floor and let her robe slip off. The room was very cold but we generated so much heat that we were sweating. It was the first time that we had made love where someone might have seen us; the door was closed, but little protection it would have given us from a curious servant or a suspicious Fulbert.

I was distracted with fear of discovery and forgot to give Heloise the pleasure that I usually did. As Heloise and I put our robes back on, she said, “Well, Farmer Abelard, you have sown some more seed.” And I did not even understand what she meant until after I had left. When I saw her again, I bowed my head before her in apology. She just laughed. “Forget about it, Farmer Abelard,” she said. “Whatever you do gives me pleasure. You can scatter your seed. The Great Speckled Bird of scripture can fly over and manure me. You can examine the quality of the sheaves of wheat all you want. It is all good.” Then she read the poem I had added to the scroll:

I burn with love
And would die for it.

She got out her quill and ink and added:

My sweetest one, I give everything for you.

The next time we met, we explored one another’s bodies closely. Try as hard as I might, I could not see her little man even when she said her finger was right on him. And we mapped out on one another the spots that provided greatest erotic stimulation.

“And the clerics think that all of your intricacies exist only so that the baby has a tube to pass through when it is born?” I asked when we rested.

“It is worse than that,” she said. “So afraid are some people of the network of stimulations with which God has woven our bodies that some people even mutilate themselves.”

“I have heard of this,” I said. “It is usually men mutilating girls. I have heard it is quite common for men to surgically remove the little man from the little woman. They must be better at finding it than I am.”

“Well,” said Heloise, “you’re going to have to learn to find it. You will have to identify it on the final examination, magister.” She smiled, then became serious. “There are some women who invite such mutilation. As you have discovered, the nipples are also foci of stimulation. Some women, in their religious devotion, have their nipples cut off.”

I had not heard this. It seemed so unfair that women should be so subjected, or invite such subjection, when all that Bernard has to do is to jump into cold water when his little man misbehaves. I mentioned this to Heloise.

“Right,” she said. “The men always quote Jesus, *It is better to enter the Kingdom of God mutilated than to have both body and soul burned up in hell*.”

“But that’s not what he meant!” I exclaimed, quietly enough that nobody could hear.

“Tell that to the men with the razors,” Heloise answered.

The servant girl brought two cups of warm wine. Soon enough, we would want cold wine, but could not have it. It would take more money than Fulbert was willing to spend to bring ice from caves in the Jura Mountains in summer.

"I'll leave you two alone now," the girl said as she departed.

For the first time, I became suspicious. "She knows," I said to Heloise.

Heloise's eyes widened in astonishment. "Well of course she knows, you clueless little boy," she said. "Everybody knows. Everybody, that is, except Fulbert. At least everybody has heard rumors. Nobody has to have actually seen us. They just know. And," Heloise smiled while casting down her eyes. "I am a bit flattered by it. To be bedding the great magister! And he such a handsome man! A real bull! Even queens envy my bed. As the Song of Solomon says, *The maidens saw her and called her happy; the queens and concubines also, and they praised her*." Then she looked up at me. I knew she would inject a little humor even into this intimate moment. "Of course, if you think about what Louis VI probably looks like under those kingly gowns, you might not wonder at the Queen's fantasy."

"But, what are we going to do?" I asked, suddenly sensing peril.

"There's nothing we can do now," she said, drawing my hands inside her robe. "Whatever is going to happen will happen. Meanwhile, we must enjoy what we can."

At yet another of our meetings we actually had a serious discussion, after we had satisfied ourselves quickly. It was about sin.

"Sin is the transgression of the law," I recited a scriptural definition.

"And so," she said, "if a dog humps your leg, it is a sinful dog."

"The law applies only to humans," I said.

"Come, come! Where is the Abélard I saw in class that day? Don't just say words. Explain. What is different about a man and a dog that is relevant to this case?"

"Well," I said, "the dog doesn't know any better."

"Still not good enough," she said. "Why should God be offended by a human doing something contrary to an arbitrary list of rules?"

I thought about it, then ventured a speculation. "Sin hurts God. I could sin against you by doing something to degrade you. Sin is when we do something that degrades God."

Heloïse turned from questioner to admirer in a single step. "Abélard, that is brilliant! That is beautiful! It is too beautiful to not be true! The same action, therefore, could be either a sin or not a sin, depending on how and when it is done. You could insult me in a joke, and it is not a sin against me, or you could say the same words without humor, and I would feel like dying."

"Then, the crucial element is intentionality," I said. "Sin is something we do when we intend to be evil. For example, if I made love to you just because I wanted to find relief for my little man, it would be sin. But I do it because I worship you, so it is not a sin."

"If this be so," said Heloise, mindlessly scratching her crotch, "then even the biggest action in the world, or that man can conceive, could be either a sin or not. Say, to curse God."

"How could cursing God ever not be sinful?" I asked.

"I suppose if a man is driven to despair by the evils of the world, and he sincerely thinks that God has caused those evils…" she began.

"Sincerely but wrongly," I interjected.

"As the case may be," she continued. "And the man curses God for the evil and suffering of the world, then it is not sin. But if the man knows that God is good, and curses him for his goodness, then it is sin. You know, I often have wondered why Qoheleth did not curse God. He came pretty close sometimes, but never did."

"What, then, about killing God?" I imagined that I had posed the ultimate question.

"Nobody could kill God," she said.

"What about the men who killed Jesus?" I asked.

"Oh," she said. "Right. You may have a point there, Abélard. Those who killed Jesus may have thought they were doing the right thing, and it would not have been sinful for them. After all, Jesus himself said, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

"Brilliant, Heloïse! We must write this up. This is exactly the sort of discussion we were supposed to be having instead of fornicating. Which was not sinful, by this standard. Yes, I must bring this up with my students."

"If you do, my clueless boy," Heloïse said, "you will get the powers of the church calling down fire and brimstone upon your head. But I suppose you must do it. Your brilliance is the light of the world. My role is to nurture you so that you can share your light with the world. It would be sinful for me to deprive the world of your light. I will just tell you now, Abélard, that I will do anything—anything—to uplift you in your work of philosophy." She looked at me wonderingly, as if she had just seen me for the first time.

"Did you just call me the light of the world?" I asked.

And when I brought the scroll back to her, I had written,

You are the glory of maidens
Radiant maiden
You are the light of the world.

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Chapter 6
Heloïse

By now it was early springtime. A warm wind began to melt the ice and snow. Abélard told me not to trust it. Jesus had said that when the figs put forth their buds, then you knew it was summer. Do not trust the wind and rain. He added, our love is the bud of passion amidst the shifting emotions of humankind. Sure enough, winter returned, and the melted snow became sheets of ice or gigantic icicles that threatened to fall and crush anyone who walked too near.

And in fact it was almost May before flowers actually filled the fields rather than just popping up as brave singularities, and the tree buds began to open. Abélard had taught me to observe; and I noted that the maples and elms opened their shy reddish flowers first, before the oaks dangled their catkins, and last of all the walnuts burst their buds. Neither Abélard nor I knew what to make of this, other than to note that each kind of tree was a life unto itself, responding differently to the seasons. One cannot generalize about trees, Abélard said. And if not trees, then neither of men. Or women.

I had heard about Peter the Peripatetic, the Abélard who took his students to wander about in the fields and woods. And one day I got to see him. Fulbert agreed that I could go out in the field with Abélard and his students if Margarethe were with me. When Abélard and I saw one another, at the door of the school, we grasped hands. I slyly slipped the scroll into his sleeve. Aside from this, we could not admit that we were acquainted, despite what everyone present thought they knew about us. Then we all walked through the streets of Paris, through the streets of the city said to be named for the lover-boy who stole Helen from Menelaus, and across the bridge over the Seine, leaving Île de la Cité behind and heading to muddy flowery fields where the buildings were more widely spaced. I supposed it was just as well that Abélard and I were not alone; the mud on our cloaks would have betrayed us had we sought even a moment of intimacy in those fields.

Abélard divided his students into groups and told them to look at something—a bees-nest just stirring to life in the hole of an old tree, or little plants growing out of cracks in rocks, or butterflies locked in copulation as they flew—and told them to analyze what they saw and report back about it. As the groups scattered in the near distance, Abelard came over to talk with me and Margarethe. I remembered to bow only after Margarethe had done so.

"How nice of you to let us come," I said to him.

"How nice of you to let *me* come," Margarethe said to him. She knew.

"How could I not?" Abélard said expansively. "My student Heloïse has convinced me that women are every bit as intelligent as men."

"I could have told you that," said Margarethe.

"And so, you will be over to our house tomorrow?" I asked him, a bit too eagerly.

"I am visiting," said Margarethe. "I will be staying with Heloïse in her room."

I looked nervously at Abélard. He just smiled.

When Peter the Peripatetic called his students back to him, he had them report their insights to the group. The youth who spoke for the group that had observed the bees said, “The bees are always busy, and that is why they survive and prosper.”

Peter was not impressed. “A platitude straight out of Proverbs,” he said. “*Consider the ant, thou sluggard,* Solomon wrote. But there are plenty of insects that live by themselves and survive quite nicely.”

The youth then said, “But do they produce honey? This is no ordinary accomplishment for the creeping things.”

Peter looked impressed. “I don’t know what to make of that, but you might be on to something there. Next.”

The youth speaking for the second group said, “The plants growing from the rocks have a really difficult time surviving, magister. There is no soil for them. They cannot grow big.”

Peter interrupted him. “Are they small because they grow there, or do they grow there because they are small?”

Peter was ready to go on to the next group, when the second youth actually answered his question. “The latter, magister. By growing where none of the larger plants can live, they have a little home to themselves.”

Peter looked even more impressed. Then he turned his attention to the third group.

“The butterflies are locked in copulation, magister, because they are overwhelmed with love for one another,” said the third youth.

“How can you know what they think and feel?” Peter shot back.

“We cannot, but God gives us no choice but to consult our own feelings to interpret theirs,” the youth answered. “And how well you must know how powerful is the force of desire.”

“What?” Abélard roared.

“I mean,” said the youth, “How well we all must know.”

After Peter had collected himself, he said, “Can it possibly be enjoyable for a male and female to remain in conjunction as they try to wander about and do the other things they have to do in life? How can that possibly be enjoyable?” The students snickered a little. “Try to imagine doing this. Try to imagine having your member inside of a woman while you are going around trying to eat, or go to class, or whatever. It would be clumsy, would it not?” By now the students laughed openly. “But you are right,” continued Peter. “Maybe we can learn something by comparing the actions of these butterflies to our feelings. Did you see anything else that might shed some light on this question?”

Another youth from the third group said, “I did, magister. There were other butterflies flitting around with them, and trying, or so I imagined, to insert themselves into the…”

“Go on,” said Peter. “There is a word for it.”

“…into the orgy,” said the youth. The other students laughed openly.

“And so, by remaining clasped to his little woman,” Peter said, “what is the male butterfly accomplishing?”

“He is keeping the other males away,” said a student from another group.

"So it is not," said Peter, "the throes of ecstasy that keeps them together. It is, instead, like the joyless vigilance that the oriental potentate keeps over his harem, from which he must drive other men away. So, think you that the other insects were males and that they were fighting?"

"Yes, I would say so, magister," answered the student.

"Even on this beautiful spring day," my Abélard's voice said, to all but it seemed to me alone, "there are little souls that cannot enjoy the pleasure of love, but turn it instead into an opportunity for conflict and oppression. Can you think of any human examples of this?" He quickly added, "You don't have to answer that."

When I got home, I read the poem Abélard had added to the scroll.

The happy face of spring
Smiles upon the world;
The bleakness of winter
Has been chased away.
In variegated apparel
The goddess of flowers reigns,
And in the dulcet woods
Hymns uplift her.
His head in the goddess's lap
The god of spring laughs
Flowers wreathed about his head.
The flocks of birds
Are choruses of a thousand maidens
Singing the joy of love.
The west wind blows honeyed breezes.
No time to waste! Love is the prize.

To which I added:
The happy god of love rules absolutely
Over people who beg for his rule.
It is a solemn rite of spring (solemne vere).
The god of love orders us to be happy (iubet nos gaudere).
Can we not obey?
Note, my love, how I trust you (Fidem meam nota).
And with all my heart and mind (Et ex mente tota)
I remain with you
Even when I am distant (Absens in remota)
Whoever loves as I do
Turns upon the wheel (Volvitur in rota).

That last line didn’t quite work. I meant the wheel of torture. Or did I mean the wheel of spinning confusion? Or the wheel that spins the fabric of love? Or was I just trying too hard to make it rhyme? But, lo, here he comes! I will give it to him, just as it is.

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Chapter 7
Abélard

I started to walk the short distance from Stephen's grand house, where I had a little room, to Fulbert's house at Notre Dame. Then, instead, I turned toward the bridge over the Seine and out to the fields. Off to the right was a vineyard. It was Stephen's vineyard, which produced the finest grapes and the choicest wines, and didn't the king, Louis VI, know it. And didn't Bernard know it. Bernard brought only the dregs of bitterness with him when he entreated the king about something that irked him, but Stephen brought a party with him whenever he visited, and seldom made requests. New tendrils were just now emerging from the gnarled branches, and the ground, I noted, was dry enough to lay upon. Then I walked, then ran, across the bridge, and tried to suppress my energy as I approached Fulbert's house.

I read Heloise's poem. As usual, I breathed into her ear how much I loved the poem. Normally, I would have taken the scroll, to write upon later—for what else could I do, when not with her, to help pass the barren time of her absence—but today I was so filled with creativity that I began writing on it immediately.

Ecce gratum et optatum *(Behold, pleasant and desired)*
Purpuratum floret pratum *(Purple flowers bloom)*
Estas redit nunc recedit *(Summer returns and now recedes)*

And I handed it to Heloise, who wrote, "The wildness of winter!" She handed it back to me.

Bruma fugit et iam sugit *(Fog dissipates, and now sucks)…*

And I handed it to Heloise, who looked at me with irritation. *Sucks! What is that supposed to mean?* I read in her face. She wrote, "Spring sucks at the breasts of summer." Then she smiled and added,

His soul is miserable
Who does not enjoy his life (qui nec vivit)
Nor his lusts (nec lascivit)
As long as summer reigns.

"And this means," I said, "that there is no time to waste." I told her about the vines and the ground. "And, it is Stephen's vineyard. He knows, by the way. And he has assured me that no one will disturb us there."

"But," she said, "We have to get there first. Easy enough for you. But for me? How am I supposed to sneak out of Uncle Fulbert's house?"

"Even at night?" I asked.

"He stays up late lucubrating," she answered.

I was stumped. Did she just make up the Latin verb *lucubrare?* I had to pretend I knew what it meant.

She understood me. "I see you do not know that word. It comes from *lux,* or light; it means to stay up late reading or writing by candlelight."

"How late does Fulbert lucubrate?" I asked.

"It varies," she said. "He falls asleep sometimes. But not very late. His eyes are not good. But we must find a way to do this! Bacchus has opened his grove to us."

"If you can slip out of the house, on the north side, I can conduct you safely across the bridge," I said.

"But when?" she asked.

I could not answer her question. Instead, I grabbed her body and clung to her and she to me with our usual desperation. But as I held her, I felt something I had not felt before. It was in her inner pocket. It was as large as the palm of a small hand, heavy, and hard. We pulled apart, and she unhooked her dress. This was more difficult than loosening a robe, for which it was now too hot. I reached inside, barely touching her breast that I now knew so well, and pulled the object out of her pocket.

"Why, you have an astrolabe," I said. "A brass one."

"Yes, of course. Don't you have one?" she responded as she handed it to me.

"Of course. But mine is wood and paper. I cannot afford a brass astrolabe."

"Wood and paper works almost as well as brass. Unless you bend it."

"That is why I keep it in my room," I said. "How did you get this? The expense!"

"Uncle Fulbert gave it to me."

"Canon Fulbert is wealthy enough to have one for himself," I said. "I have seen him playing with it. I don't think he really understands it. But two astrolabes? Wealthy enough to get one for you also?"

"I am his sole heir," Heloïse reminded me. "He offered me either jewels and a wardrobe of rich clothes, or something of equivalent value. I asked for this astrolabe instead."

"What was his reaction?" I asked.

Heloïse chuckled. "He was astonished. But when he saw the look on my face, he agreed right away. He knows that if he does not allow my mind to be fed, I will emaciate as surely as if I had no food. And, after all, he hired you to teach me."

"Why, this is amazing," I said, looking more closely at the little piece of machinery. "It has all of the gears in it. The rete, the plate, the mater. Yes. The phases of the moon, up here. The positions of the sun and moon in the zodiac, down here. And back here, the rule. Oh, you have numerous stars on this plate. You could measure the angle of any of them to determine the time of night. My paper astrolabe can do only this, and only with a couple of stars, one for winter, one for summer. In spring and fall, I never really quite know what time it is. Actually, I made it myself. I spilled some wine on it and got some swan grease on it when I was in the tavern." We

laughed. “But this! I must do whatever I can, forego whatever I must, to get one of these for myself. You would think that as Master of the School of Notre Dame I would be rich. Well, maybe up in England, or down in Burgundy, or even down in Spain, they pay teachers well. But not here in Paris. They think the privilege of teaching at Notre Dame is worth at least half a salary. And it is, but it does put certain restrictions on me.”

“Such as?” she asked.

“Such as, I cannot afford to marry you.” Somehow it was easy for me to say the words that I had dreaded to even imagine saying to her.

“Why should I want marriage? I have you, now.” She grabbed my thighs in back and pulled our crotches together. “God smiles upon our love and our union. Why do we need mankind’s approval, especially the approval of clerics who have no idea what true sexual union is like? The idea of those old, sniveling men saying, Yes, yes, I suppose *we* can approve of this consummation.”

“Marriage would be safer,” I said.

“Abelard! Safer? What care we for safety? God smiles upon us. Our love is as solid a fact of nature as is the unmoving Earth itself.” We moved apart a little so that we could see one another’s faces. “Besides, right now, we have full access to one another’s flesh, but if we had a church marriage, there would be all of those rules, you know.”

“Yes, isn’t that so,” I chuckled. “As husband and wife, we could say, let us have intimacy! But then the church leaders would say, no, not *now!* She is unclean. It is the wrong time of month.”

“They’re right about that one,” she said. “Trust me. But then they would say, no not *now!* It is the season of advent. We must focus our minds on the weeks leading up to the Nativity. A month.”

Then I continued, “No, not *now!* It is Ash Wednesday. It is Lent. Another month. Then, the days leading up to Pentecost. Fifty more days. That leaves Ordinary Time.”

Heloïse laughed. “No, not *now!* It may be Ordinary Time, but it is *Friday.* You want to eat fish, not smell like one!”

Heloïse went Shh! as I started to guffaw. I must learn to control that. My breath came out in little titters of laughter. “No, not *now!* It is Sunday!”

Now Heloïse was laughing loudly. “No, not *now!* It is the middle of the day! There is work to do!”

This time I could not suppress my loud joviality. “Obviously. But they don’t mean *that* kind of work. No, not *now!* It is time for matins. Then vespers. Then…”

Heloïse was gasping with laughter. “There must be a moment or two in there somewhere where the stoat can slither into the burrow.”

That was a beautiful image. I pressed the orbits of my eyes into hers. “That sweet burrow, surrounded by the most pleasant gardens…”

Heloïse slapped me playfully. “No time to stop and smell the flowers! You have to get right in and finish up.”

I wiped the tears of mirth on my sleeve. “Right. The stoat has to grab the mouse and wolf it down. God, too many metaphors. I’m getting confused. And just when you think there is time, Bernard calls for a prayer vigil to help rouse up the souls of the people to launch another Crusade.”

Heloïse became suddenly somber. “Which will be just as successful as the last one!” Then she erupted into laughter.

I tried to be serious. “But really, it is safer for us to marry. Let the church fathers prohibit us from intimacy, but it will be too late.” I smiled. “We will have already had it. Or they won’t know about it. *Oh, I forgot it was Friday. Oh well. I’ll try to remember next time.”*

Now Heloïse was serious and quiet. “Why should I marry you? We are together, now. And don’t worry about getting your own brass astrolabe. I have one. It is ours. We will always be together and have one. Nothing can separate us. Not heights, not depths, not broad expanses, not mountains or deserts or glaciers or streams or oceans or heaven or hell.” With each word, emotion had built up, and now she began to cry. I touched her shoulder and listened. “I would rather be your whore than to marry you. Either way, you are my master, and will always be.”

“But,” I said, “you will never be my slave. As my wife, you will have legal privileges.”

She said, “You will revere me, forever, whether I am wife or not.”

“We are not going to resolve this question right now,” I said. “I must leave soon. Do you have your faux homework done?”

She handed me a little sheaf of paper. She had written and answered a question on it.

“How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” I read. “Heloïse, this doesn’t help much. If Fulbert sees this, he will decide that we are just wasting our time…”

“Read it,” she told me.

I glanced over it. It was actually pretty good. And the more I thought about it later, the more brilliant I found it. The question sounds so outrageously silly, but to answer it, you have to deal with questions of dimensionality. Angels are spiritual beings, not material; therefore, need they obey our physical laws of scale? Are they our size, and the answer is therefore zero? Or are they infinitely small, and the answer is an infinite number? And, of course, the writer being Heloïse, the angels are dancing, not trudging on a pilgrimage, or holding up their hymnbooks, or kneeling in prayer.

“This will work just fine,” I said. “Now, when are we going to meet?”

“Does your astrolabe,” she asked, “have the star that the Arabs call Vega?”

“That’s one of the few stars on it,” I said. “It is high in the sky in late summer. It is a bit early in the year…”

“I will meet you,” she said, “when Vega is…” She consulted her astrolabe. “…when Vega is twenty degrees above the eastern horizon. That should put it above the walls, fully at night, but not be too late.”

“My astrolabe is not quite as precise as yours,” I said. “Do not fret if I am a little late.”

“You are as likely to be early,” she said.

Chapter 8
Abélard

"What's in the bag?" she asked as she met me at precisely the right time outside of her uncle's house.

"I'm the teacher, and I will let you know at the right time," I said.

I knew how to walk in the streets at night, having come home many times from taverns. I seldom went to taverns anymore, since I spent all my time alone thinking about Heloïse. But Heloïse slipped and stumbled. She clung to me, and my arm was around her.

"I hope you didn't wear your good shoes," I told her.

As we approached the bridge, the only bridge in this portion of Île de la Cité, Heloise told me, "Watch out. I see thugs on the bridge. Maybe this isn't such a good idea. And, Abélard, O my God, there are some behind us."

She could not see me smile. "The ones in front of us may be thugs, but the ones behind us are not."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I mean, what is the patronage of Stephen de Garlande worth if one cannot call upon it at such times?"

I could feel her relax. As we approached the bridge, the thugs hid, and Stephen's servants drew their swords and encompassed us from behind. The thugs did not emerge from the shadows as we passed.

"Now will you tell me what is in the bag?" Heloïse said, as we approached the vineyard.

I took her about five rows in, and Stephen's servants sat politely at the corner of the vineyard. The moon had not risen, so there was only the sidereal light against which my body was outlined. Heloïse, I imagine, could just barely see me remove my light robe and hear me drape it onto the fresh earth. I heard her dress swish and plop.

"Lie down on your back," I told her.

"Tell me what we are doing," she said.

"We are going to try out the advice found in the Song of Solomon," I said.

She gasped just slightly when my finger touched her left nipple, and again when she felt numerous small, soft objects falling around her breasts. I explained to her, "They are raisins. I had no dates, so I had to use raisins. Your breasts are clusters in the palm tree, and I am eating them." She giggled as I lapped up the raisins from her chest. Next, I told her to remain very still. She tried to keep from jumping when she felt something cool and wet raining onto her belly. "Your belly is a bowl that never lacks for mixed wine. Also, I will eat my honeycomb with my honey. Honey itself is kind of a mess, so I decided to use mead." I kept pouring mead into her navel and lapping it up as she laughed harder and harder. "Honey and milk," I said, kissing her breasts. I delivered some mead from my mouth to hers, and said, "Your kisses are like the best wine."

"My turn," she said. The raisins part didn't work so well with me, although she quoted the verse about eating her lover's fruit. The mead part worked well, however. I wondered if it tickled this much for her when I pursued the little runnels of mead down into the crevasses of her self.

"And now," I said, "here is the part that I had to promise Stephen payment over many months." I unstopped a little bottle.

"What is that fragrance! I have never smelled it!" she exclaimed. I made her guess.

Frankincense?

No.

Calamus?

No.

Cinnamon?

No, you're just going down the list of spices from Song of Solomon.

Mandrakes?

Mandrakes! I hope you mean the flowers, not the roots.

Myrrh?

No! I'm not preparing you for burial.

Oil from pines?

No, you know what that smells like.

One of those not-quite-red-not-quite-yellow fruits from the east?

No.

I finally told her.

"Nard? Where did you get that?"

I didn't answer. I just quoted Holy Scripture: "My nard gave forth its fragrance, she said." I just began rubbing her whole body with it. I was stingy at first. I knew I would never be able to get another bottle of this stuff again. But as I continued to cover her arms, legs, face, ears, even her fingers and toes with it, I realized there would never be another night like this. We could try to repeat it, but it wouldn't be the same. No surprise. So I let her anoint me also. We used the whole bottle.

When she quoted the last verse of the Song of Songs, I knew what to do. I regretted that we had done it hastily the first time, every time, and that we could not have had this experience the first time, when we were standing up in a closet. But, we were redeeming the time this night. "Make haste, my beloved, be a young stag upon the mountain of spices."

Chapter 9
Heloïse

Of course, I smelled like nard the next morning, even after bathing, and everyone including Uncle Fulbert could smell it. He asked me where I got it. After I made up my answer, I sent an urgent message to Margarethe at Argenteuil: “Dearest Margarethe, Thank you so much for letting me use some of your precious bottle of nard. I have never smelled anything like it. Even Uncle Fulbert liked the way it made me smell and he sends his thanks as well.” Margarethe and I have never discussed this matter.

And Abelard and I met in the vineyard again, but we did not try to repeat the unique night of the mead and spices. Instead, we went out to watch the stars.

“To me,” I said, “your brilliant mind, your sharp mind, your conquering mind, is like the Sun. I have no warmth except what comes from you.”

To which he responded, “And to me you are the Moon, without whose light I would stumble when the inevitable darkness comes.”

“The moon reflects the brilliance of the sun,” I said.

“As you reflect mine?” he asked. “But you also have a brilliance of your own, of love and wisdom.”

“The Moon does, scripture says, rule the night,” I said.

“Yes,” he said, lifting himself up from the ground where we both lay on our backs. Over a week had passed, and a gibbous moon hung over us. “We are both rulers, of one another, and of the Empire of Mind. We are like two knights sworn to one another’s lives. We come each to the other as an equal to an equal.”

Then I turned over and lay on top of him. “Abélard, tell me something. Jeremiah wrote that if anyone could ever measure the heavens, only then could God’s love for the people of Judah falter. I know that means that God must be really big, but, suppose that someday somebody actually measures the heavens! I mean, the planets and stars are on spheres, right, that rotate around the Earth. Their distance from us is finite, and, in theory, measurable.”

“You may be right,” he told me. “But it makes no difference. Did I ever tell you about the year I spent wandering around Brittany, France, Champagne, and even Provence? I had a little money, which I supplemented by being a troubadour. And while down in Provence, I decided to climb Mount Ventoux.”

“I have never been very far from Paris,” I said. “I know where Provence is, and where Mount Ventoux is, but that is all.”

“It is a tall mountain, up in the winds.” Of course, that is what *ventoux* means. “At the very base, there are fragrant shrublands of spices.” He touched my belly. “Further up, there are galleries of forests, moist and ferny.” He just slightly touched my moistness. “Then, even further up, there are woodlands of little pine trees.” He stroked my chest. “Then at the very top, where it is cold almost all the time, it is white with barren rock. I climbed all the way to the top.” His

fingers walked up my left breast and stood on the nipple. He removed his hand and lay back down, both of us looking at the sky. “While near the bottom, I used my astrolabe—the little paper and wood one, which was in better shape back then—to measure the diameter of the gibbous moon. I measured a full diameter. Then I camped on the top the next night. I had not brought adequate clothing, and I had to drag a little pile of branches together to protect myself from the cold. But I got out and measured the diameter of the moon again. By climbing the mountain, I got much closer to the moon. But the diameter of the moon was exactly the same. My astrolabe could be a degree or two off, but even so, the moon must be very far away. And if the moon, then what of Venus, or Mars, or Jupiter, or the stars?”

“My astrolabe is more precise,” I pointed out.

“Very well, perhaps you could measure the distance to the moon. But I very much doubt that any astrolabe could measure the distance to the stars’ sphere.”

“I sometimes wonder if there is an infinite number of stars,” I said.

“What makes you think that?” asked Abélard.

“Well, if God is infinite, why couldn’t he make an infinite number of stars?” I asked.

“They wouldn’t all fit on the crystal sphere,” he said.

I turned on him. “Brav-*oh.* But what if there isn’t any crystal sphere? Nobody has ever actually *seen* the sphere, just *inferred* its existence from the whirling of the stars. What if the stars just go on and on and on forever? Come on. Give me evidence.”

He had to think about that one. But then he had an answer. “The further away a fire is, the dimmer it appears to us. A star that is very, very far away would appear very, very dim, but at least a little bit of its light would reach us. If there were an infinite number of stars, there would be an infinite amount of light coming from them. The stars would be individually dim, but in the aggregate, the night sky would be infinitely bright.”

“That was really a good answer,” I told Abélard, kissing him.

“Do you have any more questions? I’m enjoying this,” he said.

“You mean, even when we are not having sex?” I asked playfully.

His response was to sit up and kiss my forehead.

“I wonder if anyone will ever visit the Moon,” I said. “There could be people there. The dark splotches look like oceans, even though they are not blue. Gray people around gray oceans. And if so, have they sinned? Did Jesus die for them?”

“All I know,” said Abélard, nibbling my ear, “is that I will never go there. I will never even go back to Provence. Or Burgundy. Because, all I want is you, and you are here. If I went down to Provence, and sang to the people about your beauty, I would bewilder them, because they would say that no such perfect person could exist, not even in Paris. So why would I want to go anywhere else? I don’t even want to go back home to Brittany.”

“Love is a fixed star,” I said, as we continued to gaze at the sky. “And we know exactly where it is at all times. It is where we are. Others may think that they love, but they have brief passions, then they move on. Castles are sacked in war, chieftains are scattered, kingdoms are plundered and left for the ravens, but our love will never end. It is unvarying. It can no more

waver than the stars can fly apart from one another. Wait. Our love is not a star, fixed in a moving sphere. It is the Earth itself, unmoving, the center around which everything else in our lives whirls."

"What you are saying, my love," said Abelard, "is that our love is the focus of the whole cosmos. But that does not mean there is no danger, my love. The beasts can ravage us. We have a moment, now, for our love. We cannot know how many more we will have. Now. Now is our time."

He passed the scroll to me in the moonlight. Of course, I could not discern the letters, but I read the poem when I got back to my room.

Amore suscrescente,
Pariter e medio
Avulso procul tedio,
Fit ludus ineffabilis
Membris, lacertis, labilis.

Love is wafted up, and from between both fatigue is pushed far away, and a playfulness beyond description overtakes their members, their arms, their lips. Then he wrote, in big letters, Felix coniunctio! *Happy is their mating!*

Chapter 10
Heloïse

Abélard and I met out in the vineyard again. We went right into sex, without the preliminaries of raisins, mead, or nard. We drew our lovemaking out a long time, and concentrated on every little stimulus. I do believe, with my woman's intuition, that this was the night when it happened.

As he lay beside me, Abélard said, "What we are doing tonight would be condemned by the church. But if we were invisible, would our act have even occurred?"

I was very relaxed and did not want a philosophical disquisition. I just said, "God can see us."

Of course Abélard had to say, "Define God."

"Not *now!"* I snickered.

But when we were back in our study, we continued the discussion, one that might have been worthy of recording on paper for Uncle Fulbert's perusal.

"So, you said to me, define God," I told him.

"I seem to remember that," said Abélard. "My brain was too addled by the sweet liquor of your body, breath, presence, spirit, and soul for me to remember much more."

"There wasn't much more," I said, "but I'm still awaiting an answer."

"Why don't you go first," said Abélard.

I sighed. "You won't like this. All I can do is to repeat what Bernard says."

Abélard replied, "Bernard. What a faded piece of wood. I am a living tree, bursting with sap, and you are the vine in my branches, my beloved. You are the cluster of dates. You…anyway. Go ahead. At least it gives us a place to start."

I said, "God is three persons, all equal, all the same person…"

"That's Trinity," said Abelard. "Let's not get into that. Tell me the essence of what *God* means."

"God is," I said, pausing, "infinite in power, infinite in knowledge, infinitely present everywhere in the cosmos and, I suppose, outside of it."

Abélard furrowed his brow. "Outside of the cosmos. We'll let that one pass for now."

Then I spoke up about what had been bothering my mind. "But that makes no *sense!"*

"Continue," said my lover.

I did. "If God is love, as scriptures teach—and don't ask me to define love, just now—then it must be his will—his version of our human intentionality—to bless every one of His creatures. And if He has all power, then He can do it."

"I think I know what is coming," he said. "You are going to ask, then why is there evil in the world?"

"Continue," said his lover.

"Well," he said, scrambling for something to say. "Part of God's love is to allow us the freedom to make mistakes…"

He did not notice my frown. I began to feel sad. I had prepared myself for a philosophical discussion, but a memory came back to me and changed my entire outlook on the matter.

Abélard continued, "…and then think about those mistakes, thereby coming to doubt, inquiry, and truth." He ended triumphantly by quoting himself. That was more than I could take. I slapped him. Hard. He was stunned but not angry.

"That answer," I said, "is not only stupid, but it is cruel. Have you not read Ecclesiastes? Or did you rip that part out of your Bible? About how all the good work of good people comes to nothing, and good people are forgotten, while evil people get rich and die in their beds." Then I stopped to tell him about the memory that had overtaken me. "My friend Guinevere had a baby. The little baby was born deformed, and died soon after birth. But meanwhile, he—we aren't even sure if it was a he—suffered terribly. Screaming. Day and night." My voice was rising. By now I was shouting and flailing my arms. "Screaming! Day and night! Now, what in God's name is that little baby supposed to have learned from his suffering?"

Abélard seemed wary, although I was hardly in any condition to read his expression. He held the hand with which I had slapped him, and said, "Perhaps God meant it to teach your friend, and you, about mercy and succor."

I freed my hand and slapped him again.

"I probably deserved that," he said.

I continued, as I sobbed, "What was she supposed to have learned? Don't ever have a baby, because God might afflict him with suffering? No, it *makes…no…sense.* Either God can prevent suffering, but does not, or he wills us to be happy, but cannot prevent suffering. Or, perhaps, he is not a God of love, at least love as I understand it. Yes, that's it," I said, becoming slightly calmer. "God is male, is he not. That means that he sees nothing wrong in the suffering of a deformed baby. Now, if God were female, the matter would be quite different."

Abelard said, "Very well. I admit the power of your reasoning. Then, you are suggesting that God may not exist?"

"Maybe some kind of God," I said, "but not the one we mutter about in church. Oh, please don't tell anyone I said this."

He continued, "An all powerful God could simply put all knowledge into our minds. But he does not. He could prevent suffering, or at least make it commensurate with punishment or instruction. But he does not. Clearly, our ideas of God are inconsistent. But…" He gently reached inside my dress and removed my astrolabe. He knew that now was not the right time for his hand to stop and visit. I could not help but smile at him as my dress hung loose. Whenever I looked into that wild bemused handsome face, even in darkness, I could not remain angry. He continued, "If there is no God, then there is no ground of reasoning. Our reason would be utterly meaningless. By inquiry we come to truth. But if there is no God, there is no truth. Your inquiry has brought you to the point of saying that there is no point in inquiry."

However much I loved him, I could not go with him down this philosophical road. I turned from him and pulled my dress back over my bosom. I said, “Don’t make me choose between a male God of power and abstract logic, a God so logical that suffering cannot turn His head, and a female goddess of love who must be kept cloistered in some cosmic abbey where she can do nothing at all to help us.”

Abelard held up my astrolabe. “Here,” he said, “is the cosmos. Everything in this cosmos makes perfect sense. Earth in the center. The moon and sun circling it. All the planets and stars. If there were no God, the cosmos would still be formless and void, as Genesis says. But here I will admit a possibility. Perhaps God is good in the sense of logic, but not of love. There must be some kind of God-essence, in order for the logical structure of the cosmos to exist. But perhaps—don’t tell anyone I said this—perhaps nothing more.”

I looked him right in the eye. “So,” I said, “your faith in God rests upon that astrolabe. If that astrolabe is wrong, then you have no basis of faith.”

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose. But that’s not going to happen, is it.”

I drew close to him. I said, “Peter, my love. My life. The sun of my cosmos. My one flowing with milk and honey, the whiteness of milk and sweetness of honey. Do not be offended that I have challenged you. I challenge you because I love you. I often come with parched throat to be refreshed by the nectar of your delightful mouth…” I kissed him passionately, quickly, then pulled away. “…and to drink thirstily the riches scattered in your heart. As God, whatever He is, is my witness, I declare that there is no one in this world breathing life-giving air whom I love or could imagine desiring to love more than you. I give you the most precious thing I have—my very self, firm in faith and love, unwavering in desire, never changing. But this gift would be a wad of garbage if I did not offer to you a clear and honest mind.”

When he had left, I looked at my astrolabe, sitting forlorn on the table, and saw it as Qoheleth might have: a clever but useless toy.

Chapter 11
Heloïse

I was with Uncle Fulbert in his study. I found that I could no longer give him evasive answers about what Abélard and I were studying. Everything else, but not that.

"You mean," he asked me, "he actually tells you to doubt?

"Of course," I answered. "He says—and this quote is becoming famous all over France and Brittany—"

Uncle Fulbert interrupted me. "Brittany? I can just imagine."

I continued. "He says, *By doubting we come to inquiry, and by inquiry we come to truth.*"

"Really?" pursued Uncle Fulbert. "Doubt? Doubt what?"

I had to answer, "Everything. Every word of every doctrine."

"For example," he said, "the Trinity?"

I stood my ground. "He asks me, as he asks his students in the School, to think carefully about what that term actually means."

"But why?" asked my uncle.

I continued. "He also says—another quote that is becoming famous throughout France and—yes!—Brittany—is, it is a sin to pray words that you do not understand."

"And," said Fulbert, "I bet he says that none of us really understands the Trinity."

I threw back at him, "Do you?"

"Well enough," he answered. "And sin? He probably says the rest of us do not understand it either."

"We have discussed this at great length," I said. "Abélard says—and has convinced me—that sin consists of evil intentionality. One cannot accidentally sin."

My uncle turned his full attention upon me almost in wonder. I could see his anger beginning to make his hand quake, but he remained calm. "That is outrageous. Outrageous. It is enough to make a man lose himself in fury. So he means, and you mean, that if I were to take poison, and put it into his food, but in so doing be convinced that God had told me to do so, then it would not be sin."

I answered, "It would be a crime, but not a sin."

Now my uncle began to raise his voice. "And those who killed the Lord Jesus? If they thought they were doing God's will, then they would not be sinning?"

I said, "He has spoken of this. He did not tell me, or his other students, what to think about this. He just told us to consider the possibility. Jesus did say, Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

My uncle rose in a sudden burst of fury. "And so if a man is consumed by fury…" He grimaced at me, and I cowered. "…and loses control of himself…"

Uncle Fulbert's tantrums are always funny. He tried to turn over the table, but it was too heavy; he tried to kick the chair, but it was also too heavy; he grabbed the quill pen and threw it, but it was too light.

"…and does something during that fury…" he continued. He approached me and grabbed my shoulder, digging his fingers in. "…that would, were it premeditated, be a heinous and capital sin, the lack of intentionality makes it not a sin?"

I could only look at him in terror.

He tried to relax. At least, he now spoke quietly. "See, you have made me mad. I hardly know myself."

Chapter 12
Abélard

I knew it had to happen sometime. Heloïse and I were drawn ever more deeply into wild and dangerous love and lovemaking. We tried to be careful, of course, but we were so irresistibly drawn to one another that we were, or thought we were, unable to really think through the possibilities of what might happen at any given time.

There is a little room off of Fulbert's wine cellar. There are old blankets on the floor, and the room is otherwise empty. It never occurred to me to think what it might have been used for; it must have been, for all I felt to the contrary, created especially for Heloïse and myself from the beginning of time. The servants, including those who came down into the wine cellar, knew all about us. Heloïse and I were on the blankets, our clothes flung aside, clasping one another, sweating on the first hot day of summer. When we heard someone enter the wine cellar, we assumed it was a servant getting wine for dinner. We tried to be quiet, but the stone walls reverberated our breathing and Heloise's small, occasional giggles.

I heard the loud gasp. My body nearly covered Heloise. She turned her head. I felt every muscle in her body tense. She said, in a strangled whisper, "It's Fulbert." I collapsed on top of Heloise and was astonished at how quickly I could lose an erection. I turned over and saw Fulbert holding himself up against the doorpost, shielding his eyes from us. He was breathing more heavily than I had been, but in shock.

"Get your clothes back on and come out here," he whispered hoarsely to us. Heloïse and I slipped into our light robes, having some trouble pulling them down due to our sweat. When we walked out into the main part of the wine cellar, where Fulbert stood with his eyes downcast, our clothes were quite disorderly. I could not look into Fulbert's face. I looked at the face of my lover. She stared fiercely into her uncle's face.

Fulbert spoke to me, his voice trembling with anger. "You, Abélard. You fornicator. You have used your wiles to seduce this young woman."

I swallowed and spoke. "I have, sir," I said.

Heloïse spoke up loudly and clearly. "No, that's not how it happened," she said.

Fulbert turned his attention upon her. "You, my Heloïse. Fornicatrix. Then you seduced him?"

She answered, still staring defiantly, "I have, sir."

"No, that's not how it happened," I hurriedly answered.

"Abélard," said Fulbert. "I trusted you. I hired you. I invited you into my own house. And this is how you repay my hospitality?" I started to answer, but he continued. "You probably believe me to be a stupid rule-bound administrator who has never had a wise thought in his life. You probably think I am so stupid I would never discover you. You have been my niece's tutor for several months! Is that how long you have been doing this?"

I looked down in shame. He was right, of course. And I was surprised that he was not yelling at me. Heloïse lifted her chin in defiance.

Fulbert continued, "Heloïse is my only heir. I have no children, no nephew. You may not believe this, but I really wanted you to train her mind so that she could be a shining example of wisdom in the church."

"He has done that, sir," Heloïse said to him.

Fulbert scrunched up his face in disbelief. "Wisdom? Is that what you call this? Having sex on the floor of my wine cellar?"

Fulbert then began to hyperventilate, and I began to be frightened. Not so much for myself; there was little he could do to me. But I was frightened for what he might do to his niece, to the woman whom I would love to the last drop of my blood.

The Fulbert spoke to me, breathing heavily but speaking softly. "Abélard, it would be right, you would admit, for me to kill you right now." Then he began to shout. "*Do you take me for a simpleton? I ask you! Is all of your supposed wisdom just a mask for carnality? Is that all that the mind is to you?*"

Heloïse and I both answered at the same time, "No, that's not what happened."

Fulbert was now boiling with anger, but he contained it with the greatest and most obvious effort. "In the taverns, Abélard, you could just flirt with a girl, and take her to bed. But to get Heloïse, you had to carefully weave your web of seduction, then after you have sucked the juices of pleasure out of her, you will abandon her and move on?"

I looked Fulbert in the eye, for I could answer him in full honesty. "No, sir," I said. "I will never abandon her. She is life to me. She is more than life to me."

I was astonished at what Heloïse said next. I knew what she meant. Whatever she understood about God was through her discussions with me. But what she said was certainly not convenient for the present moment. She said, "He is God to me."

Fulbert's eyes widened and he burst into fury. "Blasphemy!" He shook my shoulder. "You have led her into blasphemy!" He shook her shoulder. "You have followed him into blasphemy!"

Fulbert picked up a wine bottle and brandished it. Heloise tried to protect me, but I pushed her aside and offered my head to Fulbert. I was ready to die, and without regret. I said, "You may kill me, but my life has been worthwhile, because of Heloïse. Were she the only blessing I ever received in life, it would have been enough. Had I been able to touch her…yes, to touch her only once, it would have been enough. If I had been able to talk with her only once, it would have been enough. When I die, I will be of all men most blessed because of her. Nothing can take that away from me."

Still brandishing the bottle, Fulbert whispered loudly, "Get out of my house. Now. "

Heloïse and I started to rush through the door, but Fulbert said to her, "Not you, Heloïse. You go to your room." Then, instead of speaking to me, he said, "Wait. Both of you." We turned back to him. With a tense calmness, he said, "Now I understand. I stopped by your room one night, Heloïse. It was when you were…" He contorted his face, almost crying. "…recovering

from your illness. I wanted to check on you. You were gone. I assumed you had just taken a walk. But now I know where you were. Now, where could you have gone? Ah, there is only one place, aside from this cellar, I suppose. It is Stephen's vineyard. Well, I swear that I will have that vineyard uprooted!"

"The vineyard is innocent, sir. I am to blame," I said.

"The vineyard is innocent, sir. I am to blame," Heloïse also said.

Fulbert was now yelling at the top of his lungs and brandishing the bottle. Heloise and I started to flee as he screamed, "The filth of sin has contaminated that vineyard! And the man who owns it, he must have known! He and his vineyard will both wither and dry in the sun. I swear by God!"

I ran to the door, where Heloïse grabbed me. She drew my arms down inside her dress, and thrust her tongue into my mouth. There was no point in hiding anything, so long as I could quickly duck through the door. I closed the door just as I heard the crashing of the bottle.

I told Stephen what had happened. Stephen was sitting at his table with a wine cup. He buried his face in his hands. For the present, Fulbert's discovery of my affair with Heloïse was a secret. But, Stephen pointed out, at some point in the near future, I could no longer be Magister of the School, and that I would have to leave Paris. He assured me of his continued patronage. Then he smiled and told me that, whatever else may happen, his vineyard was safe.

Stephen smiled. "When word of this gets out, everybody is going to think that Fulbert was the most naïve person in the world to have suspected nothing about you and Heloïse. But that is not actually what happened. Bernard and probably others had told Fulbert that they believed you were having an affair with Heloïse. But Fulbert had dismissed the suggestion.

"And this was the reason he gave, according to my sources," continued Stephen. "When Bernard told Fulbert about it, Fulbert said, *Abélard is no idiot. He is Master of the School of Notre Dame. And at only age thirty-five! He would have to be an idiot to take the kind of chance you suggest. I realize, of course, that the landscape of human inquiry is limitless, and that a philosopher will always be able to find a job. But not this job! He has the job any philosopher would be happy to have for even one day! He would have to be an idiot to risk his job by having an affair with a student, right here in her house! In my house! What you seem to take for cluelessness on my part is only a reasonable assumption.* Well, your pleasant world with Heloïse, and Fulbert's reasonable assumption that you were innocent, have been shattered. It is only my friendship with the king, our excellent Louis VI, that protects you now."

Chapter 13
Abélard

I spent a restless night in my new little room at Stephen's mansion. Nearly all of my anxiety was over Heloïse. I had delirious visions of her being lacerated by the broken bottle. The next day, my teaching was really shitty. I did not feel like pursuing any logic. I would have simply read them the love poems, but Heloïse had them, and I hoped to God that Fulbert did not find and destroy them.

Imagine my surprise when Stephen told me, two afternoons later, that he had met with both Fulbert and Bernard, and had arranged a meeting between me and Fulbert. And it was Stephen who led me into Fulbert's office at the cathedral. My conversation with Fulbert was brief, and our eyes never met. I felt as if my heart had burst and that blood spread throughout my chest. I could not believe my fortune. I felt that my life had been restored.

And then Heloïse walked into the room. Our eyes immediately met and locked. I started to rise, but Stephen pushed me back down into my seat.

Fulbert spoke to his niece. "Abélard and I have reached an agreement. It is not all that surprising. It is the arrangement that is usually made in these circumstances."

Heloïse's eyes showed no response. Is it possible that she did not yet understand? Then she looked at her uncle and said, "I am with child."

I was astonished. I felt a well of happiness in my chest.

Fulbert responded, "Are you sure?"

Heloïse looked at him with hostility. "Shall I recite the evidence?"

"That won't be necessary," said her uncle. "But our arrangement will take care of that also."

Stephen touched my shoulder, and I spoke to Heloïse. I gushed forth in happiness, "Canon Fulbert has consented to our marriage!" Although I was nearly crying, I could see that Heloïse showed no emotion. So I kept talking. "Well, is this not the fulfillment of our fondest desires? Now nothing can come between us, just as you said. We can…"

Heloïse said, simply and quietly, "No."

Fulbert and I both said at the same time, "What?"

Heloïse remained quiet as she said, "You heard me. No."

"But, my love," I said, "how can you say this?"

Heloïse looked into my eyes and spoke with diamond firmness. "Master Abélard. Do you not remember? I told you I would rather be your whore than your wife."

Fulbert gasped and covered his eyes. But I blurted out, "What do you find offensive in me?"

She answered, "Oh, that's not it. But if you have a wife to take care of, and a child, your mind will be distracted from philosophy. And you are the greatest philosopher in the world."

"Spare me," muttered Fulbert.

Heloïse spoke directly to her uncle. “No, Uncle Fulbert. He is. He is the smartest man in the world. I knew this even before I met him. Knowing him as I have since that time, I remain convinced. When you know a man as I have known Abélard,” and here she looked at me, “the man cannot hide stupidity. I know him through and through. And I still say he is the smartest man in the world, and the most intellectually honest. I cannot drag him into a domestic quagmire. And we, Uncle Fulbert, we owe it to the world to share Abélard’s wisdom with it. It is a gift from God.”

Fulbert just wanted to get things over with. “The matter is decided,” he said.

I told Heloïse in exasperation, “It is to honor you that I make you my wife.”

Fulbert said, “Of course, we all understand that Abélard cannot continue as Master of the School.”

“See! That is exactly what I mean!” said Heloïse.

I pleaded with Heloïse. “I gladly give up this post for you. No sacrifice is too great for you, my only and eternal love. Besides, I can always find work. The landscape of human curiosity is vast. There are always hungry minds. A philosopher will always be able to earn a living.”

“Spare me,” said Fulbert. He said to Heloïse, “Abelard could not continue in this post anyway, marriage or no. So why not marry him?”

Heloïse looked at me with utter calmness. “Abélard, is this your command?” she asked.

Fulbert interjected, “It is mine.”

With a last glimmer of defiance, she said to him, “Spare me.” Then, still not taking her eyes from me, she said, “Abélard?”

“I hesitate to command you,” I said. “You are my equal.”

“Spare me,” said Fulbert.

Heloïse spoke firmly to me. “Abélard, my answer is no, unless you command me, then I will obey.”

“My Heloïse,’ I said. “I must ask you to do this.”

“Then I will,” she said.

Our wedding was private and simple, in a small chapel at Notre Dame. The priest was a follower of neither me nor Bernard. Heloïse barely touched me as we walked from the chapel, and barely spoke to me as we nibbled at the feast that Stephen had prepared in his dining hall. Stephen gave us the sumptuous guest bedroom. It was as if the holiness of our matrimony had sucked all of the vitality out of Heloïse. Our lovemaking was quite adequate, and wholly conventional. I had asked for a small flagon of mead, but we did not touch it. She fell asleep, crying on my shoulder.

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14
Heloïse

Our arrangement was entirely unsatisfactory to everybody. Abélard and I kept our marriage secret. He stayed at Stephen's mansion, and I with my uncle.

I wanted our marriage to be secret because, as I repeatedly made clear, I did not want to burden Abélard's career. But I was not happy that, once my pregnancy shows, I will be seen as an unwed mother. And, by this arrangement, I had even less sexual access to my husband than I had to my lover.

And if this was unsatisfactory to me, it was even more so to my uncle. He will very soon be seen as the uncle of an unwed mother, and everyone will know who the stag upon the hills was. He could get Abélard dismissed from his post, but this would displease many people, for Abélard is popular. He has many enthusiastic admirers. One of his lukewarm admirers is the king. But every day that Fulbert—and Bernard—hesitate is one more day toward the eventual revelation of my pregnancy.

Meanwhile, Abélard is unable to enjoy his continuing career. His students have noticed his heartsickness. They know, but cannot say, nor can Abélard tell them, why his spirit is dampened.

If the perfect scenario of dissatisfaction could be created, I doubt that it could be worse than this. In a perfect world, Abélard and I could just continue to be lovers, soon to be lovers with a love child, who would receive our fullest attention. But I am the pregnant woman who, very soon, must be shielded from public sight and whose joy cannot be spoken.

Several of my friends from Argenteuil, led by Margarethe, ran up to me when they saw me outside of Notre Dame.

"We heard the news!" said Margarethe.

"What could you have heard?" I asked.

"That you and Abélard have married!" Margarethe said.

"If you only knew how much we envy you!" said another girl.

So now I was a woman with a secret that everybody knew but I could not confirm. God, how can there be such complexity in life? I felt as frustrated as the woman in Song of Solomon who ran through the streets half-dressed looking for her lover.

It was no fault of Margarethe's that my anger finally burst.

"No, that's not true!" I said. *I am his lover forever, not his wife,* I wanted to say. "Why do you say things like this? What are you trying to do to me? Why can't you leave me alone?" I was screaming.

Margarethe approached me to embrace me. I slapped her.

"With friends like you, who needs enemies?" I spat at her. She stepped back with shock on her face. "All of you! Why are you afflicting me this way? Damn you! Damn all of you!" I flailed my arms in every direction as I ruined my voice screaming. "Damn all of you to hell!" The other girls retreated and watched in horror. A crowd gathered around us.

I kept hitting Margarethe as she approached me. I am sure that I created big bruises on her. I did not realize she was so strong until she grappled me in her arms and forced my face into her chest. I almost couldn't breathe. She said nothing. My incoherent screaming, muffled by her dress, gradually subsided. I stumbled as Margarethe led me back home.

"This isn't working," Fulbert said as Margarethe and I entered his house.

What happened next made things even more complex. Margarethe told me to bring my important belongings—which consisted mostly of the scroll of love poems and my journals—and meet her outside of Notre Dame. When I met her, she led me into a seldom-visited hallway and unpacked a nun's habit and wimple and told me to put it on. It was a warm day and my dress was light, so I just slipped on the disguise over my dress. Then Abélard appeared. I threw myself at him, but both he and Margarethe strongly pushed me out the door and into the street. Abélard hired a boat and a couple of hours later we were at Argenteuil, where Margarethe lived. Margarethe was such a good girl that the nuns who had cooked dinner gave her some leftovers without question. I slipped out of the habit and wimple as quickly as I could; they seemed filthy to me. My sweat made my dress cling to my form. Abélard leered lustily at me as men seldom do at their wives.

We ate at a little corner table. I do not even remember what we ate. I just remember feeling as lusty as Abélard did. I had not yet apologized to Margarethe for hitting her and for condemning her to hell, and I was about to make her uncomfortable again. Bodily heat was building up inside me again, and I opened the front of my dress all the way down. Abelard stood up quickly, knocking over his bowl and cup, and came over to my side of the table. He threw off his hat and cape and grasped my body inside of my dress. He freed his little big man. I could not even feel the hard paving stones underneath me as he fell upon me. I was vaguely aware of Margarethe picking up the bowls and leaving as quickly as possible. I do not remember any time when Abélard and I held each other so tightly. Our teeth were scraping together. We heard the vespers of the nuns in the chapel, so close by that our animal noises must have been audible to them. I remember little polygons of sky vanishing; it must have been Margarethe closing the windows.

Abélard then stood, his clothes hanging sloppily, his man spent and bowing. At the top of his huge voice, he said, "What hath God wrought!"

"This is love!" I screamed. "Not all the stupid chanting and frowning. Here! Now! This is the ultimate blessing from God! Abélard 's seed in me! God smile upon us!"

Abélard was down upon me again. "Damn!" he said. "I forgot the mead!"

The abbess, of course, knew what had happened, and she told Abélard to return to Paris, even though it was night. To be out of the abbey before complines. Margarethe, whom I had so recently condemned, used her influence to convince the abbess to let me remain. I stayed in her room. Abélard went back to Stephen's house.

Now I was a pregnant girl, not-not-married, hiding in an abbey. Just when things could not become more confusing, I heard the news.

My uncle's rage had been loud and public enough that anybody who visited Paris, not just Margarethe, could have told me about it. How Fulbert was turned away, mid-rage, from Stephen's door. How Fulbert vowed revenge. How Fulbert hired four men and bribed one of Stephen's servants. How the servant let the four men into the house. How three of the men grappled Abélard while he slept and forced him into a bent-over standing position.

Don't move or we'll cut everything off. Everything.

How a fourth man used a sharp knife and made a nearly bloodless incision, transforming Abélard into that third category of human that he had discussed with his students that day when I hid in the back of his class. How Abélard screamed as loudly as he could, even as one of the men held his mouth shut, and How Peter bit the hand. How Peter shit the hand that was working upon him.

Don't move or we'll cut everything off. Everything.

How the fourth man held up a cloth bag, and said, *We've emptied his moneybags!* How they threw Abelard, heavy and heaving, back onto his bed, and ran out the door.

I was in shock as Margarethe told me. She had brought unauthorized wine at an unauthorized time to steady my nerves as she told me.

"But there was some satisfaction," she told me. I looked at her helplessly. She told me that the four men almost escaped, but Stephen's guards caught two of them. Castrated them. Then poked out their eyes, and released them. Paris awoke to the spectacle of two of Fulbert's men staggering about the streets, blood dripping from their crotches—Stephen's men didn't bother with a precise cut—and from their eye sockets.

Margarethe, God bless her soul, knows when to leave me alone. Now was that time. I could only whirl and scream. If anything, I thought most about the blinded and bleeding men. Their suffering would not restore Abélard 's manhood. Nobody's suffering ever helped anybody to be healthy or happy. Round and round go the winds, and the streams never fill the ocean, and the floods of sorrow never nourish any tree or meadow. The dead lion has nothing to give to the living dog.

Chapter 15
Heloïse

And then, just when it couldn't get any worse, I received a message from Abélard. *What hath God wrought,* he said. *It is time for us to enter the next phase of our love.* I didn't understand this. But the priest who delivered the message told me that I was summoned the next morning to the chapel at Argenteuil. He was a minor priest. I had never heard his name.

When I arrived at the chapel, on Margarethe's arm, bending over as if I had been the one who was castrated, the first thing I saw was the nun's habit and wimple that I had worn as a disguise. I recognized the stains, now imperfectly cleansed, that had gotten on them when I had thrown them on the refectory floor. I looked up. All of the nuns were there. They had just finished their midmorning terce prayers. The priest stood tall and solemn. Margarethe led me gently to kneel before the altar.

The priest began to read. "I read to you a letter from Brother Abélard."

"Brother Abélard!" I screamed as I stood. Margarethe held my shoulder and pushed me firmly back down. *Brother* Abélard*! That could only mean…*

And why not? Why not be a manhoodless hooded monk? But…

A monk who simply accepts what his superiors tell him to believe! This is not Abélard! What? Did they cut out his brain also? Are both the little man and the big man brainless?

"This cannot be Abélard!" I screamed as I looked around at the nuns whose eyes remained averted.

The priest held out the parchment to me. "Do you recognize his writing?"

I did.

"To my sister in Christ, Heloïse, and to the sisters at Argenteuil. God makes great, and God humbles," read the priest.

"Yes! With no pattern or purpose!" I screamed. "The race is not to the swift nor profits to the wise! As if God were a crazy animal, biting at everything!"

"I have taken holy orders," the priest continued to read. "I welcome my wife Heloïse to do the same."

"He welcomes me, does he?" I shouted, my voice becoming hoarse. Again. "If he taught me anything, it was to keep my mind independent of the hoods and draperies of the obscurantists! They have beaten his mind, but as a tribute to him, they will not beat mine into submission!"

"I bid her to not view this step as a lessening of our love, but as an expansion to a new and higher spiritual plane," the priest continued.

I grasped at a thought. I said to the priest, "He couldn't have meant this. He wrote during a time of shock. Give him a few days. He will change his mind." Of course, I had never known Abélard to change his mind.

The priest showed me the parchment again, and pointed to Abélard's signature.

I remembered screaming, that recent night in the corner of the cafeteria, *Here! Now! This is the ultimate blessing from God! Abélard's seed in me!* Soon I would bear his child, unless I was one of the women who would lose the child because of God's random acts of destruction. I would be a mother. And I knew I would never love another man. My throat tightened as I realized that it really didn't matter if I became a sexless nun. If I have no sex with Abelard, I want no sex with anyone.

"Will you approach the altar and take your vows at this time?" asked the priest.

"What are you doing?" I screamed at the abbess. "I have never even been a novice! And now you expect me to jump right into being a nun?" The abbess did not answer me. She had never answered any of my questions, not even the first time I bled. Margarethe had to tell me about it. The abbess who was as silent and impassive as God must be.

"Your request to be a nun, the request that has come to us via your husband, has been approved. The novitiate stage has been waived," said the priest.

"But I do not believe all the stupid things that you teach!" I screamed. "Abélard's heat burned away the dross of your ignorance, and guess what! There's nothing left! Just empty shells of meaningless doctrine!"

"The assent to doctrine has, in your case, been waived," said the priest.

I turned my back on the altar and faced the nuns and the abbess, thrusting my arms into the air. "To Jesus and the saints, I turn my back, not my face, as Jeremiah said. How great a mind Abélard had and has! And were it not for me—no, I did not seduce him, but there I was, there I was for him to stumble over—he would still be the great stamping bull of logic, challenging the dull herdsmen of the church! I must therefore submit to him. Yes, he is my husband, but that is not why I submit to him, nor would he want me to cite that as a reason for submitting. But I swear that I cannot accept your pious mutterings! Your matins, lauds, terces, sexts, nones, vespers, and complines! Your mutterings that disturb the sleep of lovers! The Song of Solomon says, *Do not stir up love until it please!* As God said through the prophet, *I hate your holidays, and your burnt offerings my soul despises!* It is that fire of God, not the incense smoke, that courses through my veins! I now submit to the request of the man whom I made to stumble."

"I'll take that as a yes," said the priest.

And I mumbled, through my tears, everything the priest told me to say.

I sent to Abélard the scroll of our love poems, with this final poem on it:

Dulcissime,
Totam tibi subdo me!

You who are the most sweet, I subdue myself totally to you.

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Chapter 16
Abélard

Brother Mumpsimus told me one day about how much he had suffered during his life. He expected commiseration from me. This is reasonable. But I was in no mood to give it. All my work had given me no satisfaction. I have written massive books. The church hates them but never quite gets rid of them. Especially the one I entitled simply, *Yes and No.* There are always two sides to an issue, I said. Brother Bernard politely begs to differ in public, and spews spittle of venom in private. His Cistercian monks have oatmeal for brains.

So I told Brother Mumpsimus (that's what we called him, because he always said *mumpsimus* instead of *sumpsimus* during the purification of the sacred vessels, "*Quod ore sumpsimus Domine"*) that he had no idea of what suffering was like. Ah, the stories I could tell him! About that wonderful creature, Heloïse, the perfect human, whom I had corrupted by pouring my lusts upon her. I did not force them upon her, but there I was, hovering over her. As Brother Mumpsimus asked me for an explanation, I was so overtaken by powerful emotions that I could speak no more with him. But I wrote a long letter to him, which I entitled *Historia Calamitatum,* the story of my woes.

Then, by some strange twist of events, my letter or a copy of it made it into the hands of none other than Heloïse. I had not communicated with her in many years. During those years I wrote hundreds of thousands of words, but no words seemed good enough to send to her, so I sent none. I wanted to leave her in the peace of Christ Jesus, and I feared that any stirring of memory might bring her pain.

And they take me for a wise man.

Heloïse wrote back to me in distress. Not as much distress as she displayed, I am told, back when she submitted to the nun's yoke. But she made it painfully clear that, all during those years, she had been hungering for some word from me. She said that she knew a physical relationship, of any kind, was no longer possible, but she still wanted the companionship of words. She lives for words. She lived for words before I even met her, as she consumed and digested the Roman poets. And for many years she had hungered for my words. She had nearly memorized my books, she said, but those books were not written for her.

And they take me for a wise man.

I arranged for her to stay with my family in Le Pallet in Brittany while she had our child. She suggested a name, and I agreed to it: Astralabe. We decided to name our child (it turned out to be a boy) after the scientific instrument that was the focus of both our agreement and our disagreement; that was both practical (telling us the time of night and the dates of the phases of the moon) and cosmic (being a model of the Sun, Moon, and stars in their whirling spheres around the Earth). We wanted our child to be perfect in wisdom and work, and to walk in harmony with the heavenly spheres. And to know that he was doing so. But, as both Heloïse and myself had taken vows, he could not live with us. He grew up in the wild coastlands of Brittany,

under the care of my sister Denise. Even when I was at St. Giles, of which more later, not many miles away, I could not see Astralabe. He barely knows either of his parents.

And they take me for a wise man.

Heloïse remained at Argenteuil, where she had grown up, but now she was a nun. She was a married nun, a childless mother of a motherless child, who every day ate in the refectory where we had abandoned ourselves to pleasure in the corner. There was not one day in which she was not confronted by my absence. It is from there that she wrote the letter.

And they take me for a wise man.

A few years back, I received permission to begin a new abbey, near Paris. I called it The Paraclete, which refers to the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the female part of the Trinity. Not the part that thinks, or the part that speaks, but the part that embraces. I continue to struggle in the arena of words and ideas, but what do we do in the meantime? While questions remain unanswered? Such as that really clever question Heloise wrote so long ago, *How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?* Sweet Lord, she was clever. She still is clever. But if we wait until these questions are answered before we live, then we will die before we live. All we can do is comfort and encourage one another. I have enemies and battles, but I wanted this abbey to be a place of peace, *pax Domini.* In a way, I wanted everybody to see that the combative side of me, the side that can get bent all out of shape by an encounter with bad logic, is not all there is to me.

I still had students. When I announced that we were moving out into the forest to build what I called my thatched hut, I suddenly had even more students. I am no longer strong, but my students built the small chapel and dormitory mostly from discarded wood of tottering old buildings, and a few trees that the local sheriff allowed us to cut. And we made the roof of reeds from the summer meadow.

The Paraclete, however, was a little too close to Paris for my safety. I requested and was given permission to go back to Brittany. I could not go back to Le Pallet, since there is no abbey there, but I was placed in charge of the monastery at St. Giles.

Although I had grown up in Brittany, my years in Paris had made me forget the rudeness of the land and people. I had told that student, long ago, that Dagobertus, not Radolphus, was the droppings of a rat, but now it seemed to me that they both were. Porcarius wasn't, but that is because he was soft in the head. It made little difference, as my brothers seldom visited me. Even at St. Giles, I had students who were hungry for philosophy, for deductive thinking that was both a discipline and a liberation. But for the most part, the church officials were corrupt and worldly. There might have been one or two who did not have mistresses. I do not judge the women; it was the church that had the money, and it was only the *petit mort* of orgasm that could suck the money from the abbot and his men. I could see the hostility, fueled by ignorance, in their eyes. And the farmers, even when starving and even when their whore daughters brought home money, had to pay us. I wanted to tell them that I cared about their plight, but they would have denounced me openly to my face as a hypocrite.

The archbishop would not let me leave, but the monks hated me. They kept poisoning my food. Especially my bread. Often when I would eat the rye bread, I would begin to hear strange hummings from the heavens, and see colors where they should not be. Then I would see the hummings and taste the colors. One time I saw a purple sheen around candle flames and had nightmares of impossible erections. I knew it was the poison, so I did not trust my senses. Often the monks would begin to behave erratically, trembling and drooling, but maybe I was just imagining this.

My only escape was to keep writing. My output continued to be prodigious, and finally I had over a million words on paper. There was no part of scripture nor any significant question of philosophy upon which I had not offered authoritative treatments—all the more authoritative and logical because I had to concentrate my mind even while the hummings and purples assaulted it. Philosophy was easy to the Abélard who strutted in front of his Notre Dame classes and had delightful disputes with Heloïse, but now it required the fiercest effort. My physical suffering consumed away any dross that might have clung to the golden truths. As fast as I wrote, the scriptoria made copies. Every abbey library in France, Burgundy, and Champagne had my works, as did many private libraries. It was a type of immortality. If ever the church banished my works, something I always feared that Bernard would get it to do, there is no way they could find them all.

And then I received word that the nuns had been expelled from Heloïse's abbey. I say that Argenteuil was hers, because she had become the unofficial leader of the nuns, who never defied the abbot but slyly disobeyed him. I see the hand of Bernard in the expulsion of the nuns somehow. For every reed in the thatched roof of the Paraclete, Bernard has managed to acquire a slab of marble or a gold fixture for his Cistercian abbeys.

Bernard had, in fact, had Stephen's vineyard uprooted. Fulbert had been unable to do so, because he had vanished from public life. I have no idea what happened to him. You see, the law permits a husband to castrate a man who cohabits with his wife. Adultery, not fornication, is considered grounds for castration. Fulbert's actions against me were widely understood to be excessive. Even were this not so, my popularity always exceeded his. I heard that he lost all of his property. I like to imagine that he now herds cows, and is the one called upon to castrate bulls. *Hey, you there, Mr. Expert!* I like to imagine he has two blind followers limping along after him. But he did have the satisfaction of knowing that the vineyard of mead and nard was destroyed.

My course of action was clear. The Paraclete was nearly empty in my absence. Heloïse and her followers needed someplace to go. I immediately wrote a letter authorizing the nuns of Argenteuil to assume control of The Paraclete, and particularly named Heloïse as the abbess.

This was also the answer to my own problems. One day, about a month after I had finished a book and copies were just released by the scriptorium, copies that must have had all kinds of Breton and drunken errors, I knew that it was time to leave. I left everything behind, except a few clothes, some gold coins that were not not mine, and my mind. The abbey guards would not let me leave through the front door, and there was no back door. I decided to be like

that swan I sang about so long ago and proceed through the guts of St. Giles. I removed the privy seat and slid through the chute. With a giddy slickness I ended up, like the swan, on a pile of shit. I slipped on rocks and through mud down to a hidden portion of the creek. Fortunately it was a warm day. I rinsed my clothes a dozen times, and scrubbed my body with minty herbs that grew on the bank. Then I slinked away in the gathering darkness, my wet clothes flopping. I spent a hungry night under leaf litter, as far away as I could get from the monastery before full darkness, and a hungry day skittering along the east road, avoiding the view of travelers. They would be looking for me, though not very hard. Once I had gotten far enough away that nobody knew me, those gold coins became very useful. Not quite enough to buy a horse, but enough to hire someone to let me ride with him on roads too rutted and muddy for a coach.

I was headed toward the Paraclete, whose thatched roof looked in my mind like the City of Gold described in St. John's Apocalypse. (God, what a strange book, full of monsters and blood. I have written a commentary on Revelation, but secretly I thought it should never have been in the canon. John must have gotten some bad hash from Damascus when he wrote that book.) The Paraclete began to take form, in my mind, as the City of God that needed no sun, for it shone in continuous and continual brilliance. Brilliance with a slight purple sheen. And that brilliance was Heloïse. Heloïse, in my vision, had no body, but was a pure ambience of goodness. I tried to remember what sexual fantasies were like, but failed. Perhaps someone can read the poems that we wrote for one another, poems that I had copied at the scriptorium and sent to some few of my remaining friends like Peter of Cluny, and imagine what I felt better than I can myself.

But just the fact that I was no longer capable of sexual attraction to Heloïse, my wife, did not mean that there was no danger to my spiritual purity. I could easily slip into the adoration of her blissful light, rather than the adoration of logical truth which was pretty much what God was to me. I told myself over and over, as I approached the little green valley where the Paraclete nestled, that I would have to think of her only as my sister in Christ.

Chapter 17
Heloïse

Margarethe and I entered the Paraclete Abbey, which had been empty since Abelard left it for St. Giles. It was in a little green valley, filled with many kinds of trees, whose names I would shortly learn from the local women: several kinds of oaks; elms; beeches; birches; planes. Some of the oak trees were very large, left untouched from the days of the Parisii who fought the Romans. Some were very small, like the willows whose limber branches stroked the waters of the creek. The oaks withstood the forces of change by motionless strength, while the willows persisted, as Ismene sang in the Sophocles play, by letting the forces of change bend but not break them. As the nuns in my charge (which include my childhood friend Margarethe) and I move from Argenteuil to our new home, we will need both kinds of strength. I like to imagine that I have both kinds of strength in ample measure and that I got them from Abélard, the Abélard with whom I have had no direct contact and little contact by letters for so many years—but I probably had both kinds of strength, and he just helped me find them.

Abelard had called the Paraclete his thatch-roofed hut. That's what it was when it was originally built. Now it was a small wooden building with gaps between the boards and what remained of a reed roof. This is what we get, while Bernard is beginning to build cathedrals. It was a spring day when Margarethe and I walked into the chapel.

"It is beautiful," I said.

Margarethe looked up and said, "It has a grass roof. Or used to."

"I smell the scent of wildflowers coming in through the gaps in the…I mean, I smell the scent of wildflowers," I said.

"I smell mold," said Margarethe.

I tried one more time to be cheerful. "I hear the susurrus of the forest outside," I said.

To which Margarethe replied, "I hear rats."

I looked at Margarethe. "Well, it was the only place we could go, thanks to Brother Bernard's smiling upon monks and glowering upon nuns. The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit. What a beautiful name. Abelard says the Holy Spirit is the female part of God. I think we can make a new beginning here."

"We'll have to rebuild most of it ourselves," said Margarethe. "I very much doubt that the poor local men can spare much time to help us."

"We'll do what we can," I said. "We may not be able to cut down any of the big trees—or even get permission from the sheriff to do so—but there are plenty of coppiced trees from which we can get boughs. If only Abélard could come back here. He is no longer strong, but he would bring some strong students."

Margarethe said, "God spare Master Abélard. St. Gildas is an awful place. Out there on the cold Breton coast, where the clergy have no morals and the people no mercy. If I were him, I would come back here, even if…"

At that moment, one of the nuns entered. “Sister Heloïse. Some important news,” she said. “Brother Abélard. He is here.”

“What!” I exclaimed.

“We will leave the two of you alone,” Margarethe said, and left with the other nun.

Abélard entered, not through the door but through a big hole in the wall. “Guess I’ll have to fix that, one of these days,” he muttered. His appearance astonished me, although it was exactly what I expected. He was a little bent, and weak, compared to when I had last seen him. He wore a monk’s robe, and his hood fell crookedly sideways.

“Peter!” I exclaimed, suddenly feeling my body catch fire.

He lifted his eyes, saw me, and smiled gently. “Heloïse, my sister in Christ,” he said.

I ran up to embrace him, ready to clasp him like those butterflies we watched in the field back when he was being peripatetic, so long ago. But I stopped just short, and said to him, in shock, “Sister in Christ? Abélard! My husband! The lover of my heart, now and always.” Then I tried to clasp him, but he held his hands out to stop me. So I grabbed his hands and pressed them against my bosom, where I had so often imagined them to be. He grabbed my hands and moved them aside. He grasped my head with his hands and kissed my forehead.

I began to cry. “Abélard,” I said. “Hold me. Just hold me. I know I can expect nothing more. Nones are coming soon, but I will tell Margarethe to handle them. Come, to my chamber. Just lie with me. Just hold me.”

“The past is dead, my sister in the Lord,” he said. “Our love is now spiritual.”

I whispered loudly into his face, “We are still married. Our love is more than spiritual.”

“More than spiritual?” he asked. My amazement built as he continued to speak. “We have now entered the plane of higher spiritual existence. The land of philosophy, untainted by the flesh. Is this not a greater joy than the rashness and impulsiveness of our youth? I am glad that you are happy in your orders, as I am in mine.”

At these last words, my amazement exploded, and I screamed, *“Happy? What makes you think I am happy? I go through the motions of piety, but they mean nothing to me. Nothing!”* I spoke a little more quietly. “I keep the acts of piety up, partly, because the happiness of the nuns depends upon my leadership. But I mainly do it…” I screamed again. *“…because you told me to. I have sacrificed my life for you. I find no happiness in it.”*

He continued to hold my head in his hands. He spoke with the same softness as before. “Oh, my sister Heloïse. How I wish that you could find happiness in your life. There’s nothing we can do about it now. Let the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, pour happiness upon you. Open your heart to it, my sister.”

He didn’t even let me put my head on his shoulder. What has happened to him? I stood a little apart from him and dried my tears. “And you’re happy, I suppose,” I said.

“Yes,” he answered. “Well, mostly. I would be except that Bernard keeps pestering me. I have used, in my books…”

“Of which I have meditated upon every word, my love. Every word,” I quickly added.

Abélard continued. "…the most careful and correct deductive reasoning to explain how the Trinity is three yet one. But Bernard persists in saying that I believe in three Gods." He gave a miffed little sniff. I had never heard him do this before. "Bernard won't stop until he gets me condemned by the Holy See itself!"

I stared at him in astonishment. "What have they done to you?" I asked quietly.

"You know perfectly well what they have done to me," he answered.

"Why has God allowed them to do this to you?" I rejoined.

He answered, "Why, my beloved Sister in Christ, should you harbor resentment in your heart toward God for what has happened to me, when I do not?"

"It is not just your manhood, it is your mind that they have destroyed," I said. "You told me one time, upon deductive principles, that the mind and the body are separate entities. But this cannot be true. Just look at you. By unmanning your body, they have broken your mind into meekness. When I first met you, your mind was like a thrusting sword. You stamped like a bull. Now, you still think clearly, you write beautifully, you remain the smartest man in the world, but you do not thrust and parry. You, well, you are fussy."

Abelard sighed and responded, "You are right, Heloïse. I am no longer a bull. I am an ox."

I was suddenly shocked at what I had said. I had just insulted him without meaning to! "Peter! That's not what I meant!" I said, crying again. "I did not mean to insult you. You know I love you as much now as I did before they…" I threw myself at him. This time he embraced me gently.

I spoke into his chest. "Just let me wash away the insult I threw upon you, with my tears. Please. My tears are pent up inside me and this is what they must do. Please. Let me weep upon your shoulder, at least. The apostle Paul talks of groaning too deep for words. Well, leave words behind, just for a few moments, Peter, just for a few moments, and let me weep upon you."

Chapter 18
Heloïse

"I had to get out of there," Abélard told me, regarding his departure from St. Giles. "I escaped through the privy chute."

"That must have been really disgusting," I said.

"Nothing compared to the sweetness of freedom and the anticipation of returning to the Paraclete," he said. "The beloved abbey that I founded. My heart has always been here." I glowered at him a little, because I wanted him to say more. He noticed, and added, "And, I really wanted to be with you." I smiled at him. He continued, "I even left the astrolabe back at St. Gildas with ignorant and worldly people who think it is a toy."

"Abélard, there is something I've been wanting to discuss with you. A philosophical matter," I said. He smiled. I smiled and continued, "You still love it when our minds embrace, don't you?" He smiled even bigger. Then I said, "First, a confession."

" I'm not a priest," he said

"Not that kind of confession," I said. "I don't make *that* kind of confession. *Ever.*"

"You mean," he said, "you haven't even confessed and received absolution for the sin in which we participated those many years ago?"

I felt suddenly offended at him. How could he so summarily dismiss all that we had shared in secret, in the cellar, and in the vineyard? When my nard gave forth its fragrance? When we learned everything about one another's personal landscapes? I gasped, not knowing what to say. The words stumbled out of me. "Sin?" I said. "I remember clearly what we discussed. Sin consists of evil intentionality. And we intended no evil. Our carnal liaison was not a sin. Not one of our times of bliss was a sin. Not one of the…let me see, how many were there…"

"Please, Heloise," he said. "We must try not to remember."

I continued almost in shock. How could we try not to remember? What greater thing could there be to remember than our love? I blundered on. "Our intention was not evil. We intended to bless one another with our love."

"No, we did not intend evil toward one another," he said. "But I intended to partake of pleasure with you but without regard to the impact that our carnality might have upon third parties."

Confusion sicklied over my shock. "Third parties? Such as?"

He answered, "Canon Fulbert, for one."

My anger exploded more than I should have allowed. "Uncle Fulbert!" I said. "God rest his bleary soul in hell!"

"Heloïse, you mustn't be so uncharitable. Surely you cannot wish for his damnation?"

"Sorry. I got carried away," I said. "But how can you care about Fulbert? He intended evil when he planned the attack on you."

"And he paid the price. He lost his position and his lands. Which means you didn't inherit them."

"That was nothing compared to what he did to you. And to me," I said. "By taking you from me, he took the light out of my life. I will not repent. I regret nothing. Not one moment. Not one touch. Not one moistness. Not one kiss. Nothing. What we did was holy, therefore no priest can forgive it. Oh, a priest gave me absolution. He asked me if I repented of my sin. I said no. He pretended not to hear me and spoke the words of forgiveness. It was just a ceremony. It probably meant no more to him than to me."

I felt raw from the wound of Abélard thinking that our love had been something evil. Then he said, "Ah, there is a difference. I have *repented.* But I do not *regret* our love."

A dam of emotion broke in my heart. "Oh, Peter. I am so glad you said that. That makes all the difference to me. Now, I can be satisfied in your presence. *Repent* if you must. You can repent every little peccadillo if you want. If you ever let a matin remain unobserved. If you ever even think of meat on Friday. Go ahead, *repent* all you want. So long as you do not *regret* our love." I calmed down and smiled. "Don't tell Bernard," I said.

"I don't tell Bernard anything I don't have to," he said. He flashed a little smile. "But, you get along with Bernard, don't you?"

"Yes," I said. "He is an egotistical male. I just let him have space for his egotism, and he is satisfied. Anyway. My little confession. I'm getting a bit tired of that astrolabe." I had left the astrolabe on the table, and Abélard was turning the wheels.

"Getting bored with the wonders of the cosmos?" he asked.

"No, that is not what I said. It's just that, well, the model of the cosmos, as represented in the astrolabe is just too tidy. I just don't trust it anymore."

He looked at me seriously. "But, deductive logic shows that the cosmos must be this way. This is what I have dedicated my life to. This is what we dedicated our lives to. Remember? You talked about how our love was as grounded and unmoveable as the Earth itself. Our love was meant to be, as much a part of the cosmos as the Sun, Moon, and stars."

"Abélard," I said. "I know you are the master of *deductive* reasoning. But I've been thinking recently more about *inductive* reasoning. I look at all the things around me, and then try to think about what general principles they reveal. These days, I am thinking more from the bottom up than from the top down. I…I think I'll leave the top down part to you, Peter."

Abélard put down the astrolabe. "So? Inductive reasoning must lead to the same conclusions as deductive reasoning. Truth is truth, God's cosmos is as it is, whether investigated from the bottom up or from the top down."

"Peter," I said, "the cosmos is, I think, much bigger and more complex than either of us has imagined."

He did not seem impressed. "Yes, yes, particulars to fit into the general principles," he said.

I engaged his full attention. “Peter, remember when you told me about your troubadour days, before you became a logician? How you traveled from one castle to another, and sang for the lords and ladies?”

He got a dreamy look in his eyes. “Yes, I remember. I remember the ladies. Ah, but before you I did not really know what love was. And before our love became spiritual, I did not know what joy could be.”

“Stop it, Peter,” I said, referring to the spiritual love refrain he kept coming back to. “Now, you told me you visited Provence. And while you were there, you climbed Mt. Ventoux.”

“Yes. Yes, I did,” he said. “That was quite a hike.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why did you do it?”

“I wanted to worship God through the beauty of his creation…” he began.

“Stop it, Peter. Tell me honestly. Enough spiritual talk. Why did you do it?”

He abandoned his sanctimoniousness and spoke directly to me. “It was beautiful. And it was interesting. It was exhilarating to breathe the fresh air at the top.”

“But aren’t all mountains alike?” I asked. “If they are all examples of a deductive category known as mountain.”

“No,” he said. “They aren’t all alike. I saw Mont Blanc, from a distance—no way could I climb that—and it was very different. The trees were different. The rocks were different.”

“And so,” I said, “it is not enough to just know the deductive category *mountain.* You have to inductively see *mountains.* Peter, I have started studying the plants in the forests around the Paraclete. Especially the trees.”

“If I had time, I would enjoy such diversions,” he said.

“They are not mere diversions,” I responded. “I have asked the residents of the forest about what the different kinds of trees are. I was astonished. There are dozens of different kinds of trees in the forest. Why?”

“Well,” said Abelard, “each has a slightly different role intended for it in the scheme of the cosmos.”

“Why am I not surprised that you said that,” I sighed. “But could you, from general principles, have ever deduced that there ought to be oaks, and elms, and maples, and basswoods, and beeches, and rowans, and… You see my point. You must have noticed, in your mountain journeys, that the trees near the tops of the mountains were smaller than the trees in the moist valleys.”

“Yes,” he said.

“No doubt,” I continued, “this is a general pattern, explainable by some deductive truth. But exactly *which kinds of trees* are in any location—why it is that frankincense and myrrh grow only in the Holy Land, and why the spices grow only in the distant east in lands that only the Arabic traders know about—these things could never be deduced. They have to be studied. You have to go out and learn what’s there. You have to use induction, *and then* try to deduce the pattern. You are the world’s greatest deductive logician, Peter. But that is only half of reality.”

He responded, “I still say that, because there is one truth, then we can arrive at all understanding by deduction from the laws of nature.”

“But there is more than one kind of natural law,” I said. Now this got his attention. “There is the kind of natural law that could be called, if you please, the whim of God. For example, how far away the Moon is, or how big it is. Then there is the kind of natural law that *must* be true, *even if there is no God,* such as one plus one equals two. Even God cannot change that.”

“What’s this got to do with the astrolabe?” he asked.

“Quite simply, Peter, that the image of the cosmos represented by this astrolabe is one that we have *imposed upon* the cosmos. It is not something that the cosmos has *told* us.”

He looked at the astrolabe, not into my eyes. “I have always said, doubt leads to inquiry, and inquiry to truth. But you are casting doubt on the process of deductive inquiry itself. Upon all of my life’s work.”

I was afraid to answer, but I did. “Yes,” I said.

I was very relieved when he smiled. “I wish I’d thought of that. But it is too late to change now. I have built the edifice of my life’s work. I’ve written nearly a million words, Heloïse.”

I said, “You have advanced the human mind further than anyone ever has, my love. Quite enough for one man. But there is more to discover. I’ll bet that a thousand years from now scholars will still be puzzling over even some of the simplest questions of the cosmos.”

“Nevertheless,” he said, “I still think that this astrolabe is what the cosmos is like. It just makes too much sense. But I will admit that the cosmos is both bigger and more complex than most of us have dared to believe.”

“And older, too, I bet,” I said.

“Don’t let’s get carried away,” he said.

I decided to press further. “Abélard,” I said. “There is yet another way in which your deductive reasoning may fail. You once told me about something known as contingencies.”

“I did,” he said. “So?”

“Exactly. You pretty much ignored them then just as you do now. They are things that can happen but do not need to happen. Well, Abélard, I wonder if…”

“When did you get all of this time to wonder?” he interrupted.

“While I was waiting for your letters,” I said. “Which never came. I began to wonder if maybe contingencies might be the most important things that have ever happened in history. The history of a man, or a nation, or of a raindrop comes to a decision point: shall I go this way, or shall I go that way? Shall I, the little raindrop, fall on one side of the mountain, and end up flowing down the Seine, or on the other side, and end up flowing down the Rhone? Suppose St. Patrick had never made it to Ireland? Suppose the Norse had never conquered Normandy? Perhaps a storm had blown them a different direction. Suppose that you had died that time you fell, when you were a child? Dagobertus found you just in time; suppose he had not?”

“There are no accidents,” Abelard proclaimed.

"Contingencies happen all the time. You said so," I countered.

"But they only *appear to* occur," he said. "Actually God is in control of everything that happens. Patrick was meant to reach Ireland. I was meant to reach Paris. You were meant to love me."

"Even those little raindrops," I said.

"Even they."

"And if a whole bunch of the little raindrops go on one side of the mountain, and great floods wash away the houses and fields along the Seine, and the peasants starve, and very few of the raindrops go on the other side, to the Rhone, and droughts cause the crops to wither away, and the peasants starve, this was meant to be?"

"I suppose," he said, "there is no other conclusion I can reach."

"Perhaps not by deductive reasoning," I said, "but by admitting contingencies. Peter, either there are contingencies—things that God did not intend, and maybe could not have even foreknown (don't tell Bernard!)—or else God is a monster who wills floods and droughts and deaths upon whole populations, in which some individuals may deserve death, but most of whom do not. That's what Ecclesiastes says, Abelard! Things just happen! You claim that God has a reason for everything that happens…"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"And Qoheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, says, *I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them…*"

"That's my point," Abelard said.

"Would you let me read the rest of the sentence?" I said a little too loudly. "I said in my heart with regard to the sons of men that God is testing them *to show them that they are but beasts. For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. All are from the same place; all are from dust, and to dust they turn again. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the Earth?*"

"God cares about and has a purpose for every person, every animal, every plant, every raindrop…" Abélard began.

But I did not let him continue. I went on with my quotation from Qoheleth. "*And again I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. And behold the tears of the oppressed, and they have no one to comfort them!* I remember, Peter," I said, moving tenderly close to him, "that you once told me, when I asked you about the injustice of life, that you philosophers 'were working on' the problem. And since that time, you have published a million words. A million words, Peter! But have you answered that question yet?"

"No," he said, not looking at me.

I again quoted Qoheleth. *"Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."* Peter slumped down, as if he were carrying all of those books on his shoulders. And I kept quoting. *"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the men of skill; for time and chance happen to them all. Like fish which are taken in an evil net, like*

birds which are caught in a snare, so the sons of men are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

"Time and chance, Peter, time and chance! Job says that *man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward!* Sparks from a fire move randomly, screaming silently, unable to control where they go, and nobody controls where they go! That's what the world is like, Peter. Contingencies! Deductive thought will get you part of the way, but my inductive conclusion from looking at the world is that God is simply not doing anything down here in our world of monks and nuns and knights and princes and abbots and abbesses and peasants and smallpox and rats and mosquitoes and wildflowers and oaks and willows and rainbows and thunderclouds and wheat and barley and rye and miasmas and mud.

"And then we die," I concluded.

"I pray for the comfort of your soul," said Peter. "And your mind."

Chapter 19
Abélard

I was away from the Paraclete for a long time. Heloïse still desired contact with me, as often as possible. But I knew that my life was ebbing away, and I had to write everything that I could. As long as I was at the Paraclete, Heloïse, that blessed soul, would never leave me alone. And I didn't want her to. The only way I could concentrate was to leave.

As it turned out, our separation was productive. She sent me questions, and I felt obligated to answer them. Soon it became apparent that her brilliant questions and my answers, which I like to think were also brilliant, would make a good book. And it did. Soon I had published *Problemata Heloissae,* the Problems of Heloïse. I don't mean personal problems; I mean philosophical problems, which she posed to me. And she was fearless. She wanted to know why the Church seemed to think that sex was evil—something wherefrom its holiest members abstained—when God had said, right there in Genesis 1, *male and female created he them.* Complete, she said, with the little men in our crotches. (I didn't publish that part.) I loved her mind in her absence even more strongly than in her presence, and more than I had once loved her body, although I really could not remember what that felt like.

Bernard would not leave me alone. Finally he convinced the archbishop of Sens and all of the clergy and nobles in the area to put me on trial. An inquisition, he called it. The archbishop is my boss, so I had to attend.

Bernard is so sanctimonious, but he is a consummate political trickster. The panel that was supposed to judge whether my writings were heretical consisted of church administrators. Not a philosopher among them. They wouldn't know deduction from induction from contingency from lubricious guts. When I gazed upon them, from my little hot seat, they reminded me of the gnashing teeth of hungry men chattering down upon the roasting swan. I started laughing, which really confused them. Well, let them be confused.

But I noticed something more. The panel members seemed to have been drinking. Yes, I was certain that I could smell wine in the air. I realized that Bernard had gotten them drunk! I also realized that, technically, there was no rule to prevent him from doing so.

When the trial began (not a trial, Bernard said, just an inquisition to clarify certain irregularities), Bernard read off a list of eleven charges. (If there are charges, then it is a trial, you reeking pile of shit.) The charges were not just wrong, but were redundant! He had two, maybe three, gripes, which he drew out into eleven charges! And here I am supposed to be the one who quibbles over words! Well, he was making distinctions without differences. I almost felt like asking for a postponement so that I could write a better set of indictments against myself than he had written.

Bernard droned on. The panelists snored and wine-burped. I let my mind wander. Someday, I dared to think, someday people would read the list—I will not bore you with it—and wonder how anybody could ever *care* about what anyone might or might not believe about those

things. And then, able to take no more, I stood up and demanded that my case be brought before the Holy See. I walked out.

I was soon informed that the panel had approved my request. So I would be going to Rome, at last. Not that I had any hope there. But at least it brought this ridiculous Bernardian inquisition to an end. And Bernard was not happy. He wanted a conviction, not a retrial.

I was too tired to enjoy Bernard's little setback. All I could do was to return to the Paraclete, and this time I did not shun Heloise's embraces.

Chapter 20
Abélard

It was a beautiful spring morning at the Paraclete, only about a month after I had arrived following the inquisition. I wanted to just rest, and Heloïse did all she could to help me do so. But I could not leave Bernard alone. I sat at the library table reading one of Bernard's books.

Heloïse entered. She asked, sweetly and cheerfully, "Well, Abelard, how are we this beautiful morning? It is sunny, the birds are singing…"

"I don't know how *we* are," I grumped. "I can guess how *you* are. If you must know, *I* feel as if I had eaten a little bit too much swan grease."

She hesitated, then gave a little nervous laugh. "Well, it is the kind of morning on which nobody can remain cheerless for long."

"Unless one is reading a book from the hand of Bernard of Clairvaux," I said.

She answered, with a nectared voice that somehow didn't seem true to her, "Now, why would we want to do that? Haven't we read enough…"

"Yes, *we* have," I griped. "I have. But I can't get it out of my mind. It irritates the bile and phlegm out of me."

She smiled like honey and mead and stings. "The sisters have baked fresh bread. And there is fresh butter from the churn! Breakfast is such a wonderful…"

I interrupted her. "Out with it. You're up to something. Just tell me."

She inhaled and exhaled slowly, then spoke. "We are having a visitor today."

"We? Or I?"

" We," she said.

"Who is it?"

She did not answer until I looked her in the eye. She said, "Bernard."

I sighed heavily. "Why can't he just leave me alone? Whose idea was this, anyway?"

Her answer surprised me. "Mine," she said.

I put down the book and stared at her. "Yours? What could possibly make you think I wanted to speak with Bernard?"

She answered, "Of course I did not think you *wanted* to speak with him. I thought you *needed* to."

"Today?" I asked. "That means he's here."

"He arrived last night," Heloise told me.

"He came all the way here to see me?"

"He was on a journey."

"Where?"

"You know that the Paraclete is midway between Paris and Clairvaux."

"That didn't answer my question, Heloise."

"He is heading eastward."

"That doesn't answer my question either."

"He is heading southeastward." Then finally she told me. "To Rome."

"Let's get this over before breakfast," I said.

And then Bernard barged right in. "Yes, let's," he said. He looked at Heloïse. "My business is not with you," he said.

"Your business is with my husband, in my abbey," she said quietly.

"My argument is not with you, then. I thank you kindly for arranging this meeting on such short notice," said Bernard.

I said, "We do not wish to delay your journey. Rather than arguing about the presence or absence of Heloïse, let's just get started."

"Very well," Bernard began. "Abélard, we were not pleased that you walked out of our meeting at Sens."

"You mean my trial."

"Yes. You walked out without even presenting your defense."

"You cannot possibly think that I had a chance of defending myself to that panel." I said. "Not a single philosopher among them. All of them church administrators. Your case would be open and shut. I am an administrative inconvenience. Ergo."

"You are not correct in this," he said. "I remind you that the panel did not find in my favor. They ruled in yours."

"Yes. I demanded that the Holy See hear my case. I am still waiting for an invitation from them. You are on a journey?"

"Yes. I am heading to Rome," said Bernard.

"I already knew that," I said. "Thank you for not lying to me. So, you are going to get there before me, and make your case before I am even summoned?"

"Well," he said, "hardly a case."

"An inquisition?"

"Not even that. Just some preliminary information sessions."

"You are calling the same thing by three different names. This is irrational." Then I said to Heloïse, "Now I need you to explain something. You say this meeting was your idea?"

She looked down. "Yes, my love."

Bernard interrupted us. "You know perfectly well that the Holy See will not approve of you questioning their doctrines. And not just some of them. All of them. Questioning, doubting, as a fundamental procedure."

"Are they afraid that honest inquiry will fail to confirm their doctrines?" I asked.

"No. No, they are not," Bernard said. "But a man—and I'm not saying this man is you, Abélard —can take the guise of honest inquiry and thereby oppose doctrines."

"Then that is the problem of the man who inquires," I said.

"No, Abélard, it is *our* problem. *Your* problem. Now, there is no danger in certain types of inquiry…"

"Such as, perhaps, whether or not liverworts can cure diseases of the liver?" asked Heloise.

"Yes, I suppose that is one," said Bernard.

"Perhaps," continued Heloïse, "whether the sun goes around the Earth?"

I had to answer. "No, not that one."

Bernard smiled. "You see my point. The Holy See is particularly disturbed…"

"You've heard from them?" I demanded.

"Yes," said Bernard. "And so has Heloïse."

"Heloïse?" I exclaimed. "You didn't tell me!"

"I meant to, Abélard, very soon," she said. "The opportunity for this visit came rather suddenly."

"What is the Holy See disturbed about?" I asked.

"They are disturbed about your assertion that it is a sin to pray with words that you do not understand," Bernard said.

"I see," I responded. "These are the only kinds of prayers that your Cistercians pray, I take it."

"Don't talk like that, Abélard," Bernard said. "I came as a gesture of friendship. Well, that's asking a bit much to believe. I came as a gesture of reconciliation."

"He did," said Heloïse.

I said, "You're trying to be nice to me now, is that it, Bernard? Well, it doesn't matter how nice you are about it. What you are demanding is the imprisonment of the minds of men. And women."

Bernard's face took on a reasoning-mask. "Full understanding of every word of every doctrine is a commendable goal, but there simply is not enough time on Earth for it. In this fallen world, we have to accept some things on faith."

"There's no time to investigate all of it," I said, "but there's plenty of time to get started on it, rather than just mumbling things all day like your Cistercians do."

"Very well, Abélard," he said. "I came to ask you one last time. Will you renounce that position? Will you renounce the primacy of reason over faith?"

I answered, "I've no problem with faith in what God has revealed. I do have a problem with faith in what *you claim* that God has revealed *to you* and which your Cistercians and all the rest of us must just accept."

Bernard sighed. "My business here is finished. I regret we cannot part amicably, Abélard. And Heloïse, thank you for giving us this chance to work things out. A fine woman, despite all that has happened. Abélard, you might learn something from her. You should just keep your mouth shut and do your duty as she does."

Heloïse looked surprised and not pleased. "What was I thinking, to arrange this meeting?" she said.

Bernard looked surprised and not pleased. "Hmph. Women," he said as he left. Heloïse glared at him as he retreated down the hall.

Then I said, “I must go to Rome, Heloïse. Immediately. The chariot race is on. I must try to get there before Bernard.”

“But are you well enough for the journey?” my life companion asked me.

“It is not my place to choose the time of this journey,” I said. “I am sixty-five. Bernard is fifty-four, not young but with some considerable advantage over me. I must start as soon as possible. But not before that bread and butter.”

Chapter 21
Heloïse

I was working on some boring administrative paperwork in the abbey library when Margarethe entered and said, "Sister Heloïse."

"It can wait," I said.

Then she said, "My beloved friend from childhood, Heloïse." What could I do but to look up, relax, and smile when she thus addressed me? She said, "You have received two messages." She handed me two sealed envelopes.

I opened the first rapidly. I told Margarethe what it was as I skimmed it hungrily. "It is from Abélard. Yes, that handwriting. My heart is beating wildly. Well, he didn't make it to Rome. He became ill. That's the bad news. The good news is that he made it to Cluny in Burgundy. Peter the Venerable has welcomed him during his convalescence. There is no better place for Abélard to be, other than, of course, here."

I then opened the second envelope. "From the Vatican," I said.

As I read the letter, I was paralyzed by shock. Margarethe had to run over and keep me from slumping to the floor. "You can share your burden with me, my friend," she said.

I could barely speak as I said, "The Pope has declared Abelard's writings heretical."

Margarethe didn't quite laugh but I could tell she didn't take it too seriously. "This has happened before. Everybody nods their heads but don't expect Abelard's books to be pulled off the shelves and destroyed any time soon. It's just for show."

"I know," I said. "But there is more."

"Tell me," my friend said.

"Abélard is prohibited from traveling. He will never leave Cluny. I will never see him again."

"Oh, my dear friend…" Margarethe said.

I looked at her and poured out my heart. "The last words I will ever hear him say are, *not before that bread and butter!"*

I started to laugh and cry at the same time. Then it was mostly crying. I could barely speak through my sobs. "How can I live without him?"

"Oh, you will," she said. "There is much beauty to see. And there is much suffering for you, for us, to alleviate, since God won't."

"Margarethe," I said, "please go take care of the chants and all that. I need to be alone." How many times I have asked her to do this!

I walked over to the large parchment Bible and turned to the book of Qoheleth. The book, I sometimes think, of hopelessness. But Abélard was and is the wisest man in the world! Perhaps the wisest who as ever lived! And I have had the privilege to be his intimate friend! Surely there is hope in this! So I turned the pages until I found the passage I was seeking. *So I turned my mind to consider wisdom and folly. I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.* I smiled

and nodded my head vigorously in agreement. *The wise man has eyes, but the fool walks in darkness.* Yes, that's Abélard! But the smile drained quickly from my face when I read, *But then I perceived that one fate befalls all of them. I said to myself, "What befalls the fool will befall me also; why then have I been so very wise?"* I began shaking my head: no, no, no, as I continued to read. *And I said to myself that this also is vanity. For of the wise man and of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten.*

Abélard, forgotten? Never! But the sparks that fly upward are soon extinguished. I continued reading, *How the wise man dies just like the fool. So I hated life because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after the wind.* I fell to the floor and abandoned myself to tears.

Chapter 22
Heloïse

Fortune rota volvitur:
Descendo minoratus;
Alter in altum tollitur;
Nimis exaltatus
Rex sedet in vertice—
Caveat ruinam!

The wheel of luck whirls;
It throws one man down;
It lifts another man up;
Supremely exalted
The king sits at the top—
Let him beware of disaster!

Ever since Peter's death, I have had no joy in my life. Margarethe keeps telling me how important our work is at the abbey, and reminds me of the many poor people we have rescued from starvation. I admit this; I just feel no joy in it, particularly since the only way we can help the poor people who are having bad luck at this particular moment is by cajoling money out of other poor people, the ones who at this particular moment are not having such bad luck. I admit the rich land owners around the Paraclete have been helpful also, but the amount that they give to us is totally inconsequential to their fortunes. The widow gives her only mite, the rich man gives only the pocket change that slips out without being noticed. To get any money at all, we have to tell both rich and poor, nobles and merchants and farmers, that it is God's will for them to be charitable to us and through us. I do not really believe this, so each day I have to lie to them. The alternative, however, is that the neediest people will get no help at all. We are doing the only work that the Holy Spirit (Paraclete) can do in this world, and the Holy Spirit is the only part of God who does anything worth doing in this world.

Egestatum, potestatum
Dissolvit ut glaciem.

Poverty, strength,
Melting like ice.

Well, this is the job that Fortune, the Empress of the World (Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi, which is my synonym for God) has given me, and I do it well. The Paraclete (the abbey, not the God-person) now has considerable acreages on which tenant farmers raise their food and on which dairy cattle graze. We make, and distribute for free to the tenant farmers, some pretty damn good cheese. Okay, I enjoy that part. We make wine from wild elderberries. An old woman taught us how to do this; it is not something we learned in an abbey or from a philosopher. We even have some forest lands, for coppiced trees, and even a few venerable oaks. I frequently visit these oaks, which defy Fortuna as I would wish to do. When I die, what will happen to these lands and trees?

Sors immanis et inanis,
Rota tu volubilis.
Satus malus, vana salus,
Semper dissolubilis.

Fate, roaring and stupid
Is a whirling disc.
If unbalanced, your health is hopeless,
Always dissolving.

Nobody around here remembers anything about Abélard and myself, except of course Margarethe. There is no remembrance of Abélard's piercing wisdom, his unsettling brilliance, unless somebody happens to run across one of his books in an abbey library. Meanwhile Bernard's memory is perpetuated by his mumbling Cisterians whose words echo ghostlike in the big new cathedrals. A new generation of scholars has arisen, daring to study God. They call their discipline *theology.* Well, it was Peter Abélard who invented the very word! Few of them know this.

There is a little bit of legend going around about my affair with Abélard, only the repeaters of the legend completely misunderstand it. They do not know that there was anything about it other than raw sex, or that every time we conjoined it was a full mental and religious experience. Half of the whores in Paris are named Heloïse. God, this is worse than being forgotten.

O Furtuna, velut Luna
Statu variabilis,
Semper crescis aut decrescis,
Vita detestabilis.

Lady Luck, just like the Moon,
You are always changing,
You are always swelling and shriveling—
Ah, hateful life!

The prophet Jeremiah said that God said that the people of Judah had turned their backs, not their faces, to him. Well, what can you expect? Can you expect us to praise a God who is indistinguishable from sheer luck?

Fortune plango vulnera
Stillantibus ocellis—
Nunc per ludum dorsum nudum
Fero tui sceleris.

I weep for the injuries of Fortune
With overflowing eyes—
And at this gambling table, my bare back
I expose to your treachery!

Chapter 23
Astralabe

Dearest Mother:

I hope this letter finds you in health. I am well. I do not have time to write much. I am preparing to leave for Switzerland. I have just taken my vows and am joining a Cistercian abbey.

I realize that you will not approve of the views of Brother Bernard. Please do not think that I am rejecting your love or that of my departed father. I have much admired, though from a distance, always from a distance, the heroic struggle that you and Father have always maintained to defend what you consider to be truth and, more importantly, the way of finding truth. But I have also seen the terrible toll that it has taken upon you. I too have suffered from your anguish.

Please do not think me simple-minded because I turn away from the clash of minds. Knowing as I do, and as we all do, that we will never have complete understanding, whether of the Trinity or the cosmos, I have chosen the path of acceptance and humility. Even though I do in fact pray things that I do not understand, it is in this that I will find peace. I will never know what is true; but I always know how to help my brothers and the poor suffering people of my parish. I will work alongside them. As scripture says, in the book of Ecclesiastes, your favorite book, Mother, there is nothing better than that a man should enjoy his work. You see, mother, in the end, it is not a matter of truth, of inquiry, of learning, of discovery, of deduction, of induction, but of love. Whatever help I can offer to alleviate the sufferings of the world, I will do.

[Heloise wrote in the margin, "Since God will not."]

And dare I say that in this decision, the love, that famous love between you and Father, has been passed on to my heart.

Your loving son
Astralabe

Author's notes on *Paraclete*

This novel was first a stage play, unperformed, which I wrote in 2012.

The events are based mostly on standard historical sources.

The poetry is mostly based on *Carmina Burana,* medieval poems (almost from the same time and place as these events). Some of the poems were set to music by Carl Orff. I added my own words to some of them, particularly to the Swan Song in chapter 1.

I do not know that Heloïse and Abélard discussed all of the things in this novel. I hope they did. I wanted to show their thoughts as an early version of science, which did not yet exist. For example, I have them recognizing that there are lots of different species of trees.

Although I present Abélard as an early scientific thinker, he apparently never thought outside of the medieval view of the heavens, Earth at the center, as you would see in an astrolabe.

It was Petrarch, not Abélard, who climbed Mt. Ventoux, much later.

I made up the running gag about how a philosopher can always find work.

The story of mumpsimus, instead of sumpsimus, really happened, though in, as I recall, the twentieth century.

Author's notes on the *Under the Sun* novels

The novels in this series are each independent of the other, and can be read in any order. What brings them together in a series is the theme. All four novels have emerged largely from my decades of close study of the Bible, at first as a fundamentalist, then as a reader who, emerging out of fundamentalism into an undefined faith, could appreciate the power and wisdom of the thoughts behind many of the books in the Bible. If you think you understand the Bible because you go, or went, to church, be prepared for some surprising things the preachers have not told you. These novels represent situations, across millennia, in which people have had to *think about what God's will might be, and why an all-powerful God would allow evil things to happen to good people.* In particular, all the novels contain extensive, almost verbatim quotes from Song of Solomon, which is explicit in its joyous sexual details, and Ecclesiastes, which is an almost agnostic book that says that humans are no different from animals: We just die, and that's the end of the story. Not only that, but these books have a powerful beauty that the millennia have not diminished. These are the books preachers of conservative churches and of isolated religious communities don't want young people, or old, to read. Rather than to just present these passages to the reader, I wanted to show imaginary people—Solomon's scribe, Jeremiah's female friend, Heloïse and Abélard, and an Amish woman—giving careful thought to these passages and confronting them in their own experiences.

Part of my motivation, in all four novels, was to break away from reading the Bible in a kind of religious sanctimonious trance, and to experience it as an intense work of living art. When you do this, the Bible becomes a document throbbing with life and love, on the level of any novel or movie, and not something to just be read in a church lectionary.

Another major motivation of the first two novels is to show the kings and prophets as flawed human beings. The Old Testament historical chapters present Solomon as a wise man, and incredibly rich. Archaeologists (see *The Bible Unearthed* by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman) have found no evidence of this. But even the Bible itself does not try to conceal Solomon's sins. Anyone reading Solomon's stories will see him as a shrewd politician who used wisdom as a tool rather than as a way of life. Jeremiah was just plain weird, no two ways about it, though not actually crazy and delusional like Ezekiel.

About the Author

Stan Rice is the internationally celebrated author of six books of popular science. He got his Ph.D. in plant ecology at the University of Illinois in 1987, and held several academic positions until he retired from Southeastern Oklahoma State University as Professor Emeritus of Biological Science. His writings are acclaimed for their insight and humor, especially the Creationist Funhouse series in the magazine Skeptical Inquirer. His science and religion blogs and his YouTube channel (StanEvolve, in which he is Charles Darwin) have collectively had a million and a half views. You can connect to his publications, including novels and stories, at his author website https://stanleyrice.org/.



No part of this book has been produced by or with the assistance of Artificial Intelligence. Everything is based on the author's direct knowledge, insights, and experiences.