

History of Calamities

(Adapted from Peter Abelard's *Historia calamitatum*, based on *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, translated and with an introduction by Betty Radice, Penguin Books, 1974, pages 65-77.)

The number of students at my school increased enormously, and the money and fame this brought me are known to all. But success can puff up a fool with pride. I began to think myself the only philosopher in the world, with nothing to fear from anyone, and able to do whatever I desired. Until this point in my life I had been entirely pure in regard to women, but that would soon change.

There was in Paris at this time an attractive woman named Heloise, the niece of Fulbert, a church official. Fulbert cared deeply for his niece and had done everything in his power to advance her education. Heloise was not only attractive but well known for literary knowledge, which is unusual in women. I found her extremely appealing and wanted to know her intimately. Given my own good looks and fame, I believed I could find a way to bring this about.

Being on fire for this girl, I wanted to create a situation where the two of us could be alone together. Therefore, I made a deal with the uncle to rent a room in his house and to tutor Heloise in my spare time. Fulbert was greedy and saw the double advantage for himself. As an excuse I said that running my own household was expensive and getting in the way of my studies. Fulbert was so eager to further his niece's education that he gave me complete access to the girl, so that I could devote whatever free time I had, day or night, to her instruction. He even went so far as to say that if I ever found her slacking off in her studies that I was to beat her. I was amazed by his simplicity—it was as if he had thrown a tender lamb to a ravening wolf. But the reason he trusted me so completely was because I had always been a very moral person.

As a result, Heloise and I were united, first under one roof, then in one mind. With her studies as an excuse we abandoned ourselves entirely to love. The lessons allowed us to withdraw in private. With our books open before us, more words of love passed from our lips than the reading, and kissing became more frequent than teaching. To avoid suspicion we agreed for me to hit her at times, leaving a mark on her face, so that the uncle would assume everything was normal between his niece and her teacher.

Now the more I pursued these pleasures, the less dedication I showed to my students at the school. Therefore, my students were the first to discover that something was amiss. Others soon found out as well, and it became common knowledge around Paris. The last to make the discovery was the girl's uncle himself. Several months passed before he came to know what was going on. When he finally came to realize the truth I was expelled from his home.

But even that did not stop us. Heloise and I still found times and places to meet in private. After awhile Heloise discovered that she was pregnant. One night, when her uncle was away, I snuck her out of his house and sent her to my own country [Brittany], where she stayed with my sister until she gave birth to a boy, whom she named Astrolabe.

Fulbert went almost out of his mind with anger and grief. He could not harm me, because if he did the same might be done to his beloved niece by my relatives, with whom she was staying. Eventually I felt bad enough that I went to him, confessing how wrong my actions had been and wanting to make things right. I told him I was willing to marry Heloise, but the marriage must be kept secret so as not to damage my reputation in the Church and hinder my career as a teacher. Fulbert agreed to these terms.

I set off at once for my own country to retrieve Heloise and bring her back to Paris. Heloise was actually opposed to our getting married. She insisted that remaining my mistress was far better than becoming my wife. She said her uncle would still seek revenge in spite of having agreed to the marriage, and that the marriage would ruin the teaching career that God had intended for me. But seeing that I would not change my mind she gave in and agreed to it. Leaving Astrolabe in my sister's care, we returned to Paris.

A few days later, in the presence of Fulbert and a small number of friends, Heloise and I were married. Since our marriage was to be kept secret, we could not live together and saw each other only occasionally. But Fulbert and his servants, in order to ruin my reputation as well as my career, began to spread the news of the marriage and break the promise of secrecy they had given me.

Heloise, for her part, when confronted by various people with this information, insisted that Fulbert and his servants were lying. As a result, Fulbert abused her severely on several occasions. When I heard this, I placed her in the convent where she had been brought up and educated as a small girl. I also made for her a religious habit of the type worn by novices, with the exception of the veil, and made her put it on.

Upon hearing this, Fulbert and his friends and relatives imagined that I had tricked them and found an easy way of ridding myself of Heloise by making her a nun. In extreme anger they plotted against me. One night, as I slept in an inner room of my lodging, they bribed one of my servants to let them in. Having crept into my room, they cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained. Then they fled, but the two who could be caught were blinded and mutilated as I had been, one of them being my servant whom they had bribed.

The next morning the whole city gathered before my house. My students, in particular, tormented me with unbearable weeping and wailing until I suffered more from their sympathy than from the pain of my wound. In a short time I began to reflect on what had occurred: how a just judgment of God had struck me in the parts of the body with which I had sinned, and how a fair reprisal had been taken by the very man I had myself betrayed. After this, Heloise, in obedience to my wishes, did in fact become a nun. I became a monk and continued to apply myself to my studies and my teaching.