



The World's Greatest Books (Lives and Letters)

Various Authors

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In the Paris cemetery of Père-Lachaise, on summer Sundays, flowers and wreaths are still laid on the tomb of a woman who died nearly 750 years ago. It is the grave of Heloise and of her lover Abelard, the hero and heroine of one of the world's greatest love stories. Born in 1079, Abelard, after a scholastic activity of twenty-five years, reached the highest academic dignity in Christendom—the Chair of the Episcopal School in Paris. When he was 38 he first saw Heloise, then a beautiful girl of 17, living with her uncle, Canon Fulbert. Abelard became her tutor, and fell madly in love with her. The passion was as madly returned. The pair fled to Brittany, where a child was born. There was a secret marriage, but because she imagined it would hinder Abelard's advancement, Heloise denied the marriage. Fulbert was furious. With hired assistance, he invaded Abelard's rooms and brutally mutilated him. Abelard, distressed by this degradation, turned monk. But he must have Heloise turn nun; she agreed, and at 22 took the veil. Ten years later she learned that Abelard had not found content in his retirement, and wrote to him the first of the five famous letters. Abelard died in 1142, and his remains were given into the keeping of Heloise. Twenty years afterwards she died, and was buried beside him at Paraclete. In 1800 their remains were taken to Paris, and in 1817 interred in Père-Lachaise Cemetery. The love-letters, originally written in Latin, about 1128, were first published in Paris in 1616. Heloise has just seen a "consolatory" letter of Abelard's to a friend. She had no right to open it, but in justification of the liberty she took, she flatters herself that she may claim a privilege over everything which comes from that hand. "But how dear did my curiosity cost me! What disturbance did it occasion, and how surprised I was to find the whole letter filled with a particular and melancholy account of our misfortunes! Though length of time ought to have closed up my wounds, yet the seeing them described by you was sufficient to make them all open and bleed afresh. Surely all the misfortunes of lovers are conveyed to them through the eyes. Upon reading your letter I feel all mine renewed. Observe, I beseech you, to what a wretched condition you have reduced me; sad, afflicted, without any possible comfort unless it proceed from you. Be not then unkind, nor deny me, I beg of you, that little relief which you only can give. Let me have a faithful account of all that concerns you; I would know everything, be it ever so unfortunate. Perhaps by mingling my sighs with yours I may make your sufferings less, for it has been said that all sorrows divided are made lighter. "I shall always have this, if you please, and it will always be agreeable to me that, when I receive a letter from you, I shall know you still remember me. I have your picture in my room. I never pass it without stopping to look at it. If a picture, which is but a mute representation of an object, can give such pleasure, what cannot letters inspire? We may write to each other; so innocent a pleasure is not denied us. I shall read that you are my husband, and you shall see me sign myself your wife. In spite of all our misfortunes, you may be what you please in your letter. Having lost the substantial pleasures of seeing and possessing you, I shall in some measure compensate this loss by the satisfaction I shall find in your writing. There I shall read your most sacred thoughts; I shall carry them always about with me; I shall kiss them every moment. I cannot live if you will not tell me that you still love me.

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