



## LETTERS FROM A STOIC

*Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*

SELECTED AND TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ROBIN CAMPBELL  
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## LETTERS

### LETTER II

Judging from what you tell me and from what I hear, I feel that you show great promise. You do not tear from place to place and unsettle yourself with one move after another. Restlessness of that sort is symptomatic of a sick mind. Nothing, to my way of thinking, is a better proof of a well ordered mind than a person's ability to stop just where they are and pass some time in their own company.

Be careful, however, that there is no element of discursiveness and desultoriness about this reading you refer to, this reading of many different authors and books of every description. You should be extending your stay among writers whose genius is unquestionable, deriving constant nourishment from them if you wish to gain anything from your reading that will find a lasting place in your mind. To be everywhere is to be nowhere. People who spend their whole life travelling abroad end up having plenty of places where they can find hospitality but no real friendships. The same must needs be the case with people who never set about acquiring an intimate acquaintanceship with any one great writer, but skip from one to another, paying flying visits to them all. Food that is vomited up as soon as it is eaten is not assimilated into the body and does not do one any good; nothing hinders a cure so much as frequent changes of treatment; a wound will not heal over if it is being made the subject of experiments with different ointments; a plant which is frequently moved never grows strong. Nothing is so useful that it can be of any service in the mere passing. A multitude of books only gets in one's way. So if you are unable to read all the books in your possession, you have enough when you have all the books you are able to read. And if you say, "But I feel like opening different books at different times," my answer will be this: tasting one dish after another is the sign of a fussy stomach, and where the foods are dissimilar and diverse in range they lead to contamination of the system, not nutrition. So always read well-tried authors, and if at any moment you find yourself wanting a change from a particular author, go back to ones you have read before.

Each day, too, acquire something which will help you to face poverty, or death, and other ills as well. After running over a lot of different thoughts, pick out one to be digested thoroughly that day. This is what I do myself; out of the many bits I have been reading I, lay hold of one. My thought for today is something which I found in Epicurus (yes, I actually make a practice of going over to the enemy's camp – by way of reconnaissance, not as a deserter!). "A cheerful poverty," he says, "is an honorable state." But if it is cheerful it is not poverty at all. It is not the person who has too little who is poor, but the one who hankers after more. What difference does it make how much there is laid away in a person's safe or in their barns, how many head of stock they graze or how much capital they put out at interest, if they are always after what is another's and only counts what they have yet to get, never what they have already. You ask what is the proper limit to a person's wealth? First, having what is essential, and second, having what is enough.

### LETTER III

You have sent me a letter by the hand of a "friend" of yours, as you call him. And in the next sentence you warn me to avoid discussing your affairs freely with him, since you are not even in the habit of doing so yourself; in other words you have described him as being a friend

and then denied this, in one and the same letter. Now if you were using that word in a kind of popular sense and not according to its strict meaning, and calling him a "friend" in much the same way as we refer to candidates as "gentlemen" or hail someone with the greeting "my dear fellow" if when we meet him his name slips our memory, we can let this pass. But if you are looking on anyone as a friend when you do not trust him as you trust yourself, you are making a grave mistake, and have failed to grasp sufficiently the full force of true friendship.

Certainly you should discuss everything with a friend; but before you do so, discuss in your mind the person themselves. After friendship is formed you must trust, but before that you must judge. Those people who, contrary to Theophrastus' advice, judge a person after they have made them their friend instead of the other way round, certainly put the cart before the horse. Think for a long time whether or not you should admit a given person to your friendship. But when you have decided to do so, welcome them heart and soul, and speak as unreservedly with them as you would with yourself. You should, I need hardly say, live in such a way that there is nothing which you could not as easily tell your enemy as keep to yourself; but seeing that certain matters do arise on which convention decrees silence, the things you should share with your friend are all your worries and deliberations. Regard them as loyal, and you will make them loyal. Some people's fear of being deceived has taught people to deceive them; by their suspiciousness they give them the right to do the wrong thing by them. Why should I keep back anything when I'm with a friend? Why shouldn't I imagine I'm alone when I'm in their company?

There are certain people who tell any person they meet things that should only be confided to friends, unburdening themselves of whatever is on their minds into any ear they please. Others again are shy of confiding in their closest friends, and would not even let themselves, if they could help it, into the secrets they keep hidden deep down inside themselves. We should do neither. Trusting everyone is as much a fault as trusting no one (though I should call the first the worthier and the second the safer behavior).

Similarly, people who never relax and people who are invariably in a relaxed state merit your disapproval – the former as much as the latter. For a delight in bustling about is not industry – it is only the restless energy of a hunted mind. And the state of mind that looks on all activity as tiresome is not true repose, but a spineless inertia. This prompts me to memorize something which I came across in Pomponius. "Some people have shrunk so far into dark corners that objects in bright daylight seem quite blurred to them." A balanced combination of the two attitudes is what we want; the active person should be able to take things easily, while the person who is inclined towards repose should be capable of action. Ask nature: she will tell you that she made both day and night.

## LETTER V

I view with pleasure and approval the way you keep on at your studies and sacrifice everything to your single-minded efforts to make yourself every day a better person. I do not merely urge you to persevere in this; I actually implore you to. Let me give you, though, this one piece of advice: refrain from following the example of those whose craving is for attention, not their own improvement, by doing certain things which are calculated to give rise to comment on your appearance or way of living generally. Avoid shabby attire, long hair, an unkempt beard, an outspoken dislike of silverware, sleeping on the ground and all other misguided means to self-advertisement. The very name of philosophy, however modest the manner in which it is pursued, is unpopular enough as it is: imagine what the reaction would be if we started dissociating ourselves from the conventions of society. Inwardly everything should be different

but our outward face should conform with the crowd. Our clothes should not be gaudy, yet they should not be dowdy either. We should not keep silver plate with inlays of solid gold, but at the same time we should not imagine that doing without gold and silver is proof that we are leading the simple life. Let our aim be a way of life not diametrically opposed to, but better than that of the mob. Otherwise we shall repel and alienate the very people whose reform we desire; we shall make them, moreover, reluctant to imitate us in anything for fear they may have to imitate us in everything. The first thing philosophy promises us is the feeling of fellowship, of belonging to humankind and being members of a community; being different will mean the abandoning of that manifesto. We must watch that the means by which we hope to gain admiration, do not earn ridicule and hostility. Our motto, as everyone knows, is to live in conformity with nature: it is quite contrary to nature to torture one's body, to reject simple standards of cleanliness and make a point of being dirty, to adopt a diet that is not just plain but hideous and revolting. In the same way as a craving for dainties is a token of extravagant living, avoidance of familiar and inexpensive dishes betokens insanity. Philosophy calls for simple living, not for doing penance, and the simple way of life need not be a crude one. The standard which I accept is this: one's life should be a compromise between the ideal and the popular morality. People should admire our way of life but they should at the same time find it understandable.

"Does that mean we are to act just like other people? Is there to be no distinction between us and them?" Most certainly there is. Any close observer should be aware that we are different from the mob. Anyone entering our homes should admire us rather than our furnishings. It is a great soul that can treat their earthenware as if it was silver, and a person who treats their silver as if it was earthenware is no less great. Finding wealth an intolerable burden is the mark of an unstable mind.

But let me share with you as usual the day's small find (which today is something that I noticed in the Stoic writer Hecato). Limiting one's desires actually helps to cure one of fear. "Cease to hope," he says, "and you will cease to fear." "But how," you will ask, "can things as diverse as these be linked?" Well, the fact is, Lucilius, that they are bound up with one another, unconnected as they may seem. Widely different though they are, the two of them march in unison like a prisoner and the escort they are handcuffed to. Fear keeps pace with hope. Nor does their so moving together surprise me; both belong to a mind in suspense, to a mind in a state of anxiety through looking into the future. Both are mainly due to projecting our thoughts far ahead of us, instead of adapting ourselves to the present. Thus, it is that foresight, the greatest blessing humanity has been given, is transformed into a curse. Wild animals run from the dangers they actually see, and once they have escaped them worry no more. We, however, are tormented alike by what is past and what is to come. A number of our blessings do us harm, for memory brings back the agony of fear while foresight brings it on prematurely. No one confines their unhappiness to the present.

## LETTER VI

I see in myself, Lucilius, not just an improvement but a transformation, although I would not venture as yet to assure you, or even to hope, that there is nothing left in me needing to be changed. Naturally there are a lot of things about me requiring to be built up or fined down or eliminated. Even this, the fact that it perceives the failings it was unaware of in itself before, is evidence of a change for the better in one's character. In the case of some sick people it is a matter for congratulation when they come to realize for themselves that they are sick.

I should very much like, then, to share this all so sudden metamorphosis of mine with

you. Doing so would make me start to feel a surer faith in the friendship that exists between us, that true friendship which not hope nor fear nor concern for personal advantage ever sunders, that friendship in which and for which people are ready to die. I can give you plenty of examples of people who have not been lacking a friend but friendship, something that can never happen when mutual inclination draws two personalities together in a fellowship of desire for all that is honourable. Why cannot it happen? Because they know that everything – and especially their setbacks – is shared between them.

You can't imagine how much of an alteration I see each day bringing about in me. "Send me, too," you will be saying, "the things you've found so effectual." Indeed, I desire to transfer every one of them to you; part of my joy in learning is that it puts me in a position to teach; nothing, however outstanding and however helpful, will ever give me any pleasure if the knowledge is to be for my benefit alone. If wisdom were offered to me on the one condition that I should keep it shut away and not divulge it to anyone, I should reject it. There is no enjoying the possession of anything valuable unless one has someone to share it with. I shall send you, accordingly, the actual books themselves, and to save you a lot of trouble hunting all over the place for passages likely to be of use to you, I shall mark the passages so that you can turn straight away to the words I approve and admire.

Personal converse, though, and daily intimacy with someone will be of more benefit to you than any discourse. You should really be here and on the spot, firstly because people believe their eyes rather more than their ears, and secondly because the road is a long one if one proceeds by way of precepts, but short and effectual if by way of personal example. Cleanthes would never have been the image of Zeno if he had merely heard him lecture; he lived with him, studied his private life, watched him to see if he lived in accordance with his own principle. Plato, Aristotle, and a host of other philosophers all destined to take different paths, derived more from Socrates' character than from his words. It was not Epicurus' school but living under the same roof as Epicurus that turned Metrodorus, Hermarchus and Polyænus into great men. And yet I do not summon you to my side solely for the sake of your own progress, but for my own as well, for we shall be of the utmost benefit to each other.

Meanwhile, since I owe you the daily allowance, I'll tell you what took my fancy in the writings of Hecato today. "What progress have I made? I am beginning to be my own friend." That is progress indeed. Such a person will never be alone, and you may be sure he is a friend of all.

## LETTER VII

You ask me to say what you should consider it particularly important to avoid. My answer is this: a mass crowd. It is something to which you cannot entrust yourself yet without risk. I at any rate am ready to confess my own frailty in this respect. I never come back home with quite the same moral character I went out with; something or other becomes unsettled where I had achieved internal peace, some one or other of the things I had put to flight reappears on the scene. We who are recovering from a prolonged spiritual sickness are in the same condition as invalids who have been affected to such an extent by prolonged indisposition that they cannot once be taken out of doors without ill effects. Associating with people in large numbers is actually harmful: there is not one of them that will not make some vice or other attractive to us, or leave us carrying the imprint of it or bedaubed all unawares with it. And inevitably enough, the larger the size of the crowd we mingle with, the greater the danger. But nothing is as ruinous to the character as sitting away one's time at a show – for it is then, through

the medium of entertainment, that vices creep into one with more than usual ease. What do you take me to mean? That I go home more selfish, more self-seeking and more self-indulgent? Yes, and what is more, a person crueller and less humane through having been in contact with human beings. I happened to go to one of these shows at the time of the lunch-hour interlude, expecting there to be some light and witty entertainment then, some respite for the purpose of affording people's eyes a rest from human blood. Far from it. All the earlier contests were charity in comparison. The nonsense is dispensed with now: what we have now is murder pure and simple. The combatants have nothing to protect them; their whole bodies are exposed to the blows; every thrust they launch gets home. A great many spectators prefer this to the ordinary matches and even to the special, popular demand ones. And quite naturally. There are no helmets and no shields repelling the weapons. What is the point of armor? Or of skill? All that sort of thing just makes the death slower in coming. In the morning men are thrown to the lions and the bears: but it is the spectators they are thrown to in the lunch hour. The spectators insist that each on killing his man shall be thrown against another to be killed in his turn; and the eventual victor is reserved by them for some other form of butchery; the only exit for the contestants is death. Fire and steel keep the slaughter going. And all this happens while the arena is virtually empty.

"But he was a highway robber, he killed a man." And what of it? Granted that as a murderer he deserved this punishment, what have you done, you wretched fellow, to deserve to watch it? "Kill him! Flog him! Burn him! Why does he run at the other man's weapon in such a cowardly way? Why isn't he less half-hearted about killing? Why isn't he a bit more enthusiastic about dying? Whip him forward to get his wounds! Make them each offer the other a bare breast and trade blow for blow on them." And when there is an interval in the show: "Let's have some throats cut in the meantime, so that there's something happening!" Come now, I say, surely you people realize – if you realize nothing else – that bad examples have a way of recoiling on those who set them? Give thanks to the immortal gods that the men to whom you are giving a lesson in cruelty are not in a position to profit from it.

When a mind is impressionable and has none too firm a hold on what is right, it must be rescued from the crowd: it is so easy for it to go over to the majority. A Socrates, a Cato or a Laelius might have been shaken in his principles by a multitude of people different from himself: such is the measure of the inability of any of us, even as we perfect our personality's adjustment, to withstand the onset of vices when they come with such a mighty following. A single example of extravagance or greed does a lot of harm – an intimate who leads a pampered life gradually makes one soft and flabby; a wealthy neighbor provokes cravings in one; a companion with a malicious nature tends to rub off some of their rust even on someone of an innocent and open-hearted nature – what then do you imagine the effect on a person's character is when the assault comes from the world at large? You must inevitably either hate or imitate the world. But the right thing is to shun both courses: you should neither become like the bad because they are many, nor be an enemy of the many because they are unlike you. Retire into yourself as much as you can. Associate with people who are likely to improve you. Welcome those whom you are capable of improving. The process is a mutual one: people learn as they teach. And there is no reason why any pride in advertising your talents abroad should lure you forward into the public eye, inducing you to give readings of your works or deliver lectures. I should be glad to see you doing that if what you had to offer them was suitable for the crowd I have been talking about: but the fact is, not one of them is really capable of understanding you. You might perhaps come across one here and there, but even they would need to be trained and developed by you to a point where they could grasp your teaching. "For whose benefit, then, did I learn it all?" If it was

for your own benefit that you learned it, you have no call to fear that your trouble may have been wasted.

Just to make sure that I have not been learning solely for my own benefit today, let me share with you three fine quotations I have come across, each concerned with something like the same idea – one of them is by way of payment of the usual debt so far as this letter is concerned, and the other two you are to regard as an advance on account. "To me," says Democritus, "a single person is a crowd, and a crowd is a single person." Equally good is the answer given by the person, whoever it was (their identity is uncertain), who when asked what was the object of all the trouble they took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a very few people, replied: "A few is enough for me; so is one; and so is none." The third is a nice expression used by Epicurus in a letter to one of his colleagues. "I am writing this," he says, "not for the eyes of the many, but for yours alone: for each of us is audience enough for the other." Lay these up in your heart, my dear Lucilius, that you may scorn the pleasure that comes from the majority's approval. The many speak highly of you, but have you really any grounds for satisfaction with yourself if you are the kind of person the many understand? Your merits should not be outward facing.

## LETTER VIII

"Are you, of all people," you write, "really telling me to avoid the crowd, to retire from the world and find contentment in a good conscience? Where are those Stoic rules of yours that call on a man to die in harness?" Come now, do I really give you the impression that I advocate a life of inactivity? I have only buried myself away behind closed doors in order to be able to be of use to more people. With me no day is ever whiled away at ease. I claim a good part of my nights for study; I have no time for sleep: I just succumb to it, keeping my eyes at their work when they are heavy-lidded and exhausted from lack of rest. I have withdrawn from affairs as well as from society, and from my own affairs in particular: I am acting on behalf of later generations. I am writing down a few things that may be of use to them; I am committing to writing some helpful recommendations, which might be compared to the formula of successful medications, the effectiveness of which I have experienced in the case of my own sores, which may not have been completely cured but have at least ceased to spread. I am pointing out to others the right path, which I have recognized only late in life, when I am worn out with my wanderings. "Avoid," I cry, "whatever is approved of by the mob, and things that are the gift of chance. Whenever circumstance brings some welcome thing your way, stop in suspicion and alarm: wild animals and fish alike are taken in by this or that inviting prospect. Do you look on them as presents given to you by fortune? They are snares. Anyone among you who wishes to lead a secure life will do his very best to steer well wide of these baited bounties, which comprise yet another instance of the errors we miserable creatures fall into: we think these things are ours when in fact it is we who are caught. That track leads to precipices; life on that giddy level ends in a fall. Once, moreover, prosperity begins to carry us off course, we are no more capable even of bringing the ship to a standstill than of going down with the consolation that she has been held on her course, or of going down once and for all; fortune does not just capsize the boat: she hurls it headlong on the rocks and dashes it to pieces. Cling, therefore, to this sound and wholesome plan of life: indulge the body just so far as suffices for good health. It needs to be treated somewhat strictly to prevent it from being disobedient to the spirit. Your food should appease your hunger, your drink quench your thirst, your clothing keep out the cold, your house be a protection against inclement weather. It makes no difference whether it is built of turf or of

variegated marble imported from another country: what you have to understand is that thatch makes a person just as good a roof as gold does. Spurn everything that is added on by way of decoration and display by unnecessary labor. Reflect that nothing merits admiration except the spirit, the impressiveness of which prevents it from being impressed by anything."

If these are the things I'm saying to myself, if these are the things I'm saying to future generations, don't you think I'm doing more good than when I go into court to enter into a recognizance on someone's behalf, or stamp my seal on a will, or lend my assistance by word or action in the Senate to some candidate for office? Those who appear inactive are, believe me, engaged in far more important activity; they're dealing with matters divine and human at the same moment.

But the time has come to make an end, and in accordance with the practice I have started to make some disbursement on this letter's behalf. For this I shall not draw on my own resources. I'm still turning over the pages of Epicurus, and the following saying, one I read today, comes from him: "To win true freedom you must be a slave to philosophy." A person who surrenders and subjects themselves to her doesn't have his application deferred from day to day; they are emancipated on the spot, the very service of philosophy being freedom.

Quite possibly you'll be demanding to know why I'm quoting so many fine sayings from Epicurus rather than ones belonging to our own school. But why should you think of them as belonging to Epicurus and not as common property? Think how many poets say things that philosophers have said – or ought to have said! Not to mention the tragedians or our native Roman drama (which has a serious element in it as well and stands halfway between comedy and tragedy), think of the quantity of brilliant lines to be found lying about in farces alone! Think of the number of Publilius' verses that really ought to be spoken by actors wearing the tragic buskins instead of barefooted pantomime actors! I'll quote one verse of his which belongs to philosophy, and the same facet of philosophy that I was occupied with just now, a verse in which he proclaims that gifts which chance brings our way are not to be regarded as possessions:

If you pray a thing may

And it does come your way,

‘Tis a long way from being your own.

I recall your expressing the same idea a good deal more happily and succinctly: What fortune has made yours is not your own. And I can't pass over that even happier expression of yours: The boon that could be given can be withdrawn. (This being from your own stock, I'm not debiting it to your account!)



## LETTER XII

Whereever I turn I see fresh evidence of my old age. . . Well, we should cherish old age and enjoy it. It is full of pleasure if you know how to use it. Fruit tastes most delicious just when its season is ending. The charms of youth are at their greatest at the time of its passing. It is the final glass which pleases the inveterate drinker, the one that sets the crowning touch on their intoxication and sends them off into oblivion. Every pleasure defers till its last its greatest delights. The time of life which offers the greatest delight is the age that sees the downward movement – not the steep decline – already begun; and in my opinion, even the age that stands on the brink has pleasures of its own – or else the very fact of not experiencing the want of any pleasures takes their place. How nice it is to have outworn one's desires and left them behind!

"It's not very pleasant, though," you may say, "to have death right before one's eyes." To this I would say, firstly, that death ought to be right there before the eyes of a young person just as much as an old one – the order in which we each receive our summons is not determined by our precedence in the register – and, secondly, that no one is so very old that it would be quite unnatural for him to hope for one more day....

Every day, therefore, should be regulated as if it were the one that brings up the rear, the one that rounds out and completes our lives. Pacuvius, the man who acquired a right to Syria by prescription, was in the habit of conducting a memorial ceremony for himself with wine and funeral feasting of the kind we are familiar with, and then being carried on a bier from the dinner table to his bed, while a chanting to music went on of the words "He has lived, he has lived" in Greek, amid the applause of the young libertines present. Never a day passed but he celebrated his own funeral. What he did from discreditable motives we should do from honorable ones, saying in all joyfulness and cheerfulness as we retire to our beds,

"I have lived; I have completed now the course that fortune long ago allotted me.

If God adds the morrow we should accept it joyfully. The person who looks for the morrow without worrying over it knows a peaceful independence and a happiness beyond all others. Whoever has said "I have lived" receives a windfall every day they get up in the morning."

But I must close this letter now. "What!" you'll be saying. "Is it coming to me just as it is, without any parting contribution?" Don't worry, it's bringing you something. Why did I call it "something," though? It's a great deal. For what could be more splendid than the following saying which I'm entrusting to this letter of mine for delivery to you: "To live under constraint is a misfortune, but there is no constraint to live under constraint." Of course not, when on every side there are plenty of short and easy roads to freedom there for the taking. Let us thank God that no one can be held a prisoner in life – the very constraints can be trampled under foot.

"It was Epicurus who said that," you protest. "What business have you got with someone else's property?" Whatever is true is my property. And I shall persist in inflicting Epicurus on you, in order to bring it home to the people who take an oath of allegiance to someone and never afterwards consider what is being said but only who said it, that the things of greatest merit are common property.

## LETTER XV

Our ancestors had a custom, observed right down as far as my own lifetime, of adding to the opening words of a letter: "I trust this finds you as it leaves me, in good health." We have good reason to say: "I trust this finds you in pursuit of wisdom." For this is precisely what is meant by good health. Without wisdom the mind is sick, and the body itself, however physically powerful, can only have the kind of strength that is found in persons in a demented or delirious state. So this is the sort of healthiness you must make your principal concern. You must attend to the other sort as well, but see that it takes second place. It won't cost you any great trouble if good health is all you want. For it is silly, my dear Lucilius, and no way for an educated person to behave, to spend one's time exercising the biceps, broadening the neck and shoulders and developing the lungs. Even when the extra feeding has produced gratifying results and you've put on a lot of muscle, you'll never match the strength or the weight of a prize ox. The greater load, moreover, on the body is crushing to the spirit and renders it less active. So keep the body within bounds as much as you can and make room for the spirit. Devotees of physical culture have to put up with a lot of nuisances. There are the exercises, in the first place, the toil involved in which drains the vitality and renders it unfit for concentration or the more demanding sort of studies. Next there is the heavy feeding, which dulls mental acuteness. Then there is the taking on as coaches of the worst brand of slave, persons who divide their time between putting on lotion and putting down liquor, whose idea of a well spent day consists of getting up a good sweat and then replacing the fluid lost with plenty of drink, all the better to be absorbed on a dry stomach. Drinking and perspiring – it's the life of a dyspeptic! There are short and simple exercises which will tire the body without undue delay and save what needs especially close accounting for, time. There is running, swinging weights about and jumping – either high-jumping or long-jumping or the kind indulged in by the priests of Mars, if one may so describe it, or to be rather more disrespectful, by the laundress. Pick out any of these for ease and straightforwardness. But whatever you do, return from body to mind very soon. Exercise it day and night. Only a moderate amount of work is needed for it to thrive and develop. It is a form of exercise to which cold and heat and even old age are no obstacle. Cultivate an asset which the passing of time itself improves.

I'm not telling you to be always bent over book or writing-tablets. The mind has to be given some time off, but in such a way that it may be refreshed, not relaxed till it goes to pieces. Travelling in one's carriage shakes the body up and doesn't interfere with intellectual pursuits; you can read, dictate, speak, or listen – nor does walking, for that matter, preclude any of these activities. Nor need you look down on voice-training, though I will not have you practicing any of this ascending and then descending again by degrees through set scales – if you start that, you'll be going on to take lessons in walking! Once let into your house the sort of person that hunger teaches unheard-of occupations and you'll have someone regulating the way you walk and watching the way you use your jaws as you eat, and in fact going just as far as your patience and credulity lead his audacity on. Are you to conclude from what I've just said that your voice should start its exercises with immediate shouting at full force? The natural thing is to lead up to it through easy stages, so natural in fact that even persons involved in a quarrel begin in conversational tones: only later do they go on to rend the air. No one makes an impassioned appeal for "the help and support of all true men of Rome" at the very outset. ... Our purpose in all this is not to give the voice, exercise, but to make it give us exercise.

I have relieved you, then, of no little bother. To these favors there shall be added the following small contribution, a striking maxim that comes from Greece. Here it is: "The life of folly is empty of gratitude, full of anxiety: it is focused wholly on the future." "Who said that?" you ask. The same man as before. And what sort of life do you think is meant by "the life of folly"? Baba's and Isio's? No, he means our own life, precipitated by blind desire into activities that are likely to bring us harm and will certainly never bring us satisfaction – if they could ever satisfy us they would have done so by now – never thinking how pleasant it is to ask for nothing, how splendid it is to be complete and be independent of fortune. So continually remind yourself, Lucilius, of the many things you have achieved. When you look at all the people out in front of you, think of all the ones behind you. If you want to feel appreciative where the gods and your life are concerned, just think how many people you've outdone. Why be concerned about others, come to that, when you've outdone your own self? Set yourself a limit which you couldn't even exceed if you wanted to, and say good-bye at last to those deceptive prizes more precious to those who hope for them than to those who have won them. If there were anything substantial in them they would sooner or later bring a sense of fullness; as it is they simply aggravate the thirst of those who swallow them. Away with pomp and show; as for the uncertain lot that the future has in store for me, why should I demand from fortune that she should give me this and that rather than demand from myself that I should not ask for them? Why should I ask for them, after all? Am I to pile them up in total forgetfulness of the frailty of human existence? What is the purpose of my labors going to be? See, this day's my last – or maybe it isn't, but it's not so far away from it.

## LETTER XVI

It is clear to you, I know, Lucilius, that no one can lead a happy life, or even one that is bearable, without the pursuit of wisdom, and that the perfection of wisdom is what makes the happy life, although even the beginnings of wisdom make life bearable. Yet this conviction, clear as it is, needs to be strengthened and given deeper roots through daily reflection; making noble resolutions is not as important as keeping the resolutions you have made already. You have to persevere and fortify your pertinacity until the will to good becomes a disposition to good. So you needn't go in for all this long-winded protestation or say any more on the subject – I'm well aware that you've made a great deal of progress. I realize the feelings that prompt you to put these things in your letter, and there is no pretence or speciousness about them. But – to give you my honest opinion – at this stage, although I have great hopes of you, I do not yet feel quite confident about you. And I should like you to adopt the same attitude: you've no grounds for forming a ready, hasty belief in yourself. Carry out a searching analysis and close scrutiny of yourself in all sorts of different lights. Consider above all else whether you've advanced in philosophy or just in actual years.

Philosophy is not an occupation of a popular nature, nor is it pursued for the sake of self-advertisement. Its concern is not with words, but with facts. It is not carried on with the object of passing the day in an entertaining sort of way and taking the boredom out of leisure. It moulds and builds the personality, orders one's life, regulates one's conduct, shows one what one should do and what one should leave undone, sits at the helm, and keeps one on the correct course as one is tossed about in perilous seas. Without it no one can lead a life free of fear or worry. Every hour of the day countless situations arise that call for advice, and for that advice we have to look to philosophy.

Someone may say: "What help can philosophy be to me if there is such a thing as fate? What help can philosophy be if there is a deity controlling all? What help can it be if all is governed by chance? For it is impossible either to change what is already determined or to make preparations to meet what is undetermined; either, in the first case, my planning is forestalled by a God who decrees how I am to act, or, in the second case, it is fortune that allows me no freedom to plan." Whichever of these alternatives, Lucilius, is true – even if all of them are true – we still need to practice philosophy. Whether we are caught in the grasp of an inexorable law of fate, whether it is God who as lord of the universe has ordered all things, or whether the affairs of mankind are tossed and buffeted haphazardly by chance, it is philosophy that has the duty of protecting us. She will encourage us to submit to God with cheerfulness and to fortune with defiance; she will show you how to follow God and bear what chance may send you. But I mustn't pass on here to a discussion of the problem what is within our control if there is a governing providence, whether we are carried along enmeshed in a train of fated happenings, or whether we are at the mercy of the sudden and the unforeseeable. For the present I go back to the point where I was before, to advise and urge you not to allow your spiritual enthusiasm to cool off or fall away. Keep a hold on it and put it on a firm footing, so that what is at present an enthusiasm may become a settled spiritual disposition.

If I know you, you'll have been looking around from the very start of this letter to see what it's going to bring you by way of a little present. Search the letter and you'll find it. You needn't think my kindness all that remarkable: I am only being generous, still, with someone else's property. Why, though, do I call it someone else's? Whatever is well said by anyone belongs to me. Here is another saying of Epicurus: "If you shape your life according to nature, you will never be poor; if according to people's opinions, you will never be rich." Nature's wants are small, while those of opinion are limitless. Imagine that you've piled up all that a veritable host of rich men ever possessed, that fortune has carried you far beyond the bounds of wealth, so far as any private individual is concerned, building you a roof of gold and clothing you in royal purple, conducting you to such a height of opulence and luxury that you hide the earth with marble floors – putting you in a position not merely to own, but to walk all over treasures – throw in sculptures, paintings, all that has been produced at tremendous pains by all the arts to satisfy extravagance: all these things will only induce in you a craving for even bigger things. Natural desires are limited; those which spring from false opinions have nowhere to stop, for falsity has no point of termination. When a person is following a track, there is an eventual end to it somewhere, but with wandering at large there is no limit. So give up pointless, empty journeys, and whenever you want to know whether the desire aroused in you by something you are pursuing is natural or quite unseeing, ask yourself whether it is capable of coming to rest at any point; if after going a long way there is always something remaining farther away, be sure it is not something natural.

## LETTER XXVII

"So you're giving me advice, are you?" you say. "Have you already given yourself advice, then? Have you already put yourself straight? Is that how you come to have time for reforming other people?" No, I'm not so shameless as to set about treating people when I'm sick myself. I'm talking to you as if I were lying in the same hospital ward, about the illness we're both suffering from, and passing on some remedies. So listen to me as if I were speaking to myself. I'm allowing you access to my inmost self, calling you in to advise me as I have things out with myself. I proclaim to my own self: "Count your years and you'll be ashamed to be wanting and working for exactly the same things as you wanted when you were a boy. Of this one thing make sure against your dying day – that your faults die before you do. Have done with those unsettled pleasures, which cost one dear – they do one harm after they're past and gone, not merely when they're in prospect. Even when they're over, pleasures of a depraved nature are apt to carry feelings of dissatisfaction, in the same way as a criminal's anxiety doesn't end with the commission of the crime, even if it's undetected at the time. Such pleasures are insubstantial and unreliable; even if they don't do one any harm, they're fleeting in character. Look around for some enduring good instead. And nothing answers this description except what the spirit discovers for itself within itself. A good character is the only guarantee of everlasting, carefree happiness. Even if some obstacle to this comes on the scene, its appearance is only to be compared to that of clouds which drift in front of the sun without ever defeating its light.

How soon will you be fortunate enough to attain to this happiness? Well, you haven't been dragging your steps up till now, but your pace could be increased. There's a lot of work remaining to be done, and if you want to be successful you must devote all your waking hours and all your efforts to the task personally. This is not something that admits of delegation. It is a different branch of learning which has room for devilling. There was a rich man called Calvisius Sabinus, in my own lifetime, who had a freedman's brains along with a freedman's fortune. I have never seen greater vulgarity in a successful man. His memory was so bad that at one moment or another the names of Ulysses, or Achilles, or Priam, characters he knew as well as we knew our early teachers, would slip his memory. No doddering butler ever went through the introductions of a mass of callers committing quite such solecisms – not announcing people's names so much as foisting names on them – as Sabinus did with the Greek and Trojan heroes. But this didn't stop him wanting to appear a well-read man. And to this end he thought up the following short cut: he spent an enormous amount of money on slaves, one of them to know Homer by heart, another to know Hesiod, while he assigned one apiece to each of the nine lyric poets. That the cost was enormous is hardly surprising: not having found what he wanted in the market he had them made to order. After this collection of slaves had been procured for him, he began to give his dinner guests nightmares. He would have these fellows at his elbow so that he could continually be turning to them for quotations from these poets which he might repeat to the company, and then – it happened frequently – he would break down halfway through a word. Satellius Quadratus, who regarded stupid millionaires as fair game to be sponged off, and consequently also fair game for flattery, as well as – and this goes with the other two things – fair game for facetiousness at their expense, suggested to him that he should keep a team of scholars "to pick up the bits." On Sabinus' letting it be known that the slaves had set him back a hundred thousand sesterces apiece, he said: "Yes, for less than that you could have bought the same number of bookcases." Sabinus was none the less quite convinced that what anyone in his

household knew he knew personally. It was Satelliuss, again, who started urging Sabinus, a pale and skinny individual whose health was poor, to take up wrestling.

When Sabinus retorted: "How can I possibly do that? It's as much as I can do to stay alive," Satelliuss answered: "Now please, don't say that! Look how many slaves you've got in perfect physical condition!" A sound mind can neither be bought nor borrowed. And if it were for sale, I doubt whether it would find a buyer. And yet unsound ones are being purchased every day.

But let me pay you what I owe you and say goodbye. "Poverty brought into accord with the law of nature is wealth." Epicurus is constantly saying this in one way or another. But something that can never be learned too thoroughly can never be said too often. With some people you only need to point to a remedy; others need to have it rammed into them.

## LETTER XXVIII

Do you think you are the only person to have had this experience? Are you really surprised, as if it were something unprecedented, that so long a tour and such diversity of scene have not enabled you to throw off this melancholy and this feeling of depression? A change of character, not a change of air, is what you need. Though you cross the boundless ocean, though, to use the words of our poet Virgil, "Lands and towns are left astern." "whatever your destination you will be followed by your failings. Here is what Socrates said to someone who was making the same complaint: "How can you wonder your travels do you no good, when you carry yourself around with you? You are saddled with the very thing that drove you away." How can novelty of surroundings abroad and becoming acquainted with foreign scenes or cities be of any help? All that dashing about turns out to be quite futile. And if you want to know why all this running away cannot help you, the answer is simply this: you are running away in your own company. You have to lay aside the load on your spirit. Until you do that, nowhere will satisfy you. Imagine your present state as being like that of the prophetess whom our Virgil represents in a roused and excited state, largely taken over by a spirit not her own:

The Sibyl raves about as one possessed,  
In hopes she may dislodge the mighty god  
Within her bosom.

You rush hither and thither with the idea of dislodging a firmly seated weight when the very dashing about just adds to the trouble it causes you – like the cargo in a ship, which does not weigh her down unduly so long as it does not shift, but if it rolls more to one side than the other it is liable to carry the side on which it settles down into the water. Whatever you do is bad for you, the very movement in itself being harmful to you since you are in fact shaking up a sick man.

Once you have rid yourself of the affliction there, though, every change of scene will become a pleasure. You may be banished to the ends of the earth, and yet in whatever outlandish corner of the world you may find yourself stationed, you will find that place, whatever it may be like, a hospitable home. Where you arrive does not matter so much as what sort of person you are when you arrive there. We ought not, therefore, to give over our hearts for good to any one part of the world. We should live with the conviction: "I wasn't born for one particular corner: the whole world's my home country." If the truth of that were clear to you, you would not be surprised that the diversity of new surroundings for which, out of weariness of the old, you are

constantly heading fails to do you any good. Whichever you first came to would have satisfied you if you had believed you were at home in all. As it is, instead of travelling you are rambling and drifting, exchanging one place for another when the thing you are looking for, the good life, is available everywhere.

Could there be a scene of greater turmoil than the City? Yet even there, if need be, you are free to lead a life of peace. Given a free choice of posting, though, I should flee a long way from the vicinity, let alone the sight of the City. For in the same way as there are unpleasant climates which are trying even to the most robust constitutions, there are others which are none too wholesome for the mind, even though it be a sound one, when it is still in an imperfect state and building up its strength. I do not agree with those who recommend a stormy life and plunge straight into the breakers, waging a spirited struggle against wordly obstacles every day of their lives. The wise person will put up with these things, not go out of their way to meet them; they will prefer a state of peace to a state of war. It does not profit a person much to have managed to discard their own failings if they must ever be at loggerheads with other people's. "Socrates," they will tell you, "had the Thirty Tyrants standing over him and yet they could not break his spirit." What difference does it make how many masters a person has? Slavery is only one, and yet the person who refuses to let the thought of it affect them is a free person no matter how great the swarm of masters around them.

It is time I left off – not before I have paid the usual duty, though! "A consciousness of wrongdoing is the first step to salvation." This remark of Epicurus is to me a very good one. For a person who is not aware that they are doing anything wrong has no desire to be put right. You have to catch yourself doing it before you can reform. Some people boast about their failings: can you imagine someone who counts their faults as merits ever giving thought to their cure? So – to the best of your ability – demonstrate your own guilt, conduct inquiries of your own into all the evidence against yourself. Play the part first of prosecutor, then of judge and finally of pleader in mitigation. Be harsh with yourself at times.

## LETTER XXXIII

You feel that my present letters should be like my earlier ones and have odd sayings of leading Stoics appended to them.①

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This is why I look on people like this as a spiritless lot – the people who are forever acting as interpreters and never as creators, always lurking in someone else's shadow. They never venture to do for themselves the things they have spent such a long time learning. They exercise their memories on things that are not their own. It is one thing, however, to remember, another to know. To remember is to safeguard something entrusted to your memory, whereas to know, by contrast, is actually to make each item your own, and not to be dependent on some