

THE EPISTLES OF SENECA

velut levia tela laxo sinu eludit, quaedam discutit et in eum usque, qui miserat, respuit. VALE.

LIIII.

SENECA LVCILIO SVO SALVTEM

- 1 Longum mihi commeatum¹ dederat mala validudo; repente me invasit. "Quo genere?" inquis. Prorsus merito interrogas; adeo nullum mihi ignotum est. Uni tamen morbo quasi adsignatus sum, quem quare Graeco nomine appellem nescio; satis enim apte dici suspirium potest. Brevis autem valde et procellae similis est impetus; intra horam fere desinit.
- 2 Quis enim diu exspirat? Omnia corporis aut incommoda aut pericula per me transierunt; nullum mihi videtur molestius. Quidni? Aliud enim quicquid est, aegrotare est, hoc animam egerere. Itaque medici hanc "meditationem mortis" vocant. Faciet² enim aliquando spiritus ille, quod saepe conatus est.
- 3 Hilarem me putas haec tibi scribere, quia effugi? Tam ridicule facio, si hoc fine quasi bona validudine delector, quam ille, quisquis vicisse se putat, cum vadimonium distulit. Ego vero et in ipsa suffocatione non desii cogitationibus laetis ac fortibus adquiescere.
- 4 "Quid hoc est?" inquam. "Tam saepe mors

¹ *commeatum* Lipsius; *comitatum* MSS.

² *faciet* Lipsius; *facit* MSS.

^a *i. e.*, asthma. Seneca thinks that the Latin name is good enough.

^b Celsus (iv. 8) gives this disease as the second of those which deal with the respiratory organs: *cum vehementior est, ut spirare aeger sine sono et anhelatione non possit.*

EPISTLES LIII., LIV.

off with the loose folds of her gown, as if they had no power to harm; others she dashes aside, and hurls them back with such force that they recoil upon the sender. Farewell.

LIV. ON ASTHMA AND DEATH

My ill-health had allowed me a long furlough, when suddenly it resumed the attack. "What kind of ill-health?" you say. And you surely have a right to ask; for it is true that no kind is unknown to me. But I have been consigned, so to speak, to one special ailment. I do not know why I should call it by its Greek name^a; for it is well enough described as "shortness of breath." Its attack is of very brief duration, like that of a squall at sea; it usually ends within an hour. Who indeed could breathe his last for long? I have passed through all the ills and dangers of the flesh; but nothing seems to me more troublesome than this. And naturally so; for anything else may be called illness; but this is a sort of continued "last gasp."^b Hence physicians call it "practising how to die." For some day the breath will succeed in doing what it has so often essayed. Do you think I am writing this letter in a merry spirit, just because I have escaped? It would be absurd to take delight in such supposed restoration to health, as it would be for a defendant to imagine that he had won his case when he had succeeded in postponing his trial. Yet in the midst of my difficult breathing I never ceased to rest secure in cheerful and brave thoughts.

"What?" I say to myself; "does death so often

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experitur me? Faciat; ego¹ illam diu expertus sum." "Quando?" inquis. Antequam nascerer. Mors est non esse; id quale sit, iam scio. Hoc erit post me, quod ante me fuit. Si quid in hac re tormenti est, necesse est et fuisse, antequam prodiremus in lucem; atqui nullam sensimus tunc
 5 vexationem. Rogo, non stultissimum dicas, si quis existimet lucernae peius esse, cum extincta est, quam antequam accenditur? Nos quoque et extinguimur et accendimur; medio illo tempore aliquid patimur, utrimque vero alta securitas est. In hoc enim, mi Lucili, nisi fallor, erramus, quod mortem iudicamus sequi, cum illa et praecesserit et secutura sit. Quicquid ante nos fuit, mors est. Quid enim refert, non incipias an desinas, cum utriusque rei hic sit effectus, non esse?

6 His et eiusmodi exhortationibus, tacitis scilicet, nam verbis locus non erat, adloqui me non desii. Deinde paulatim suspirium illud, quod esse iam anhelitus coeperat, intervalla maiora fecit et retardatum est ac remansit. Nec adhuc, quamvis desierit, ex natura fluit spiritus; sentio haesitationem quandam eius et moram. Quomodo volet, dummodo non ex
 7 animo suspirem. Hoc tibi de me recipe; non trepidabo ad extrema, iam praeparatus sum, nihil cogito de die toto. Illum tu lauda et imitare, quem

¹ Before *ego* the MSS. read *at*; Gertz removed it from the text.

^a *i. e.*, that the sigh be physical,—an asthmatic gasp,—and not caused by anguish of soul.

^b The argument is: I am ready to die, but do not praise me on that account; reserve your praise for him who is not loth to die, though (unlike me) he finds it a pleasure to live (because he is in good health). Yes, for there is no more virtue in accepting death when one hates life, than there is in leaving a place when one is ejected.

EPISTLE LIV.

test me? Let it do so; I myself have for a long time tested death." "When?" you ask. Before I was born. Death is non-existence, and I know already what that means. What was before me will happen again after me. If there is any suffering in this state, there must have been such suffering also in the past, before we entered the light of day. As a matter of fact, however, we felt no discomfort then. And I ask you, would you not say that one was the greatest of fools who believed that a lamp was worse off when it was extinguished than before it was lighted? We mortals also are lighted and extinguished; the period of suffering comes in between, but on either side there is a deep peace. For, unless I am very much mistaken, my dear Lucilius, we go astray in thinking that death only follows, when in reality it has both preceded us and will in turn follow us. Whatever condition existed before our birth, is death. For what does it matter whether you do not begin at all, or whether you leave off, inasmuch as the result of both these states is non-existence?

I have never ceased to encourage myself with cheering counsels of this kind, silently, of course, since I had not the power to speak; then little by little this shortness of breath, already reduced to a sort of panting, came on at greater intervals, and then slowed down and finally stopped. Even by this time, although the gasping has ceased, the breath does not come and go normally; I still feel a sort of hesitation and delay in breathing. Let it be as it pleases, provided there be no sigh from the soul.^a Accept this assurance from me: I shall never be frightened when the last hour comes; I am already prepared and do not plan a whole day ahead. But do you praise ^b and imitate the man whom it does not

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non piget mori, cum iuuet vivere. Quae est enim virtus cum eiciaris exire? Tamen est et hic virtus; eicior quidem, sed tanquam exeam. Et ideo nunquam eicitur sapiens, quia eici est inde expelli, unde invitus recedas; nihil invitus facit sapiens, necessitatem effugit, quia vult quod coactura est. VALE.

LV.

SENECA LVCILIO SVO SALVTEM

1 A gestatione cum maxime venio non minus fatigatus, quam si tantum ambulassem, quantum sedi. Labor est enim et diu ferri, ac nescio an eo maior, quia contra naturam est, quae pedes dedit, ut per nos ambulemus, oculos, ut per nos videremus. Debilitatem nobis indixere deliciae, et quod diu nolimus, posse desimus. Mihi tamen necessarium erat concutere corpus, ut sive bilis insederat faucibus, discuteretur, sive ipse ex aliqua causa spiritus densior erat, extenuaret illum iactatio, quam profuisse mihi sensi. Ideo diutius vehi perseveravi invitante ipso litore, quod inter Cumas et Servili Vataiae villam curvatur et hinc mari, illinc lacu velut angustum iter cluditur. Erat enim a recenti tempestate spis-

^a Cumae was on the coast about six miles north of Cape Misenum. Lake Acheron (see § 6) was a salt-water pool between those two points, separated from the sea by a sandbar; it lay near Lake Avernus and probably derived its name from that fact. The Vatia mentioned here is unknown; he must not be confused with Isauricus.

EPISTLES LIV., LV.

irk to die, though he takes pleasure in living. For what virtue is there in going away when you are thrust out? And yet there is virtue even in this: I am indeed thrust out, but it is as if I were going away willingly. For that reason the wise man can never be thrust out, because that would mean removal from a place which he was unwilling to leave; and the wise man does nothing unwillingly. He escapes necessity, because he wills to do what necessity is about to force upon him. Farewell.

LV. ON VATIA'S VILLA

I have just returned from a ride in my litter; and I am as weary as if I had walked the distance, instead of being seated. Even to be carried for any length of time is hard work, perhaps all the more so because it is an unnatural exercise; for Nature gave us legs with which to do our own walking, and eyes with which to do our own seeing. Our luxuries have condemned us to weakness; we have ceased to be able to do that which we have long declined to do. Nevertheless, I found it necessary to give my body a shaking up, in order that the bile which had gathered in my throat, if that was my trouble, might be shaken out, or, if the very breath within me had become, for some reason, too thick, that the jolting, which I have felt was a good thing for me, might make it thinner. So I insisted on being carried longer than usual, along an attractive beach, which bends between Cumae and Servilius Vatia's country-house,^a shut in by the sea on one side and the lake on the other, just like a narrow path. It was packed firm under foot, because of a recent

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