

**Box. Moral Letters to Luccilius. Letter 50: On our Blindness and its Cure**<sup>11</sup>. The letter constitutes a warning: we are all blind, and we should continuously examine our souls and fight evil within it. Sections 2 and 3 refer directly to Harpaste and her bemoaned blindness and are also presented in Latin.

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**1.** I received your letter many months after you had posted it; accordingly, I thought it useless to ask the carrier what you were busied with. He must have a particularly good memory if he can remember that! But I hope by this time you are living in such a way that I can be sure what it is you are busied with, no matter where you may be. For what else are you busied with except improving yourself every day, laying aside some error, and coming to understand that the faults which you attribute to circumstances are in yourself? We are indeed apt to ascribe certain faults to the place or to the time; but those faults will follow us, no matter how we change our place. **2.** You know Harpaste, my wife's female clown; she has remained in my house, a burden incurred from a legacy. I particularly disapprove of these freaks; whenever I wish to enjoy the quips of a clown, I am not compelled to hunt far; I can laugh at myself. Now this clown suddenly became blind. The story sounds incredible, but I assure you that it is true: she does not know that she is blind. She keeps asking her attendant to change her quarters; she says that her apartments are too dark. **3.** You can see clearly that that which makes us smile in the case of Harpaste happens to all the rest of us; nobody understands that he is himself greedy, or that he is covetous. Yet the blind ask for a guide, while we wander without one, saying: "I am not self-seeking; but one cannot live at Rome in any other way. I am not extravagant, but mere living in the city demands a great outlay. It is not my fault that I have a choleric disposition, or that I have not settled down to any definite scheme of life; it is due to my youth." **4.** Why do we deceive ourselves? The evil that afflicts us is not external, it is within us, situated in our very vitals; for that reason we attain soundness with all the more difficulty, because we do not know that we are diseased. Suppose that we have begun the cure; when shall we throw off all these diseases, with all their virulence? At present, we do not even consult the physician, whose work would be easier if he were called in when the complaint was in its early stages. The tender and the inexperienced minds would follow his advice if he pointed out the right way. **5.** No man finds it difficult to return to nature, except the man who has deserted nature. We blush to receive instruction in sound sense; but, by Heaven, if we think it base to seek a teacher of this art, we should also abandon any hope that so great a good could be instilled into us by mere chance. No, we must work. To tell the truth, even the work is not great, if only, as I said, we begin to mould and reconstruct our souls before they are hardened by sin. But I do not despair even of a hardened sinner. **6.** There is nothing that will not surrender to persistent treatment, to concentrated and careful attention; however much the timber may be bent, you can make it straight again. Heat unbends curved beams, and wood that grew naturally in another shape is fashioned artificially according to our needs. How much more easily does the soul permit itself to be shaped, pliable as it is and more yielding than any liquid! For what else is the soul than air in a certain state? And you see that air is more adaptable than any other matter, in proportion as it is rarer than any other. **7.** There is nothing, Lucilius, to hinder you from entertaining good hopes about us, just because we are even now in the grip of evil, or because we have long been possessed thereby. There is no man to whom a good mind comes before an evil one. It is the evil mind that

gets first hold on all of us. Learning virtue means unlearning vice. **8.** We should therefore proceed to the task of freeing ourselves from faults with all the more courage because, when once committed to us, the good is an everlasting possession; virtue is not unlearned. For opposites find difficulty in clinging where they do not belong, therefore they can be driven out and hustled away; but qualities that come to a place which is rightfully theirs abide faithfully. Virtue is according to nature; vice is opposed to it and hostile. **9.** But although virtues, when admitted, cannot depart and are easy to guard, yet the first steps in the approach to them are toilsome, because it is characteristic of a weak and diseased mind to fear that which is unfamiliar. The mind must, therefore, be forced to make a beginning; from then on, the medicine is not bitter; for just as soon as it is curing us it begins to give pleasure. One enjoys other cures only after health is restored, but a draught of philosophy is at the same moment wholesome and pleasant. Farewell.

*2 Harpasten, uxoris meae fatuam, scis hereditarium onus in domo mea remansisse. Ipse enim aversissimus I ab istis prodigiis sum ; si quando fatuo delectari volo, non est mihi longe quaerendus; me rideo. Haec fatua subito desiit videre. Incredibilem rem tibi narro, sed veram : nescit esse se caecam. Subinde paedagogum suum rogat ut migret. Ait domum tenebricosam esse. 3 Hoc quod in illa ridemus, omnibus nobis accidere liqueat tibi ; nemo se avarum esse intellegit, nemo cupidum. Caeci tamen ducem quaerunt, nos sine 1 aversissimus Agricola; avarissimus duce erramus et dicimus: " Non ego ambitiosus sunij sed nemo aliter Romae potest vivere. Non ego sumptuosus sum, sed urbs ipsa magnas inpensas exigit. Non est meum vitium, quod iracundus sum, quod non- dum constitui certum genus vitae ; adulescentia haec facit."*