Francesco Petrarca

Rerum familiarium libri
I–VIII

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To Claudià
To Giovanni Colonna of the Order of Preachers, that one must love not sects but the truth, and concerning the remarkable places in the city of Rome.

We used to walk widely by ourselves throughout Rome, and you are indeed acquainted with my peripatetic habit. I enjoy it very much and find it most appropriate to my nature and personal habits. Of the opinions of the Peripatetics certain ones please me, others hardly at all, for I do not love sects but the truth. Therefore I am at one time a Peripatetic, and at another a Stoic and sometimes an Academic. Often however I am none of these, especially at those times when something suspect appears in their writings which is opposed to our true and blessed faith. For we are permitted to love and approve philosophical schools if they are not opposed to the truth, and if they do not turn us from our primary purpose. When by chance they attempt this, whether it be Plato or Aristotle or Varro or Cicero, they are all to be disdained and trampled upon freely and steadily. Let no sharpness of dispute, no mildness of words, no authority of names affect us. They were men, and to the extent that they could accomplish this through human curiosity, they had both knowledge of things and clarity of expression and were fortunate in natural genius. But they were wretched in their lack of the knowledge of the highest and ineffable good, and like those who trust their own strength and do not desire the true light, they often stumbled over an immovable stone in the manner of the blind. Therefore let us admire their genius in such a way that we venerate the author of such genius; let us have compassion for their errors as we rejoice in our grace; and let us realize that without any merit we have been honored and have been raised above the greatest thinkers by Him who deemed worthy of revealing to children what he had hidden from the wise. In short let us philosophize in a manner which the very name of philosophy suggests, for the love of wisdom. Indeed the true wisdom of God is Christ: so that in order to philosophize rightly we must first love and cherish Him. Let us be such in all things that above all things we may be Christians. Let us thus read philosophical, poetic, or historical writings so that the Gospel of Christ resounds always in the ear of our heart. With it alone are we sufficiently happy and learned; without it no matter how much we learn we become more ignorant and more wretched. To it all things must be referred as if to the loftiest stronghold of the truth, on it as if on a single immovable foundation of literary truths, human labor can safely build. And we must not restrain ourselves from diligently cultivating other teachings which are not contrary to it, for although the returns may be limited in so far as any real accomplishment is concerned, we shall appear to have added a considerable measure to the enjoyment of the mind and the cultivation of life. I have said these things at random as far as they seem to befit a letter of this type. Now I shall proceed.

We used to wander together in that great city which, though it appeared empty because of its vast size, had a huge population. And we would wander not only in the city itself but around it, and at each step there was present something which would excite our tongue and mind: here was the palace of Evander, there the shrine of Carmentis, here the cave of Cacus, there the famous she-wolf and the fig tree of Rumina with the more apt surname of Romulus, there the overpass of Remus, here the circus games and the rape of the Sabines, there the marsh of Capri and the place where Romulus vanished, here the conversations of Numa and Egeria, there the battle line of the trigemini. Here the conqueror of enemies who was in turn conquered by a thunderbolt, and the builder of the militia; there the architect king Ancus Martius; here the organizer of social classes, Priscus Tarquinius, lived; there the head of Servius glowed; there sitting in her carriage cruel Tullia crossed and made the street infamous because of her crime. Here however is Via Sacra, while over there are the Esquiline Hill, the Viminal, the Quirinal; here the Campus Celsus, there the Campus Martius and the poppies cut down by the hand of the proud one. Here one can still see the wretched Lucretia lying upon her sword and the adulterer fleeing his death, as well as Brutus the defender of violated chastity. There is threatening Porcina and the Etruscan Army, and Mutius beset by his erring right hand, and the son of the ty-
man competing with liberty, and the Consul pursuing (to hell itself) the enemy expelled from the city; and the Sublician bridge broken behind the brave man, and Horatius swimming, and Cloelia returning on the Tiber. There may be seen the house of Publicola which was fruitlessly suspected; here Quintius used to plow until through his merit the plowman was made dictator; from here Serranus was led away to become Consul. This is the Janiculum, this is the Aventine, that is Monte Sacro, on which the angered plebians withdrew from the rulers; here the lustful tribunal of Appius stood, and Virginia was rescued from violence by the sword of her father, and there occurred a worthy end to the dissipation of the Decemvirs. From here Coriolanus, who was perhaps about to triumph with his arms, departed after having been conquered by the devotion of his supporters. This is the rock that Manlius defended and then fell from; here Camillus repelled the Gauls as they gaped at the unexpected gold and taught the despairing citizens how to recover a lost fatherland with a sword and not with gold. Here armed Curtius descended; there was found underground the head of a man with an immoveable face which was viewed as a prediction of the highest and firmest form of empire. There a deceitful Virgin fell under arms after having been deceived by her own deceits; here is the Tarpeian fortress, and the wealth of the Roman people collected throughout the world; here is the silver goose; there is Janus the guardian of arms; here is the temple of Jupiter Feretrius; this was the temple of Jupiter, this was the home of all the triumphs; here Porsus was brought, from here Hannibal was driven away, here Jugurtha was destroyed as some believe, others indeed believe that he was slain in prison. Here Caesar triumphed, here he perished. In this temple Augustus viewed the prostrate kings and the whole world at his feet; here is the arch of Pompey, here is the portico, here is the Cimbrian arch of Marius. There is Trajan's Column where he alone of all the emperors, according to Eusebius, is buried inside the city; here is his bridge which eventually assumed the name of St. Peter, and Hadrian's fortress, under which he also lies buried and which they call Castel Sant'Angelo. This is that massive rock surmounted by two bronze lions which was sacred to the deified emperors, and whose summit, rumor has it, rest the bones of Julius Caesar. This is the shrine to the goddess Tellure, this is the temple of Fortune, this is the temple of Peace, which was rightly destroyed at the arrival of the King of Peace; this is the work of Agrippa taken from the false gods to be dedicated to the mother of the true God. Here is where it snowed on the fifth of August; from here a stream of oil flowed into the Tiber; from here, according to tradition, the old Augustus, following the Sibyl's advice, saw the Christ child. This is the insolence of Nero and his raging extravagance in the buildings he raised; there is the house of Augustus, on Via Flaminia, where some maintain is the tomb of the Emperor himself; this is the Column of Antoninus; this is the palace of Appius; this is the Septizonium of Severus Afrus which you call the temple of the sun but whose name I find in the form I use written in history. On these stones still survives after so many centuries the great rivalry in talent and skill between Praxiteles and Phidas; here Christ appeared to his fleeing Vicar; here Peter was crucified; there Paul was beheaded; here Lawrence was burned, who after being buried here, was succeeded by Stephen. Here John scorned the burning oil; there Agnes after her death came back to life and forbade her kin to weep; here Sylvester hid; there Constantine got rid of his leprosy; there Calixtus mounted his glorious bier. But where shall I end? Can I really describe everything in this short letter? Indeed, if I could, it would not be proper; you know all these things not because you are a Roman citizen but because since your youth you have been intensely curious especially about such information. For today who are more ignorant about Roman affairs than the Roman citizens? Sadly do I say that nowhere is Rome less known than in Rome. I do not deplore only the ignorance involved (although what is worse than ignorance?) but the disappearance and exile of many virtues. For who can doubt that Rome would rise again instantly if she began to know herself? But this is a complaint to be dealt with at another time.

We used to stop often at the baths of Diocletian after the weariness which ceaseless walking about that city had pro-
duced in us, and indeed we would often ascend to the roof of that building, once a home, because only there could we enjoy the healthy air, the unimpeded view, silence and desired solitude. There we did not discuss business, household problems or public affairs of which we had previously sufficiently burdened ourselves. And as in our travels through the remains of a broken city, there too, as we sat, the remnants of the ruins lay before our eyes. What else may be said? Our conversation was concerned largely with history which we seemed to have divided among us, I being more expert, it seemed, in the ancient, by which we meant the time before the Roman rulers celebrated and venerated the name of Christ, and you in recent times, by which we meant the time from then to the present. We also spoke much about that part of philosophy which deals with morals, whence it gets its name; and sometimes indeed we discussed the arts and their authors and rules. Thus once when we had entered into this latter subject you asked me to explain clearly where I thought the liberal arts and the mechanical arts had their beginning because you had from time to time heard me talk on the subject. I responded quite simply because the hour, the absence of trivial cares, and the very place encouraged me to go into the subject at some length, and because your attentiveness suggested that the subject was indeed pleasing to you. I assured you, however, that I would say nothing new, nothing that was really mine, and yet nothing that was essentially borrowed, far from whatever source we learn anything it is ours unless by chance forgetfulness takes it from us. You request now that what I said that day I repeat and commit to a letter. I confess that I did say many things which I can only repeat with different words. Give me back that place, that idle mood, that day, that attention of yours, that particular vein of my talent and I could do what I did then. But all things are changed: the place is not present, the day has passed, the idle mood is gone, and instead of your face I look upon silent words, my spirit is impeded by the din of the business matters I have left behind, matters which until recently roared in my ears, although I fled as soon as I could in order to answer you more freely. I shall, however, obey as best I can. I could send you

some ancient and modern writers from whom you can

meet what you seek; but you made provisions for me not to

tell you when you asked that I say whatever I have to say on

the subject in my own words because, as you observed, every-

thing I say appears most pleasing and clear to you. I thank

you for this opinion whether it is really true or whether you

believe it by way of stimulating my mind. Here is then what I

did at that time, perhaps with the words of others but cer-

tainly the same thoughts. But really, what are we doing? The

subject is clearly not a small one, this letter is already too

long, and we have not yet started, though the end of this day

is at hand. Would it not be a good idea for me to give some

to my fingers and to your eyes? Let us put off what re-

mains until another day; let us divide the labor and the letter,

and let us not cover two very different matters in the same

letter. But what do I have in mind? What am I promising you

when I say another letter tomorrow? This is neither the work

of a single day nor a task for letters; it requires a book which

I shall undertake (if I am not impeded and frustrated by ma-

jor cares) when fortune returns me to my solitude. Only there

and not elsewhere am I myself; there lies my pen which at

present rebels everywhere I go and refuses my orders because

I am preoccupied with burdensome matters. Thus, while it

is constantly busy when I have plenty of leisure, it prefers to

have leisure when I have much to do, and almost like a

wicked and insolent servant, it seems to convert the fervor

of the master into its own desire for rest. However, as soon

as I get back home I shall compel it to take on its duties and

I shall write about what you seek in a separate book, indicat-

ing what has been written by others and what are my own

ideas. Indeed just as I am accustomed to writing these friendly

letters almost as amusement in the very midst of conversations

and bustle, in the same way I have need of solitary quiet and

pleasant leisure and great and uninterrupted silence in order to

write books. Farewell.

30 November, in transit.