

More's Letter to John Colet, c. 1504

London

10 November 1504

I was walking up and down the law courts when your servant met me. I was delighted at seeing him, both because I have always been fond of him, and still more because I thought he had not come [to London] without you. But when I learnt, not only that you had not returned, but were not to return for a considerable time, I was as greatly dejected. What can be more distressing to me than to be deprived of your most dear society, after being guided by your wise counsels, cheered by your charming familiarity, assured by your earnest sermons, and helped forward by your example, so that I used to obey your very look or nod? With these helps I felt myself strengthened, but without them I seem to languish. Following your guidance, I had escaped almost from the jaws of hell; now, like Euridice, I know not by what force I am being drawn back into darkness. Euridice, however, suffered this violence because of the presence of Orpheus; I, because of your absence. What is there in the city to incite to virtue? On the contrary, when one wishes to live well, by a thousand devices and seductions the life of a city drags one down. False love and flattery on the one side; on the other, hatreds and quarrels and legal wranglings. One sees nothing but butchers, fishmongers, cooks, confectioners, fishermen, fowlers, ministering to the appetites of body, and to the world and its prince, the devil. Why, the very houses intercept a great part of the light, and prevent one seeing the heavens. It is not the horizon that bounds the prospects, but the roofs of the houses. So I do not blame you that you are not yet tired of the country, where you see the simple country folk, ignorant of city tricks; and, wherever you turn your eyes, the beautiful landscape refreshes, the fresh air exhilarates, and the sight of heaven delights you. You see nothing but the kind gifts of nature, and the holy impressions of innocence. Still, I would not have you so captivated by these charms as not to hasten back to us as soon as possible. For if you dislike the town, yet your country parish of Stepney, for which also you must be solicitous, will afford you as many attractions as the place where you now are; and from thence you can now and then pass into the city, where you will find a great field of merit. In the country, men are, of their own nature, harmless—or, at least, not involved in such enormous crimes—so that the hand of an ordinary physician will suffice for them; whereas, in the city, both on account of the multitude of the diseases and their inveteracy, no physician but the most skilled can do any good.

There come sometimes into the pulpit of St. Paul's some who promise health; yet, when they seem to have preached beautifully, their life is so contrary to their words that they irritate our wounds rather than cure them. For they cannot persuade us to believe them fit to have the cure of other men's diseases entrusted to them when they are themselves more sick than any. No; we get angry, and refuse to allow our wounds to be touched by those whose own wounds are ulcers. But if, as naturalists affirm, the physician in whom the patient has perfect confidence is the one likely to cure, there is no doubt that there is no one more fit than yourself to undertake the cure of this whole city. How ready all are to put themselves in your hands—to trust and obey you—you have already found by experience, and at the present time their longing and eager desire proves.

Come, then, my dear Colet, even for the sake of your Stepney, which laments your long absence as an infant does its mother's; come for the sake of [London] your native place, which merits your care no less than do your parents. Lastly, though this is but a feeble motive, let your regard for me move you, since I have given myself entirely to you, and am awaiting your return full of solicitude. Meanwhile I shall pass my time with Grocyn, Linacre and our friend Lilly: the first of whom is, as you know, the only director of my life in your absence; the second, the master of my studies; the third, my most dear companion. Farewell, and continue to love me as you do.

Thomas More

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