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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to the same

To follow the thought of my last letter, here is more or less what a fairly sensible European said to me the other day.

The worst choice the princes of Asia could make is to hide as they are doing. They want to make themselves more respectable ; but they make royalty respected and not the king, and attach the mind of the subjects to a certain throne and not to a certain person.

This invisible authority that governs is always the same for the people. Although ten kings, which they know only by name, have slit each others' throats one after the other, they are aware of no difference ; it is as if they have been governed successively by spirits.

If the contemptible parricide [1] of our great king Henri IV [2] had stabbed an Indian king, master of the royal seal and an immense treasure that would have seemed to be amassed for him, he would have tranquilly taken up the reins of the empire without a single man thinking of calling for his king, his family and his children.

People marvel that there is almost never any change in the government of Oriental princes ; and why is that, if not because it is tyrannical and horrible ?

Changes can only come about through the prince or the people ; but there, the princes are not about to make any, because at such a high level of authority they have all they can ; if they changed something, it could only be to their prejudice.

As for the subjects, if one of them conceives some resolution, he cannot possibly carry it out against the state ; he would have to counter all at once a formidable and always single authority ; he has neither the time nor the means. But he has only to go to the source of that power, and needs only one hand and one instant.

The murderer mounts the throne while the monarch descends from it, falls, and expires at his feet. [3]

A malcontent in Europe thinks to maintain some secret informants, mix with the enemies, seize some stronghold, provoke some vain murmurs among the subjects.

A malcontent in Asia goes straight to the prince, surprises, strikes, overthrows ; he obliterates the very thought of him : in a moment the slave and the master, in a moment usurper and legitimate.

Woe be the king who has but one head ; he seems to accumulate all his authority on it only to indicate to the first volunteer the spot where he will find it all.

Paris this 17th day of the moon of Rebiab II, 1717

[1] *Parricide* was a frequent synonym for *régicide*.

[2] Ravailac (1610).

[3] See letter 78 : letters from Isfahan dated 30 June 1719 announce the *coup d'état* in India and the assassination of the Great Mogul. See also Antoine Galland, *La Mort du sultan Osman, ou le rétablissement de Mustapha sur le trône* (Paris, 1678).