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*Rica to ****

All religions are hard put when it comes to giving an idea of the pleasures that are in store for those who have lived right. The evil are easily frightened by a long list of punishments they are threatened with ; but for virtuous people no one knows what to promise them. It seems it is the nature of pleasures to be of short duration ; the imagination finds it difficult to represent others.

I have seen descriptions of paradise that could make everyone of good sense relinquish it. Some have these happy shades playing the flute unceasingly ; others condemn them to the torture of walking around forever [1] ; still others, who have them dreaming up yonder of mistresses here below, have not believed that a hundred million years was a long enough time to end their attraction for such amorous anxieties.

I remember in this regard a story I heard told by a man who had been in the land of the Mogul ; it shows that Indian priests are not less sterile than others in the notions they have of the pleasures of paradise.

A woman who had just lost her husband came ceremoniously to the governor of the city to ask permission to burn herself ; but as they try their best in countries under Muhammadan rule to abolish that cruel custom, he absolutely refused.

When she saw that her prayers were powerless, she threw herself into a furious fit. You see, she said, how restricted we are : a poor woman will not even be allowed to burn herself when she wants to ! Have you ever seen the like ? My mother, my aunt, and my sisters have burned themselves ; and when I go to ask permission of this cursed governor, he gets angry, and starts to yell like a madman.

By chance there was a young bonze present. Infidel, the governor said to him, was it you to put this madness into this woman's mind ? No, he said, I have never spoken to her ; but if she takes my advice, she will consummate her sacrifice : she will commit an act agreeable to the god Brama, and she will be well rewarded for it, for she will be reunited with her husband in the next world, and begin with him a second marriage. [2] What is that ? said the woman, surprised ; I will be reunited with my husband ? Oh, I am not burning myself. He was jealous, morose, and besides so old that if the god Brama has not transformed him in some way, he surely has no need of me. Burn myself for him ?... not even the tips of my fingers to withdraw him from the depths of hell. Two old bonzes who induced me, and who knew what life with him was like for me, were careful not to tell me everything. But if that is the only present the god Brama has for me, I relinquish that beatitude : Mr Governor, I am becoming a Muhammadan. And as for you, she said, looking at the bonze, you may, if you wish, go tell my husband that I am doing very well indeed.

Paris this 2nd day of the moon of Chalval 1718

[1] In Greco-Roman antiquity, that is the fate of shades, who drearily roam the Elysian Fields.

Letter 120

[↩](#) This anecdote sets up the story that will be related in letter 135.