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*Rica to ****

In this letter I will tell you about a certain nation that is called newsmongers, who assemble in a magnificent garden where their idleness [1] is ever occupied. They are quite useless to the state, and fifty years of their discoursing has had no different an effect than an equally long silence would have produced ; nevertheless they believe themselves considerable because they discuss magnificent projects and deal with important interests.

The basis of their conversations is a frivolous and silly curiosity. There is no study so secret that they do not pretend to get inside it ; they would never consent not to know something. They know how many wives our august sultan has, and how many children he begets each year ; and though they spend nothing on spies, they are informed of the measures he takes to humiliate the Turkish and Mogul emperors.

Scarcely have they exhausted the present than they rush into the future, and going to meet Providence, they anticipate it with regard to all human actions. They lead a general by the hand ; and after praising him for a thousand stupid mistakes he has not made, they prepare a thousand more for him that he will not make.

They make armies fly like cranes, and make walls fall like cardboard ; they have bridges over every river, secret paths in all the mountains, immense storehouses in burning sands ; the only thing they lack is common sense.

There is a man with whom I am lodging, who received this letter from a newsmonger ; since it appeared singular to me, I kept it. Here it is :

MONSIEUR,

I am rarely mistaken in my conjectures about current events. On the first of January 1711 I predicted that the emperor Joseph would die in the course of the year. It is true that, since he was in excellent health, I feared I would be mocked if I expressed myself in a very clear manner, for which reason I used somewhat enigmatic terms ; but people who can reason knew what I meant. On the 17th of April of that same year he died of smallpox. [2]

As soon as war was declared between the emperor and the Turks, I sought out all of our men in every corner of the Tuileries ; I assembled them near the basin, and predicted to them that we would besiege Belgrade and that it would be taken. I was fortunate enough for my prediction to come true. It is true that toward the middle of the siege I wagered a hundred pistoles that it would be taken the 18th of August [3] ; it was not taken until the next day [4] : can one lose such a good bet ?

When I saw that the Spanish fleet was disembarking in Sardinia, I figured it would conquer it ; I said so, and it turned out to be true. [5] Emboldened by this success, I added that this victorious fleet would go land at Finale to conquer the duchy of Milan. As I found resistance to getting this thought accepted, I wanted to maintain it gloriously : I wagered fifty pistoles, and again lost them, for that devil Alberoni, despite the faith of treaties, sent his fleet to Sicily, and fooled at the same time two great politicians, the Duke of Savoy and me. All that, monsieur, so disconcerts me that I have resolved always to predict and never to wager. Formerly we in the Tuileries did not know the use of wagers, and the

late M. I. c. d. L. [6] never allowed them ; but since a band of fops has infiltrated our ranks, we no longer know what is going on. We can scarcely open our lips to announce a piece of news without one of these young men proposing to bet against it.

The other day, as I was opening my manuscript and adjusting my eyeglasses on my nose, one of these braggarts, seizing precisely on the interval between the first word and the second, said to me : I wager a hundred pistoles against. I pretended not to notice this outlandish behavior, and beginning again, but louder, I said : Marshall de ***, having learned... That is false, he said ; you always have outlandish news, none of it makes any sense. I entreat you, monsieur, to do me the pleasure of lending me thirty pistoles, for I confess that these wagers have greatly compromised me. I am sending you a copy of two letters which I have written to the minister. I am, etc. [7]

Letter from a newsmonger to the minister :

MONSEIGNEUR,

I am the most zealous sujet the king has ever had. I am I who obliged one of my friends to carry out the project which I had conceived of a book to demonstrate that Louis the Great was greater than all the princes who have merited the name great. [8] I have long been working on another work that will do even more honor to our nation, if your greatness will grant me a privilege. [9] My purpose is to prove that since the beginning of the monarchy the French have never been defeated, and that what the historians have said so far of our disadvantages are veritable impostures. I am obliged to correct them on many occasions, and dare flatter myself that I am especially brilliant in critique. I am, Monseigneur...

MONSEIGNEUR,

Since our loss of M. le c. d. L., we beseech you to have the goodness to allow us to elect a president. Disorder has come into our conferences, [10] and the affairs of state are not treated there with the same discussion as in the past ; our young men live utterly without deference to the elders, and among themselves without discipline. It is truly the counsel of Rehoboam, where the young hold sway over the old. [11] It does not help to point out to them that we were peacefully in possession of the Tuileries twenty years before they came into the world ; I think they will finally drive us out, and that, forced to leave these premises, where we have so often conjured the shades of our French heroes, we will have to go hold our conferences in the Jardin du Roi, or in some other more distant place. I am...

Paris this 7th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1719

[1] The Tuileries, a royal garden, was the meeting center of the most notable newsmongers (*nouvellistes*).

[2] Joseph I was emperor of the house of Austria (1678-1711), and indeed died of smallpox on 17 April 1711. But the newsmonger's science more resembles astrology.

[3] 1717 [*author's note*].

[4] Prince Eugene of Savoy, generalissimo of emperor Charles VI, launched his troops against the Turks in July 1716 ; "having won a signal victory near this fort on 16 August 1717, it was taken two days later by capitulation" (Moreri, 1732). Cf. letter 119.

[5] Alberoni, chief minister of Philip V of Spain, attacked Sardinia on 20 August 1717. Eight thousand Spaniards and six hundred horses overran the

island in less than two months. Then he attacked Sicily in July 1818.

[6] Count Joachim de Lionne, who died on 31 March 1716. According to the obituary in the *Mercure de France*, he was first squire in the royal stable, "but had not exercised that function for a long time when he died. The greatest politicians and the oldest newsmongers of the Jardin Royal des Tuilleries all recognize him as their sovereign, and consider him a marvel" (April 1716, p. 181-182).

[7] A standard formula, shortened from "I am, monsieur, your very humble and very obedient servant."

[8] This project was carried out by the royal historiographer, Claude Guyonnet de Vertron, in *Le Nouveau Panthéon, ou le rapport des divinités du paganisme, des héros de l'Antiquité, et des princes surnommés grands, aux vertus et aux actions de Louis le Grand* (Paris : Morel and Charpentier, 1686).

[9] A *privilège* was exclusive right to publication for a fixed period of time.

[10] The newsmongers were organized into societies, and their sessions recorded.

[11] See I Kings (III Kings) 12:6-14.