

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3485>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

Usbek to the same in Isfahan

You have seen, my dear Mirza, how the Troglodytes perished by their very meanness, and were the victims of their own injustices. [1] Of so many families there remained but two which escaped the nation's ill fortunes. There were in that land two most unusual men : they possessed some humanity, they understood justice, they loved virtue ; as bound together by the uprightness of their hearts as by the corruption of the others', they saw the general desolation, and felt it only through pity. This was the basis of a new union ; they labored with a common devotion to the common interest. Their only disputes were those to which a gentle and tender friendship gave rise ; and in the remotest part of the country, separated from their compatriots, unworthy of their presence, they led a happy and tranquil life ; the earth seemed to produce by itself, [2] tilled by these virtuous hands.

They loved their wives, and were tenderly cherished by them. They did all they could to raise their children to virtue : they related constantly to them the misfortunes of their compatriots, and held up to them such an affecting example. They especially made them realize that the interest of individuals is always found in the common interest ; that to separate oneself from it was akin to ruin ; that virtue is not something we should find onerous ; that we must not regard it as an unpleasant exercise ; and that justice for others is a charity for us.

They soon had the consolation of virtuous fathers, which is to have children who are like them. The young people that grew up under their eyes increased through solid marriages : their number increased, and the union was ever the same ; and virtue, far from being diluted by the multitude, was fortified on the contrary by a larger number of examples.

Who could describe here how happy the Troglodytes were ? A people so just was certain to be cherished by the gods. As soon as they opened their eyes to know them, they learned to fear them, and with religion their behavior became more gentle where nature had left it too crude.

They instituted festivals to honor the gods : the girls bedecked with flowers, and the boys celebrated them with their dancing and with the harmonies of rustic music ; then they made feasts, where joy was as prominent as frugality. It was in these assemblies that naïve nature could speak ; that is where they learned to give their hearts and receive them ; that is where virginal timidity blushingly admitted to love, one soon confirmed by the fathers' consent ; and that is where the affectionate mothers presumed to foresee a sweet and faithful union.

On went to the temple to ask favors of the gods : not wealth and burdensome abundance ; such wishes were unworthy of the happy Troglodytes ; they were able to desire them only for their compatriots : they were at the foot of the altars only to ask health for their fathers, the union of their brothers, the affection of their wives, and the love and obedience of their children. Maidens came bearing the tender sacrifice of their hearts, and asked of them no other mercy than that to be allowed to make a Troglodyte happy.

In the evening when the herds were coming in from the prairies, and the weary oxen had brought in the wagon, they assembled ; and during a frugal repast they sang of the injustices of the early Troglodytes and their misfortunes ; of virtue arising anew with a new people, and its felicity ; next they sang of the greatness of the gods, their blessings ever present to the men who invoke them, and their inescapable wrath to those who do not fear them. Then they would describe the delights of rustic life, and the happiness of a condition ever adorned with innocence ; soon they fell into a

sleep which cares and worries never interrupted.

Nature provided no less for their desires than for their needs. Covetousness was foreign in this happy land. When they gave each other gifts, the giver always felt the better off. The Troglodyte people thought of itself as a single family ; the flocks were almost always comingled ; the only trouble they ordinarily avoided was sorting them out.

Erzerum this 6th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1711

[1] The corruption and anarchy of the Hebrew people are summarized in the refrain : "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6).

[2] A Virgilian echo that admixes an allusion to the *Georgiques* (II, 458-460), exalting the tilling of the land, and that of the *Bucolics* (IV, 18 ss.) evoking the golden age when the earth produced by itself without requiring any labor.