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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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### *Usbek to Rhedi in Venice*

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A long time ago it was said that good faith was the soul of a great minister. [1]

An individual may enjoy the obscurity he is in : he loses credit only among a few ; he keeps out of sight for others ; but a minister who fails in probity has as many witnesses, as many judges, as there are people whom he governs.

Dare I say it ? The greatest evil accomplished by a minister lacking probity is not to ill serve his prince and ruin his people ; there is another, in my view a thousand times more dangerous : it is the bad example he gives.

You know that I long travelled in the Indies ; there I saw a naturally generous nation perverted in an instant, from the last of subjects to the greatest, by the bad example of a minister ; I saw there an entire people in whom generosity, probity, candor, and good faith have forever passed for natural qualities, become all of a sudden the last of peoples, the disease spread and spare not even the holiest members ; the most virtuous men commit unworthy acts, and violate on every occasion in their lives the primary principles of justice, on the vain pretext that it had been violated against them.

They called odious laws to support the most cowardly actions, and gave to injustice and betrayal the name of necessity.

I have seen the faith of contracts banished, the most sacred conventions blotted out, all the laws of families overturned. I have seen avaricious debtors proud of an insolent poverty, unworthy instruments of the fury of the laws and the rigor of the times, feign a payment rather than making it, and plant a knife in the breast of their benefactors.

I have seen others even more unworthy buy for almost nothing, or rather gather oak leaves from the ground, to put them in place of the substance of widows and orphans. [2]

I have seen the sudden birth in every heart of an insatiable thirst for riches. I have seen the formation in a moment of a detestable conspiracy of self-enrichment, not by honest and hard work, but by the ruin of the prince, of the state, and of fellow citizens.

I have seen an honest citizen in these unhappy times never go to bed without saying to himself : Today I have ruined a family ; I will ruin another tomorrow.

Another would say, I am going with a black man who carries a writing case in his hand and a pointed blade behind his ear, [3] to assassinate all those with whom I have any debt.

Another would say : I see that I am getting my affairs in order. It is true that when I went three days ago to make a certain payment, I left a whole family in tears ; that I dissipated the dowry of two innocent maids ; that I deprived a little boy of his education. The father will die of grief, the mother is wasting with sorrow ; but I have done only what the law

allows.

What greater crime than that which a minister commits when he corrupts the standards of an entire nation, degrades the most generous souls, tarnishes the luster of dignities, obscures virtue itself, and confounds the highest birth in the universal contempt ?

What will posterity say when it has to blush at the shame of its fathers ? What will the rising people say when they compare the iron of their ancestors with the gold of those from whom they immediately sprang ? I do not doubt that those nobles will suppress from their quarters an unworthy degree of nobility [4] that dishonors them, and leave the present generation in the horrible oblivion it got itself into.

*Paris this 11th day of the moon of Rhamazan 1720* [5]

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[1] Cicero, in *De legibus* (III, 14).

[2] An allusion to the practice of gleaning, widespread in France and England at the time, based on the Mosaic precept (see Deuteronomy 24:19). But the oak leaves probably allude to paper money.

[3] A clerk of the court, carrying behind his ear the knife with which he trims his quill.

[4] "Quality" of nobility was counted in "quarters", each quarter representing one parent, grandparent, etc., who was noble.

[5] This letter of 11 November 1720 is the last of the novel by date, insofar as Roxane's letter 150, the very last letter, is dated 8 May of the same year. Since this amounts to an interval of six months, and no interval in the series running from letters 139 to 150 exceeds five months and ten days, one must suppose that Usbek, in writing this letter, has already received no. 150. Nothing here indicates - no more than in Supplementary Letter 8 - any intention on his part to return to Isfahan, as his letter 147, dated in fact more than a year earlier, had seemed to portend.