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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Letter 20

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Usbek to the principal white eunuch [1]

You should tremble as you open this letter ; or rather you should have when you suffered Nadir's treachery : you for whom, cold and languishing in old age, it is a crime to lift up your eyes on the fearsome objects of my love ; you who are never permitted to set a sacrilegious foot on the threshold of that forbidding place that shields them from all eyes ; you suffer that those whose conduct is entrusted to you should have done what you would not have the audacity to do, and you do not see the thunderbolt about to fall on them, and on you ?

And what are you all but base instruments which I can break whenever I wish ; who exist only so long as you are able to obey ; who are in the world solely to live under my rule, or to die the minute I so command ; who breathe only so long as my happiness, my love, and even my jealousy require your meanness ; and who further can have no other lot than submission, no other soul than my desires, no other hope than my felicity ?

I know that some of my wives suffer impatiently the austere laws of duty ; that the continual presence of a black eunuch annoys them ; that they are tired of those horrible objects who are given to them to bring them to their husband : I know this. But you who lend yourself to such disorder will be punished in such a way as will cause all who abuse my confidence to tremble.

I swear by all the prophets in heaven, and by Ali the greatest of all, that if you stray from your duty I will regard your life as that of the insects I find under my feet.

Smyrna this 12th day of the moon of Zilcade 1712 [2]

Supplementary Letter II of 1758 edition

[1] Sole mention of the principal white eunuch, who is kept in in the wings except when he needs a reprimand. White eunuchs, according to Chardin, "never go among the women, or at least only very rarely, whereas the black ones never leave the palace" (VI, 120).

[2] The original says 1711, an apparent error that may be owing to the fact that the Muslim year began in March (Maharram).