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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Rica to Ibben in Smyrna

Among the peoples of Europe the first fifteen minutes of marriage smooths out all the difficulties. The ultimate favors always bear the same date as the nuptial benediction ; the women do not act as do our Persian women, who dispute the terrain sometimes for a period of months ; there is nothing so plenary. If they lose nothing, it is because they have nothing to lose ; but - the same of it all - the moment of their defeat is always known, and without consulting the stars, one can predict the hour of their children's birth with precision.

The French almost never talk about their wives, because they are afraid of talking about them in front of people who know them better than they do.

There are among them some very unhappy men whom no one comforts : they are the jealous husbands ; there are some whom everyone hates : they are the jealous husbands ; there are some whom all the men look down on : they are again the jealous husbands.

It is also true that there is no country where they are so few as among the French : their placidity is not based on the confidence they have in their wives but on the contrary on the poor opinion they have of them. All of the Asians' sage precautions - the veils that cover them, the prisons in which they are kept, the eunuchs' vigilance - appear to them as means more likely to stimulate the ingenuity of the sex rather than frustrate them. Here husbands graciously accept their lot, and regard infidelities as instances of an inescapable fate. A husband who wanted alone to possess his wife would be regarded as a public killjoy and as a madman who wanted to benefit from the sun's rays to the exclusion of other men.

Here, a man who loves his wife is a man who has not enough merit to get another one to love him, who abuses the necessity of the law to supplement the attractions he lacks, who invokes all his advantages to the prejudice of an entire society, who arrogates to himself what had been given him only temporarily, and who acts as much as is in him to overturn a tacit convention that makes both sexes happy. The title of husband with a pretty wife, which in Asia is so carefully concealed, is worn here without anxiety ; one feels in a position to create a diversion everywhere. A prince consoles himself for the loss of a fort by taking a different one. Back when the Turks were taking Bagdad from us, were we not taking the fortress of Candehar from the Mogul ? [1]

A man who in general suffers his wife's infidelities is not disapproved : on the contrary, he is praised for his prudence ; only particular instances are dishonoring.

It is not that there are no virtuous ladies, and one can say they are distinguished. My coachman always pointed them out to me, but they were always so ugly that it would take a saint not to hate virtue.

After what I have told you of the ways of this country, you easily surmise that the French hardly make a point of constancy ; they think it is as ridiculous to swear to a woman that you will love her forever as it is to maintain that you will be healthy or happy forever. When they promise a woman they will love her forever, they assume she is promising on her part to be loveable forever ; and if she fails in her word, they no longer think they are engaged by theirs.

Letter 53

Paris this 7th day of the moon of Zilcadé 1714

[1] *L'Espion turc* describes the siege of Bagdad by the sultan Amurat IV. The city was taken on 15 August 1638, and Candahar retaken only in 1649.