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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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### *Usbek to Ibben in Smyrna*

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There is no country on earth where fortune is as inconstant as in this one. Every ten years there occur revolutions that plunge the rich man into misery and raise the poor man on swift wings [1] to the height of riches. The former is astonished at his poverty, the latter at his abundance. The nouveau riche [2] admires the wisdom of Providence ; the poor man, the blind fatality of destiny.

Those who collect the tributes [3] swim in the midst of treasures ; there are few Tantaluses among them. [4] Yet they begin this profession in the worst poverty. They are as disdained as mud while they are poor ; when they are rich, they are rather esteemed, and so they neglect nothing in order to acquire esteem.

They are presently in a most terrible situation. A chamber has just been established called the chamber of justice, [5] because it is going to steal all their wealth away. They can neither divert nor hide their holdings, for they are being required to declare them precisely on penalty of their lives ; thus they are being made to file through a very narrow strait, I mean between life and their money. To cap off their bad luck, there is a minister known for his wit who honors them with his jokes and banter about all the deliberations of the Council. [6] It is not every day one finds ministers disposed to make the people laugh, and this one has to be thanked for giving it a try.

The corps of manservants is more respectable in France than elsewhere ; it is a school for great lords ; it fills the vacancies in the other estates. [7] Those who compose it replace unfortunate grandees, ruined magistrates, and gentlemen killed in the furies of war ; and when they cannot themselves compensate, they raise up all the great houses back up by means of their daughters, who are like a sort of manure [8] that fertilizes rocky and arid lands.

I find Providence wonderful, Ibben, in the manner in which it has distributed riches. If they had been given only to good people, they would not have been sufficiently distinguished from virtue, and all of their vanity would not have been appreciated. But when one examines who are the people who have the most of them, by dint of disdaining the rich one ultimately comes to disdain riches.

*Paris this 26th day of the moon of Maharram 1717*

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[1] The goddess Fortune was associated by the Greeks with events that occur accidentally ; for the Romans, she dispensed goods and favors. Eusebius and Plutarch give her wings (Montfaucon, vol. II, p. 312).

[2] This expression in French was relatively recent, it seems, not attested in literature before 1699. It is found again (in the plural) in letter 126.

[3] *I.e.*, the taxes. There was a corporation of farmers general (*fermiers généraux*) who under contract with the crown collected the indirect taxes. The concentration of the tax farms took place gradually over the seventeenth century, creating an ever wealthier set of beneficiaries. For want of a central bank which could advance it money, the state was dependent on a system of generalized credit and financiers.

[4] Tantalus, in Greek mythology, was condemned to stand in water to his chin, but unable to drink, with fruit hanging overhead which he could not

eat.

[5] An edict created a royal chamber of justice in August 1716 ; its mission was to punish crimes relating to state finances, striking some so as to intimidate others, and help dissimulate the state's near-bankruptcy. In fact the reaction was such that it was suppressed in March 1717, the very month of this letter (see *DGS*, art. "Chambres de justice").

[6] See the end of letter 61. A possible allusion to Duke Adrien Maurice de Noailles (1678-1766), president of the council of finance from 1715 to 1718.

[7] Social ascension was becoming a cliché and literary theme, already figuring in the early parts of Lesage's *Gil Blas* in 1715 and even more prominently in the sequels of 1724 and 1735 ; see also the comedy *Turcaret* (1709) by the same author.

[8] By means of the rich dowries thanks to which their daughters could marry into the nobility. This expression, reported several times by Saint-Simon, originated with Mme de Grignan, speaking of her own daughter-in-law, a daughter of the farmer general Saint-Amand : she "would say that sometimes the best pieces of land required a little manure" (year 1704, vol. II, p. 523 ; see also *Additions au Journal de Dangeau*, *ibid.*, p. 1084, no. 538, dated 21 August 1705).