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*Rica to Usbek in \*\*\**

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I will come to see you at the end of the week ; how agreeably the days will go by with you !

I was presented a few days ago to a lady of the court who had some desire to see my foreign countenance. I found her lovely, worthy to be seen by our monarch, and of an august rank in the sacred place where his heart rests.

She asked me a thousand questions about the ways of Persian and of their manner of living. It seemed to me that the life of the seraglio was not to her taste, and that she was put off by the idea of a man shared among ten or twelve women. She could not see without envy the happiness of the one, and without pity the condition of the others. As she likes to read, especially that of poets and novels, she invited me to tell her about ours. What I told her about them increased her curiosity ; she bade me have translated for her a fragment of some of the ones I have brought. I did so, and sent her a few days later a Persian tale ; you might enjoy seeing how it is transposed.

IN THE TIME of Sheik Ali Can, [1] there was in Persia a woman named Zulema. She knew the entire holy Qur'an by heart ; there was no dervich with better knowledge than her of the traditions of the holy prophets. The Arabic doctors had said nothing so mysterious that she had not understand all its meanings, and to such learning she added a certain character of playful mind that scarcely allowed one to guess whether she was trying to entertain those to whom she was speaking or to instruct them.

One day when she was with her companions in one of the rooms of the seraglio, one of them asked her what she thought of the after-life, and whether she gave credence to that ancient tradition of our doctors according to which paradise is intended for men only. [2]

That is the common opinion, she told them : there is nothing that has not been done to degrade our sex ; there is even a nation spread throughout Persia, which we call the Jewish nation, which maintains by the authority of its holy books that we have no soul. [3]

These injurious opinions originate entirely from the arrogance of men, who want to extend their superiority even beyond their lifetimes, and do not think that in the great day all creatures will appear before God as nothing, having among them no prerogatives but those that virtue has put there.

God will not limit himself in his recompenses ; and as the men who have lived well and made good use of the dominion they have over us here below, will be in a paradise full of celestial, ravishing beauties, such that if a mortal had seen them, he would immediately have ended his life from his impatience to enjoy them, virtuous women too will go to a place of delights where they will be intoxicated by a torrent of pleasures with divine men who will be subjugated to them ; each of them will have a seraglio in which the men will be locked, and eunuchs even more loyal than ours to guard them.

I have read, she added, in an Arabic book, that a man named Ibrahim was unbearably jealous. He had twelve extremely beautiful wives whom he treated in a very harsh manner : he no longer trusted his eunuchs, nor the walls of his seraglio ; he kept them almost always under lock and key in their rooms without being able either to see or speak to each other, for he was even jealous of innocent friendship. All his actions took on the coloration of his natural

brutality ; never did a kind word cross his lips, and never did he make a lesser sign but that it added something to the rigor of their enslavement.

One day when he had assembled them all in a room in his seraglio, one of them, bolder than the others, reproached him for his bad temperament. When one tries so hard to find means of being feared, she told him, one always first finds means of being hated. We are so unhappy that we cannot help but desire a change. Others in my place would wish your death, I wish only for mine ; and being unable to hope to be separated from you in any other way, it will still be very pleasant to me to be separated. These words, which ought to have moved him, sent him into furious anger : he drew his dagger and plunged it into her breast. My dear companions, she said in a failing voice, if heaven takes pity on my virtue, you will be avenged. With those words she departed this unfortunate life to go to the abode of delights where women who have lived a good life enjoy a happiness that is forever renewed.

First she saw a pleasant prairie, its greenery heightened by the colors of the brightest flowers ; a stream whose waters were purer than crystal meandered through it. She then entered into charming woods whose silence was interrupted only by the sweet song of the birds. Magnificent gardens next appeared ; nature had bedecked them with its simplicity and all its magnificence. Finally found a sumptuous palace prepared for her, and filled with celestial men destined for her pleasures.

Two of them came forward at once to disrobe her ; others placed her in the bath, and perfumed her with the most delicious essences ; next they gave her raiment infinitely more rich than her own, after which they led her into a large room where she found a fire built from fragrant woods and a table covered with the most exquisite delicacies. Everything seemed to conspire to ravishing the senses : on one hand she heard music all the more divine that it was the more tender ; on another she could see nothing but the dances of those divine men exclusively occupied with pleasing her. Yet all these pleasures were to serve only to draw her gradually into greater pleasures. She was led to her room, and once she was again disrobed, she was carried to a sumptuous bed, where two men of enchanting beauty took her into their arms. It was then she was intoxicated and her ecstasy surpassed even her desires. I don't know where I am, she told them, I would think I was dying if I were not assured of my immortality. It is too much, leave me ; I am overcome by the violence of pleasures. Yes, you restore some calm to my senses ; I begin to breathe, and feel like myself. Why have they taken away the torches ? Why may I not now contemplate your divine beauty ? Why can I not see... But why see ? You are taking me back to my first transports. Ye gods, how lovable is this darkness ! You mean I shall be immortal, and immortal with you ? I shall be... No, please, have mercy, for I see that is something you will never ask.

After several reiterated commands, she was obeyed, but not before she quite seriously wished to be ; she rested languidly, and fell asleep in their arms. Two moments of sleep restored her energies ; she received two kisses that instantly inflamed her and caused her to open her eyes. I am uneasy, she said ; I am afraid you no longer love me. That was a doubt in which she did not wish long to remain ; indeed she had with them all the clarifications she could desire. I am disabused, she cried ; pardon, pardon, I am confident in you ; you say nothing, but you prove better than anything you could say to me. Yes, yes, I confess it, never did anyone so love. But what is this ? You vie for the honor of persuading me ? Oh, if you quarrel, if you add ambition to the pleasure of my capitulation, I am finished ! You shall both be victors ; I shall be the only one vanquished, but I shall make the victory cost you dearly.

All this was interrupted only by daylight. Her faithful and amiable servants entered her room and got the two young men up, who were led by two old men to the quarters where they were kept for her pleasures. She then arose, and first appeared at that court of idolatry in the charms of a simple deshabelle, and afterward covered with the most sumptuous ornaments. The night had enhanced her beauty ; it had given life to her color and expression to her graces. All day long it was nothing but dances, concerts, feasts, games, strolls ; and it was noted that Anais slipped away from time to time and flew to her two young heroes ; after some precious moments of interview she would return to the group she had left, each time with more serenity in her countenance. Finally, toward evening, they lost her completely ; she went to close herself up in the seraglio, where she wanted, she said, to get to know these immortal

captives who were forever to live with her. She therefore visited the apartments of those most remote and most charming quarters where she counted fifty slaves of miraculous beauty ; she roamed all night from room to room, receiving in each one homages ever different and ever the same.

This is how the immortal Anais spent her life, now in spectacular pleasures, now in solitary pleasures ; admired by a brilliant troop, or loved by an ecstatic lover ; often she left an enchanted palace to go to a country grotto ; flowers seemed to sprout under her feet, and games arose in droves to meet her.

In over a week in this happy abode, still delirious, she had not made a single reflection ; she had enjoyed her happiness without understanding it, and without a single one of those moments when the soul makes an account, so to speak, to itself and listens to itself in the silence of the passions.

The blessed have pleasures so intense that they can rarely enjoy such freedom of spirit ; that is why, invincibly attached to present objects, they entirely lose their memory of things past, and have no more care at all for what they have known or loved in their former life.

But Anais, whose mind was truly philosophical, had spent almost all her life meditation ; she had taken her reflections much farther than should have been expected of a woman left to herself. The austere retreat in which her husband had kept her had left her this single advantage. It was this force of spirit that had led her to brave the fear that struck her companions, and death, which was to be the end of her sufferings and the beginning of her bliss.

Thus she slowly emerged from the inebriation of pleasures, and enclose herself alone in an apartment of her palace. She let herself go to most agreeable reflections on her past condition and her present bliss : she could not help feeling compassion for the unhappiness of her companions ; one is sensitive to torments one has shared. Anais did not limit herself to the mere bounds of compassion : more tender towards those unfortunates, she felt an urge to help them.

She ordered one of those young men who was with her to assume the face of her husband, go into his seraglio, take control of it, drive him out, and stay there in his place until she recalled him.

The execution was prompt : he sped through space and came to the door of the seraglio of Ibrahim, who was not there. He knocks : everything opens wide, the eunuchs fall at his feet ; he flies towards the apartments where Ibrahim's wives are locked up. On the way he had taken the keys from the pocket of the jealous husband to whom he had made himself invisible. He enters, and immediately surprises them by his gentle, affable air, and soon after he surprises them even more by his eagerness and the rapidity of his initiatives. They all had a share in the astonishment, and they would have thought he was a dream had there been less reality.

While these new scenes were playing out in the seraglio, Ibrahim knocks, states his name, rages and shouts. After passing through many difficulties, he enters and cases the eunuchs into an extreme disorder ; he strides forward, but recoils and falls as if thunderstruck when he sees the false Ibrahim, his true image, in all the liberties of a master. He cries for help ; he wants the eunuchs to help him kill this imposter ; but he is not obeyed. He has but one very feeble recourse remaining, which is to rely on the judgment of his wives. In an hour the false Ibrahim had seduced all his judges : he is driven and dragged ignobly out of the seraglio, and would have a thousand times been put to death had his rival not ordered that his life be spared. Finally the new Ibrahim, alone master of the battlefield, proved himself more and more worthy of such a choice, and distinguished himself by miracles heretofore unseen. You are not like Ibrahim, these wives would say. Say rather that that imposter is not like me, said the triumphant Ibrahim ; what does it take to be your husband, if what I am doing does not suffice ?

Oh, we are not about to doubt, said the wives. If you are not Ibrahim, it is enough for us that you have so well

deserved to be ; you are more Ibrahim in a day than he was in the course of ten years. You promise me then, he replied, that you will declare yourselves in my favor against that imposter ? Have no doubt, they said in a single voice ; we swear to you everlasting fidelity. We have only too long been abused ; the bastard did not suspect our virtue, he only suspected his weakness ; we see clearly that men are not made like him ; it is no doubt you they are like ; if you knew how much you make us hate him. Oh, I will often give you new reasons for hatred, replied the false Ibrahim ; you do not yet know all the harm he has done you. We judge his injustice by the greatness of our vengeance, they replied. Aye, you are right, said the divine man, I have measured the expiation to the crime ; I am very pleased that you are satisfied with my way of punishing. But, said these women, if that imposter returns, what shall we do ? It would be difficult, I think, for him to fool you, he answered, in the place I occupy with you, it can hardly be maintained by ruse ; and moreover I shall send him so far away that you will never hear of him again. Then I shall assume responsibility for your happiness. I shall not be jealous, I shall be able to keep you true without restraining you ; I have good enough opinion of my merit to believe you will be faithful to me. If you were not virtuous with me, with whom would you be ? This conversation went on for a long time between him and these women, who, more struck by the difference between the two Ibrahims than by their resemblance, never had even a thought of inquiring about so many marvels. Ultimately the desperate husband returned again to trouble them : he found his whole house in joy, and the women more incredulous than ever. The position was not tenable for a jealous man ; he left, furious, and an instant later the false Ibrahim followed him, took hold of him, and transported him through space, and left him four hundred leagues away.

O gods, in what desolation did these women find themselves in the absence of their dear Ibrahim ! Already their eunuchs had resumed their natural severity ; the whole house was in tears ; they would imagine sometimes that everything that had happened to them was only a dream. They all would look at each other and remember the slightest circumstances of those strange adventures. Finally Ibrahim returned ever more lovable ; it seemed to them that his journey had not been difficult ; the new master adopted a behavior so opposite the other's that it surprised all the neighbors. He fired all the eunuchs, made his house accessible to everyone ; he was even unwilling to allow his wives to be veiled. It was a rather singular thing to see them at festivals among the men as free as they. Ibrahim rightly believed that the customs of the land were not made for citizens like himself. Meanwhile he spared no expense ; he dissipated with immense profusion the wealth of the jealous man, who, back three years later from the distant lands where he had been transported, found nothing left but his wives and thirty-six children.

*Paris this 26th day of the moon of Gemmadi I, 1720*

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[1] He was named grand vizier of shah Soliman III in 1668.

[2] This question had been treated by Pierre Bayle in the article "Muhammad" of his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.

[3] Though there is no obvious Jewish source for this proposition, it is probably a deduction based on Genesis 2:18 : woman having been created as a "helpmeet" to man - which he will no longer need in the next life - she requires no immortal soul. The question of woman's soul, traditional since Aristotle, was an object of debate at the Council of Mâcon in 585.