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Usbek to Rhedi in Venice

Since I have been in Europe, my dear Rhedi, I have seen many a government ; it is not as in Asia, where the rules of politics are everywhere the same.

I have often wondered to myself which of all governments best conformed with reason. I has seemed to me that the most perfect is the one which achieves its goal at the least cost, and thus that the one that steers men in the manner best suited to their penchant and their inclination is the most perfect.

If under a mild government the people are as docile as under a harsh one, the former is preferable, because it is most in conformity with reason, and that severity is a foreign motive.

You may be sure, my dear Rhedi, that within a state, more or less cruel penalties do not make people obey the laws better. In countries where punishments are moderate, they are feared as in those where they are tyrannical and awful.

Whether a government is mild or cruel, one always punishes by degrees ; one inflicts a more or less great punishment for a more or less great crime. The imagination bends on its own to the ways of the country in which one lives ; a week in prison or a light fine make as much impression on the mind of a European, raised in a land of lenience, as the loss of an arm intimidates an Asian. They attach a certain degree of fear to a certain degree of penalty, and each sorts it out in his own way ; the despair of infamy may grieve a Frenchman who has just been sentenced to a penalty that would not cost a Turk fifteen minutes' sleep.

Besides, I do not see that order, justice, and equity are better observed in Turkey, Persia, or in the land of the Mogul, than in the republics of Holland, Venice, and even in England ; I do not see that they commit fewer crimes there, or that men intimidated by the magnitude of the punishments are more submissive to the laws.

I note on the contrary a source of injustice and vexation in the midst of these very states.

I find even the prince, who is himself the law, less master than everywhere else.

I see that in these rigorous moments there are always tumultuous movements where no one is in charge ; and that when violent authority has once been rejected, no one has enough of it left to make it return ;

that the very despair of impunity confirms disorder and makes it greater ;

that in those states no small revolt is formed, and there is never any interval between murmur and sedition ;

that great events do not have to be set up by great causes ; on the contrary, the slightest accident sometimes produces a great revolution, often as unforeseen by those who make it as by those who suffer it. [1]

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When Osman, emperor of the Turks, was deposed, none of those who committed this coup had in mind to commit it ; they were simply petitioning as supplicants that justice be done them over some complaint ; a voice that has never been identified came by chance from the crowd, the name of Mustapha was uttered, and suddenly Mustapha was emperor. [2]

Paris this 2nd day of the moon of Rebiab I, 1715

[1] At this time the word *revolution* suggests great change or calamity rather than massive overthrow of the government.

[2] Osman II was deposed in 1622, after a four-years reign, and replaced by Mustapha I ; in 1678 Antoine Galland had published *La Mort du sultan Osman, ou le rétablissement de Mustapha sur le trône*.