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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to Usbek in ****

This morning I was in my room, which, as you know, is separated from the others only by a very thin partition, with several openings in it so that one hears everything that happens in the next room. A man who was pacing with great strides was saying to another : I don't know what it is, but everything is turning against me ; it ha's been three days since I said anything that did me any credit, and I have found myself intermingled indiscriminately in every conversation without anyone paying me any attention or addressing me even twice. I had prepared a few set pieces to spice up my speech, but they have never allowed them me to bring them up ; I had a nice story to tell, but as I tried to work up to it they dodged I had done it on purpose ; I have some clever remarks that for four days have been aging in my head without my being able to make the least use of them. If this keeps up, I think I will end up a moron : it seems that is my destiny, and that I cannot avoid it. Yesterday I had hoped to shine with three or four old ladies who certainly do not intimidate me, and I would have said the most delightful ; it took me more than a quarter-hour to steer my conversation, but they never followed a coherent line, and like the Parcae cut the thread of everything I said. Do you want to know what I think ? A reputation for cleverness is very hard to sustain, and I don't know how you have managed to succeed at it. I have an idea, replied the other ; let us work together to make ourselves look clever. Let us collaborate on that : each of us will tell the other every day what we are to talk about, and we will shoulder each other so well that if someone should interrupt in the middle of our train of thought, we will draw him in ourselves, and if he does not come willingly we will force him. We will agree on the places when we should approve, when we should smile, others when we should laugh out loud and uproariously. You will see that we will set the tone in every conversation, and people will admire the liveliness of our wit and the cleverness of our rejoinders. We will protect each other with reciprocal nods. You will shine today ; tomorrow you will be my second. I shall go into a house with you and exclaim, pointing at you : I must tell you a most amusing reply which monsieur just made to a man we encountered in the street - and I will turn towards you - he did not expect it, and was quite taken aback. I will recite some of my verses, and you will say : I was there when he wrote them ; it was during a supper, and he took not even a moment to think about them. Often we will even tease each other, and they will say : Look how they attack each other and how they defend themselves ; they don't spare each other ; let's see how he will get out of that one : beautiful, what presence of mind ! It is a real battle, but they will not say that we had sparred the day before. We'll have to buy certain books, which are collections of jokes intended for those who have no wit, and want to fake it ; it all hinges on having some models. I think before six months are up we will be able to maintain an hour's conversation chock full of jokes. But we must take care to sustain their fortune ; it is not enough to tell a joke ; it must be published, it must be spread abroad and sown everywhere ; otherwise it is for naught ; and I confess that there is nothing so dismaying as to see a lovely thing you have said die in the ear of the idiot who hears it. It is true that often there is a compensation, and that we also make many foolish remarks that pass *incognito* ; and that is the only thing that can console us in that instance. This, my friend, is what we should decide upon. Do what I tell you, and I promise you within six months a seat in the Académie. That is just to say that it will not be a long labor, for then you will be able to relinquish your art : you will be willy-nilly a man of wit. They remark in France that once a man enters a society, he immediately assumes what is called the *esprit du corps* : you will do the same, and the only thing I fear for you is an embarrassment of applause.

Paris this 6th day of the moon of Zilcadé 1714