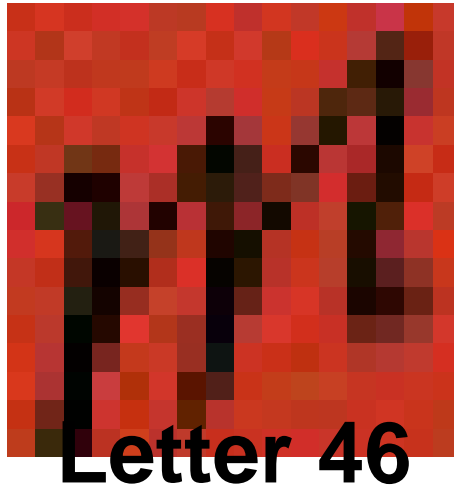


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Usbek to Rhedi in Venice

Those who like to learn are never idle ; although I am charged with no important business, I am nevertheless continually occupied. I spend my life examining ; in the evening I write down what I have noticed, what I have seen, what I have heard during the day. Everything interests me, everything surprises me ; I am like a child whose immature organs are acutely struck by the slightest objects.

You might not believe it, but we are pleasantly received in all companies and in all societies. I think I owe much to Rica's lively wit and natural gaiety, which cause him to seek out everyone, and is equally sought after by them. Our foreign appearance no longer offends anyone ; we even benefit from the surprise people manifest at finding that we possess some refinement, for the French do not imagine that our clime produces men ; nevertheless, it must be admitted, they are worth the trouble of setting them straight.

I have spent a few days in a country house near Paris, at the home of a man of consideration [1] who is delighted to have company. He has a very amiable wife, who combines with great modesty a gaiety of which the secluded life always deprives our Persian ladies.

Foreigner that I was, I had nothing better to do than study, as is my wont, the crowd of people who were constantly arriving there, whose characters were forever presenting me with something new. I immediately noticed a man whose simplicity appealed to me ; I attached myself to him, he attached himself to me, and thus we always found each other close by.

One day when we were talking together in a large circle, leaving the general conversations to themselves : You might find in me, I said to him, more curiosity than politeness, but I beg you to allow me to ask you a few questions, for it bothers me to not to be up on anything, and spending time among people whom I absolutely cannot figure out. My mind has been working for two days ; there is not a single man here who has not put me to the torture more than two hundred times, and yet I would never see through them in a thousand years ; to me they are more invisible than the wives of our great monarch. You have only to speak, he replied, and I shall inform you about anything you wish, all the more that I think you are a discreet man who will not abuse my confidence.

Who is that man, I said, who has talked so much to us about the dinners he has given for the great, who is on such familiar terms with your dukes, and speaks so often to your ministers, who, I am told, are so difficult to contact ? He must obviously be a man of quality, [2] but he has such a common physiognomy that he hardly does honor to people of quality ; and besides he seems to lack education. I am a foreigner, but it seems to me that there is in general a certain refinement common to all nations, but I do not find any of this in him ; are your persons of quality more poorly raised than others ? That man, he replied with a laugh, is a farmer [3] : he is as much above others in wealth as he is beneath everyone in birth. He would have the best table in Paris, if he could decide never to eat at home [4] ; he is quite foolish, as you see, but he excels by means of his cook ; indeed he is no ingrate, for you have heard him praise him all day.

And that fat man dressed in black, I said, whom that lady had seated beside herself ? Why does he dress so dismally with such a bright appearance and healthy mien ? He smiles graciously whenever he is spoken to ; his costume is

more modest but more composed than that of your women. He is a preacher, he replied, and worse still, a director [5] : the man you see there is better informed than husbands : he knows women's weakness ; they know also that he has one of his own. How is that ? I said. When he is always talking about something he calls grace. No, not always, he replied : in the ear of a pretty woman he is more apt to talk about her fall. He thunders in public, but he is gentle as a lamb in private. It seems to me, that made me say, that people pay him considerable of attention, and show him great deference. Considerable attention ? That man is necessary ; it is he who makes the secluded life agreeable : bits of advice, obliging attentions, regular visits ; he dispels a headache better than anyone in the world : he is an excellent man.

But if I am not putting you to any trouble, tell me who is that man across from us who is so badly dressed, who sometimes grimaces, and has a language different from the others ; who is not clever enough to speak, but speaks to be appear clever ? That, he replied, is a poet, and the caricature of the human race. Those people say they are born what they are [6] : that is true, and also what they will be their whole lives, which is to say almost always the most ridiculous of men. So they are not spared : people pour scorn on them by the fistful. Famine made this one enter this house, and he is welcomed by the master and mistress here, whose kindness and politeness never fails with respect to anyone. He wrote their epithalamion [7] when they were married : it was the best thing he ever did, for the marriage happens to have been as happy as he predicted.

Maybe you will not believe it, he added, as stuck as you are with Oriental prejudices, but there are happy marriages here, and women whose virtue is a severe defender. The people we are talking about enjoy amongst themselves a peace that cannot be troubled ; they are inspired and esteemed by all. There is just one thing, which is that their natural kindness, makes them receive all sorts into their home, which means there is sometimes bad company. Not that I disapprove them ; one has to live with people as they are. The people said to be good company are often merely those whose vice is more refined ; and maybe, as with poisons, the subtlest are also the most dangerous.

And that old man, I whispered, who looks so troubled ? At first I took him for a foreigner ; for besides being dressed unlike the others, he censures everything that happens in France, and does not approve of your government. He is an old warrior, he said, who makes himself memorable to all his hearers by the length of his great feats. He cannot bear for France to have won battles when he was not there, or to hear a siege vaunted if he was not guarding the trenches ; he thinks himself so necessary to our history that he imagines it finishes where he finished ; he considers a few wounds he has received as the dissolution of the monarchy ; and unlike those philosophers who say one only enjoys the present, and that the past is nothing, he on the contrary enjoys only the past, and exists only in the campaigns he participated in. He breathes in bygone times as heroes must breathe in the times that will take place after them. But why, said I, did he leave the service ? He did not leave it, he replied, but the service left him ; he was assigned to a small role where he will spend the rest of his days recounting ; but will never go farther : the road to honors is closed to him. And why is that ? I asked. We have a maxim in France, he replied, which is never to promote officers whose patience has languished in subaltern positions ; we regard them as men whose mind has more or less shrunk among details, and who in the habit of small things have become incapable of the largest ones. We believe that a man who does not have the qualities of a general at thirty will never have them ; that one who does not have an immediate overview of several leagues of terrain in all its possible configurations, the presence of mind that makes you use all your advantages in a victory, and all your resources in a failure, will never acquire those talents. That is why we have brilliant positions for those great, sublime men whom heaven has endowed not only with a heart, but also with an heroic genius, and subaltern positions for those whose talents are subaltern. Of that number are those men who have aged in an obscure war ; they succeed at most at doing what they have done all their lives ; and one must not begin giving them responsibilities at a time when they are losing strength.

A moment later, I got curious again, and said to him : I promise not to ask you any more questions if you will just allow me this one. Who is that tall young man who has hair, [8] little wit, and such impertinence ? Why does he talk more loudly than the others, and is so pleased by his own existence ? He is a ladies' man, he replied. At these words there was some going and coming, we rose, someone came to talk to my gentleman, and I remained as uninformed as

before. But a moment later, by some chance this young man found himself at my side, and addressing me, said : It is a lovely day : would you like, monsieur, to take a turn about the parterre ? I replied as civilly as I could, and we went outside together. I came to the country, he said to me, as a favor to the mistress of the house, with whom I am on pretty good terms ; there is to be sure a certain woman of society who will rail a bit, but how can I help that ? I see the pretties women in Paris, but I do not settle on any, and I string them along : for just between you and me I am not good for much. [9] Clearly, monsieur, I said to him, you have some official function, or some position that prevents you from attending them more assiduously. No, monsieur, I have no other occupation than to outrage a husband, or drive a father to despair ; I like to scare a women who thinks she has me, and put her within an inch of losing me. A few young men like me who share all of Paris this way, and force people to follow our slightest movements. From what I understand, I said, you cause more talk than the most valiant warrior, and are more highly regarded than a grave magistrate. If you were in Persia you would not enjoy all these advantages ; you would become better suited to guarding our ladies than appealing to them. My face flushed, and I think that had I said anything, I would not have been able to avoid insulting him.

What do you say of a country where such persons are tolerated, and where a man who exercises such a profession is allowed to live ; where infidelity, betrayal, subornation, perjury, and injustice lead to consideration ; where a man is thought well of because he takes a daughter from her father, a woman from her husband, and disrupts the most agreeable and sacred societies ? Happy the children of Ali, who protect their families from shame and seduction. The light of day is not more pure than the love that burns in the hearts of our wives [10] ; our daughters think only in trembling of the day that will deprive them of that virtue by which they resemble the angels and incorporeal powers. Dear land of my birth, on which the sun casts its first rays, thou art not tainted by the horrible crimes that oblige that star to hide the moment it appears in the dark Occident.

Paris this 5th day of the moon of Rhamazan 1713

[1] The expression does not necessarily denote a nobleman, unlike the term *man of quality* (see next note) : consideration is, according to *Académie* 1718 "the esteem and [...] reputation that good qualities merit, or dignity and position attract."

[2] This expression always designates a nobleman, as well as some distinction within his family. "*De qualité* goes farther than *de condition*, for this latter expression is used with respect to the bourgeoisie, and the former cannot be used except with respect to nobility" (Gabriel Girard, *Les Synonymes français*, Paris : Veuve d'Houry, 1736, p. 104.)

[3] Since 1687 the totality of royal income was grouped under what was called the *ferme générale*, a consortium of financiers (called *fermiers* 'farmers' or *fermiers généraux*) who shared the contract with the crown for the collection of taxes.

[4] An echo of Cléon in Molière's *Le Misanthrope* (II, 4).

[5] A confessor, or more specifically a *directeur de conscience*, which is to say a priest who also provides almost daily moral guidance.

[6] From the Latin proverb *Fiunt oratores, nascuntur poetae* ("one becomes an orator, one is born a poet").

[7] A poem in honor of the newlyweds.

[8] Bernard says with regard to the fops (*petits-maitres*) of his time : "The dressing of their heads is not less singular than that of the women : the head of a *man of the world* is buried in a mass of braided and curled hair, rising half foot above the forehead ; its form changes at least yearly. This false hair is a wonderful aid" (chap. ix, p. 210).

[9] The expression is doubtless an avowal of sexual inadequacy, especially since at the end of the paragraph Usbek assimilates him to the eunuch.

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[10] An echo of Racine : "Le jour n'est pas plus pur que le fond de mon coeur" (*Phèdre*, IV, 2.)