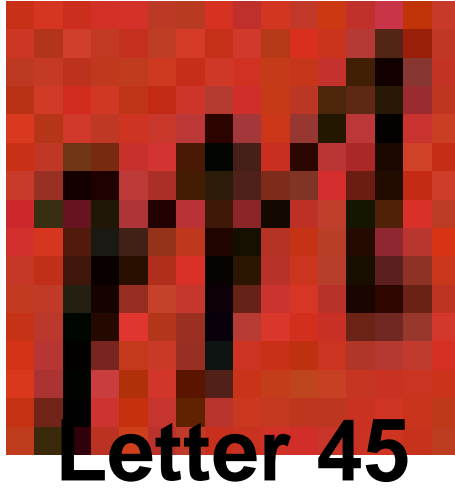


<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3450>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Date de mise en ligne : mercredi 15 avril 2020

Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés

Zachi to Usbek in Paris

I have wonderful news for you : I have made up with Zephis. [1] The seraglio, divided between us, has been reunited ; only you are wanting in these halls where peace prevails. Come, my dear Usbek, come and give love the victory here.

I gave a great feast for Zephis to which your mother, [2] your wives, and your principal concubines were invited. Your aunts and several of your women cousins were also present : they had come on horseback, covered in the dark cloud of their veils and their clothing.

The next day we left for the country, where we hoped to be more at liberty : we climbed onto our camels, and four of us got into each loge. [3] As the outing had been arranged quickly, we did not have time to have courouc proclaimed all around, [4] but the principal eunuch, always thorough, took another precaution, for he added to the fabric that prevented us from being seen a curtain so heavy we could see absolutely no one.

When we reached that river which must be crossed, each of us got into a box, as is customary, and was carried onto the boat, for we were told that there were many people on the river. One curious man who came too close to the place where we were enclosed received a mortal blow that deprived him forever of the light of day. Another who was found bathing naked on the shore had the same fate, and your faithful eunuchs sacrificed those two unfortunates to your honor and ours.

But hear the rest of our adventures. When we were in the midst of the river, such a violent wind arose, and such an ominous cloud covered the sky, that our sailors began to despair. In our fright at this peril, nearly all of us passed out. I remember hearing the voices and the arguments of our eunuchs, some of whom were saying that we should be alerted to the peril and saved from our prison ; but their chief still maintained that he would rather die than suffer his master to be thus dishonored, and that he would plunge a dagger into the breast of anyone who made such bold suggestions. One of my slaves, quite beside herself, ran toward me in deshabelle to assist me, but a black eunuch seized her brutally and sent her back to where she had come from, whereupon I passed out and did not come to my senses until the peril was passed.

How troublesome is travelling for women ! Men are exposed only to perils that threaten their lives, and we are at every moment in peril of losing our lives or our virtue. Adieu, my dear Usbek, I shall ever adore thee.

The Fatmé seraglio this 2nd day of the moon of Rhamazan 1713

[1] Their dispute, not mentioned previously, might have had something to do with the ambiguous role played with each of them by the slave Zelide : see letters 4 and 19 ; we will see in letter 51 that Zelide has in the meantime passed into the service of Zelis.

[2] The only - and incidental - mention of Usbek's mother, as was the case with his father in letter 24, and as will be mentioned, without particular emphasis, his daughter (letter 60), his brother (letter 91), and another brother who is a governor (letter 94).

Letter 45

[3] Chardin speaks a kind of basket or cradle in which the women are carried on camels' backs, but it has been adapted here, insofar as Chardin specifies that each camel "carries two of these cradles, one on each side."

[4] "When women of quality leave their lodgings and go into town, which happens almost only at night, a number of horsemen precede them by a hundred paces, and another number comes a hundred paces behind, crying *Courouc, courouc*, a Turkish word that means *forbidden, abstinence*, and which in this situation means let everyone withdraw, and let no one approach. This voice provokes fear in Persia, and no one waits to hear it a second time : everyone flees as if a lion were unleashed." (Chardin, VI, 238.)