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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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*Rica to \*\*\**

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The other day I went to see a house where about three hundred persons are rather poorly maintained [1] ; I had soon done, for neither the church nor the buildings are worth looking at. [2] Those who are in this house were rather cheerful ; a number of them were playing cards or other games unfamiliar to me. As I was leaving, one of these men was also leaving, and after hearing me ask directions to the Marais, which is the most distant quarter of Paris [3] : I am going there, he said to me, and I will take you there : follow me. He led me perfectly, got me out of all the jams, and deftly saved me from carriages and cars. We were almost there when my curiosity got the best of me : My good friend, said I, could I not know who you are ? I am a blind man, he answered. What ? said I ; you are blind ? [4] Then why did not you ask that nice man who was playing cards with you to lead us ? He too is blind, he replied ; for four hundred years there have been three hundred of us blind persons in that house where you found me. But I must leave you : this is the street you were asking me for. I am going to join the crowd : I am going to this church where, I swear, I will embarrass other people more than they will embarrass me. [5]

*Paris this 17th day of the moon of Chalval 1712*

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[1] The Hôpital Royal des Quinze-Vingts, a hospice founded by St. Louis in 1254 for three hundred blind persons (hence the name, which means fifteen score), was situated in the Rue Saint-Honoré near the Palais-Royal.

[2] Its state of dilapidation was to call for reconstruction beginning in 1748.

[3] Le Marais, on the eastern edge of Paris, was an aristocratic quarter in the seventeenth century.

[4] The philosophical problem of what the blind could know about the world had been treated by Locke (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690) and Berkeley (*New Theory of Vision*, 1709), and would return at the time when Diderot wrote his *Letter sur les aveugles* (1749) in the context of a broader debate over sensitivity and perception.

[5] The "brothers and sisters" of the Quinze-Vingts had the right to beg in the churches.