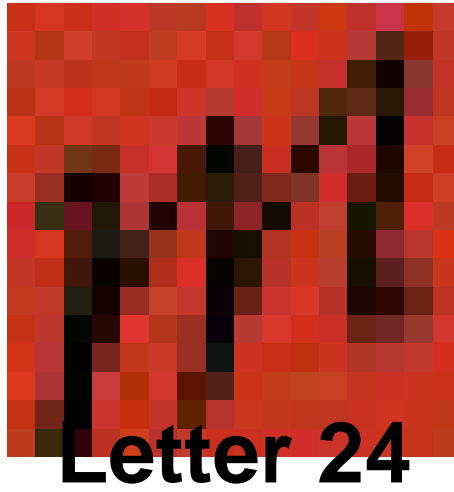


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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to Roxane in the seraglio in Isfahan

How fortunate you are, Roxane, to be in the fair land of Persia, and not in these poisonous climes where they know neither shame nor virtue ! How fortunate you are ! You live in my seraglio as in the domicile of innocence, untouched by the assaults of all humans ; you have the joy of being happily powerless to fail. [1] Never has a man defiled you with his lascivious gaze ; even your father-in-law during the licence of feasts has never seen your lovely lips ; you have never forgotten to wear a sacred headband to cover them. Fortunate Roxane ! When you have been in the country, you have always eunuchs who walked ahead of you to put to death anyone foolhardy enough not to flee your sight. What difficulty even I had, I to whom heaven gave you to bring me happiness, to take possession of that treasure which you defended with such determination ! [2] What a disappointment for me those first days of our marriage not to see you ! And what impatience once I had seen you ! Yet you did not satisfy it ; you provoked it on the contrary with the obstinate refusals of aroused shame ; you treated me just like all those men from whom you constantly conceal yourself. Do you remember that day when I lost you amongst your slaves, who betrayed you and hid you from my pursuits ? Do you remember that other day when, seeing that your tears were to no avail, you invoked your mother's authority to check the impetuosity of my love ? Do you remember, when every resource failed you, of those you found in your courage ? You took a dagger into your hand, and threatened to immolate a husband who loved you if he continued to demand from you what was even more dear to you than your husband ? Two months were spent in that combat of love and virtue. You pushed your chaste scruples too far ; you did not give in even after you were defeated ; you defended an expiring virginity to the ultimate extremity ; you regarded me as an enemy who had aggressed you, and not as a husband who had loved you. For more than three months you dared not look at me without blushing ; your consternated mien seemed to reproach me the advantage I had taken. I did not even have a tranquil possession : you hid from me as much as you could of those charms and graces, and I was enthralled with the greatest favors without having received the smallest ones.

If you had been raised in this country, you would not have been so upset. Here women have lost all restraint ; they show themselves to men with unveiled faces, as if they wanted to ask to be taken ; they look about for them ; they see them in the mosques, on strolls, [3] at home. The custom of being served by eunuchs is unknown to them ; instead of that noble simplicity and amiable modesty that prevail reign among us, we see stark impudence to which one cannot possibly become accustomed.

Indeed, Roxane, if you were here, you would feel outraged at the awful ignominy to which your sex has descended ; you would flee these abominable halls, and long for that gentle retreat where you find innocence, where you are sure of yourself, and where no threat makes you tremble ; in short where you can love me without fearing you will ever lose the love that you owe to me.

When you highlight the luster of your skin with the loveliest colors, when you perfume your whole body with the most precious essences ; when you put on your most lovely clothes ; when you seek to distinguish yourself from your companions by the graces of dance and the sweetness of your singing ; when you graciously rival them for charm, sweetness, and light-heartedness, I cannot imagine that you have any other purpose than to give me pleasure ; and when I see you blush modestly, and see your eyes seek mine, when you find your way to my heart with your sweet and flattering words, there is no way, Roxane, that I could doubt your love.

But what can I think of the women of Europe ? The art of making up their faces, the ornaments they put on, the care

they take for their person, their constant preoccupation with being attractive, are so many stains on their virtue and insults to their husbands.

Not that I think, Roxane, that they take their effrontery as far as such conduct might well imply, and carry licence to the horrible excess that make one shudder of absolutely violating conjugal troth. There are very few women wanton enough to carry the crime that far ; they all carry in their hearts a certain character of virtue that is engraved there, which is given by birth, and weakened, but not destroyed, by education ; they might well let up on the outward obligations which modesty requires : but when it comes to taking those last steps, nature rebels. Thus, when we enclose you so securely, when we have you guarded by so many slaves, when we constrain your desires so much when they sail too far, it is not that we fear the ultimate infidelity : but because we know that purity cannot be too pure, and the slightest stain can corrupt it.

I pity you, Roxane ; your chastity so long tested deserved a husband who would never have left you, and could himself have repressed the desires that your virtue alone is able to subdue. [4]

Paris this 7th day of the moon of Regeb 1712

[1] The language here is strikingly similar to the justifications often given for life in a convent : see for example Hieronome Platus's *The Happiness of the Religious State*, n. p., 1632.

[2] Roxane's principal characteristic, her reputation for "ferocious virtue", will be evoked later, in letter 149.

[3] According to Chardin, the notion of stroll is foreign to the Persian mentality.

[4] The tragic tone of this letter, reflecting Usbek's rather formal relationship with Roxane, his most cherished wife, is very different from the one he sent to Zachi (letter 19). Nevertheless, Roxane will not again be mentioned until letter 143. Nothing confirms the confidence he expresses with regard to her devotion to him, as there is not a single letter from her until letter 148, more than seven years later.