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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Usbek to his wife Zachi [1] in the Isfahan seraglio

You have offended me, Zachi, and I feel in my heart urges that you ought to fear if my departure did not leave you the time to change your behavior and calm the violent jealousy tormenting me.

I hear that you have been found alone with the white eunuch Nadir, [2] who will pay for his infidelity and betrayal with his head. How have you have so forgotten yourself as not to realize that you are not permitted to receive a white eunuch in your room, while you have black ones whose duty is it to serve you ? [3] There is no point in your telling me that eunuchs are not men, and that your virtue sets you above thoughts that an imperfect resemblance could suggest to you. That will not do either for you or for me. For you, because you are doing something that the laws of the seraglio forbid you to do ; for me, because you violate my honor by exposing yourself to the gaze - nay, merely the gaze ? perhaps to the enterprises [4] - of a traitor who might have soiled you with his crimes, and even more by his regrets and the despair of his impotence.

Maybe you will tell me that you have always been faithful to me. But what choice did you have ? How could you have evaded the vigilance of those black eunuchs who are so taken aback by the life you lead ? How could you have broken those bolts and those doors that keep you locked in ? You vaunt a virtue that is not free ; and your impure desires have perhaps a thousand times denied you the merit and the reward for that fidelity you so vaunt.

Supposing you have not done all that I have reason to suspect ; that the traitor did not put his sacrilegious hands on you ; that you refused to feast his eyes on his master's delights ; that, with your clothes on, you kept that frail barrier between him and yourself ; that, himself struck by a holy respect, he lowered his eyes ; that, his boldness failing, he trembled at the punishments he is setting in store for himself : were all that true, it is no less true that you have done something counter to your duty ; and if you have violated it for nothing, without gratifying your restive inclinations, what would have done to satisfy them ? What would you yet do if you could escape that sacred place, which to you is a harsh prison, as it is for your companions a favorable haven from the attacks of vice, a holy temple where your sex loses its helplessness and becomes invincible, despite all the disadvantages of nature ? What would you do if, left to yourself, you had nothing to defend you but your love for me, which is so grievously offended, and your duty, which you have so unworthily betrayed ? Sacred are the ways of the country where you live, which preserve you from attack by the vilest slaves ? You must thank me for the constraint under which I keep you, since it is only because of it that you still deserve to live.

You cannot suffer the chief of the eunuchs, because he always has his eyes on your behavior, and gives you wise advice. His face is so horrible, you say, that you cannot look at him without cringing, as if we placed more beautiful objects in that sort of position. What you regret is not having in his place the white eunuch who dishonors you.

But what did your first slave do to you ? She told you that the liberties you were taking with the young Zelide [5] were indecent : that is the reason for your ire.

I ought to be a severe judge, Zachi ; I am but a husband, who is trying to find you innocent. My love for Roxane, [6] my new wife, has left to me all the affection I should have for you, who are not less fair. I share my love between you, and Roxane's only advantage is that which virtue can add to beauty.

Smyrna this 12th day of the moon of Zilcade 1712 [7]

[1] This letter is in part a response to letter 3 of 21 March 1711, but it is provoked above all by information received in the interim from Isfahan (but not part of the collection) : see note following.

[2] Sole mention, here and in the following letter, of this person. As this letter is dated 12 January 1712, the information received by Usbek in Smyrna must have left Isfahan, at the latest, three or four months earlier : Zachi has taken not more than six months to be betray the "passion" she had expressed so emphatically in letter 3. Cf also Supplementary letter 9.

[3] "There are two sorts of eunuchs to guard the sultan's wives and those of the great lords. Some are white, and these rarely approach the women, but are charged with guarding the gates of the harem ; the others are black, their faces hideous, and are completely cut off, as are also the former, and it is these who guard the interior of the harem." (Tavernier, book V, ch. xiv ; vol. I, p. 705.) On white eunuchs, see letter 20, note 1.

[4] The allusion to the eunuch's "enterprises" recognizes that castration did not necessarily deprive them of all sexual motivation : "they say that eunuchs, although they are totally amputated, are nevertheless able to give and receive pleasure in intercourse with women" (Chardin, VI, 231).

[5] The same slave of Zephis with whom she was caught in a compromising situation earlier (letter 4) ; cf. letter 51, note 3.

[6] First mention of Roxane, fourth wife of Usbek, who will be the recipient of letter 24 and the author of letters 148 and 150. Roxane is an authentic Persian name, that of one sister of king Cambyses II (cf. letter 65, note 4) ; but the echo of Racine's Roxane in *Bazajet* serves to reinforce the tragic overtones which will be reinforced in letter 150.

[7] "Zilcadé" corresponds to January ; the year is necessarily 1712, as in the following letter.