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- Persian Letters - Letters -

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Ibben [1] to Usbek in Paris

Three ships have arrived here without bringing me any news of you. Are you ill, or do you enjoy making me worry ?

If you do not love me in a country where you have no ties, what will it be in the middle of Persia and in the bosom of your family ? But maybe I am mistaken : you are amiable enough to find friends everywhere. The heart is a citizen of every country : how can a good soul keep from making new commitments ? I admit that I though I respect old friendships, but I am not unhappy to make new ones everywhere.

In whatever land I have been, I have lived as if I had to spend my life there ; I have had the same zeal for virtuous people, the same compassion or rather the same kindness for the unfortunate, the same esteem for those whom prosperity has not blinded. That is my character, Usbek ; wherever I find men, I shall pick myself some friends.

There is a Gheber [2] here who, after you, I think, holds the first place in my heart ; he is the very soul of probity. Particular reasons have obliged him to retire to this city, where he lives tranquilly from the product of an honest trade, with a wife he loves. His life is constellated with generous deeds ; and although he aspires to a life of obscurity, he has in his heart more heroism than the greatest monarchs.

I have spoken to him a thousand times of you. I show him all of your letters ; I note that that pleases him, and I already see that you have a friend whom you do not know.

You will find his principal adventures here. However reluctant he was to write them down, he could not refuse them to my friendship, and I confide them to yours.

The Story of Aphéridon and Astarté [3]

I was born among the Ghebers, in a religion that is perhaps the most ancient in the world. I was so unfortunate that love came to me before reason. I was scarcely six when I could not do without my sister ; my eyes were always fixed on her, and when she left me for a moment she found them bathed in tears ; my love increased by the day no less than my age. My father, marvelling at so strong a sympathy, would like to have seen us married, in keeping with the Ghebers' ancient custom introduced by Cambyses ; but fear of the Muhammadans, under whose yoke we live, prevents those of our nation from thinking of these holy alliances [4] which our religion less permits than commands, and which are such naive images of the union already formed by nature.

Therefore my father, seeing that it would have been dangerous to follow my inclination and his, resolved to extinguish a flame he thought incipient, but which was already at its apogee ; he pretexted a journey, and took me with him, leaving my sister in the hands of a woman who was a relative of his, for my mother had died two years earlier. I will not tell you the despair of this separation ; I embraced my sister, who was bathed in tears, but I shed none, for grief had made me virtually numb. We arrived at Tiflis, [5] and my father, after entrusting my education to one of our relatives, left me there and returned back home.

Some time later, I learned that he had, using the influence of one of his friends, got my sister into the king's beiram, [6] where she was in the service of a sultana. Had I been notified of her death, I would not have been more bewildered ; for besides the fact that I lost hope of seeing her again, her entrance into the beiram had made a Muhammadan of her ; and following the prejudice of that religion, she could now look at me only in horror. Meanwhile, unable to live any longer in Tiflis, weary with myself and with life, I returned to Isfahan. My first words to my father were bitter ones ; I reproached him for putting his daughter in a place where one does not enter without changing religion. You have drawn the wrath of God upon your family, I said, and of the sun which lights your way ; you have done worse than if you had defiled the elements, since you have defiled your daughter's soul, which is not less pure : it will kill me with grief and love, but may my death be the only punishment God will make you feel ! With these words I left, and for two years I spent my time going to watch the walls of the beiram and contemplate the place where my sister might be, exposing myself a thousand times every day to being massacred by the eunuchs who mount the guard around those fearsome premises.

Finally my father died, and the sultana whom my sister served, seeing her grow in beauty by the day, became jealous of her, and married her off to a eunuch [7] who wished for her passionately. By this means my sister left the seraglio, and with her eunuch took a house in Isfahan.

For more than three months I could not speak to her ; the eunuch, the most jealous of all men, forever put me off under various pretexts. Finally I entered his beiram, and he had me speak to her through a jalousie ; the eyes of a lynx could not have made her out, so enveloped was she in clothing and veils, and I could recognize her only by the sound of her voice. What was my emotion when I found myself so near to her and so far from her ! I controlled myself, for I was being observed. For her part, it appeared to me that she shed some tears. Her husband tried to make some lame excuses to me, but I treated him like the last of the slaves. He was befuddled when he saw that I was speaking with my sister a language he did not know : it was ancient Persian, which is our sacred language. Really, dear sister, I said, is it true that you have renounced the religion of your fathers ? I know that upon entering the beiram you had to make a profession of Muhammadism ; but tell me, could your heart have consented as your lips did to renounce a religion that allows me to love you ? And for whom do you renounce this religion which we ought to cherish ? For a poor wretch still marked by the chains he has worn ; who, were he a man, would be the lowest of them all ? Dear brother, she said, this man of whom you speak is my husband : I must honor him, however unworthy he seems to you, and I would be the lowest of women if... Ah, dear sister ! I said, you are a Gheber : he is not your husband, nor can he be ; if you are faithful like your fathers, you must regard him only as a monster. Alas, she said, I can see that religion only from afar ! Scarcely did I know its precepts when I had to forget them. You see that this language which I speak with you is no longer familiar to me, and I have the greatest difficulty expressing myself ; but be sure that the memory of our childhood still charms me ; that I have had nothing but false joys since that time ; that not a day has gone by but I have thought of you ; that you had a bigger share in my marriage than you think ; and I was persuaded to do it only by the hope of seeing you again. But how dear this day that came to me so dear will yet be ! I see you all beside yourself ; my husband is trembling with rage and jealousy : I will not see you again ; I am speaking with you no doubt for the last time in my life. If that were the case, dear brother, it would not be long. With these words she broke down, and finding herself unable to continue the conversation, she left me the most unhappy of all men.

Three or four days later I asked to see my sister ; the cruel eunuch would have liked to prevent me, but besides the fact that these sorts of husbands do not have over their wives the same authority as others, he loved my sister so desperately that he could not refuse her anything. I saw her again in the same place, and in the same finery, accompanied by two slaves, which made me have recourse to our private language. Dear sister, I said, how is it that I am unable to see you without being in a dreadful situation ? The walls that keep you all imprisoned, these bolts and these gratings, these wretched guards who observe you, put me in a rage ; how have you lost the sweet liberty which your ancestors enjoyed ? Your mother, who was so chaste, gave her husband no warrant of her virtue but her virtue itself ; they both lived happily in mutual confidence, and the simplicity of their behavior was for them a treasure a thousand times more precious than the false glitter you seem to enjoy in this sumptuous house. By losing your religion, you have lost your liberty, your happiness, and that precious equality that is the honor of your sex. But what is still worse is that you are not the wife, for you cannot be, but the slave of a slave who has been demoted from

humanity. Oh, dear brother, she said, respect my husband ; respect the religion I have embraced. According to that religion, I have not been able to hear you or speak to you without crime. What ? dear sister, I said, furious ; so you believe this religion is true ! Oh, she said, how advantageous it would be to me if it were not ! I am making for it too great a sacrifice to be able not to believe in it ; and if my doubts... With these words she fell silent. Yes, your doubts, dear sister, are well founded, whatever they are. What do you expect from a religion when it makes you unhappy in this world and leaves you no expectation for the next ? Remember that ours is the most ancient on earth ; that it has always flourished in Persia, and has no other origin than this empire whose beginnings are unknown ; that it is only chance that introduced Muhammadism here ; that that sect has been established here, not by the path of persuasion, but of conquest. If our natural princes had not been weak, you would still see the cult of those ancient wizards prevailing [8] here. Think back to those distant eras : everything will speak to you of wizardry and nothing of the Muhammadan sect, which several thousand years later was not yet even in its infancy. But, she said, even if my religion were more modern than yours, it is at least purer, since it worships only God, whereas you also worship the sun, the stars, fire and even the elements. I see, dear sister, that you have learned from the Muslims to slander our holy religion. We worship neither heavenly bodies nor the elements, and our fathers have never worshipped them ; never have they raised temples to them, never have they offered sacrifices to them ; they merely devoted a religious reverence to them, but inferior, as the handiwork and manifestations of the deity. [9] But, dear sister, in the name of God who enlightens us, receive this holy book I bring you. It is the book of our lawgiver Zoroaster [10] : read it without preconceptions ; receive into your heart the rays of light that will light your way as you read it ; remember your fathers, who have so long honored the sun in the holy city of Balk [11] ; and finally, remember me, who have no hope for rest, fortune, or life except in your change. I turned away exalted, and left her to decide alone the most important matter I could ever have in my life.

I returned there two days later. I did not speak to her ; I waited in silence my decree of life or death. You are loved, dear brother, she said, and by a Gheber. I have long struggled, but oh how many difficulties love resolves ! How relieved I am ! I no longer fear loving you too much ; I am free to put no limits on my love : its very excess is legitimate. Oh how this concurs with the state of my heart ! But you, who have managed to break the chains which my mind had forged for itself, when will you break those that bind my hands ? From this moment I give myself to you ; show me your quick acceptance of me how much you value this present. Dear brother, the first time I am able to embrace you, I think I will die in your arms. I would never express adequately the joy I felt at those sweet words. I felt and indeed was in an instant the happiest of all men. I almost saw the realization of all the desires I had conceived in twenty-five years of life, and the vanishing of all the concerns that had made it so laborious. But when I had gotten a little used to these sweet thoughts, I saw that I was not so close to my happiness as I had at once imagined, although I had surmounted the greatest of all the obstacles. I had to fool the vigilants of her guards ; I dared confide the secret of my life in no one : we had to do everything, she and I ; if I failed in my attempt, I ran the risk of being empaled, but I saw no more cruel punishment than to fail. We agreed that she would send to me for a clock which my father had left to her, and I would place in it a file for sawing the jalousies on her window that faced the street and a knotted cord for coming down ; I would see no more of her, but would go every night beneath her window to wait until she could carry out her plan. I spent fifteen entire nights without seeing anyone, because she had not found the right moment. Finally, on the sixteenth night, I heard a saw at work ; every now and then it was interrupted, and in those intervals my fear was inexpressible. Finally, after an hour's work, I saw her attaching the cord : she lowered herself and slid into my arms. I had no more awareness of the danger ; I and remained a long time without moving from there. I led her out of the city, where I had a horse at the ready ; I mounted her behind me, and fled with all possible haste a place that could be so fateful to us. We arrived before daylight at the house of a Gheber in a lone spot to which he had withdrawn, living frugally by the labor of his hands. We did not deem it opportune to remain with him, and following his advice we entered a dense forest and hid in the hollow of an old oak until the news of our flight had dissipated. We were living together in this remote abode without witnesses, repeating ceaselessly that we would love each other for ever, awaiting the opportunity for some Gheber priest to perform the marriage ceremony prescribed by our holy books. Dear sister, I would say, how holy is this union : nature had united us ; our holy Law will unite us further. Finally a priest came to quell our amorous impatience : in the peasant's home he performed all the ceremonies of marriage ; he blessed us and wished us a thousand times all the vigor of Gustaspe and the holiness of Hohoraspe. [12] Soon after we left Persia, where we were not safe, and withdrew into Georgia. We lived there for a year, each day more enchanted with each other ; but as my money was going to run out, and I feared misery for my sister, not for myself, I

left her to go seek some assistance among our relatives. Never was a farewell more tender. But my journey was not only fruitless, but fatal : for having found on the one hand all our property confiscated, and on the other my relatives nearly prevented from assisting me, I only brought back precisely the money required for my return. But what was my despair : I no longer found my sister. A few days before my arrival, some Tartars [13] had made an incursion in the city where she was ; and as they found her comely, they took her, and sold her to some Jews who were going to Turkey, and left only a small daughter to whom she had given birth some months earlier. I followed these Jews, and caught up with them three leagues from there. My prayers and my tears were vain ; they always demanded of me thirty tomans, [14] and never conceded a single one. After trying everyone, imploring the protection of Turkish and Christian priests, I tried an Armenian merchant : I sold him my daughter, and sold myself also for thirty-five tomans ; I went to the Jews, I gave them thirty tomans, and took the five remaining to my sister, whom I had not yet seen. You are free, I said to her, dear sister, and I can embrace you ; here are five tomans I bring you ; I regret that I was not purchased for more. What, she said, you have sold yourself ? Yes, I said. Oh poor man, what have you done ? Was I not unfortunate enough without you working to make more so ? Your freedom was consoling me, and your slavery is going to put me in the grave. Oh dear brother, how cruel is your love ! And my daughter ; why do I not see her ? I have sold her also, I told her. We both broke into tears, and had not the strength to say anything. Finally I went to find my master, and my sister got there almost as soon as I. She dropped to her knees. I ask you for servitude, she said, as others ask you for freedom : take me, you will get more for me than for my husband. A contest ensued that drew tears from my master's eyes. Poor man, she said, did you think I could accept my freedom at the price of yours ? My lord, you see two unfortunates who will die if you separate us. I give myself to you, pay me : perhaps that money and my services can some day obtain from you what I dare not ask of you. It is in your interest not to separate us : be sure I hold his life in my hands. The Armenian was a kind man, who was moved by our misfortunes : Serve me both of you with loyalty and zeal, and I promise you that in one year I will give you your freedom. I see that neither of you deserves the misfortunes of your situation. If, once you are free, you are as happy as you deserve to be, if fortune smiles on you, I am certain that you will make good to me the loss I will sustain. We both embraced his knees, and followed him on his journey. We relieved each other in the labors of servitude, and I was delighted when I had been able to perform the work that was my sister's lot.

The end of the year came ; our master kept his word and freed us. We returned to Tiflis. There I found an old friend of my father's who was successfully practicing medicine in that city ; he loaned me some money, with which I did some trading. Some business later called me to Smyrna, where I settled. I have been living here for six years, where I enjoy the most amiable and agreeable company in the world ; unity reigns in my family, and I would not change my situation for that of all the kings in the world. I was fortunate enough to find the Armenian merchant again to whom I owe everything, and have rendered him signal services.

Smyrna this 27th day of the moon of Gemmadi II, 1714

[1] The only letter from Ibben - unless we count Supplementary Letter 3 - who remains in Smyrna, and who on the other hand is the recipient of numerous letters from both Rica and Usbek.

[2] "Gheber, a Persian word signifying particularly a Zoroastrian, a fire worshipper, and one who professes the ancient Persian religion" (d'Herbelot, art. "Ghebr") ; also called Parsee in English. Paul Vernière has shown (p. 138-148) that Montesquieu derives most of his information about them from Thomas Hyde's *Historia religionis veterum persarum* ('History of the religion of the ancient Persians', 1700).

[3] The name of a Semitic goddess (Ashtar), assimilated through various paths with the Ishtar of Mesopotamia, and even with the Iranian Anahita and the Greek Aphrodite.

[4] According to Herodotus (III, 31), Cambyses II, king of Persia from 530 to 522 B.C.E., married two of his sisters without authorization by the law. According to the *Life of Gushtasp* by the Arab historian Abu Muhammed Mustapha, quoted by Thomas Hyde, it is Zerhudst (Zoroastre) who allowed

incest (Hyde, ch. xxiv, p. 313-314.)

[5] Today called Tbilisi.

[6] A term perhaps confused with haram ; Montesquieu's usual term is *sérail* (cf. letter 2, note 2).

[7] See letters 9 and 51 on the possible marriage of a eunuch.

[8] They are the Sassanians or Sassanides : "Thus did the Persians call the kings of their fourth dynasty" (d'Herbelot, art. "Sassanian," p. 761-762).

[9] On the question of whether the Ghebers worshipped the sun, Tavernier's answered : "they say they recognize but one God, creator of heaven and earth, and worship him only. As for fire, they keep and revere it in thankfulness for the great miracle by which their Prophet was delivered from the flames." (book IV, ch. viii, vol. I, p. 490). The worship of the sun is ordained in Zoroaster's rule XCVI.

[10] The Zend-Avesta was, according to various sources, written by Zoroaster or sent from heaven, affirms Shahristâni, quoted by Hyde (ch. xxii, p. 299). Cf. Chardin : " This Zerdoucht, or Zoroaster, was the first to write methodically on the sciences, and the religion of the Persians. The Ghebers tell a thousand fables about him, making him a wholly divine man" (IX, 145).

[11] According to Hyde, Zerdusht converted Gushtâsp in Balch (p. 314-315).

[12] Hyde devotes his chapter xxiii (p. 301-307) to Gushtasp (son of Lohrasp), whose name is evoked by the priest in nuptial ceremonies ("Be strong like king Gushtap", p. 303).

[13] Muslims "who inhabit almost the whole northern part of Asia" (*Encyclopédie*, art. "Tartares," vol. XV, p. 920).

[14] Tavernier values the toman at 46 livres (book I, ch. xii ; vol. I, p. 136).