

<http://montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article3332>



- Persian Letters - Letters -

Publication date: mercredi 15 avril 2020

---

**Copyright © Montesquieu - Tous droits réservés**

---

*The principal eunuch to Ibbi [1] in Erzerum*

---

You follow your former master in his travels ; you survey provinces and realms. Worries could make no impression on you : each moment reveals new things to you ; everything you see is a diversion to you and makes you pass time unawares.

Such is not my case. I, locked up in a horrible prison, am constantly surrounded by the same objects and devoured by the same anxieties ; I groan under the weight of the cares and worries of fifty years, and in the course of a long life I cannot say I have known a peaceful day or a tranquil moment.

When my first master had conceived the cruel design of entrusting his wives to me, and obliged me with enticements supported by a thousand threats to separate myself from myself forever, [2] I, weary of serving in the most arduous functions, figured I was sacrificing my passions to my tranquillity and my fortune. What a fool I was ! My preoccupied mind made me see the compensation, and not the loss ; I hoped I would be delivered from the temptations of love by the inability to satisfy it. Alas, they extinguished in me the effect of the passions, without extinguishing their cause ; and far from being relieved of them, I found myself surrounded by objects that constantly provoked them. I entered the seraglio where everyone made me feel regret for what I had lost : I felt aroused at every moment ; a thousand natural graces seemed to exposed themselves in my presence me only to demoralize me ; to make matters worse, I had a satisfied man constantly before me. In that unstable time I never escorted a wife to my master's bed, I never undressed her, without returning to my room with a heart full of rage, and terrible despair in my soul.

That is how I spent my miserable youth ; I had no other confidant than myself. Burdened with vexations and ruefulness, I had to stifle them ; and these very wives whom I was tempted to look upon with such affectionate eyes I could only imagine looking back at me sternly : I was doomed if they had read me : what advantage would they not have take of that ?

I remember that one day when I was putting a wife into the bath, I felt so excited that I utterly lost my wits and dared to put my hand in a dangerous place. My first thought was that that day was my last, yet I was fortunate enough to avoid a thousand deaths ; but the beauty to whom I had betrayed my weakness made me pay dearly for her silence : I entirely lost my authority over her ; and she has since forced me into connivances that have a thousand times put my life at risk.

Finally the ardors of youth passed ; I am old, and find myself in this respect in a tranquil state. I look on women with indifference, and I return all their contempt, and all the torments they have made me suffer. I always remember that I was born to command them, and I feel like I become a man again on those occasions when I still command them. I have hated them since I started considering them dispassionately, and my reason has allowed me to see all their weaknesses. Although I guard them for another, the pleasure of making them obey me gives me an inner joy ; when I deprive them of everything, it seems to me it is for me, and I always get an unseen satisfaction from it. I am in the seraglio as in a small empire, and my ambition, the only passion I have left, gets some satisfaction. I see with pleasure that everything has to do with me, and that I am necessary at every moment ; I willingly assume the hatred of all these women, which affirms me in my post. Nor is it an ingrate they are dealing with : they find I have anticipated all their most innocent pleasures ; I always appear to them as an unshakeable barrier ; they make plans, and I quickly put a stop to them. I have refusals at the ready ; I bristle with scruples ; the only words ever on my lips are duty, virtue,

shame, and modesty. I drive them to despair by speaking forever about the weakness of their sex, and the master's authority, then I

protest I am obliged to be so strict, and seem to want to make them understand that my only motive is their own interest, and my great attachment to them.

Not that I in turn do not have an infinite number of contrarities, and that every day these vindictive women do not seek to exceed those I give them. They have awesome turnabouts : there is something between us like an ebb and flow of domination and submission. They always see that I get the most humiliating tasks ; they affect a contempt without parallel ; and without regard for my age, they make me get up ten times a night for the slightest trifle ; I am constantly deluged with orders and commands, tasks, and whimsies ; they seem to take turns keeping me occupied, and their fantasies come in succession. Often they take pleasure in making me work harder. They have me plied with false information ; sometimes someone comes to tell me that a young man has been seen about the walls, another time that a noise has been heard, or that a letter is to be passed. All this consternates me, and they laugh at my consternation ; they are delighted to see me thus torment myself. Another time they attach me outside their doors, chaining me there night and day. They are very good at feigning illnesses, faints, and frights ; they have no shortage of pretexts to lead me to the point they wish. I owe them on these occasions a blind obedience and boundless indulgence : a refusal in the mouth of a man like me would be something unheard-of, and if I hesitated to obey them, they would be entitled to punish me. I would as soon lose my life, my dear Ibbi, as stoop to that humiliation.

This is not all : I am never sure for an instant of being in favor with my master ; they are just so many enemies in his heart, whose only thought is to undo me. They have moments with him when I am not heard, moments when nothing is refused, moments when I am always in the wrong. It is angry women I lead to my master's bed : do you think they are working there on my behalf, and that my side is the strongest ? I have everything to fear from their tears, their sighs, their caresses, and even their pleasures : they are in the arena of their triumphs ; their charms become dreadful for me ; present services erase in a moment all my past services, and there is no way I can depend on a master who is no longer himself.

How often have I gone to bed in favor, only to arise disgraced ? The day when I was so ignominiously whipped throughout the seraglio, what had I done ? I left a wife in my master's arms ; once his desires were inflamed, she shed a torrent of tears ; she complained, and so calibrated her complaints that they grew in proportion to the love she was arousing. How could I stand up to such a critical moment ? I was undone when I expected it the least ; I was the victim of an amorous deal and a treaty that sighs had made. Such, dear Ibbi, is the cruel state in which I have always lived.

How fortunate you are ! your attentions are limited solely to the person of Usbek ; you can easily please him, and keep yourself in his favor until the last day of your life.

*The Isfahan seraglio this last day of the moon of Saphar 1711*

---

[1] The only letter to this individual, who is author of none. The principal eunuch and the principal black eunuch addressed in letter 2 are one and the same.

[2] On the implications of this expression, see note to letter 40.