

MONTESQUIEU

THE
PERSIAN LETTERS

Translated, with Introduction, by
GEORGE R. HEALY

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
Indianapolis/Cambridge

*Some Reflections on The Persian Letters*¹

Nothing in *The Persian Letters* has given more pleasure than the unexpected discovery of a kind of story in them. It can be seen to have a beginning, a development, and an end, and its various characters are linked in a chain. In proportion as their stay in Europe lengthens, the manners of this part of the world appear to them less astonishing and less bizarre; and they are more or less struck by the bizarre and the astonishing as their personalities differ. On the other hand, the Asiatic seraglio grows more disorderly in proportion to the length of Usbek's absence from it—that is to say, in proportion as frenzy increases and love declines.

Moreover, stories of this sort are usually successful because the characters themselves recount their actual experiences, and this makes us feel their passions better than any mere narration could. This is one of the reasons for the popularity of several charming works which have appeared since the publication of *The Persian Letters*.²

Finally, in ordinary stories, digressions are permitted only when they form in themselves a separate and new story; in them philosophic arguments cannot be included, because the characters have not been gathered together for the purpose of speculating, and to make them do so violates the nature and design of the work. But in the epistolary form, where accident selects the characters and where the subjects treated are not dependent upon any preconceived design or plan, the author permits himself to join philosophy, politics, and ethics to the

¹ [The "Reflections" were first added by Montesquieu to the 1754 edition.]

² [In a manuscript draft of the "Reflections" found at La Brède, Montesquieu cited Samuel Richardson's *Famela* (1741) and Mme. de Graffigny's *Lettres peruviennees* (1747) as examples of such "charming works."]]

story, and to bind the whole with a secret and, in some respects, hitherto unknown chain.

The Persian Letters had such a prodigious sale when it first appeared that publishers made every effort to obtain sequels. They buttonholed everyone they met. "Sir," they would say, "write me some more *Persian Letters*."

What I have just said, however, should convince the reader that they can have no sequel, much less any admixture with even the cleverest letters from the hand of another.³

Some people have found certain remarks excessively bold; but they are advised to regard the nature of the work itself. The Persians who play such a large part in it found themselves suddenly transplanted in Europe—which is to say, in another world. For a time, therefore, it was necessary to represent them as full of ignorance and prejudice; the author's purpose was to show the formation and development of their ideas. Their first thoughts had to be singular, and it seemed that the author had only to give them that kind of singularity which can harmonize with wit, to depict their sentiments on everything which appeared extraordinary to them. Far from intending to touch upon any principle of our religion, he did not even suspect himself of imprudence. The remarks in question are always found joined to sentiments of surprise and astonishment, never to a sense of inquiry, and much less to one of criticism. In speaking of our religion, these Persians could not be made to appear better instructed than when they spoke of our customs and manners; and if they sometimes find our dogmas strange, their observations are always marked by a complete ignorance of the links between these dogmas and our other truths.

This justification the author submits out of his love for these great truths, to say nothing of his respect for the human race, which he never intended to strike in its most sensitive spot. The reader is thus entreated always to regard these remarks of which I speak as the effects of surprise in men who

³ [Probably a reference to Germain Saint-Foix's *Lettres turques*, published with *The Persian Letters* in a 1744 edition.]

were bound to be surprised, or as paradoxes made by men who were in no position to make them. He is asked to notice that the entire charm of the work is in the constant contrast between things as they really are and the singular, naïve, or bizarre way in which they are perceived. Certainly the nature and the design of *The Persian Letters* are so obvious that they can deceive only those who wish to deceive themselves.

self-knowledge
as seen

*Introduction*¹

I am not writing a dedication here, nor do I seek protection for this book. It will be read if it is good; if bad, I am not anxious that it be read.

I have issued these first letters to gauge the public taste; I have many more in my portfolio which I may release later.

This, however, is only on condition that I remain unknown; I shall be silent the moment my name becomes public. I know a woman who walks well enough, but who limps when watched.² There are enough faults in this work without also exposing my person to criticism. Were I known, it would be said, "His book is inconsistent with his character; he ought to occupy his time to better purpose; this is not worthy of a serious man." Critics never miss a chance to make such remarks, for they can do so without needlessly exerting their brains.

The Persians who write here were lodged in my home, and we spent our time together. Since they regarded me as a man from another world, they hid nothing from me; indeed, people transplanted from such a distance could have no more secrets. They would show me most of their letters; I copied them. I even fell upon several which they would surely have kept from me, so mortifying were they to Persian vanity and jealousy.

I am, then, only a translator, and all my efforts have been to adapt the work to our taste. I have spared the reader as much as possible of the Asiatic idiom and saved him from a countless number of sublime expressions which would have been supremely boring.

But this is not all I have done for him. I have cut out those

¹ [The Introduction first appeared in 1721.]

² [Probably an allusion to Montesquieu's wife, who limped slightly.]

long compliments, which Orientals abuse no less than we, and I have omitted a vast number of those trivialities which barely survive exposure to light, and which always ought to die within the circle of intimate friendship.

If most of those who have published collections of letters had done the same, they would have seen their works disappear completely.

One thing has often astonished me: to see these Persians sometimes as learned as I in the customs and manners of the nation, to the point of knowing the most subtle details and of noticing things which I am sure have escaped many a German who has traveled in France. I attribute this to the long time they have stayed here; I might add that it is easier for an Asiatic to learn about the customs of the French in one year than for a Frenchman to learn Asian customs in four, since the former are as communicative as the latter are reserved.

Usage permits every translator, and even the most barbarous commentator, to adorn the head of his version or his commentary with a panegyric on the original, and to extol its utility, merit, and excellence. I have not done so; it should be easy to guess my reasons. One of the best is that it would be a most tedious thing, put in a place which already is quite tedious itself, namely, a preface.

LETTER I 3

Usbek to his friend Rustan, at Ispahan

We stayed only one day at Com. After we had made our devotions at the tomb of the virgin who gave birth to twelve prophets, we resumed our journey, and yesterday, twenty-five days after our departure from Ispahan, we arrived at Tauris.¹

Rica and I are perhaps the first Persians who, urged by a thirst for knowledge, have left their country and renounced the delights of a tranquil life in favor of the laborious search for wisdom.

We were born in a flourishing realm, but we did not believe that its boundaries were those of our knowledge, nor that the light of the Orient should alone illuminate us.

Tell me what they are saying about our journey; do not flatter me: I am not counting on many supporters. Address your letter to Erzeroum,² where I will stay for some time. Farewell, my dear Rustan. Rest assured that wherever I am in the world, there you have a faithful friend.

*Tauris, the 15th of the moon of Saphar, 1711*³

¹ [Com (Qum) and Tauris (Tabriz) are Persian (Iranian) cities; Ispahan (Isfahan, Esfahan), before it was sacked by the Afghans in 1722, was the capital and chief city of Persia. The virgin venerated in the Com mosque is Fatima, daughter of Mousa al Kassim, the sixth successor of Ali (Hail), Mohammed's son-in-law. Montesquieu evidently confuses her with Mohammed's daughter Fatima, Ali's wife and thus mother of the Alid line if not of "twelve prophets."]

² [Erzeroum (Erzurum) is the chief city of Turkish Armenia.]

³ [For information on the Persian calendar, see p. xxxv.]

I note with gratification that everything depends on me, that I am absolutely necessary; and I willingly accept the hatred of these women, for that confirms me in my post. In this way I am not undeserving of their hate: I block all their pleasures, however innocent; I am an unshakable barrier; they conceive projects and I suddenly frustrate them; I am armed with refusals and bristle with scruples; I mouth only words of duty, virtue, chastity, and modesty; I drive them to despair by continually speaking of the weakness of their sex and the authority of their master. Finally, I lament that I am required to be severe, and I pretend to be concerned that they realize I act only in their best interest and out of true affection for them.

In turn, of course, I suffer an infinity of disagreeable acts, by which these vindictive women seek to retaliate for what I do to them. Their revenge is dreadful. Between us there is a constant ebb and flow of authority and submission. They continually seek to have the most humiliating tasks fall on me; they affect a contempt without parallel; and with no regard for my age, they rouse me ten times nightly for the slightest trifle. I am overwhelmed with orders, commands, whims; they seem to take turns in bothering me with successive fantasies. Often they delight in making me redouble my vigilance, and in bringing me false rumors. Sometimes they tell me of a young man prowling around the walls, or that they heard a noise, or that someone is to receive a letter. All this unnerves me, and they laugh, pleased to see me tormenting myself. At other times they make me suspicious enough to guard their doors day and night. They cleverly feign sickness, swoons, and frights, never lacking pretexts to lead me where they wish. On such occasions my only possible action is blind obedience and limitless compliance; for refusal from someone like me is unheard of, and if I hesitated to obey them they would have the right to punish me. And I would rather die, Ibbi, than descend to that humiliation.

Nor is that all. From one minute to the next I am never certain of my master's favor. In his heart each woman is my enemy, dreaming only of destroying me. They command parts

of the day when I am not heard, when they are refused nothing, when I am always wrong. I conduct an angry woman to my master's bed; do you suppose that she labors there for me, that my interests prevail? I have everything to fear from their tears and their sighs, even from their embraces and pleasures. They are in the place of their triumphs; their charms terrify me; their present services to my master efface in a moment all mine past, and responsibility vanishes in a master who is no longer himself.

How often have I gone to bed in favor and awakened in disgrace? The day I was whipped so ignominiously around the seraglio, what had I done? I left a woman in my master's arms; as soon as she saw him enflamed, she burst into a torrent of tears; she complained, and scaled her complaints so well that they augmented exactly in proportion to the love she aroused. How could I defend myself at such a critical moment? I was doomed when I least expected it, the victim of amorous negotiations and a treaty composed of sighs. Such, my dear Ibbi, is the cruel state in which I have always lived.

How fortunate you are! Your duties are only to Usbek personally. It is easy for you to please him, and to hold his favor to the end of your days.

*The seraglio at Ispahan, the last day of the moon
of Saphar, 1711*

LETTER X 6

Mirza to his friend Usbek, at Erzeroum

You are the only one who can recompense me for Rica's absence, and only Rica could console me for yours. We miss you, Usbek, for you were the life of our company. How difficult it is to break the bonds formed by both heart and mind.

We are much given to discussion here, usually on moral

questions. The problem was posed yesterday, whether men were made happier by the pleasures and satisfactions of the senses or by the practice of virtue. I have often heard you say that men were born to be virtuous, and that justice is a quality as innate in them as existence. Would you please explain to me what you mean?

I have talked with the mollahs¹ about this, but they drive me to despair with their quotations from the Koran; for I speak to them not as a true believer, but as a man, a citizen, and as the head of a family. Farewell.

Ispahan, the last day of the moon of Saphar, 1711

LETTER XI 10

Usbek to Mirza, at Ispahan

You renounce your judgment, to defer to mine; you even deign to consult me; you believe me capable of instructing you. My dear Mirza, the one thing that flatters me even more than the good opinion you have of me is the friendship that prompts it.

To satisfy your request, I do not believe it necessary to use abstract arguments. There are certain truths of which one must not only be persuaded but-must feel; such are the truths of morality. Perhaps this bit of history will touch you more than any philosophical subtleties.

In Arabia there once lived a small tribe called the Troglodytes, descendants of those ancient Troglodytes who, if we can believe the historians, more resembled beasts than men.¹

¹ ["Mollah" (mullah, mollah) is an honorific title given to learned religious dignitaries and is roughly equivalent to "theologian."]

¹⁸³
¹ [In ancient legends (see Herodotus IV), the distant and unknown regions around the southern coasts of the Red Sea were inhabited by savage and fierce cave dwellers, or Troglodytes.]

But the people of whom I speak were not that deformed; they were not shaggy like bears, nor did they hiss, and they had two eyes. However, they were so brutal and ferocious that there was no principle of equity or justice among them.

They had a king of foreign origin who, hoping to correct the brutality of their nature, treated them harshly; but they conspired against him, killed him, and exterminated the entire royal family.

Having struck the blow, they assembled to choose a government, and after much dissent they elected magistrates. No sooner had they been elected, however, than they became intolerable, and they too were massacred.

Freed from this new yoke, the people now consulted only their own savage nature. All of them agreed that they would no longer obey anyone at all; each was to attend only to his personal interests, and to consider none other.

This unanimous resolution was extremely pleasing to all. Each said: "Why should I kill myself working for people who don't matter to me? I will think only of myself. I will be happy; what is it to me if the others are happy or not? I will satisfy all my needs, and after that, I won't care if the other Troglodytes are miserable."

When the month for sowing came, each said, "I will cultivate only as much of my fields as is needed to furnish me with grain for my sustenance; a greater quantity would be useless, and I am not going to trouble myself for nothing."

The land of this little realm was not all alike; some was high and arid, and in the lowlands some was watered by many streams. The first year was very dry, so that land in the high places was completely unproductive, while that which could be irrigated was very fertile. Thus the mountain people almost all perished of hunger, because their merciless neighbors refused to share their harvest.

The next year was very wet, and the high places were extraordinarily productive, while the lowlands were flooded. Again, half of the people cried famine, but they found the others to be as heartless as they themselves had been.

One of the chief men had a very beautiful wife; his neighbor fell in love with her and carried her off. This occasioned a great quarrel, and after many insults and blows they agreed to abide by the decision of a Troglodyte who had had some distinction under the earlier republics. They went to him and asked that he hear their arguments. "What is it to me," the man said, "whether this woman is yours, or yours? I have my field to cultivate; I am not going to waste my time in settling your differences and doing your business while I neglect my own. I ask you to leave me alone and not bother me any longer with your quarrels." Thereupon he left them, and went to work his land. The ravisher, who was the stronger man, swore to die rather than return the woman; and the other, wounded by his neighbor's injustice and the hardness of the judge, was returning home in despair, when he saw in his path a young and pretty woman returning from the well. No longer having a wife, he was attracted to her, and the more so when he discovered that she was the wife of the man he had hoped to employ as a judge, and who had been so insensitive to his misery. He seized her, and carried her off to his house.

Another man possessed a very fertile field, which he cultivated with great care. Two of his neighbors banded together, chased him from his house, and occupied his fields. Between them they made a compact to defend each other from anyone who in turn might seek to overthrow them, and, indeed, they managed to stay there for several months. But one man, tired of sharing what he could have for himself, killed the other and became sole master of the field. His rule did not last long: two other Troglodytes attacked him, and, too weak to defend himself, he was slaughtered.

Yet another Troglodyte, almost naked, saw some wool for sale and asked its price. The merchant said to himself, "At market price I could expect from this wool only enough money to buy two measures of grain; but I will sell it for four times that, so I can get eight measures." The other needed the wool, and paid the price. "I am pleased at this," said the merchant; "now I can buy some grain." "What was that?" the buyer re-

plied. "You need grain? I have some to sell, but the price may astonish you; you know grain is extremely expensive now, for famine reigns everywhere. But give me back my money, and I will give you one measure—but not one bit more, even if you were dying of hunger."

Meanwhile a dreadful disease was ravaging the country. A skillful physician came from a nearby country, and dispensed medicine so effectively that all those in his care were cured. When the disease had died out, he went to those he had treated and requested his fee. But he met with refusals everywhere, and returned to his own country, worn out by the rigors of a long journey. Shortly afterward, he learned that the same disease had sprung up again and was afflicting the ungrateful land even more than before. This time they did not wait for him to come to them but came to him themselves. "Begone," he told them. "Unjust men, your souls contain a poison more fatal than that which you want cured. You do not deserve a place on the earth, because you have no humanity, no sense of the rules of justice. I believe I would offend the gods who are punishing you, if I opposed their just anger."

Erzeroum, the 3rd of the moon of Gemmadi II,
1711

LETTER XII //

Usbek to the same, at Ispahan

You have seen, my dear Mirza, how the Troglodytes perished by their wickedness and became victims of their own injustice. Only two families in the entire nation escaped its ruin. For there were in this country two remarkable men, who were humane, just, and lovers of virtue. As much united by their upright hearts as by the corruption all about them, they re-

garded the general desolation with a pity that became a new bond between them. They labored together for their mutual benefit; their only differences were those that spring from sweet and tender friendship; and in a remote part of the country, apart from compatriots unworthy of their presence, they led a happy and tranquil life. The earth, cultivated by such virtuous hands, seemed to fructify spontaneously.

They loved their wives, and were beloved by them. Their entire attention was directed to educating their children in the ways of virtue; the miseries of their fellow countrymen were constantly represented to them and held up as the sorriest of examples. Above all, they were taught that individual interest is always bound to the common interest, that to try to separate them was to invite ruin, that virtue is not something costly to achieve nor painful to exercise, and that justice for others is a blessing for ourselves.

They soon had the consolation of virtuous fathers, seeing their children develop in their image. The young race grew before their eyes and increased through happy marriages; the community grew, but the bond of union remained, and virtue, far from dispersing in the crowd, was instead strengthened by new examples.

Who could describe the happiness of these Troglodytes? So just a people could not fail to gain the gods' favor. From the moment they first learned of the gods, they learned also to fear them, and religion softened manners that nature had left hard.

They instituted feasts in honor of the gods. Boys and young girls adorned with flowers paid them homage with dancing and the harmonies of rustic music; festival banquets followed at once, joyful yet frugal. In such assemblies untutored nature spoke. There young people learned to exchange their hearts, and blushing virgins were surprised into confessions soon to be ratified by their fathers; there tender mothers delighted to predict sweet and faithful unions to come.

When they prayed in the temple for favor from the gods, it was not their own wealth and abundance they sought—for such wishes were unworthy of these happy Troglodytes, who

knew only how to request good for their fellows. They went to the altars only to seek health for their parents, unity among their brethren, love from their wives, and affection and obedience from their children. Girls came to submit the tender sacrifice of their hearts, asking no other blessing than the power to make a Troglodyte happy.

In the evening, when the flocks had left the meadows and the weary oxen returned with the plow, they gathered together at a modest supper, where they sang of the wickedness and the miseries of the early Troglodytes, of the revival of virtue in the new people, and of their happiness. They celebrated the grandeur of the gods, their unflinching aid to men who implore it, and their inevitable vengeance on those who do not fear them. They next described the delights of a simple rural life, and the joys of an existence graced with innocence. Then they gave themselves up to a sleep which care and grief never disturbed.

Nature supplied their desires as well as their needs. Cupidity was alien to this happy land, and when they gave presents to each other, he who presented the gift always believed himself the favored one. All the Troglodytes considered themselves members of a single family; their flocks always mingled, and the only trouble they spared themselves was that of separating them.

Erzeroum, the 6th of the moon of Gemmadi II,
1711

LETTER XIII 12

Usbek to the same

I cannot tell you enough of the Troglodytes' virtue. One of them once said, "Tomorrow my father is to work his field; but I will get up two hours earlier, and when he goes to his work, he will find it all done."

Another said to himself: "It seems to me that my sister has taken a liking to a young Troglodyte related to us. I must speak to my father and convince him to arrange a marriage."

Another was told that thieves had carried off his herd. "I am very sorry," he said, "because in it there was a white heifer I intended to sacrifice to the gods."

One man was overheard telling another, "I must go to the temple to give thanks to the gods, for my brother, whom my father and I love so dearly, has recovered his health."

And again, "The field bordering my father's is always exposed to the heat of the sun; I must plant some trees in it, so those who work there may have some place in the shade to rest occasionally."

One day, in a group of Troglodytes, an old man mentioned a youth whom he suspected of committing a crime and reproached him for it. "We don't believe him guilty," the young Troglodytes said, "but if he is, may he be the last member of his family to die!"

Another Troglodyte was informed that strangers had sacked his house and carried off everything in it. "If they had not been wicked men," he answered, "I would wish that the gods grant them a longer use of my things than I had of them myself."

All this prosperity was not unenvied; neighboring tribes banded together and decided, on some pretext, to carry off their herds. As soon as they learned of this decision, the Troglodytes sent ambassadors, who spoke as follows:

"What have the Troglodytes done to you? Have they carried off your women, stolen your animals, or ravished your lands? No, for we are just and fear the gods. What, then, do you ask of us? Do you want wool to make clothing? Do you want milk from our herds, or the fruits of our lands? Lay down your arms, come to us, and we will give you all that. But we swear by all that is most sacred, that if you enter our country as enemies, we will consider you wicked people and treat you like wild beasts."

These words were scornfully rejected, and the barbaric

tribes came armed into the land of the Troglodytes, whom they believed were defended only by their innocence.

They were, however, quite able to defend themselves. They had put their wives and children within their defenses. It was the wickedness of their enemies which horrified them, not their great numbers. In their hearts burned a previously unknown ardor. One wished to die for his father, another for his wife and children; this one for his brothers, that one for his friends; all for the Troglodyte nation. The place of each dying man was at once taken by another, who had not only the common cause to defend but a particular death to avenge.

Such was the struggle between injustice and virtue. The wretched tribes, whose only object was plunder, were not ashamed to flee; thus, though unaffected by the Troglodytes' virtue, they were forced to succumb to it.

Erzeroum, the 9th of the moon of Gemmadi II,
1711

LETTER XIV 13

Usbek to the same

As the Troglodyte nation grew larger every day, the people felt it appropriate that they choose a king. They agreed that the crown must go to the most just, and their thoughts turned toward a man respected both for his age and his virtue. He, however, had refused to attend the meeting and, stricken with grief, had shut himself into his house.

Deputies were sent to inform him that he had been chosen. "God forbid," he said, "that I should so wrong the Troglodytes as to make them believe that no one among them was more just than I. You offer me the crown, and if you absolutely insist, I must of course accept it; but rest assured that I will die of grief to see the Troglodytes, free since my birth,

submit now to a master." With these words he burst into tears. "O miserable day!" he exclaimed. "Why have I lived so long?" Then his voice became severe. "I see very well what is happening, Troglodytes. Your virtue is beginning to burden you. In your present leaderless state you must be virtuous in spite of yourselves, for if you were not you could not exist, and you would fall into your ancestors' misery. But this yoke seems too hard; you prefer to submit yourselves to a prince and to obey his laws, which would be less exacting than your own morality. You know that under such laws you will be able to indulge your ambition, acquire riches, and languish in mean pleasures; you know that, so long as you avoid actual crime, you will not need virtue." He stopped for a moment; his tears flowed faster than ever. "And what do you suppose I could do? How could I command anything of a Troglodyte? Would you have an act deemed virtuous because I required it, when it would have been done anyway, by natural instinct? O Troglodytes, I am at the end of my life; the blood grows colder in my veins. I will soon rejoin your revered ancestors; why do you ask me to afflict them, and oblige me to tell them that I have left you under a yoke other than that of virtue?"

*Erzeroum, the 10th of the moon of Gemmadi II,
1711*

LETTER XV 14

*The chief eunuch to Jaron, the black eunuch,
at Erzeroum*

I pray that heaven will bring you back to this country, and keep you from all dangers.

Although I have scarcely known that attachment men call friendship and am entirely wrapped up in myself, yet you have made me aware that I still have a heart; and while I was

as hard as bronze to all the slaves living under my authority, yet I watched with pleasure your childhood growth.

The time came when my master cast his eyes on you, and even before nature had shown herself in you, the knife separated her from you. I will not say whether I pitied you, or whether I felt pleasure in seeing you raised to my condition. I appeased your tears and cries. I imagined that I saw you born again, and leaving a servitude where you could only obey, to enter a servitude where you would command. I took charge of your education, and while the severity required in instruction kept you for a long time ignorant of my love, yet you were dear to me. I can tell you now that I loved you as a father loves his son, if the names of father and son are consistent with our destiny.

You are about to travel through lands inhabited by Christians, who have never been believers; it is inevitable that you will be somewhat soiled. How can the Prophet watch over you in the midst of so many millions of his enemies? I hope that my master, on his return, will make the pilgrimage to Mecca; in that land of the angels you can purify yourself.

*The seraglio at Ispahan, the 10th of the moon of
Gemmadi II, 1711*

LETTER XVI 15

*Usbek to the mollah Mohammed Ali, guardian
of the three tombs at Com*¹

Why, divine mollah, do you live in the tombs? You are better qualified to dwell among the stars. No doubt you hide yourself for fear of obscuring the sun, for though you are not

¹ [The three tombs at Com are those of Fatima (see above, p. 9, footnote 1) and Sefi I and Abbas II, Shahs of Persia.]

I can again reject the propositions made to me, which are contrary to your liberty and repose.

For I wish you to forget that I am your master and to remember me only as your husband.

Paris, the 5th of the moon of Chahban, 1714

LETTER LXVI 65

Rica to ———

People here are much infatuated with the sciences, but I question whether they are very learned. He who doubts everything as a philosopher dares to deny nothing as a theologian, yet such a contradictory person is perfectly self-satisfied provided that you agree with his distinctions.

The passion of most of the French is to be thought witty, and the passion of those who wish to be considered wits is to write books.

A worse misconception cannot be imagined, for while nature seems wisely to have provided that the stupidities of men should be transient, books immortalize them. A fool should be content with boring everyone who has lived with him, but he further undertakes to torment future generations. He wants his folly to triumph over the oblivion which he should welcome like the sleep of the tomb; he wants to inform posterity that he has lived, and to have it forever remembered that he was a fool.

Of all authors, I most despise the compilers, who search everywhere in the works of others for fragments which they then fit into their own, much as you would piece turf into a lawn. They are no better authors than the printers who select and combine letters and thus, contributing only their manual labor, make a book. I would have original books respected,

and it seems to me that there is something profane in tearing constituent pieces from their sanctuary and exposing them to a scorn they do not deserve.

When a man has nothing to say, why is he not silent? Who cares for these repetitions? Let me suggest a new plan. You are a clever man! Come to my library; put the books from the top shelf on the bottom, and move the others from bottom to top; you have created a masterpiece!

I write to you on this subject, ———, because I am outraged by a book I have just finished, one so large that it might be expected to contain the universal science, but which has broken my head without putting anything into it. Farewell.

Paris, the 8th of the moon of Chahban, 1714

LETTER LXVII 66

Ibben to Usbek, at Paris

Three vessels have arrived here without bringing any news from you. Are you ill? Or does it please you to alarm me?

If you do not care for me in a country where you have no connections, what will it be like when you return to Persia and to your family? But perhaps I am mistaken. You are amiable enough to find friends anywhere; the heart is a citizen of all countries, and how can a generous nature prevent itself from forming attachments? I confess, I respect old friends, but I am not opposed to making new ones everywhere.

In whatever lands I have visited, I have lived as if I had to spend my life there. I have felt the same attraction to virtuous people, the same compassion, or rather love, for the unfortunate, the same esteem for those whose prosperity has not blinded them. Such is my character, Usbek; wherever I find men I choose friends.

There is a Guebre¹ here who, I believe, holds after you the first place in my heart; he is the very soul of honor. Special reasons have required him to retire in this city, where he lives peacefully upon the income from an honest trade, and with a wife he loves. His life is marked by many generous acts, and although he seeks obscurity he has more heroism in his heart than the greatest of monarchs.

I have frequently spoken to him of you, and I show him all your letters. I notice that this gives him pleasure, and I perceive already that you have a friend, though unknown to you.

Here you will find his principal adventures; though most reluctant to write them, he could not refuse them to my friendship, and I confide them to yours.

THE STORY OF APHERIDON AND ASTARTE

I was born among the Guebres, whose religion is perhaps the oldest in the world. Unhappily, love came to me before reason, and although I was only six I could not live apart from my sister. My eyes followed her everywhere; and if she left for only a moment, she returned to find me in tears; each day increased my love as much as my age. My father, surprised at such strong feelings, would have been willing to let us marry, in accordance with the ancient custom of the Guebres introduced by Cambyses;² but fear of the Mohamedans, under whose yoke we lived, prevented our people from thinking of such sacred unions, which are ordered rather than permitted by our religion, and which are the artless images of a union already formed by nature.

So, seeing that it would have been dangerous to follow my in-

¹ [Guebre (also Gueber, Gobar) was the derogatory term, meaning "unbeliever," given by the Mohammedans to the followers of the religion of Zoroaster or Zarathustra. Once dominant in Persia, Zoroastrianism declined rapidly after the Mohammedan conquest in the seventh century, and by the eighteenth century it was represented only by a few thousand Guebres in Persia, and by the Parsees who emigrated to the vicinity of Bombay in India.]

² [Cambyses, son of Cyrus and king of the Persians from 529 to 521 B.C., according to Herodotus (III. 31), set aside the laws against incest in his own case by marrying his sister.]

clination and his, my father resolved to extinguish the flame, which he believed was just starting but in fact was already at its height. He made up a pretext for a journey, taking me with him and leaving my sister with one of his relatives, as my mother had died two years before. I need not describe the despair at our separation; I embraced my sister, who was bathed in tears, but I shed none myself, as grief had made me insensible. We arrived at Tiflis,³ where my father, having entrusted my education to a relative, left me and returned home.

Some time later I learned that through a friend's influence he had my sister placed in the king's harem, as a servant to a sultana. I could not have been more overcome had I learned of her death; for apart from the fact that I could now no longer hope to see her, her entry into the harem made her a Mohammedan, and according to the prejudices of that religion she could now regard me only with horror. Nonetheless, unable to live any longer at Tiflis and tired both of myself and of life, I returned to Ispahan. My first words to my father were bitter ones; I accused him of having put his daughter into a place one could enter only by changing his religion. "You have brought down upon your family," I told him, "the anger of God and of the Sun that shines upon you; you have done more than if you had polluted the elements, by soiling the soul of your daughter, which is no less pure. I will die of sorrow and love, and may my death be the only torment that God makes you suffer!" With these words I left, and for two years I passed my life watching the walls of the harem, wondering just where my sister could be, and exposing myself daily to the danger of having my throat cut by the eunuchs who patrolled that dread place.

Eventually my father died, and the sultana whom my sister served, jealously watching her grow more beautiful every day, married her to a eunuch who desired her passionately. In this way my sister left the seraglio and with her eunuch took a house in Ispahan.

For more than three months I was unable to speak to her, for the eunuch, the most jealous of men, always put me off by various pretexts. Finally, when I was allowed into the harem, he made me speak to her through a lattice, and even the eyes of a lynx would have been unable to discover her under the covering of clothes and veils; I recognized only the sound of her voice. Oh my emotion, to find

³ [Tiflis (Tbilis) is the capital of Georgia, in the eighteenth century an independent kingdom, and since 1799 part of Russia.]

myself so close and yet so far from her! I contained it, however, for I was carefully watched; she, it seemed to me, wept a bit. Her husband tried to make some poor excuse, but I treated him as the meanest slave. He was much annoyed when he heard me speak to my sister in the ancient tongue of Persia, our sacred language and unknown to him. "What, my sister," I said, "is it true that you have renounced your ancestral religion? I know that in entering the harem you had to profess Mohammedanism; but tell me, has your heart been able to consent to your mouth's agreement to leave a religion which permits me to love you? And for whom have you renounced that religion we ought to cherish? For a wretch still marked by the chains he has worn, who would be the least of men, even if he were one." "My brother," she said, "that man you're speaking of is my husband. I must honor him however unworthy he appears to you, and I would also be the least of women if. . . ." "Ah, my sister," I said, "you are a Guebre; he is not your husband and cannot be. Had you been faithful to your ancestors you could regard him only as a monster." "Alas!" she said, "how distant that religion now seems to me! I had scarcely learned its precepts before I had to forget them. You can see that the tongue in which I speak to you is no longer familiar to me, and that I express myself only with great difficulty. But be assured that the memory of our childhood will always delight me, that since then I have known only false joys, that a day never passes but that I think of you, that you have had a greater part in my marriage than you know, for I resolved to go through with it only because I thus hoped to see you again. But this day, which has already cost me so much, will yet cost more! For I see you quite beside yourself and my husband quivering with jealous rage. I will never see you again; I am doubtless speaking to you for the last time in my life; and if that be so, my brother, it will not be a long one." With these words she was overcome, and knowing herself to be unable to continue the conversation, she left me, the most desolated of men.

Three or four days later I asked to see my sister; the barbarous eunuch would have liked to prevent me, but apart from the fact that his sort of husband has not the same authority over their wives as do others, he was so hopelessly in love with my sister that he could refuse her nothing. I saw her in the same place and covered with the same veils; as she was accompanied by two slaves, I again

had recourse to our special language. "My sister," I said to her, "why can I see you only under these frightful conditions? These walls that imprison you, these bolts and bars, these wretched guardians watching you make me furious. How can you have lost that sweet liberty enjoyed by your ancestors? Your mother, who was so chaste, gave to her husband as a pledge of her virtue only virtue itself. They both lived happily in mutual trust, and the simplicity of their morality was for them a thousand times more precious than the false glitter you seem to enjoy in this sumptuous house. In losing your religion you have also lost your liberty, your happiness, and that precious equality which honors your sex. What is even worse, you are and can only be not the wife but the slave of a slave who has been degraded from humanity." "Ah, my brother," she said, "respect my husband and the religion I have embraced, for according to that religion I can neither listen nor talk to you without committing a crime." "What, sister!" I said, quite carried away. "Do you really believe that religion to be true?" "Ah," she said, "how well it would be for me if it were not! I made so great a sacrifice for it that I must believe in it, and if my doubts. . . ." With these words she stopped. "Yes, your doubts, my sister, are well founded whatever they are. What can you expect from a religion which makes you unhappy in this world and leaves no hope for the other? Recall that ours is the oldest in the world, that it has always flourished in Persia, and that it has no origins beyond this empire, whose beginnings are lost in time; Mohammedanism was introduced here only by chance and has been established not by persuasion but by conquest. If our native princes had not been so weak, you would still see reigning the cult of those ancient Magi. Go back into those remote centuries, where everything speaks to you of Magianism and nothing of the Mohammedan sect, which was still in its infancy thousands of years later." "But," she said, "if my religion is more recent than yours, it is at least more pure, since it worships only God, while you still revere the sun and stars, fire, and even the elements." "I see, my sister, that among the Mussulmans you have learned to slander our sacred religion. We worship neither stars nor elements, nor have our fathers ever so worshipped; they never built temples to them or made sacrifices but offered to them only the lesser reverence due to the works and manifestations of the deity. But, my sister, in the name of the God who enlightens us, do take this holy book I have

brought. It is the book of our lawgiver Zoroaster.⁴ Read it without prejudice; receive into your heart the rays of light which will shine upon you as you read; remember your ancestors who have so long honored the Sun in the holy city of Balk;⁵ and finally, remember me, whose only hope of peace, of fortune, of life lies in your version." Entirely transported, I left her alone to decide the most momentous event of my life.

I returned two days later. I said nothing, awaiting in silence the sentence of life or death. "You are loved, my brother," she said, "and by a Guebre. I struggled long, but, by the gods, how love removes difficulties! How relieved I am! I am no longer afraid of loving you too much; I cannot put bounds upon my love, and now even that excess is legitimate. Ah, how that agrees with my heart! But you, who knew so well how to break the chains which my mind had forged, when will you break those holding my hands? From this moment I give myself to you; show by the speed of your acceptance how dear this gift is to you. My brother, the first time I am able to embrace you I believe I will die in your arms." I can never express the joy I felt at these words; I believed myself to be, and I saw myself in a moment becoming in fact, the happiest of men. I saw almost achieved every desire I had formed in twenty-five years of life, and I saw vanish all the sadness which had made that life so painful. But when I accustomed myself to these sweet thoughts, I discovered that I was not so near my happiness as I first supposed, even though I had surmounted the greatest obstacle. It remained to deceive the vigilance of her guards. I dared not confide my life's secret to anyone; my sister and I had only each other for aid. If I failed the attempt, I ran the risk of being impaled; but I did not see

⁴ [The *Avesta*, the sacred book containing the teachings of Zoroaster, religious reformer of ancient Persia. Zoroastrianism, the dominant religion of Persia before the Mohammedan conquest, is dualistic in doctrine, emphasizing the universal sway of the opposed forces of good, led by Ormuzd, and evil, led by Ahriman; however, it teaches the millennial victory of Ormuzd, following man's free acceptance of regenerative good. There was also a strong element of polytheism in the Zoroastrians' veneration of the elements, which led them to refuse to bury or burn dead bodies, on the ground that to do so would be to pollute either earth or fire.]

⁵ [Balk (ancient Bactra) is a small city in Afghanistan; it was traditionally the birthplace of Zoroaster.]

that pain as any more cruel than the failure itself. We agreed that she would have me send a clock which her father had left her; that in it I would put a file to cut the lattice of a window opening onto the street, as well as a knotted rope for the descent; that thereafter I would no longer visit her but wait under the window each night until she could execute her plan. As she had not found a favorable time, for fifteen entire nights I waited without seeing anyone. Finally, on the sixteenth, I heard a file working; from time to time the work was interrupted, and in those intervals my dread was inexpressible. After an hour's work, I saw her attach the rope and let herself down to fall into my arms. I no longer sensed any danger and stood motionless there for a long time; then I took her out of town, where I had a horse all readied. With her mounted behind me, we fled with all imaginable speed from the place that could be so dangerous to us. Before daybreak we arrived at a Guebre's house in a deserted spot where he had retired to live frugally by the work of his hands. We did not consider it prudent to remain there, and at his suggestion we entered a dense forest and lodged in the hollow of an old oak tree until the noise of our flight had quieted. Here in this remote place we stayed, seen by no one, ceaselessly repeating our undying love and waiting for the time when a Guebre priest could perform the marriage ceremony prescribed by our sacred books. "Sister," I said to her, "how holy is this union, made by nature and soon to be reaffirmed by our sacred law!" At last a priest arrived to calm our amorous impatience. In the peasant's house he performed the ceremonies of marriage, gave us his blessing, and a thousand times wished us the vigor of Gustaspes and the holiness of Horospes.⁶ Shortly thereafter we left Persia, where we were not safe, and went to Georgia. Here we lived a year, every day more charmed with each other. However, as my money began to run out, and as I feared poverty for my sister's sake if not my own, I left her to seek aid from our relatives. Never was there a more tender parting. But my journey was not only useless but disastrous: for I found not only that all our property had been confiscated, but that my relatives were almost powerless to help me; and I obtained only as much money as was needed for my return trip. But then, to my

⁶ [Gustaspes (Gushtasp, Vistasp), king of Persia (c. 600 B.C.), according to legend was converted by Zoroaster and then officially imposed the religion upon his realm. Horospes (Aurvatasp) was the legendary father of Gustaspes.]

great despair, my sister was not to be found! Some days before my return the Tartars had invaded the city where she lived, and finding her beautiful, they carried her off and sold her to some Jews on their way to Turkey, leaving behind only the little girl born to her a few months before. I followed the Jews and met them three leagues away; but my prayers and tears were in vain, for they insisted upon thirty tomans and would not relent a single one. After appealing to everyone, and imploring protection from both Turkish and Christian priests, I went to an Armenian merchant and sold myself and my daughter to him for thirty-five tomans. Then I went to the Jews, gave them thirty tomans, and took the other five to my sister, whom I had not yet seen. "You are free, my sister," I said to her, "and I can embrace you. Here are five tomans; I am sorry that I could not sell myself for more." "What!" she said, "you have sold yourself?" "Yes," I said. "Ah, unhappy man, what have you done? Was I not miserably enough without your working to intensify it? Your freedom consoled me; your slavery will drive me to the tomb. Oh, my brother! Your love is cruel! And my daughter—I do not see her?" "I have sold her too," I said. We both burst into tears, having no strength to say more. Finally I went to find my master, and my sister arrived there almost as soon as I did. She threw herself at his feet. "I ask slavery of you," she said, "as others ask for liberty. Take me; you can sell me for a higher price than my husband's." A struggle then took place, which brought tears to my husband's eyes. "Unhappy man," she said, "did you think I could accept freedom at the price of yours? Master, you behold two unfortunates who will die if you separate us. I give myself to you. Pay me; perhaps this money and my services may someday obtain from you what I do not now dare to ask. It is to your interest not to separate us; consider that his life depends on mine." The Armenian was a gentle man and was touched by our calamity. "If you both will serve me faithfully and with zeal, I promise that in a year I will grant you freedom. I see that neither of you deserves the pain of your lot. If, when you are free, you are as happy as you deserve to be, and if fortune favors you, I am certain that you will compensate me for the loss I shall suffer." We both embraced his knees and followed him on his journey. We comforted each other in our servile tasks, and I was delighted when I was able to do my sister's work.

The end of the year came, and our master kept his word and freed us. We returned to Tiflis, where I found an old friend of my father

who was successfully practicing medicine. He lent me some money, with which I made several negotiations. Various affairs later called me to Smyrna, where I established myself. I have lived here for six years, enjoying the most amiable and pleasant society in the world. Unity reigns in my family, and I would not change places with all the kings in the world. I have been fortunate enough to meet again the Armenian merchant to whom I owe everything, and I have been able to do some important services for him.

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

LETTER LXVIII 69

Rica to Usbek, at ———

The other day I dined at the home of a magistrate, who had invited me several times. After speaking of various things, I said to him, "Sir, it seems to me that your profession is very laborious." "Not to the degree you imagine," he replied. "As we treat it, it is only an amusement." "But how is that? Isn't your head always full of other people's business? Aren't you continually involved in uninteresting things?" "You are right. These affairs do not interest us, for the reason that we take no interest in them. That explains why our profession is not as fatiguing as you supposed." When I saw him take the matter so casually, I continued and said, "Sir, I have not seen your study." "I believe it, for I have none. When I took this position, I needed money to pay for it, so I sold my library; the bookseller who bought it left me, of its vast number of volumes, only my account book. Not that I regret them; we judges are not inflated with vain knowledge. What use have we of all those volumes of law? Almost all their cases are hypothetical, and exceptions to the general rule." "But might not this be, sir," I said, "because you have made them exceptions? For why, after all, should every nation on earth have