Montesquieu

PERSIAN LETTERS

Translated with an introduction and notes by C. J. Betts

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MONTESQUIEU'S PREFACE

THIS is not a dedicatory epistle: I am not asking anyone's protection for this book. People will read it if it is good, and if it is bad I do not care whether they read it or not.

I have detached these first letters so as to see if the public will like them; I have a large number of others in my files, which I may publish later on.

But this would be on condition that I remain unidentified, for if my name were to become known I should keep silent from that moment on. I know a woman who walks quite gracefully, but she limps as soon as anyone looks at her.[1] The book's defects are enough in themselves, without exposing my own to criticism as well. If it were known who I am, people would say: 'His book doesn't match his character; he ought to use his time on something better; such things aren't worthy of a serious man.' Critics never fail to make remarks of this sort, because it is no great strain on the intellect to make them.

The Persians who wrote these letters lodged with me, and we spent our time together. They considered me as a man from another world, and hid nothing from me. Certainly, men transplanted from so far away could no longer have had any secrets. They showed me most of their letters and I copied them; I even intercepted some which they would never have entrusted to me, because they were so mortifying to Persian self-esteem and jealousy.

My function, therefore, has been merely that of a translator; all I have taken the trouble to do is adapt the work to our own habits. I have relieved the reader of oriental turns of phrase as far as I have been able to do so, and preserved him from countless lofty expressions which would have bored him sublimely.[2]

But this is not all that I have done on his behalf. I have omitted the lengthy compliments which the Asians use as lavishly as we, and passed over an infinite number of those trivial details which cannot survive being brought into the light of day, and should live only between two friends.

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

Something which has often surprised me is the realization that these Persians knew as much as I did about the customs and way of life of our nation; they had grasped even the subtlest points, and noticed things which, I am sure, have escaped many a German who has travelled through France. I attribute this to the length of their stay here, apart from the fact that it is easier for an Asian to learn about the habits of Frenchmen in a year than for a Frenchman to learn about the habits of Asians in four, because the latter's readiness to talk about himself is equalled only by the reticence of the former.

The conventions allow any translator, and even the most uncivilized editor, to adorn the beginning of his translation or edition with a panegyric of the original, so as to bring out its usefulness, its merits, and its high quality. I have not done so, for reasons which will easily be guessed; one of the best of them is that it would be extremely tedious to have such a thing placed where there is enough tedium already, I mean in a preface.

Letter 10
Mirza to his friend Usbek, at Erzerum

You alone could have compensated for Rica's absence, and nobody but Rica could console me for yours. We miss you, Usbek: you were the soul of our circle of friends. What violence it needs to break attachments formed by both heart and mind!

We argue here a great deal; our arguments are usually about moral questions. Yesterday the subject under discussion was whether men are made happy by pleasure, and the satisfaction 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 which is as proper to them as existence. Please explain to me what you mean.

I have asked our mullahs about it, but they drive me to desperation with their quotations from the Koran: for I am not consulting them as a true believer, but as a man, as a citizen, and as a father.

Farewell.

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

Letter 11[1]
Usbek to Mirza, at Ispahan

You abandon your own powers of reason in order to try out mine; you condescend to consult me; you believe me capable of instructing you. My dear Mirza, there is one thing that flatters me more than the good opinion which you have formed of me: it is your friendship, to which I owe it.

To comply with your request, it seemed to me that there was no need to use any very abstract arguments. With truths of a certain kind, it is not enough to make them appear convincing: one must also make them felt. Of such a kind are moral truths. Perhaps this fragment of history will make a deeper impression on you than philosophical subtleties.

There was in Arabia a small nation of people called Troglodytes, descended from those Troglodytes of former times who, if we are to believe the historians, were more like animals than men. Ours were not so deformed as that: they were not hairy like bears, they did not hiss, they had two eyes; but they were so wicked and ferocious that there were no principles of equity or justice among them.

They had a king of foreign origin, who, in an attempt to reform their natural wickedness, treated them with severity; but they

conspired against him, killed him, and exterminated all the royal family.

The deed accomplished, they held a meeting to choose a government, and after many disagreements they elected ministers. But hardly had they elected them than they found them unbearable; and they massacred them too. Freed of this new restriction, the nation let itself be ruled only by its natural wildness. Each individual agreed that he would not obey anybody any more, but that each one would look after his own interests exclusively, without considering those of others.

This unanimous decision greatly appealed to each individual Troglodyte. They said: 'What business is it of mine to go and kill myself working for people who mean nothing to me? I shall think uniquely of myself; I shall be happy, what does it matter to me if the others are or not? I shall get all I need, and provided that I do, I shan't care if all the other Troglodytes are miserable.'

It was the month for sowing the crops. Everybody said: 'I shall plough only enough land to grow the wheat necessary to feed myself. I should have no use for a larger amount; I won't put myself out to no purpose.'

The soil of this small country was not all the same. There were arid, mountainous districts, and others on low ground which were irrigated by a number of streams. That year it was extremely dry, so that the fields which were high up failed completely, while those which could be watered were very fertile: so that almost all the mountain dwellers died of hunger, because of the harshness of the others, who refused to share the harvest with them.

Next year it was very rainy. The high ground was unusually fertile, and the low-lying regions were inundated. For a second time, half the population cried famine; but the poor wretches found that the others were as harsh as they had been themselves.

One of the leading citizens had a very beautiful wife. His neighbour fell in love with her and abducted her. This caused a great quarrel, and after a good deal of insults and fighting they agreed to abide by the decision of a Troglodyte who, while the Republic had lasted, had had a certain amount of influence. They went to him, wanting to present their arguments. 'What does it matter to me,' he said, 'if

this woman belongs to you, or to you? I have my land to plough; I am certainly not going to spend my time patching up your disputes, and looking after your affairs while I neglect my own. Please leave me in peace, and don't trouble me any more with your quarrels.' With this he left them and went off to work on his fields. The abductor, who was the stronger, swore that he would sooner die than give the woman up, and the other man, overcome by the injustice of his neighbour and the judge's callousness, was going home in despair when he came across a young and beautiful woman returning from the fountain. He no longer had a wife; he found this woman attractive, and he found her a great deal more attractive when he learnt that she was the wife of the man whom he had wanted to have as judge, and who had been so unfeeling about his misfortune. He carried her off and took her to his house.

There was a man who possessed quite a fertile piece of land, which he diligently cultivated. Two of his neighbours joined forces, turned him out of his house, and took possession of his field. They made an alliance to defend each other against any possible usurper, and did in fact manage to give each other mutual protection for several months. But one of the pair, tired of having to share something that he could have to himself, killed the other, and became sole master of the field. His reign was short: two other Troglodytes came and attacked him. He found that he was too weak to defend himself, and was massacred.

A Troglodyte with almost nothing to wear saw some wool for sale. He asked the price. The merchant said to himself: 'Ordinarily I could expect to get only as much for my wool as I should need to buy two measures of wheat; but I shall sell it for four times as much, so as to have eight measures.' There was no alternative, and the price had to be paid. 'That's good,' said the merchant; 'now I shall have some wheat.'

'What did you say?' retorted his customer. 'Do you need wheat? I have some to sell. There is only one thing that may surprise you, and that is the price. You must know that wheat is extremely expensive, and there is a famine almost everywhere. But give me my money back, and I will give you one measure of wheat: for otherwise I shall refuse to let any go, even if you were to die of hunger.'

Meanwhile, a cruel disease was rife throughout the area. A skilled

doctor arrived from a neighbouring country, and gave treatment so expertly that he cured everyone who went to him. When the epidemic was over he went round all his patients to ask for payment, but he met with nothing but refusals. He went back to his own country, and arrived exhausted with the strain of his long journey. But soon afterwards he heard that the same disease had struck again, and was now taking a heavier toll than ever of the ungrateful country. This time the Troglodytes went to him, instead of waiting for him to come to them. 'Away with you!' he said, 'for you are unjust. In your souls is a poison deadlier than that for which you want a cure. You do not deserve to have a place on earth, because you have no humanity, and the rules of equity are unknown to you. It seems to me that I should be offending against the gods, who are punishing you, if I were to oppose their rightful anger.'

From Erzerum, the 3rd of the second moon of Jomada, 1711

Letter 12
Usbek to the same, at Ispahan

You have seen, my dear Mirza, how the Troglodytes perished because of their wickedness, and fell victim to their own injustice. Of all the families that there had been, only two remained, and escaped the national misfortune. There had been two very extraordinary men in this country. They were humane; they understood what justice was; they loved virtue. Attached to each other as much by the integrity of their own hearts as by the corruption of the others, they saw the general desolation and felt nothing but pity: which was another bond between them. They worked with equal solicitude in the common interest; they had no disagreements except those which were due to their tender and affectionate friendship; and in the remotest part of the country, separated from their compatriots, who were unworthy to be with them, they led a calm and happy life. The earth seemed to produce of its own accord, cultivated by these virtuous hands.

They loved their wives, by whom they were tenderly cherished.

Their only concern was to bring up their children to be virtuous. They constantly described to them the distress of their fellow-countrymen, letting their wretchedness serve as an example to them. Above all they made them realize that the individual's self-interest is always to be found in the common interest; that wanting to cut oneself off from it is the same as wanting to ruin oneself; that virtue is not such as to cost us anything, and should not be considered as a wearisome exercise; and that justice to others is charity for ourselves.

Soon they had the reward of virtuous parents, which is to have children who resemble them. The younger generation which grew up before their eyes increased through happy marriages. As their numbers grew larger, they remained just as closely united, and virtue, so far from becoming weaker among the multitude, was on the contrary fortified by a greater number of examples.

Who could now describe the happiness of these Troglodytes? So just a race of men was bound to be cherished by the gods. As soon as they opened their eyes to know the gods, they learnt to fear them, and religion appeared, to soften any roughness of manner left over from nature.

They instituted festivals in the honour of the gods. The girls, adorned with flowers, and the youths celebrated them with dancing and the music of rustic harmonies. Then came feasting, and joy reigned equally with frugality. It was at these gatherings that the innocence of nature spoke. There the young people discovered how to give their hearts, and how to receive the gift; there virginal delicacy, blushing, made a confession obtained by surprise, but soon confirmed by the parents' consent; and there the affectionate mothers took pleasure in foreseeing a tender and faithful union from afar.

They would go to the temple to ask the favours of the gods: not the burdens of wealth and superfluity, for such wishes were unworthy of the happy Troglodytes; they were incapable of desiring them except for their fellow-countrymen. They had come to the altar only to ask for their fathers' health, unity among their brothers, their wives' affection, the love and obedience of their children. The young girls came with the tender sacrifice of their hearts, and asked no favour except to be able to make a Troglodyte happy.

In the evenings, as the herds came in from the fields and the tired

oxen brought in the ploughs, they would gather together, and over a simple meal they would sing of the injustices of the first Troglodytes, their misfortunes, the rebirth of virtue with a new generation, and its happiness. They celebrated the greatness of the gods, the constancy with which they bestow their favours on those who pray to them, and the inevitability of their anger towards those who do not fear them. They described the delights of the pastoral life and the happiness of a situation that was always adorned by innocence. Soon they would abandon themselves to a sleep which was never interrupted by worry or anxiety.

Nature provided for their desires as abundantly as for their needs. In this happy land, cupidity was alien. They would give each other presents, and the giver always thought that the advantage was his. The Troglodyte nation regarded themselves as a single family; the herds were almost always mixed up together, and the only task that was usually neglected was that of sorting them out.

From Erzerum, the 6th of the second moon of Jomada, 1711

Letter 13
Usbek to the same

I shall never be able to tell you enough about the virtue of the Troglodytes. One of them said one day: 'My father will have to plough his field tomorrow; I shall get up two hours before him and, when he goes to his field, he will find it all ploughed.'

Another said to himself: 'I think that my sister has a liking for a young Troglodyte who is related to us. I must speak to my father and persuade him to arrange the marriage.'

Another was brought the news that thieves had stolen his herd of cattle. 'That makes me very angry,' he said, 'for there was a pure white heifer which I wanted to sacrifice to the gods.'

Another was heard to say: 'I must go to the temple to give thanks to the gods, because my brother, whom my father loves so much, and whom I am so fond of, has been restored to health.'

Or again: 'There is a field next to my father's, and the people who cultivate it are exposed every day to the heat of the sun. I must go and plant a couple of trees there, so that those poor people can go and rest sometimes in the shade.'

One day, when a number of Troglodytes were together, one of the older ones mentioned a young man whom he suspected of having committed a crime, and reproached him for it. 'We do not believe that he committed the crime,' said the younger Troglodytes, 'but if he did, may he be the last of his family to die!'

A Troglodyte was brought the news that strangers had looted his house and taken everything away with them. 'If they were not unjust,' he replied, 'it would be my wish that the gods should grant them the use of it for a longer time than I had.'

All this good fortune was not observed without envy. The neighbouring peoples met together and resolved, on an empty pretext, to make off with their herds. As soon as they knew of this decision the Troglodytes sent envoys to meet them and give them this message:

'What have the Troglodytes done to you? Have they taken away your wives, stolen your cattle, ravaged your country? No: we are just, and we fear the gods. What then do you want from us? Do you want wool to make yourselves clothes? Do you want milk for your herds,[1] or the fruit from our lands? Put down your weapons; come to us and we will give you all these things. But we swear, by whatever is most sacred, that if you enter our land with hostile intent, we shall regard you as unjust, and treat you like wild beasts.'

Their words were dismissed with contempt. These savage peoples, in arms, entered the country of the Troglodytes, whom they believed to be defended by their innocence alone.

But they were well prepared for defence. They had put their wives and children in the centre. They were appalled by the injustice of their enemies, and not by their numbers. A new kind of ardour possessed their hearts: one wanted to die for his father, another for his wife and children; one for his brothers, another for his friends; and all of them for the Troglodyte nation. As soon as one died, his place was taken by another, who, besides the common cause, had in addition an individual's death to avenge.

Such was the combat of injustice and virtue. These cowardly peoples, who wanted nothing but plunder, were not ashamed to run away, and yielded to the virtue of the Troglodytes while remaining unaffected by it.

From Erzerum, the 9th of the second moon of Jomada, 1711

Letter 14
Usbek to the same

Since the nation was daily increasing in numbers, the Troglodytes thought that it would be right to choose themselves a king. They agreed that the crown should be bestowed upon the justest among them, and their choice unanimously fell on an old man whose age, and years of virtue, made him venerable. He had not wanted to attend the assembly; he had retired to his house, his heart wrung with grief.

Deputies were sent to inform him that the choice had fallen on him. 'God forbid,' he said, 'that I should do such a wrong to the Troglodytes, and that it should be thought that no one among them is juster than I! You bring me the crown, and if you insist upon it absolutely I shall certainly have to take it. But be sure that I shall die of grief, having seen when I was born the Troglodytes in freedom, and seeing them subjects today.' As he spoke, tears began to stream down his face. 'Unhappy day!' he said, 'and why have I lived so long?' Then he cried in a stern voice: 'I see what it is quite well, oh Troglodytes! your virtue has begun to be a burden to you. In your present state, without a ruler, it is necessary for you to be virtuous despite yourselves. Otherwise you could not continue to exist, and you would fall into the misfortunes of your first ancestors. But this imposition seems too hard for you. You would prefer to be subject to a king, and obey his laws, which would be less rigid than your own customs. You know that you would then be able to satisfy your ambitions, accumulate wealth, and live idly in degrading luxury; that, provided you avoided falling into the worst crimes, you would

have no need of virtue.' He paused a moment, and his tears fell faster than ever. 'And what is it that you expect of me? How could I command a Troglodyte to do something? Would you want him to perform a virtuous action because I tell him to, when he would have done it just the same without me, by natural inclination alone? Oh Troglodytes! I am at the end of my days, my blood is frozen in my veins, I shall soon see your blessed ancestors: why do you want me to grieve them, and to be obliged to tell them that I have left you under the rule of something other than virtue?'

From Erzerum, the 10th of the second moon of Jomada, 1711