

## Persian Letters Montesquieu (1721)

### INTRODUCTION

#### I

Of all the great French authors perhaps Montesquieu is the least known in this country. It is more than a hundred years since any work of his was translated into English, and no greater sign of the neglect which has befallen him could be instanced than the infrequency of the appearance of his name in our periodical and journalistic literature, at a time when our ideas of government are once more in the crucible. The greater fame of Voltaire and Rousseau, and the absorbing interest of the French Revolution, are the principal causes of this neglect; at the same time, had there been anything in the shape of a true biography of Montesquieu, a living picture of the man, the operation of these causes might have been in some degree obviated.

It was the custom under the *ancien régime* in the great law-families for the eldest son to compose a life of his father: a document designed to hide the actual man behind a mask of the domestic and legal virtues so effectually that his friends and colleagues should be unable to recognize him. Such a *mémoire pour servir* in the highest style of the art, Montesquieu's son prepared and published in 1755. The eulogies of D'Alembert, Maupertuis, and the Chevalier de Solignac, founded, all of them, so far as they refer to Montesquieu's life, upon this filial effigy, represent only a mask with the conventional air proper to a great and good man.

This lack of a truthful picture has, of course, had a bad effect on Montesquieu's fame in France as well as in England. Least known, until recently, as regards his life, of all the great Frenchmen of the eighteenth century, he has had perhaps the most varied fortune of all writers of that or any other age. For about fifty years after his death, his reputation was unrivalled; but from 1789 till 1814, the alterations of feeling towards him in France were as extravagant as if he had been a living agent in the Revolution and its sequel, "now extolled to the clouds as the master of political science, as the man of genius who had rediscovered the title-deeds of the human race; now denounced as *laudator temporis acti*, the apostle of privilege, and the defender of abuses." Abandoned and condemned in evil times, he has always reappeared when France has recognized its truest interests. Under the Consulate and the First Empire he is intentionally forgotten, but in 1814 he comes to the front once more. Publishers and editors were seized about that time with a "sort of fury" for the works of Montesquieu, and from 1819 till 1834 numerous annotated editions appeared. Then again there came a period of eclipse, and it was not until the close of the Second Empire that France, once more free, resumed the study of him who first tried to show it what freedom meant.

In 1875 M. Edouard Laboulaye's edition of Montesquieu's works, perhaps the best, was published in seven volumes; and in 1878 M. Louis Vian issued his "Histoire de Montesquieu," the most important work on Montesquieu that has yet appeared. M. Vian had access to much unpublished matter; and his book, which is the result of fifteen years of study and research, supplies that biography for want of which Montesquieu's personality has hitherto been as vague as a spectre. In short, they seem at last in France in a fair way to get something like the true focus of Montesquieu, to have him placed in his proper niche: to understand him, even to label him, for he is not one of the very greatest whom it is criminal, and indeed impossible, to docket and define until one can look at them through the thought of many generations.

It is from M. Vian's biography that the material for this introduction is mainly drawn. The

writer is also indebted to M. Albert Sorel's monograph on Montesquieu, and to the prefaces of M. Laboulaye. For the translation, the editions used were those of M. Laboulaye and M. Tourneux, the text of the former having been followed as a rule: the notes in both have been found very serviceable.

## II

Like Montaigne, Montesquieu was a Gascon. His father, Jacques de Secondat, married Marie-Françoise de Penel, the descendant of an English family which had remained in France after the English rule had ceased there. She was an only child, and her husband received with her the title and barony of La Brède, an estate in Gascony, with a fantastic old Gothic donjon built in the thirteenth century. Montesquieu was the second of six children. The date of his birth is not known, but he was baptized on the 18th of January, 1689. His godfather, like the godfathers of Montaigne in 1553, of the lord of Beauvais in 1644, and of the Comte de Buffon in 1742, was a beggar belonging to the district, chosen "in order that his godchild might remember all his life that the poor are his brothers." He was christened Charles-Louis, and bore, according to a curious custom of the time, the surname of De la Brède, the patronymic, De Secondat, being reserved for the head of the house.

His nurse was a miller's wife, and the first three years of his life were spent with her. Most of those who have written of Montesquieu have attributed his constant use of the Gascon accent, and of certain idioms and solecisms, to these three years. Is it likely, if he had not heard the Gascon accent in his father's household, and probably from his father's lips, that the effect of his lisping in a *patois* in his earliest infancy would have remained with him all his life? If, however, he heard nothing in his father's house but the best "French of Paris," his close and lasting friendship with his foster-brother, Jean Demarenes, is a sufficient cause for the perpetuation of his Gasconisms. But the point is of small moment.

Montesquieu's mother died when he was seven years old, and four years after, in 1700, he was sent to the college of the Oratorian Fathers at Juilly, near Meaux, in the department of Seine-et-Marne. There he remained till 1711. He was docile and diligent, and the solid foundation laid in Juilly enabled him to become the best informed writer of his time in France. In the year in which he left Juilly he wrote his first non-scholastic piece – the first, at least, of which we know anything. It was a refutation, in the form of a letter, of the doctrine of the eternal damnation of idolaters: the substance of it he afterwards incorporated in the "Persian Letters."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Letter XXXV.

## III

On leaving college Montesquieu began to study law. It was natural, as both his grandfathers had been presidents of the Parliament of Guienne, and his uncle occupied a similar position. Methodical in all things, he studied jurisprudence according to a plan of his own, the draft of which still exists; and found plenty of time to frequent the best salons in Bordeaux, in which the rank of his family and his own reputation as a young man of talent secured him a welcome. The chief figure in Bordeaux society was the Duke of Berwick,<sup>1</sup> the son of James II. And Marlborough's sister. This careful soldier and upright man, the only cool-headed and thoroughly sensible scion of the House of Stuart, perceived the merit of Montesquieu, and a

friendship sprang up between them which ended only with the Duke's death. Montesquieu cherished his memory, and among his papers was found a warm and eloquent eulogy of the victor of Almanza.

In 1713 Montesquieu's father died, and his uncle, the Baron de Montesquieu, took upon himself the duties of guardian. Two months after his nephew had reached his twenty-fifth year, he caused him to be appointed a lay-councillor of the Parliament of Guienne; and a year later, on the 30th of April 1715, Montesquieu married the girl of his uncle's choice, the Demoiselle Jeanne Lartigue, a plain-looking Calvinist, inclined to limp,<sup>2</sup> but frank, good-natured, and with a dowry of a hundred thousand livres. Love had nothing to do with the marriage: Montesquieu's wife was his housekeeper, and the mother of his heir.

In the beginning of 1716 his uncle died, leaving him sole legatee on condition that he should call himself Montesquieu. Besides the name, which he had already adopted on the day of his marriage, he inherited a house in Bordeaux, lands in Agénois, and the position of *President à mortier* in the Parliament of Guienne. His installation took place in July, 1716, and he retained his presidentship till 1728.

Of the twelve provincial parliaments of France, that of Guienne, which sat at Bordeaux, ranked third with regard to the extent of its jurisdiction. It was directed by six *presidents à mortier*,<sup>3</sup> and as it possessed political, religious, administrative, and judicial attributes, the proper performance of the duties of a president entailed considerable study, and were in themselves by no means light. Montesquieu is believed to have given them sufficient attention, although on his own showing, he did not understand legal procedure; but no trace remains of his judicial functions.

His official duties did not by any means occupy him exclusively. After the Academies of Caen and Paris, that of Bordeaux, having been established in 1712, is the most ancient. Three years after its constitution, Montesquieu was admitted, and became one of its most enthusiastic members. Wherever he was, and in whatever he might be engaged, he had always time to attend to its interests. More than once in acknowledgment of his many services he was appointed president. Much of the work he prepared for the Academy has been lost; of the dissertation which was considered the most remarkable, only the title remains – “The Religious Policy of the Romans.” Medicine, physics, natural history, were all studied, and numerous discourses written. The effect of these studies is to be found throughout all his works, the principal definitions in “L'Esprit des Lois” itself being, not those of a lawyer or metaphysician, but rather of a geometer and naturalist.

<sup>1</sup> Governor of Guienne, 1716-1719.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 7 [Montesquieu's introduction].

<sup>3</sup> So called because they wore a cap of the shape of a mortar, made of black velvet, ornamented with a gold band.

#### IV

In all likelihood the idea of the “Persian Letters” occurred to Montesquieu before he left college. The first of them, dated the 21st of the moon of Muharram (January), 1711, was written in his twenty-second year; the last in his thirty-second. Reflections of his favourite reading are to be found in their framework, and critics have pointed out the many resemblances to Dufresney's “Amusements,” “The Turkish Spy,” “The Spectator,” the “Decameron,” with

borrowings from Erasmus and other less-known writers. But Montesquieu has at least spoiled nothing that he has used. The “Letters” were printed in Amsterdam, and published anonymously in 1721; and at once, as a friend of Montesquieu’s had predicted, “they sold like loaves.” No French writer had ever before said so perfectly what all felt and were trying to say; and it was done so skillfully, so pleasantly, like a man telling a story after supper.

At the time they appeared the social order of the *ancien régime* was beginning to crumble about the monarchy. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, by exiling the Huguenots, had deprived the country of many of its most industrious subjects, and struck a disastrous blow at its trade; the power of France, build up peacefully by Mazarin and Colbert, had been shattered at Ramilies and Malplaquet; and Louis XIV.’s acceptance of the Bull *Unigenitus*, directed against the Jansenists, had destroyed the last remnant of religious liberty. As for the parliaments, they were only able to mumble and grumble, endless edicts having pulled their teeth, as it were, one by one; and the condition of the people was desperate in the extreme. It is no wonder that when Louis XIV. Died, the middle and lower classes thanked God with “scandalous frankness” as for a long-expected and certain deliverance. The upper classes were delighted also, although they hardly returned thanks in the same quarter, nor for the same reason. It was not a lightening of taxation, some liberty of conscience, more equal laws, that the latter anticipated, but the old licence, the “unchained libertinage,” the idea of which had never disappeared, but had been handed down, as Sainte-Beuve says, in direct and uninterrupted descent from the Renaissance to the Fronde, from the Fronde to the Regency, through De Retz, Saint-Evremond, Vendome, Bayle, to the Epicureans, Pyrrhonists, professors of an imperturbable impiety, the unbelievers, as full and certain in their unbelief as Bossuet was in his faith, who made a byword of the eight years from the death of Louis XIV. To his successor’s assumption of power. Grown sanctimonious in his old age, Louis XIV. Had made his subjects hypocrites. At his death the boast of vice succeeded to ostentatious devotion; the court like one man changed from Tartuffe into Don Juan. All things were discussed, examined, and torn to shreds. The intestine quarrels of the Church gave scoffers the opportunity they would have made. Dubois debauched politics; Law, finance; and the populace debauched themselves: for gaming, which had before been confined to people of quality, became the common amusement. Incest, too, was quite *à la mode*; and those who could not be in the height of the fashion had to be satisfied with lesser vices. The autocratic rule of the *Grand Monarque* gave place to the *laissez-aller* of Philip of Orleans, the “unbelieving Regent.” Hope, desire, speculation, knew no bounds, all things in heaven above and in the earth beneath having become common and unclean. It is this period that is reflected and criticized in the “Persian Letters.”

## V

The “Persian Letters” are the correspondence of several Persians, on a visit to Europe, with each other and their friends in Ispahan. Rica, the younger of the two principal writers, is good-humoured, sarcastic, and represents the lighter side of Montesquieu’s nature. His lively intellect makes him a keen observer; his youth and health enable him to go everywhere, see everybody, and experience everything. He describes the surface of society with a quick glance that sometimes pierces deep enough, too. The King of France, although he has no mines of gold and silver, like the King of Spain, is much wealthier, deriving supplies from an inexhaustible source, the vanity of his subjects. He is likewise a magician, for his dominion extends to the minds of

his subjects. If he has a costly war on hand, and is short of money, he simply suggests that a piece of paper is a coin of the realm, and his people are straightway convinced of it. But this is a small matter. There is a much more powerful magician, the Pope, to wit, who sometimes makes the King believe that three are no more than one; that the bread he eats is not bread, and the wine he drinks not wine. It is Rica who makes the discovery that the Christian religion practically consists in the non-fulfilment of an immense number of tedious duties; and it is he who quotes the epitaph on the diner-out which recalls by its numerical exactness Teufelsdröck's epitaph on Philippus Zaehdarm. "Here," it runs, "rests one who never rested before. He assisted at five hundred and thirty funerals. He made merry at the births of two thousand six hundred and eighty children. He wished his friends joy, always varying the phrase, upon pensions amounting to two millions six hundred thousand livres; in town he walked nine thousand six hundred furlongs, in the country thirty-six furlongs. His conversation was pleasing; he made a ready-made stock of three hundred and sixty-five stories; he was acquainted also from his youth with a hundred and eighteen apophthegms derived from the ancients, which he employed on special occasions. He died at last in the sixtieth year of his age. I say no more, stranger; for how could I ever have done telling you all that he did and all that he saw."<sup>1</sup> It is Rica who sketches the alchemist in his garret, praying fatuously that God would enable him to make a good use of his wealth; the people whose conversation is a mirror which reflects only their own impertinent faces; the professional wits planning a conversation of an hour's length to consist entirely of *bons-mots*; the compilers who produce masterpieces by shifting the books in a library from one shelf to another; the universal "decider," who knew more about Ispahan than his Persian interlocutor; the French Academy, a body with a chokeful of tropes, metaphors, and antitheses; the geometer, a martyr to his own accuracy, who was offended by a witty remark, as weak eyes are annoyed by too strong a light; the quidnuncs, *petits-mâtres*, lazy magistrates, financiers, bankrupts, and opera-dancers.

Usbek is older, graver, given to meditation and reflection. Although from his earliest youth a courtier, he has remained uncorrupted. As he could not flatter, his sincerity made him enemies, and brought upon him the jealousy of the ministers. His life being in danger, he forsook the court, and retired to his country-house. Even there persecution followed him, and he determined on the journey to Europe. Rica went as his companion.

The opening paragraph of Letter XLVIII., in which Usbek characterizes himself, is undoubtedly descriptive of Montesquieu. "Although I am not employed in any business of importance, I am yet constantly occupied. I spend my time observing, and at night I write down what I have noticed, what I have seen, what I have heard during the day. I am interested in everything, astonished at everything: I am like a child, whose organs, still over-sensitive, are vividly impressed by the merest trifles." Usbek can be as brilliant and satirical on occasion as his younger companion, but his aim is to probe to the heart of things, and he knows that truth will only reveal itself to a reverent search. To him all religions are worthy of respect, and their ministers also, for "God has chosen for Himself, in every corner of the earth, souls purer than the rest, whom He has separated from the impious world that their mortification and their fervent prayers may suspend His wrath." He thinks that the surest way to please God is to obey the laws of society, and to do our duty towards men. Every religion assumes that God loves men, since He establishes a religion for their happiness; and since He loves men we are certain of pleasing Him in loving them, too. Usbek's prayer in Letter XLVI. is not yet out of date. "Lord, I do not understand any of those discussions that are carried on without end regarding Thee: I would serve Thee according to Thy will; but each man whom I consult would have me serve Thee according to his." He insists that religion is intended for man's happiness; and that, in order to

love it and fulfil its behests, it is not necessary to hate and persecute those who are opposed to our beliefs – not necessary even to attempt to convert them. Indeed, he holds that variety of belief is beneficial to the state. A new sect is always the surest means of correcting the abuses of an old faith; and those who profess tolerated creeds usually prove more useful to their country than those who profess the established religion, because, being excluded from all honours, their endeavour to distinguish themselves by becoming wealthy improves trade and commerce. Proselytism, with its intolerance, its affliction of the consciences of others, its wars and inquisitions, is an epidemic disease which the Jews caught from the Egyptians, and which passed from them to the Christians and Mohammedans, a capricious mood which can be compared only to a total eclipse of human reason. “He who would have me change my religion is led to that, without doubt, because he would not change his own, although force were employed; and yet he finds it strange that I will not do a thing which he himself will not do, perhaps for the empire of the world.”<sup>2</sup> Usbek is a sophist, but it is quite evident that he is no bigot; he even goes further than Montesquieu himself, a wit of the Regency, felt to be right; and when he praises suicide as being no more a disturbance of the order of Providence than the making a round stone square, he is rapped over the knuckles with the reminder that the preservation of the union of body and soul is the chief sign of submission to the decrees of the Creator.

Usbek has his character-sketches as well as Rica. He gives a lively description of those geniuses who frequent the coffee-houses, and on quitting them believe themselves four times wittier than when they entered. The savage king sitting on his block of wood, dressed in his own skin, and inquiring of the sailors if they talked much of him in France, is an illustration of his. One letter, the forty-eighth, is quite a picture-gallery. Usbek is in the country at the house of a man of some note; and he describes to his friend Rhedi various members of the company he meets. There are vulgar farmers-general who brag of their cooks; jaunty confessors, necessities of female existence, who can cure a headache better than any medicine; poets, the grotesquest of humankind, declaring that they are born so; the old soldier, who cannot endure the thought that France has gained any battles without him; and last, but not least, the lady-killer who has a talk with Usbek. “‘It is fine weather,’ he said. ‘Will you take a turn with me in the garden?’ I replied as civilly as I could, and we went out together. ‘I have come to the country,’ said he, ‘to please the mistress of the house, with whom I am not on the worst of terms. There is a certain woman in the world who will be rather out of humour; but what can one do? I visit the finest women in Paris; but I do not confine my attentions to one; they have plenty to do to look after me, for, between you and me, I am a sad dog.’ ‘In that case, sir,’ said I, ‘you doubtless have some office or employment which prevents you from waiting on them more assiduously?’ ‘No, sir; I have no other business than to provoke husbands, and drive fathers mad; I delight in alarming a woman who thinks me hers, and in bringing her within an ace of losing me. A set of us young fellows divide up Paris among us in this pursuit, and keep it wondering at everything we do.’ ‘From what I understand,’ said I, ‘you make more stir than the most valorous warrior, and are more regarded than a grave magistrate. If you were in Persia you would not enjoy all these advantages; you would be held fitter to guard our women than to please them.’ The blood mounted to my face; and I believe had I gone on speaking, I could not have refrained from affronting him.” Then there are casuists, great lords, men of sense and men of none, bishops, philosophers and philosophasters, all pricked off as deftly as any of Rica’s acquaintances, and with less exaggeration, if with more sobriety. One brief dramatic sketch must not be omitted. Has any one failed to meet the gentleman who says, “I believe in the immortality of the soul for six months at a time; my opinions depend entirely on my bodily condition: I am a Spinozist, a

Socinian, a Catholic, ungodly or devout, according to the state of my animal spirits, the quality of my digestion, the rarity or heaviness of the air I breathe, the lightness or solidity of the food I eat?”<sup>3</sup>

Montesquieu has distinguished the characters of Rica and Usbek with care; and during the first months of their stay in Europe, he succeeds with fair success in depicting their state of mind in the midst of, what was to them, a new world. Soon, however, they become in all except their domestic matters merely mouthpieces for the author’s satire and criticism, and expounders of his theories. It is Usbek who in several letters explains those ideas which Montesquieu afterwards developed in “L’Esprit des Lois.” On this subject he writes as a legislator, with the well-balanced judgment, the restraint and reserve which always temper Montesquieu’s enthusiasm and control his expressions of opinion. Here in one sentence is the policy of “L’Esprit des Lois”: “I have often inquired which form of government is most conformable to reason. It seems to me that the most perfect is that which obtains its object with the least friction; so that the government which leads men by following their propensities and inclinations is the most perfect.”<sup>4</sup> And in the following has been detected the philosophy of Montesquieu’s great book: “Nature always works tardily, and, as it were, thriftily; her operations are never violent; even in her productions she requires temperance; she never works but by rule and measure; if she be hurried she soon falls into decline.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, the latter portion of the “Persian Letters” is edited from Montesquieu’s commonplace-book. It reveals his ideas on international law, on the advancement of science, and on the origin of liberty; and states those problems which were to be the study of his life.

From the travels of Chardin and Tavernier, Montesquieu derived his knowledge of Persia. To Chardin he is particularly indebted, not only for the background, but for his theory of despotism<sup>6</sup> and his theory of climates.<sup>7</sup> The story of the revolt of Usbek’s harem, though belonging to a style long out of fashion, is skillfully told, and will be found to interest the most prudish reader in spite of some disgust. The forsaken wives, the long-winded pedantic eunuchs, are all French, of course, French people of the Regency; and Usbek himself is as jealous as a *petit-maître*. As for the story of Anais, and the sexual love of brother and sister in “Apheridon and Astarte,” all that need be said of them is that they are characteristic of the mood of the Regency. The translator gave a passing thought to the propriety of omitting the former; but the author did not omit it, so it appears. One word more on this subject, and it shall be a word from Montesquieu himself. He found his daughter one day with the “Persian Letters” in her hand. “Let it alone, my child, he said. “It is a work of my youth unsuited to yours.”

<sup>1</sup> Letter LXXVIII.

<sup>2</sup> Letter LXXXVI.

<sup>3</sup> Letter LXXV.

<sup>4</sup> Letter LXXXI.

<sup>5</sup> Letter CXV.

<sup>6</sup> Letters CIII., CIV.

<sup>7</sup> Letter CXXII.

## VI

Soon after the publication of the “Persian Letters” Montesquieu went to the capital to enjoy his reputation. There he found society more agreeable in Paris than in Versailles, because in the

small world of the latter intrigue was the rule, whereas in the former people amused themselves. He became a member of the informal Club de l'Entre-sol, which met on Saturdays in the house of President Hénault. Bolingbroke was the founder of this club, and its most distinguished member. Among those who frequented it were the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, D'Argenson, "secretary to the Republic of Plato," and Ramsai. Probably the principal benefit which Montesquieu derived from his attendance at the Entre-sol was his introduction to Lord Chesterfield; but he continued a member until Cardinal Fleury interdicted the club in 1730, on account of the active part it began to take in politics.

With the aid of Mademoiselle de Clermont, Louis XIV.'s unspeakable tenth muse, Montesquieu was elected to the Academy in 1725; but his election was invalidated on account of his non-residence in Paris. He then returned to Bordeaux, sold his presidentship, acquired the necessary qualification, and, not without a questionable intrigue, was elected in 1728 to the chair rendered vacant by the death of De Sacy, a forgotten translator.

In the spring of the same year Montesquieu set out on his travels with a nephew of the Duke of Berwick, whose affairs called him to Vienna. It was during this journey that he applied for nomination to some diplomatic post. In urging his claim he pointed out that he was not duller than other men; that, being of independent means, honour was the only reward he sought; that he was accustomed to society, and had toiled (*beaucoup travaillé*) to make himself capable. The powers that then were, however, elected to dispense with his services.

Montesquieu was much disappointed with his reception at the hands of the great. On his first entrance into society he had been announced as a man of genius, and had been looked on favourably by people in place; but when the success of the "Persian Letters" proved that he actually had ability, and brought him the esteem of the public, people in place began to be shy of him. It was no consolation for him to tell himself that officialdom, secretly wounded by the reputation of a celebrated man, takes vengeance by humiliating him, and that he who can endure to hear another praised must merit much praise himself.<sup>1</sup> He was deeply disappointed. In his youth he had written, "Cicero, of all the ancients, is he whom I should most wish to be like." A public career was denied him and he suffered, having set his heart on it; but he was more of an ancient Roman than Cicero, if that was his ambition; and it is surely better to be famous as the author of "L'Esprit des Lois," than to be infamous as one of Louis XV.'s ministers.

In Italy he found Lord Chesterfield. The two men had already tested each other in the Entre-sol, and they were now glad to travel together. Journeying to Venice, they met Law, the creator of credit, who, having preserved his taste for speculation and a fine diamond, passed his time in staking the latter at the gaming-table. Montesquieu had dealt severely with him in the "Persian Letters," but that did not prevent Law from receiving him pleasantly; nor did the ruined financier's complaisance prevent Montesquieu from applying the lash again in "L'Esprit des Lois."

From Venice they went to Rome. Montesquieu frequented the salon of Cardinal Polignac, the French ambassador; and the city, both ancient and modern, had its due effect. Before leaving it, he paid a visit to the Pope, Benedict XIII., who said to him, "My dear president, I wish you to carry away some souvenir of my friendship. To you and yours I grant permission to eat meat every day for the term of your natural lives." Montesquieu thanked the Pope and withdrew. Next day they brought him the dispensation with a note of charges. "The Pope," said Montesquieu, returning the papers, "is an honest man; I will not doubt his word; and I hope God has no reason to doubt it either." An answer becoming a shrewd economic Gascon.

After visiting Naples, Pisa, Florence, Turin, and the Rhine country, they arrived at the

Hague, where Chesterfield was English ambassador. From the Hague they sailed to England, reaching London in November, 1729.

<sup>1</sup> “Pensées.”

## VI

Although Montesquieu lived in England for eighteen months, there is but little to tell of his visit. According to his custom he went everywhere, and saw, if not everybody, certainly Walpole, Pope, and Swift. Montesquieu derived immense benefit from his travels, because he was always pliant to the manners of the country in which he sojourned. “When I am in France,” he said, “I swear friendship with everybody; in England, with nobody; in Italy, I do the agreeable all round; in Germany, I drink with the whole world.” He found England the most useful country to visit. Germany, he thought, was made to travel in, Italy to rest in, England to think in, and France to live in.

Montesquieu left behind him a set of notes on England, from which we can gather and condense his impressions.

In London the people eat much fleshmeat, with the result that they become very stout, and collapse at forty or forty-five.

The streets of London are so bad, that it is advisable to make one’s will before taking a hackney-coach.

The young English noblemen are divided into two classes: those who, having been to the University, have some learning, and are consequently shamefaced and constrained; and the shameless ones who know nothing, and are the *petits-mâtres* of the nation. But the English in general are modest.

Paris is a handsome city where there are ugly corners; London is a villainous place containing some very beautiful things.

The complaints of foreigners, especially of the French, in London, are lamentable. They say that they cannot make a friend; and that their overtures are received as injuries. But how can the Kinski, the Broglies, and La Vilette, with their profuse French manners, expect the English to be like them? How should the English, who do not love each other, love strangers?

I look on the King of England simply as a man who has a pretty wife, a hundred servants, a handsome equipage, and a good table. People think him fortunate; but when he is left alone, and his door closed, and he has to quarrel with his wife and his servant, and swear at his butler, he is not so much to be envied after all.

By dint of suspecting everybody, people grow hard-hearted here.

There are some Scotch members of parliament who can get only two hundred pounds for their votes, and who sell them at that price.

A minister thinks only of defeating the opposition; and to that end he would sell England – the whole world.

Extraordinary things are done in England for money. The English do not even know the meaning of honor and virtue.

I do not know what will be the upshot of European emigration to Africa and the West Indies; but I am certain that England will be the first nation to be deserted by its colonies.

The English make little effort at politeness, but are never impolite.

Women in England are reserved because they see little of the men. If a foreigner speaks to them, they suspect his intentions. “‘Je ne veux pas,’ disent-elles, ‘give to him encouragement.’”

There is no religion in England. If religion is spoken of everybody laughs.

England is at present the freest country in the world, not excepting any republic. I call it free, because unlimited power is in the hands of the King and the Parliament. A good English citizen will therefore endeavour to protect liberty as much against the Commons as against the King.

Montesquieu’s impressions of England were written on his lands as well as in his books; for when he returned to France he had his ancestral estate of La Brède laid out in the English style.

## VIII

The rest of Montesquieu’s life was spent at his estates in the country and at Paris.

He made great improvements in his land, and increased his revenues largely. At his death his income is said to have been sixty thousand francs. He was not ambitious to be rich; but in all that he took in hand he wished to feel and to see signs of his ability. He has been accused of parsimony, but that is one of the commonest charges the weak have to bring against the strong. Order was the law of his being, and prodigality and dissipation as repugnant to him as anything else chaotic. Indeed there was always too little chaos about Montesquieu.<sup>1</sup> He saw life steadily and saw it whole, too soon, too easily; and he took a part for the whole. But, to return, he was certainly not avaricious. His enlightened benevolence appeared in the moderate rents he charged; and there are several specific acts of generosity recorded.

Henry Sully, an English astronomer of note, being at Bordeaux pursuing experiments in horology, received much attention at the hands of Montesquieu, then President of the Bordeaux Academy. One day Sully, reduced to his last sou, “no uncommon thing with inventors,” wrote Montesquieu a brief note, “very English and very artless”—“I am in the mood to hang myself, but I don’t think I should do so if I had a hundred crowns.” “I send you a hundred crowns,” replied Montesquieu, “don’t hang yourself, and come and see me.”

In the winter of 1747-48, Guienne, on account of the war with England, had been unable to import a sufficient quantity of grain. On the 7th of December, Montesquieu, being at La Brède, was told that the tenants on an estate of his fifty leagues away were almost famine-stricken. He drove to the place at once with hardly a halt; summoned the curés of “the four villages,” and while waiting for them examined the state of provisions. On their arrival, he said, “Gentlemen, I beg you to assist me in procuring some help for your parishioners. You know those who are in need of corn, or of money to buy it. I wish all the grain in my barns to be distributed gratuitously. My steward will hand it out in quantities to be fixed in proportion to the needs of those who are in want of it. It is not right that any one should lack the necessaries of life on my lands as long as I have a superabundance. Gentlemen, you are good fellows. I trust to you entirely to make this distribution. You will oblige me by carrying out my intentions promptly; and by keeping the thing a secret.”

Montesquieu then went away at once, to escape the thanks of his tenants. According to the friend—of a scenic turn of mind evidently—who accompanied him, wheat to the value of 6400 livres was distributed by the curés. To prevent the recurrence of the distress which he had so munificently relieved, Montesquieu established on his estates granaries for the poor (*greniers de*

*charité*).

Montesquieu was, indeed, one of the best of landlords and country gentlemen. He was looked upon in France as a species of “Milord Anglais,” as interested in men as in books; and he was so—in the peasants of La Brède, who were “not learned enough to make the worse appear the better reason,” as well as in the wits of Paris. His habits and manners were as simple as could be. He would go about La Brède all day long with a white cotton cap on his head and a vine-pole over his shoulder; in which guise he was, of course, mistaken more than once for a vine-dresser, and asked by those who came to offer him “les hommages de l’Europe,” if that “was the chateau of Montesquieu.”<sup>2</sup> A Genevese naturalist, Trembley,<sup>3</sup> whom he had met in England, wrote to a friend, after having passed several days at La Brède in the autumn of 1752, “I cannot describe the pleasure I enjoyed during my stay. How beautiful, how charming the things I heard! What do you think of conversations which begin at one o’clock in the day and last till eleven at night? Now there was talk of the loftiest subjects; anon full bodied laughter over some delightful story. . . I talked much of agriculture with M. de Montesquieu. In a conversation on that subject he exclaimed:

‘ O fortunatos nimium sua si bona norint Agricolas!’

adding, ‘I have often thought of putting these words on the front of my house.’”

The Earl of Charlemont wrote requesting an audience.<sup>4</sup> The reply was favourable, and he and his companion, so excited were they at the prospect of seeing the great man, arrived at his house before he was up. The servant put them into the library, where “the first thing we saw was an open book lying on a table at which he had probably sat on the preceding evening: the extinguished lamp was still in position. Impatient to know the night reading of the great philosopher, we stepped at once to the volume: it was the *Elegies of Ovid*, open at one of the most gallant pages. We had not recovered from our surprise, when it was increased by the entrance of the president, whose appearance and manners were entirely opposed to the idea which we had formed of him. Instead of a grave and austere philosopher, whose very presence would have intimidated young folk like us, the person who addressed us was a Frenchman”—even the French philosophers are French! —“gay, polished, full of vivacity, who, after a thousand agreeable greetings, and a thousand thanks for the honour which we did him, invited us to breakfast; but”. . . in short, we went to walk instead. “At the skirt of a fine wood, cut in alleys, surrounded by a paling, and entered by a gate three feet high and fastened with a chain, ‘Come on,’ said he, after having searched in his pocket, ‘it is not worth while waiting for the key. You can jump as well as I, I am sure, and it’s not a gate like that I’m afraid of.’ So saying, he ran at the gate and leapt over it as light as you like. He had noticed our embarrassment on first meeting him—for we were much moved—and so he set to work, out of pure good-nature, to put us at our ease. Little by little his age and his genius disappeared so completely that the conversation became as free and easy as if we had been his equals in every respect. We spoke of the arts and sciences. He questioned us on our travels, and as I had visited the east he addressed himself particularly to me, interesting himself in the smallest details of the lands through which I had traveled. I heard him say more than once that he regretted not having seen these countries. . . After having made the tour of his estate, laid out in the English style, we returned and were received by Madame la Baronne and her daughter. . . . The meal was simple and abundant. After dinner Montesquieu insisted that we should stay, and he kept us for three days, during which his conversation was equally amusing and instructive.” This, though of the gushing order,

is evidently a true picture of the man who said, "He who writes well does not write as people write, but as he writes; very often in talking badly such a one writes well." To himself may be applied what he said of Montaigne: "In most authors I see a writing man; in Montaigne, a thinking man." He was always saying, "The misfortune of certain books is the killing work one has to do in condensing what the author took so much trouble to expand."

<sup>1</sup> His "tranquil chaos" was what Carlyle admired most in Tennyson.

<sup>2</sup> Garat, "Mémoires sur le Dix-huitième Siècle."

<sup>3</sup> Sayoux, "Le Dix-huitième Siècle à l'Etranger."

<sup>4</sup> Fr.Hardy, "Memoirs of Charlemont."

## IX

This simplicity was the great charm of the man, as it is that of the writer. He never lectures the reader, he talks with him; "he makes him assist him in his composition." In Paris he was, as in the country, as in his books, even-tempered, simple, and pleasantly merry. In the very heat of conversation he never lost his equanimity. Simple, profound, sublime, he charmed, instructed, without offence: was even more marvelous in conversation than in his works:<sup>1</sup> "and always that same energy when his hatred of despotism lighted his face."<sup>2</sup> Without bitterness, without satire, full of wit and brilliant sallies, no one could tell a better story, promptly, vividly, without premeditation.<sup>3</sup> And he was always more willing to listen than to talk; he learnt as much from conversation as from books. The Duchess de Chaulnes said of him, "That man makes his book in society: he remembers everything that is said to him, and only talks with those who have something to tell him worth remembering.: Such a man requires the company of the best brains to bring him out; with commonplace people he will be commonplace: and yet he could find wit in those who were called dull.<sup>4</sup> It was possible, however, to bore him. On one occasion, when disputing with some portentous councilor who got warm and cried, "M. le Président, if it is not as I say, I will give you my head, " he replied, coolly, "I accept; little gifts are the cement of friendship."<sup>5</sup> A certain young lady, *un peu galante*, annoyed him with a torrent of questions one evening. His opportunity came when she asked him in what happiness consisted. "Happiness," he replied, "means for queens, fertility; for maidens, sterility; and for those who are near you, deafness."<sup>6</sup> Still he delighted in the company and conversation of women, and in his younger days did not object to be in their best graces. He tells that he attached himself to such as he thought loved him, and detached himself as soon as he thought they didn't:<sup>7</sup> the manners of the Regency being somewhat different from ours.

<sup>1</sup> Maupertuis, "Éloge de Montesquieu."

<sup>2</sup> Garat, "Mémoires sur le Dix-huitième Siècle."

<sup>3</sup> D'Alembert, "Éloge de Montesquieu."

<sup>4</sup> "Pensées."

<sup>5</sup> Laplace, "Pièces intéressantes et peu connues."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> "Pensées."

## X

The eighteenth century was in France the age of the “monstrous regiment of women.” The divine right of kings, as it had done in England half a century before, resolved itself into the divine right of mistresses. One legacy bequeathed by them was the French Revolution; modern conversation was the other. In England conversation remained among men, and produced clubs; in France women invaded it, and the salon was the result: the heyday past, the Regent’s mistress, the minister’s mistress, opened a salon, where Montesquieu and all celebrities might meet to talk. Claudine Guérin de Tencin, saddened by the suicide of a lover and the arrival of her forty-fifth year; Madame Geoffrin, “whimsical and cross-grained,” citizen’s daughter, millionaire’s widow, who had the excellent talent of drawing every one out in his own subject, and called her salon “a shop;” Marie de Vichy, Marquise du Deffand, whom Massillon could not convert, who was interested in nothing, and had neither temperament nor romance; and the Duchess de Chaulnes, the “intimate enemy” of Madame du Deffand, “a typical woman of the eighteenth century,” delighting only in wit, bons-mots, and gallantry, and made piercingly sagacious by her wicked life: these and others like them kept salons, primarily for their own amusement. Earnest talk on momentous matters was the one thing forbidden. Clear analysis of questions of finance, of morality, of legislation, clear mockery of the problems of human destiny, the facile, brilliant, and winged talk, “on everything *à propos* of nothing,” was the order of the day.

Madame du Deffand was Montesquieu’s favourite among these. She gathered about her in her own phrase “les trompeurs, le trompés, et les trompettes”—everybody connected with diplomacy, in fact. In her salon the author of “L’Esprit des Lois” learned much. “I like that woman,” he said, “with all my heart; she pleases me, amuses me; it is impossible to weary in her company.” It was in this society that Montesquieu “talked out” his books; and the reader should remember that it was for this society they were written.

Montesquieu was often glad to retire from the “official centers of conversation” to quieter houses, where he could be more at home, and where he could meet such marvels of the age as the two sisters of Madame de Rochefort, “the Marquise de Boufflers, who was faithful to her lover, and the Duchesse de Mirepoix, who was faithful to her husband.” But of all salons he preferred that the Duchesse d’Aiguillon. There he met the most interesting men of the day of all nationalities, attracted by the impartiality of the duchess, her abundant and original wit, her refined talk, her obligating manners, and her ability to speak four languages. Gustavus III. called her the “living journal of the Academy.” But she had judgment also; and authors consulted her about their works. Montesquieu liked her for herself and also because in her house he could meet Madame Dupré de Saint-Maur, wife of the Intendant of Bordeaux, who was “equally charming as mistress, as wife, and as friend.” It was in the arms of Madame Dupré de Saint-Maur that Montesquieu died on the 10th of February, 1755, in his sixty-sixth year.

## XI

Of “L’Esprit de Lois,” perhaps the greatest French book of the eighteenth century, “La Grandeur des Romains et leur décadence,” and Montesquieu’s minor works, it is not necessary to speak here. It has been said that Montesquieu only wrote one book, the “Persian Letters” and the “Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans” being studies for “L’Esprit des Lois;” but with a master the sketch is as perfect a work of art as the completed picture. “Timidity”—Montesquieu was a severe judge of himself—“timidity has been the curse of my life,” he said; but his very dread of being weak—which he never was—helped to make his first work a masterpiece.

## XII

Quesnay, the elder Mirabeau, Raynal, Morelly, Servan, Malesherbes, Voltaire, Beccaria, Filangieri, Blackstone, Ferguson, all descend from Montesquieu; and Gibbon found “the strong ray of philosophic light,” which “broke from Scotland in our times” upon political economy, only a reflection, though with a far steadier and more concentrated force, from the scattered but brilliant sparks kindled by the genius of Montesquieu. Chateaubriand and Benjamin Constant imitated him; Talleyrand, the best servant France ever had, was his disciple. Catherine of Russia said, “His ‘Esprit de Lois’ is the breviary of sovereigns.” The men of the French Revolution swore by him. Robespierre was parodying him when he said, “The principle of democratic government is virtue; the means of its establishment, terror;” and Napoleon honoured him by discarding him as an ideologist.

France never had a wiser counselor, “his blood and judgment were so well commingled;” but he could not prevent the Revolution any more than Horatio could have saved Hamlet.

JOHN DAVIDSON.

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### SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE PERSIAN LETTERS <sup>1</sup>

Nothing in the Persian Letters has been found more attractive than the unexpected discovered of a sort of story, which can be followed easily from beginning to end. A chain of circumstance connects the various characters. In proportion as their stay in Europe is extended, the morals and manners of that part of the world appear to them less wonderful and odd; and the degree in which they are affected by the marvelous and the eccentric depends upon the difference in their dispositions. On the other hand, the Asiatic *seraglio*<sup>2</sup> becomes more disorderly the long Usbek remains away—that is to say, in proportion as frenzy increases and love abates.

Another cause of the success of romances of this kind lies in the fact that events are described by the characters themselves as actually happening. This produces a sensational effect unattainable in the narrative of an outsider; and it is to this that the popularity of certain works which have appeared since the publication of the “Persian Letters” is mainly due.

Although in the regular novel, digressions are inadmissible unless they themselves constitute a fresh romance, and argumentative discussion is altogether beside the mark, since the characters are not brought together for the purpose of chopping logic; yet, in the epistolary form, where accident selects the characters, and the subjects dealt with are independent of any design or preconceived plan, the author is enabled to mingle philosophy, politics, and morality with a romance, and to connect the whole by a hidden, and somewhat novel, bond.

So great was the sale of the “Persian Letters” when they came out that publishers did their

utmost to obtain sequels. They button-holed every author they met, and entreated him to write "Persian Letters.

What I have just stated, however, should convince the reader that they do not admit of a sequel<sup>3</sup>, still less of any admixture from the hand of another.<sup>4</sup>

Some remarks have been found by many people sufficiently audacious; but I beg them to consider the nature of the work. The Persians, who were to play so important a part in it, found themselves, transported, to all intents and purposes, into another world. It was therefore necessary for some time to represent them as ignorant and full of prejudices: attention was bestowed exclusively on the formation and development of their ideas. Their first thoughts must have been exceptional.<sup>5</sup> It seemed to the author that all he had to do was to endow them with singularity in as spirited a manner as he could; and to this end what was more necessary than to depict their state of mind in presence of whatever appeared to them extraordinary? Nothing was further from his thoughts than the idea of compromising any principle of our religion—he did not even suspect himself of the simplest indiscretion. What questionable remarks there are on religion will always be found united with feelings of surprise and astonishment, and not with any critical intention, still less with that of censure. Why should these Persians appear better informed when speaking of our religion, than when they discuss our manners and customs? And if they do sometimes find our dogmas singular, it is always a proof of their entire ignorance of the connection between those dogmas and other religious truths.

The author advances this justification out of his love for these great truths, independently of his respect for the human race, whose tenderest feelings he certainly did not intend to wound. The reader is, therefore, requested not for one moment to regard the remarks referred to as other than the result of amazement in people who could not fail to be amazed, or as the paradoxes of men who were in no condition to be paradoxical. The reader should also observe that the whole charm of the work lies in the continuous contrast between the existing state of things and the remarkable, artless, or odd manner in which they are regarded. Beyond a doubt, the nature and design of the "Persian Letters" are so obvious that they can only deceive those who are inclined to deceive themselves.

<sup>1</sup>These reflections first appeared as an introduction to the quarto edition of the "Persian Letters" (1754), and have always been ascribed to Montesquieu himself.

<sup>2</sup>A *seraglio* is a royal dwelling. Montesquieu used the word as if were synonymous with *harem*, the name of the portion of an oriental mansion in which the women are sequestered.

<sup>3</sup>Probably an allusion to Lord Lyttleton's "Letters of Selim," published in English in 1735, and shortly afterwards translated into French.

<sup>4</sup>A reference to the "Lettres Turques" of Sainte-Foix, which in the edition of 1740 appeared collectively with the "Persian Letters."

<sup>5</sup>At one time Montesquieu intended to remove what he called "certain *juvenilia*" from the "Persian Letters;" but the intention was never carried out.