

UN ANGE à SODOME

SAINT OURS

L'HOMOSEXUALITÉ SUBLIMÉE




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The *Diary of an angel* is the first of seven short-stories written by Saint Ours and published in 1973 by Guy Gauthier éditeur in a collection called *Un ange à Sodome, l'homosexualité sublimée*. The six other stories are: L'Enlèvement de Ganymède, Le château des sables (Oukhaidour), L'Écurie des Centaures, Le Juge et L'Assassin, Chronique d'une saison des pluies and Le Bout du monde. Each story is set in a different background: Sodom for *Diary of an angel*, an oriental desert, Siam, Anjou or Marrakech for the others...

Saint Ours is the pen-name of Claude Achille Clarac. Clarac was born in Nantes, France, on August 31, 1903. He studied law and entered the Foreign Service in 1930. In 1934, he became embassy secretary in Tehran, where he married, in May 1935, the Swiss writer and photojournalist Anne-Marie Schwarzenbach (1908-1942). He was Consul of France in Tehran until 1942, was employed in Washington, DC and then became French ambassador to Syria in Damascus from 1955 to 1956 and later French ambassador in Bangkok, Thailand, from 1956 to 1968.

In 1971, Clarac wrote *Discovering Thailand* with Michael Smithies (published by Siam Publications). *Un ange à Sodome* is the only literary book he ever published. As of now, it has not been reprinted.

Roger Peyrefitte knew Saint Ours's real identity but never revealed it. In *Propos secrets* (Albin Michel et René Julliard, 1977, p. 106) he writes: « Lettré, du reste, comme beaucoup de diplomates, (Saint Ours) a publié, sous un pseudonyme, *Un ange à Sodome*, recueil de nouvelles assez remarquables ». « Assez remarquable » is, of course, an under-statement: if one needed to compare the *Diary of an Angel* to another work of the same merits, it would be with Annie Messina's *The Myrtle & The Rose*, that's how good Saint Ours's short-story is.

Claude Achille Clarac died on January 11, 1999.

JM Thian, March 2024

THE DIARY OF AN ANGEL

I

I was once an angel. Fire licks me, fire twists me, fire burns me. Unable to repent, I am damned for eternity. Ah, may this fire consume me until the end of time! The good of my sin is more lasting than its punishment.

I was an angel. Fixed as a star in the contemplation of the Lord, I was unaware of anxiety and peace, suffering and joy; I did not know that there were beings of blood and fruits, perfumes and waves. The Master had absorbed me in his light and this dazzle struck me with a blindness that fulfilled me. But then a voice tore through the silence. From a stop that felt like a shock, time began to flow, a line cut across the infinite. I can't say where or when, but my age dates back from this moment.

And the Voice says:

“I name you. You will descend onto earth and go to Sodom. The people of that city are an insult to me. Before I strike them down, I want you, adorned with the beauty of an angel, to go and tempt them one last time.”

I took shape just a stone's throw from a canal. My legs were trembling under my weight like those of a newborn foal. I could breathe: a sweet smell was filling my nostrils. Evening was coming; between the mountains, whose profiles were fading in the distance, orchards of dates and almonds, fields of beans and barley were stretching as far as the city walls. I heard a song that made me aware of the transparency of space. I looked at my body and noticed that it took pleasure from the touch of my hands in a way that was similar to but different from the pleasure my fingers derived from it. While I was looking at myself, a man passed me by. He was driving a donkey laden with baskets and was reprimanding it in a guttural voice. He stopped and, raising his eyebrows, asked me what I was doing standing there, naked, by

the side of the road. As I didn't know what to answer, a lie came to my lips; it was my first act as a creature.

“I was washing in the stream,” I said, “and now I'm waiting for my shirt to dry...”

At the same moment, an immaculate dress appeared at the fork of a branch.

“You must be going to Sodom?” he asked, pointing to the city whose walls rose above the sands and fields. I nodded in the affirmative.

“Well,” he continued, “get dressed and come with me... We'll chat on the way, it won't be such a long journey.”

As I draped myself in my dress and told him that I was a stranger in these parts, he added:

“I thought so... A boy of your age and your figure would have to be a stranger to undress as you did, in full view, in the spring, under the walls of Sodom...”

“But there was no one there...”

“Marvellous innocence! There could have been someone there. Didn't I surprise you?”

“Are you not a Sodomite then?”

“No, ah! by God no, I'm not a Sodomite!”

We were approaching the town. My feet, which had never been used, were getting hurt on the stones of the path. The path ran alongside earthen walls, clumps of palm trees and canals hemmed in with greenery. Birds sang and flew away at the sound of our footsteps, bees buzzed in the creamy scent of rapeseed. As we advanced, the landscape changed colour and lines; we were passing through russet shadows and grey earth baked by the sun. The city walls, supported by high arches, were flanked by towers and, higher up, there were terraces decorated with earthenware glistening on the adobe. Beyond, further away, the mountain was rising its golden and bloody face up in the heart of the sky.

I could only feel this spectacle through my skin. The angel in me was interested in everything that the body into which it was

poured was bearing witness. The nameless beauty of which I had been a part had been made of a single block, but the beauty of the earth to which each of my steps introduced me was a fragile opposite that filled me with doubt. It changed constantly; it was impossible to grasp it because it was only a quality of the things that were projected by the mirror of the senses onto creatures that were themselves perishable; it crumbled in the light, the time, the season, but as it was fragmentary, evasive, it could be sought, perhaps touched, embraced, destroyed. Through my human flesh, my still angelic conscience received the pleasure that came from the corruptibility of things, along with the foreboding of a fall. Yet I was delighted by its novelty. As the path we were following became swollen with other tracks, the movement of peasants, donkey-drivers and walkers increased around us. While staring at me, they were exchanging jokes I was unsure whether or not were aimed at me or at my companion. He sighed and said to me:

“Don't listen to what these people say when they see you! You are handsome, it's true, but in this capital of the devil, beauty is soiled as soon as it is seen; the only way to preserve its candour is to hide it...”

He spat and beat his donkey, which farted, kicking one leg. I followed his advice, as the commotion I seemed to be causing was making me a little uncomfortable.

“I come from a village halfway between Sodom and Gomorrah,” said my travelling companion. “Ras el Bebek, as it is called, is where the canal that carries the waters of the Euphrates, three hundred leagues away, divides into two branches, one of which feeds Sodom and the other Gomorrah. Our soil is fertile. We bring up our children to be principled, to fear excesses and to revere God. So we are prosperous... No one notices us. So we keep out of troubles. Yet every year I pay tribute from my village to the king of Sodom. I appear before a scribe who, having received my money and checked its value, makes a mark in front

of my name. God be praised, in Sodom I'm just a taxpayer and as soon as I've paid my tax, I go home...

... The story of these people? Ugh! A Babylonian king who ruled Mesopotamia, Egypt and Syria had a son and a daughter by his last wife. Malek debauched his comrades at an early age, and at fourteen Malika started a revolution in her father's harem. As the king, old and weak, could do nothing but weep on his throne over the disorders caused by his young wife's children, he allocated these lands to them and exiled them there. And so Malek founded Sodom and Malika Gomorrah...

...The mountain you see there? It overlooks Gomorrah from the other side. The Sodomites are not only infamous. Cruel and superb, they make a living out of war, while their reclusive, veiled wives languish in their homes. In Gomorrah, on the other hand, the women command, intrigue and trade; their men, who are little better than stallions, work day and night for them... But who would believe it? The population of these cities is constantly increasing. Unfortunately, we must also admit that the Sodomites have spirit. They dance and sing, make music and poetry, and build palaces. But their morals, Sir, their morals! They are revolting, abominable, infamous! The Lord wants us to love him by observing his law, doesn't he? As for me, I rise at dawn, I go to bed at dusk, I don't cut my hair or my beard, and I wash modestly. The three women I have married have given me ten daughters and fifteen sons who will praise God like me and, like me, they will give birth to righteous children. Ah, I hate the people of Sodom! They are proud, corrupt, they are... And yet I have to pay them tribute. What a disgrace! What indignity! I spit on them..."

My companion put his words into action, but not before checking that no one was watching him. I listened to him distractedly, as I was otherwise occupied. I realised that after the stony track, it was sweet to walk in the furrows of dust, on the sand of the streams that melted under my feet, in the clay that

crept between my toes. We were reaching the foot of the walls. The tracks were knotted around the monumental gate that gave access to the city. From time to time, groups of ten or twenty horsemen armed with lances galloped straight ahead, and one could see their spurs, jewels and sabres glinting in the dust and cloaks. A shout would ring out and they would rear their horses to dash off in another direction or to divide into squads with marvellous precision. My guide, perched on his donkey, kept grumbling.

... “The laws of this city are laws of scandal. We owe them, it seems, to Malek, but only the devil could have invented them. And the worst thing of all, Sir, the worst thing of all, is that these laws are obeyed! The women who are locked in are ignorant and superstitious; their husbands knock them up when they have nothing better to do. Because here they only have laws for boys. At the age of eight, they are circumcised with great pomp and ceremony. A barbaric custom, young man, and well worthy of this God-forsaken race! Then they enter secondary school. Ah, you won't believe your ears! Imagine that between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, boarders are obliged to wear... yes... how can I say this without blushing?... to wear... well, you know what I mean? A belt...”

As I was getting bored of his chatter, I interrupted him.

“What's wrong with that? Everyone wears belts...” “Yes,” he replied, “but that's the thing! This belt is, how shall I put it? special. It's a belt that... a belt that... in short, a belt that painlessly shapes them to satisfy unspeakable tastes. Do you understand what I mean? I would hate to insult your innocence, young man. Yes... Don't you agree? Isn't that monstrous? Vice is so deeply rooted in their foundations... Ha! Ha! Ha... What a good joke! Yes, so deeply rooted in their foundations that they speak of these horrors without the slightest shame!

... And when they reach the age of seventeen, the pages who have been brought up in these schools choose those who will

introduce them to war and debauchery at the same time. I'll spare you the details, they're as disgusting as the rest, but since you're a foreigner, perhaps they'll interest you all the same? There are rhymes and tambourines in a sort of court down below, a veritable breeding ground for prostitution, where the elders go fishing for the cadets. I once attended, I'm telling you now, but oh, only out of curiosity, because you know, I couldn't care less all about these things! Yes, I once attended the feast that consecrates these couplings. It ends with a banquet where, by the light of torches, in the fumes of wine, the worst bestiality is given free rein... The lovers drink from the same cups and bite into the same fruit, their hands and knees seek each other out under the tables, they kiss each other full in the mouth and only interrupt each other to urge their comrades to do better. Once the feasting is over, the torches are extinguished and in the alcoves lit by the night-lights, these drunken brutes mate. Imagine the scene! Limbs twisting like sections of earthworm, moanings, tongues clicking, the smell of spilt wine and smoking wicks... Enough to make one feel sick!... Filthy, I'm telling you, young man, filthy!"

After he had uttered these words, he spat again.

I didn't understand everything he was saying, but I couldn't help thinking that for a man who so strongly condemned the Sodomites, he was taking a curious pleasure in describing their vices. He must have been surprised at my silence, for, after spitting profusely, he said to me:

"You are so shocked, I can see it, that it leaves you speechless. Sons of whores and dogs! But shush! Let's be quiet! If they heard us, they might get angry..." We entered the town. The guards at the gate asked us where we were coming from. My guide replied: "What? Don't you recognise me? I am Lot, chief of the Ras el Bebek district. Let a righteous man enter Sodom!" The guards shrugged their shoulders. As for me, I declared that I had come from a distant country with a message for the king. They let us pass. Tall, thin and swarthy, the guards, who wore gold

bracelets on their wrists, had a severe beauty; it was as if a black fire ran under their skin.

The streets were paved with coloured cobblestones and lined with arcades where fruit, babouches and carpet merchants displayed their wares. Most of the men wore brightly coloured robes, elaborate daggers on their belts and soft boots on their feet. From time to time, some notables draped in fine woollen coats passed us by, but there were few young men. I assumed, from what Lot had told me, that they were being held back in their schools. Those I saw passed quickly, their eyes lowered, but their undulating gait belied the modesty of their attitude. As for the women, wrapped from head to toe in black veils with their eyes protected by horsehair visors, they examined the stalls with the piercing air of birds looking for food. Lot, full of contemptuous superiority, said nothing. At last we arrived at the gate of some sort of palace. “This, said Lot, is the hotel where I stay every time I come here. There are better ones, but I know the owner of this one. I'll recommend you; he'll give you a good price. Besides, in case this house doesn't suit you, you can move somewhere else whenever you want to...”

I uncovered my face as I entered and Lot introduced me to the hotelier. Ben Bachir, a well-fed man of about forty, welcomed me in infinitely flowery terms, but my companion cut him off.

“Show this stranger your best rooms. As far as I'm concerned, I'll take the same apartment as last time...”

I followed Ben Bachir. He pulled a large key from his cafetan, pushed it into the lock of a low door, opened it and asked me to come in. The flat consisted of two rooms which shared a common door. The first was cooled by an alabaster basin around which mattresses and cushions were arranged; in the other smaller room, there was a low bed, a few loose tables and Shiraz carpets. The lime-painted walls were hollowed out at regular intervals by lance-iron arches framing shelves on which pottery, ewers and lacquer boxes had been placed with discreet taste. Two pairs of

triple windows let pearly light through stucco scrolls at ceiling level. The murmur of the fountain and the diffuse light that shimmered off the carpets made the silent peace of the place more intimate.

“Does this apartment suit you?” asked Ben Bachir, bowing with his hand over his heart.

“Perfectly!”

He clapped his hands and four young servants immediately came and stood in front of me.

“Here are,” he said, “Hassan, Mahmoud, Nasser and Cherif. Choose the one you like best. He will take care of you...”. As I replied that I didn't care, the boys, who were smiling and nudging each other, were speechless. Ben Bachir then put his hand on the shoulder of the tallest of the five.

“Mahmoud is gentle and wise. Isn't that so, Mahmoud, my child?” he said, stroking his cheek. “To make your stay as pleasant as possible, he will do whatever you ask of him... I hope you'll like him...”

Mahmoud brought me some fruit, milk and jam. While I was eating, he followed my movements, kneeling in front of me to anticipate my every need. When I had finished tasting, he quickly removed the leftovers and offered to prepare a bath for me. He led me out of the apartment and into a cell decorated with glass and earthenware, furnished with a daybed and shelves covered with bottles of perfume, boxes of balms and ointments; at the back of this tiny room, an iron door and three steps led us down into the steam room. Mahmoud, who had undressed and was wearing only a loincloth, followed me in with a basin, cloths and soap. I made him understand that I didn't need his services: the smile he had had until then faded from his lips. Was he afraid he had displeased me? I would have liked to reassure him, but, lacking experience of this world, I wasn't sure how to go about it and I dismissed him as gently as I could. When I returned to my apartment, I saw that Mahmoud had brought flowers to my

bedside. He asked me if I still needed him, went round the room two or three times, kissed my hand, wished me good night and disappeared.

An hour later, I heard a scratching at my door as if someone was begging me to let him in. I didn't answer. Two or three timid knocks... I got up and, without opening the door, asked who was there. A whisper answered me:

“It's me, Lot! Open up! I've got something to tell you.” He slipped into my room, put his lamp on the edge of the basin, and pressing himself against me as if to confide in me, he whispered in my ear:

“We mustn't let anyone know that I'm here... Let's not make any noise...” His breath smelt of wine and his beard reeked of a barber's shop; his black robe, trimmed with refined decorations, made him look like a bad priest. I moved away from him.

“I value my reputation,” he continued. “If it were known that I entered your room at this time of night, I can't imagine what assumptions those Sodomite dogs would make!”

He came up to me and, stroking my arm, said to me, stammering: “Ah, young man, your skin is so soft! And your hair is like silk! Gold! Honey! Sunshine!” His hands, agitated by an increasingly indiscreet curiosity, were trying to slip under my dress...

“I'm sure that your...”

“Hey! What are you doing here, Lot, Sir?”

“What are you saying? What are you trying to say?” he shouted back, offended. “I only came here, young man, to advise you not to stay another moment in Sodom. At your age! With your size, your figure, your skin, your... You don't know what you're letting yourself in for. Have you noticed Ben Bachir's antics? The grimaces of the servants? Haven't they already...? Come on, tell me everything! You can trust me, I'm old enough to be your father. Ah! I fear, I tremble for your innocence. What a pity that would be! For *I* am not a Sodomite. Don't stay here!

Come with me to Ras el Bebek! I have two nubile daughters; I will give them to you in marriage. Their breasts are swollen like figs, their buttocks are like bushels of wheat and their bellies are as polished as ivory...”

He was dancing from one foot to the other; a little drool frothed at the corner of his mouth. I dismissed him as best as I could.

I collected myself after Lot's departure. Had his appearance in my adventure been pure chance? I was already wondering. But there was no doubt about my mission: I had been sent to earth to tempt the people of Sodom. In truth, since the Lord had condemned them in the secret of his plan, all I had to do was give them the opportunity to crown their wickedness with a sin which, symbolising all the others in an extreme scandal, would justify the descent of the thunderbolt upon them. The punishment that was about to befall the Sodomites was nestled, unbeknownst to them and close to their hearts, in Ben Bachir's guesthouse.

I had been the mirror in which Jehovah had loved to contemplate himself. The force that had suddenly separated me from it had made me the instrument of a damnation from which the angel's charms left no chance of escape. And yet everyone was asleep, lips barely parted, limbs barely untied. Was this abandonment so criminal? Had it never inspired courage, loyalty or sacrifice? I did not question the order I had received. Yet a kind of tenderness came over me for these people whom I did not yet know, but whose bodies were similar to mine, and I wished that the very excess of my beauty, betraying fate, would warn the Sodomites to turn away from me.

I knew that men were weak, but wasn't their weakness the flip side of their strength? Were not their virtues and vices merely the vicissitudes of their condition? The scent of the myrtle by which I had appeared, swept away by the wind, had returned to my nostrils mingled with the perfume of broad beans and rapeseed. Everything on earth was changing, but everything was

also being renewed; nothing was ever gained or lost. They were insatiable only because the rebirth of their needs prevented them from resting, which is only a foreshadowing of death. Pitiful creatures! This body, condemned to live and die, was all that they had.

And, upon those thoughts, I fell into my first sleep.

II

The sun was already high when Mahmoud woke me up. I asked him to comb my hair, which had fallen into disarray on the pillow. He did so devoutly, and when I had finished washing, he sprinkled me with rosewater. The cupboards in my room had been filled with linen and dresses while I was sleeping, so it seemed that I would never be short of anything. I chose a very fine white woollen coat with a gold braid around the neck and, so as not to stand out from the Sodomites, I borrowed a dagger from Ben Bachir and put it in my belt.

The air was warm but dry and light. Pretending to ignore the often indiscreet sensation caused by my passage, I mingled without embarrassment with the crowd, whose admiration was not unpleasant to me. The hotel where I was staying was in the commercial district of the city and as I moved away from it, the streets became less busy. I walked along walls with magnificent gates guarded by negroes who, with folded arms, followed me with the whites of their eyes. I learned later that originally, each of the princes of Sodom resided in the district under his control, but that they had gradually grouped together around the royal palace. Soon I saw this palace at the end of a square decorated with fountains, forming the centre of a monumental ensemble whose fantasy balanced its majesty. The sun gave a biscuit tint to its walls; its colossal foundations supported irregularly arranged storeys and the apartments in the upper parts of the building, airy with loggias and colonnades, crowned it with a light marble frieze. At the top of a bare wall, a precious frame seemed to call forth some delicious apparition and behind the earthenware ribbons that ran along the terraces, one imagined a delicate world. To the right, the royal temple, not as high as the palace but entirely covered in enamel, was sparkling like a reliquary, and on the other side of the square, a pleasure pavilion was opening onto

a terrace from which, on feast days, under painted coffers and coloured chandeliers, the sovereign and his guests would watch the horsemen's games.

I lingered there among the groups of notables who came and went, some in a hurry, others chatting under parasols carried by pages over their heads. A very well-dressed boy who had been following me for a few moments offered to show me the palace gardens. The enclosure to which he led me was not very large, but a profusion of flowers and water made it a miniature of Paradise. Couples were strolling around, exchanging confidences and laughing in hushed tones; the moments seemed suspended in this scented resting place whose calm, after the bustle of the shopping streets, delighted me.

“My name is Pasha...” whispered the child who was following me. As I didn't reply, he shyly took hold of the front of my dress.

“And you,” he whispered in my ear, “what's your name?”

“My name is Angel...”

He moved away from me to dip his hand in the water of a fountain. I went towards him. Lowering his eyes with a bat of his eyelashes, without changing his game or seeming to notice my presence, he murmured:

“You're not from around here?”

“It's obvious, isn't it...”

“Where are you from?”

“I'm visiting Sodom...”

He turned around with a quick movement of his back, sat down on the edge of the pool and, swinging his legs like a schoolboy, stared at me with a hint of malice.

“There are many things to see here. Foreigners who come to Sodom are usually attracted by its reputation, but they are often disappointed by what they find. You'll need a guide. Wouldn't you like me to show you around? I can do everything... you know...”

He jumped down from his perch, plucked two carnations, gave me one, put the other to his ear and, taking me by the hand, led me to the belvedere from where you could see a view famous throughout the East. This reputation was not usurped. I had arrived in Sodom by the side of the fields, but the city was built on the edge of a cliff overlooking Lake Asphaltite, nine hundred feet high. The back of the palace commanded the immense landscape and, a little lower down, the king's private gardens occupied a succession of terraces from which the same view could be enjoyed. The lake, whose heavy waters lay dormant at the bottom of a gaping gash, was dominated by ramparts of rock whose walls of sulphur, bastions of silver and spalls of gold, cinnabar and purple were sparkling in the sunlight. This frozen splendour lent a poignant grace to the flowers and fountains that adorned Sodom's gardens.

“We are alone here,” said Pacha, caressing my hand; “no one will disturb us...”

I remained silent, lost in the contemplation of this sumptuous void.

“It's beautiful, isn't it?” continued Pacha, but as I didn't reply, he walked away without bothering me any further. A little later I saw him holding the hand of a waddling figure who kept a handkerchief to his nostrils.

When I got back to the hotel, Ben Bachir told me that the king had asked me to report to the palace before the end of the day. “How,” I said, “does the king already know that I'm here?” “Young man,” he replied with a knowing smile, “you don't seem to realise what a sensation you are making here. Besides, sovereigns need to know everything in good time, because their ‘majesty’ must never be surprised. The protocol that governs palace life leaves nothing to chance, but the person who will come to collect you later will instruct you in the ceremonial of the audience. So don't you worry...”

I then asked Ben Bachir if he knew the young man who had approached me in the public garden.

“Of course! He's not a bad boy, but he's lazy. As he's not bad-looking, he lacks nothing. These kids who go from one to the other quickly become slanderous and capricious; their hearts fade before their cheeks do and the distractions they offer are not worth the time or the money spent on them.”

I asked Ben Bachir about Lot.

“Is he a friend of yours?” he asked cautiously.

“No, he's not. I met him on the way...”

“Ah, what a relief!” he exclaimed. “Every time this man comes here, he finds a way to cause a scandal. Even though the tribute he pays is the price of the security that Sodom ensures for his village, he is angry at having to pay it and vomits against us all the insults in his repertoire. The contempt he displays against us did not prevent him from brutalizing my poor Chérif to the point that I had to call the surgeon and when I discreetly reproached him for his behavior, he claimed that I was trying to defame him, uttered loud cries and called upon my head all the furies of heaven. His reputation! He only has this word in his mouth. Lot is sacrilegious, impious! Chérif will forget what he did to him, because he is young, but the fear that this bad man has linked in his mind with the experience of pleasure will perhaps leave him a scar that will take a long time to fade...”

The king's messengers came for me at the fifth hour. Six guards escorted us to the palace gate while two servants armed with fly swatters pushed aside the crowd in front of us. After passing through the gate, we crossed several courts which communicated with each other by steps at the foot of which stood black marble lions. The lords who awaited me at the entrance to each of these courts bowed as I passed and in accordance with etiquette, I greeted them first to my left, which is the side of the weapon and the heart, then to my right, the side of the pen and the government. Finally we arrived at the foot of a staircase which

was higher and steeper than the others. The pages waiting for me there went down on one knee, kissed my hands and lightly supporting my elbows, helped me climb up.

Each of these details was calculated, I later learned, to make the visitors appreciate the exaltation of the Throne. The Prime Minister was waiting for me in a fairly large room with stained glass windows covered in colorful shades. He came towards me and asked me to sit down; the pages who had introduced me immediately let fall the curtains which they had pushed aside to allow me passage. The Prince of Endor — that was his title — could have been forty years old. He looked at his interlocutors straight in the eyes, like someone used to commanding. His hair and beard, black as ink, made his complexion appear even paler than it was.

“Young man,” he said to me, “welcome to Sodom. Our city is beautiful, its climate is healthy, it is hospitable to foreigners. I hope that you will keep a pleasant memory of it... However, you would oblige me if you could tell me the purpose of your visit...”

“I come from a kingdom whose Master has delegated me to you. He wants to propose an alliance to you...”

“Do you have any credentials?”

“I have nothing other than his word...” The Prince stroked his beard meditatively.

“Your youth,” he said to me with a smile, “vouches for you quite sufficiently and as for your beauty, it is certainly irrefutable. But since I must take your word for it, let me in turn speak of Sodom... Sodom does not need anything...”

“My Sovereign doesn't want to negotiate. His breath animates and kills; he reigns over kings. He offers you his alliance. But if you refuse it...”

“I would gladly accept an agreement which, on our part, only entailed a commitment of friendship. We love friendship and there is nothing we would not do to honour it. But have we ever seen treaties without clauses? We know how to face reality and

we are not afraid to fight. Why don't you speak frankly? What are the terms of the pact your master is proposing?"

"He wants you to revoke your laws, adopt his and exterminate those who reject them. You will then be the chosen people. You will seize the goods of the infidels and you will reign on earth in the unity of the faith which you will guard."

"What are you saying to me?" exclaimed the Prince. "Is it possible that such a charming mouth could utter such horrors? You speak of faith, but I hear blindness, cruelty and pride! Our arrangements are only human, indeed, but they have the merit of being acceptable to us. Your master offers the people of Sodom to elect him and no one else. We are sensitive to the honour, but none of us would accept, as you propose, the right to tyrannise the universe..."

...Trust my old experience! Peoples, these weak social bodies, are doomed to the trial and error of imperfection. Only the creature is called upon to come closer to the ideal of his or her type. We recognise this effort, the only worthwhile one, and we encourage it; we give it a framework, we open the way. Here, we do not exclude blood or instinct. Our laws leave room for the flower and the fruit, the time for work and the time for pleasure. They are written out of fairness rather than justice, out of understanding rather than rigour, out of wisdom rather than truth... Abusive or arbitrary prescriptions cannot be justified by using a constraint that would force you to follow them. They corrupt morals, either by degrading those who obey them out of fear, or by forcing others to lie. We do not impose our laws on any of our neighbours, because we fully accept that they prefer their own arrangements. Is that pride? No! The search for the absolute may be the noble exercise of thought, but reality demands empiricism. Let me ask you: who is the real criminal? The Sodomite or the man who gives in to the violence of his nature because he believes it to be infallible? The Sodomite or the

prophet who devastates the earth in the name of the truth of which he claims to be the depository?"

The eloquence of this sophistry disturbed me so much that all I could come up with in reply was some stammering which, I'm afraid, did little credit to my presence of mind. However, I comforted myself with the thought that it is easy to lie with words and that the truth, being what it is, does not need to be defended.

"Be careful not to repeat to His Majesty what you have just told me," continued the Prime Minister. "He would be obliged to answer you curtly and, I am sure, he would regret it... You are fulfilling your mission in good faith; I therefore do not blame you, but do not expect to bring back to your master anything other than a refusal. We fear nothing. Our armies are ensuring peace in the East. The trading cities of the coasts, the capitals of the delta, the markets of the desert, the cities of science and those of pleasure, the thermal baths and sanctuaries, they all pay us a tribute so that we can defend them from pirates and barbarians..."

... The prosperity of Sodom, founded by Malek in a place where it never rains, bears witness to the genius of its inhabitants. From the Euphrates below Rakka, a canal carries the water that makes our countryside green. Like Malek, following his example, we choose to live where there used to be nothing. We have diverted a river from its course by an act of will that must always be renewed. No Sodomite can therefore allow himself to forget that the flower that blossoms before his eyes, the grass that his foot treads on, testify at the same time to the sovereignty and the danger of his choice..."

"But," I said, "that's pride for you!"

"No, my dear Ambassador! It is good that man never forgets that nothing is given to him and that at all times he must deserve what he creates, what he acquires, what he receives. The people who lose sight of their fundamental fragility condemn themselves to rapid decadence. As far as we are concerned, we would

disappear from the face of the earth if we did not make every day the effort that enables us to live...”

“I don't dispute your reasons,” I replied. “But these laws, whose wisdom, moderation and humanity you extol, contravene the natural order. That is why my master condemns them. By placing yourself outside the common rule, you endanger it. Your tastes are acquired; the temptation offered by your example corrupts those whose imagination alone would not have invented anything similar. That's all it takes to commit a crime...”

I had spoken these words with a solemnity which, without implying a threat, was nevertheless intended to convince the Prince of the importance of my mission. He frowned. I thought he was going to get angry, but he controlled himself, thought for a moment and said:

“This discussion would take us too far. Let us not pursue it! Besides, His Majesty's audience is approaching. Besides, the beauty you radiate belies the words you were ordered to say well enough for me not to have to refute them...” He rose and added as we left the room where he had received me:

“Let's be serious! Let me tell you something else: the nature whose commandments you invoke does not oblige men with the same rigour as it does animals. Man is a peculiar creature. Very peculiar indeed! Doesn't he claim that God made him in his own image and that he was put on earth to rule? We are beings of choice, of fiction, of art. Have you ever seen a monkey, no matter how well trained, sharpen a stone to carve the shape of a buffalo on the side of a rock? If our natural condition imposes on us the same needs as on animals, we find in our minds a thousand ways of satisfying them. Look around you, my dear Ambassador! Sodom, a city of palaces and gardens, owes nothing to nature. What do we live on? The maintenance of peace! Is there anything more contrary to natural chaos? We dress in linen, cotton and silk; we embroider our dresses; we perfume ourselves, we embellish ourselves; we go to the bath, to the banquet, to the theatre and we

listen to the declamations of the poets. Do we obey the laws of nature in this way? Believe me, let us keep our own laws: they ensure our happiness. I hope you will stay here long enough to reform your opinion and convince your master of the futility of his prejudices...”

“But,” I replied, a little impatiently, “I was not sent to Sodom for that purpose. It matters little that your laws ensure, as you say, your happiness and that, taking credit for their singularity, you refrain from imposing them onto others! The scandal is that you live as you do, that you take pleasure in this state, that you train youth in it and that, in vexation of all justice, you make Sodom the most revolting counterfeit of virtue!”

“You can clearly see the futility of this discussion now. We don't speak the same language. Once again, you are invoking nature, principles and virtue. We only give importance to what we do and what we create; we only aspire to make the best use of our bodies and minds. This modest programme is enough for us...”

The Prince struck the floor with the tip of his cane. Two servants hurried over. We followed them through bright corridors to a room decorated with frescoes whose subjects, which seemed to me to be very daring, apparently had a symbolic meaning. The large double door at the far end of this room, moved by invisible hands, opened before us without a sound to give us access to the Throne Room. Dazzled by so much magnificence, I wondered in what even more splendid surroundings the king would receive me. At last we stopped in front of a painted door, behind which the Prince disappeared for a moment, beckoning me to wait for him. A few seconds later I entered the simple whitewashed room where the king was working. Nassir, for it was he, raised his glasses to his forehead, leaned back in his armchair and invited me to sit down with a kind gesture. He had to be a very old man, for his beard and complexion had a pink finesse that can only be seen in old age. He explained to me in a slow voice that the Prince of Endor, who had his full confidence, had opportunely

relieved him of any government worries. His only pleasure was to study the manuscripts of the poets, to write fairy tales and fables; his only distraction was to walk in his garden and pick the single flower that adorned his work table every day, or to contemplate the landscape of rocks and still water that he showed me with his hand in his window frame. He gave orders to make everything easier for me and dismissed me with the kindest simplicity.

III

The next day I received a visit from a page who, having placed a tray of bitter oranges and candied citrons in front of me, drew a note from his breast and handed it to me.

“Dear ambassador,” the Prince of Endor had written, “Eudoxe, whom I have asked to bring you these delicacies, will keep you company...” I chatted with the Prince's messenger. Wisely kneeling before me, his hands resting on his thighs, he lowered his eyes when I spoke to him, but he quickly became tame and, losing all fear, soon answered with abandon the questions I put to him.

He told me that he would never enter the page school because he was neither noble enough nor rich enough to do so. At fourteen, already well trained for his age, he had been noticed by a lord who had kept him in his palace on the pretext of teaching him music and dance, but who, quickly fed up with him, had thrown him out on the street six months later. Eudoxe, ashamed to return to his poor family, had lived by his wits. One night, when he hadn't found a place to stay, he had fallen asleep in front of the Prime Minister's door. The Prime Minister took him in, asked him questions and, taking pity on him, kept him close to him because his candour rested him from the wiles of the government.

Eudoxe told me how Nassir had succeeded his elder brother, a solemn and sullen figure whom nobody liked. Before coming to the throne, he had been wildly dissipated in love, parties and war; his bravery on the battlefield bordered on extravagance and the tales told in Sodom enchanted the public, but as his reign approached, the old men shook their heads in disquiet. However, as soon as he had taken the place of his brother, who had died without children, his conduct became as firm as it had been light before; for a quarter of a century he had maintained the power and peace of the state without any sign of weakness. At the age of

sixty, he had retired from active life and entrusted the exercise of power to Samuel, whom he had loved in his youth and made Prince of Endor. The King rarely appeared except at festivities, but his experience, combined with the affection that bound him to the Prime Minister, made him the inspirer of the government in the highest sense of the term. The King, surrounded by the respect and affection of his subjects, reigned above criticism, and the wear and tear of power affected only the Prince of Endor.

“Eudoxe”, I said to him, “you talk like a book...”

The child laughed heartily.

“I repeat what my master tells me. All day long, during his interminable absence, I think of his return. I wipe the folds out of his cushion, I tidy up his papers, I copy out his notes. I dress and comb my hair, praying the heavens to help me dispel his worries. His footsteps echo in my heart long before I can hear them, and when, exhausted, he finally returns to his palace, I rest my head on his lap. He likes to talk to me, and that's how I, who am only a street child, come to know the kindness of this inflexible man. Yes, the Prince is accused of being tough. Yet there is no man more indulgent, more gentle, more tender towards his family. But he has principles. Eudoxe, he sometimes says to me, no one should know what it costs me to be harsh. To you, who are nothing, I can admit it. If you were to betray my confidence, no one would believe you. But I need to justify myself to my conscience. I would so much like to be loved! Alas! I have to make myself feared, I have to punish... You don't deserve authority if you don't believe in it. I know that and I force myself to do it, but what an effort! what pain! That's what he says to me and many other things that I forget...”

I was moved by Eudoxe's fidelity, but a pang in my heart called me to order. I asked him, with a brutality I regretted too late, how it was that the Prince could imagine lending him to a stranger. He blushed up to his ears and replied after a moment's silence: “I owe him everything. Oh, I probably love him

differently than he loves me. I only aspire to please him and I obey him when he sends me away as well as when he calls me. He said to me: I was your age once. I'm just an old man. Go to this stranger. He's as beautiful as our ancestors thought angels were. You'll amuse and entertain him..."

It was my turn to blush. Eudox had not invented the words he was telling me in order to flatter me. Perhaps he wanted me to understand that he liked me, but it seemed to me that he was only telling me about the Prince's generosity in order to warn me not to use it.

We then chatted at random. Eudoxe described the courtship which, at this time of year, was held three times a week at the School of Pages. The enthusiasm with which he talked about these ceremonies betrayed the regret he felt at not being able to take part in them. Cruelly again, I asked him why the Prime Minister had not helped him to enter one of the schools that prepared the elite of youth for the duties of adulthood.

"I'm not asking him," he replied with a shadow of sadness, "because I know it's impossible. I was too young to understand what a fool I was when I followed the Chevalier Drago, and then I thought I loved him. Today, the colleges are closed to me... But I have no regrets. No, I regret nothing..."

Eudoxe left me to arrange my visit to the School of Pages. When he left, a new feeling, that of solitude, seeped into my soul. My limpidity, I don't know how, had been coloured without losing any of its transparency. Eudoxe was just like me. He spoke to me, I questioned him, I spared him, I hurt him. The kinship of his weakness with the appearance of mine threatened me with a probably dangerous contagion that was invincibly drawing me towards the traps of form, place and time. I could sense this danger without yet having to fear it. Yes, Eudoxe's absence had left me with a void that my return to contemplation could no longer entirely fill.

Had I therefore disobeyed my orders?

Despite the temptation that the beauty which I had been endowed with must have exerted on the Sodomites, I had so far only been bothered by Lot's manoeuvres. The proposals that had been made to me, although very clear, had always remained courteous. The reserve of the people, the beauty of the city and the elegance of the speeches I had heard were hardly in keeping with the impudence of the vice my visit was intended to punish. Nassir, the Prince of Endor, Ben Bachir and Eudoxe were certainly not furious men...

It was perhaps necessary to pursue my investigation, gather further testimonies, wait for the Sodomites to give in to temptation? I should perhaps encourage them to hastily succumb to it? All these thoughts left me perplexed and the certainty that had driven me was gradually deserting me. Yes, it was obvious, the voice that had commanded me was now only reaching me like an echo; but at the same time, the body into which I had been placed seemed to be born a second time. Whereas by the myrtle bush I had only experienced it from the outside, I now felt its boundaries becoming clearer within me, like a landscape emerging from the mist where it had never ceased to be. Frightened by the speed of the slope I felt myself sliding down, I mentally called out to the Lord. My fall stopped. Eudoxe returned in the meantime with a note of recommendation for the Minister of Education and the Armed Forces who, having been warned of my visit, received me without keeping me waiting. I explained to him that, having come from afar to study the institutions of Sodom, I wished to see the School of Court Pages. "You couldn't have come at a better time," he said to me. "When the equinox festivities approach, our schools are full of joyful activities. That's when you must visit them. You will notice," he continued, "that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Armed Forces are one and the same. For us, military life crowns the cycle of studies. As you may have noticed, Sodom is a cheerful city... Sullenness is incompatible with the status of the soldier. He who

gives up his will in order to serve puts down his personal worries at the same time. The brass bands carry him along, his weapons shine, his uniform distinguishes him. Shoulder to shoulder with his lover, sharing his joys and sorrows, the cadet of Sodom laughs his way to victory or death... Our educational principles are very simple. We attach as much importance to training the body as the mind of our sons. We teach them a morality which has been designed to support them without hindering it, and we seek to give them the feeling that if they had to reinvent it, they would invent one that would be very similar to the one we are teaching them today... Naturally, we pay close attention to the qualities of our teachers, who, moreover, have an eminent place in the State, as it is as much a priesthood as a preceptorship... We believe that a good teacher must know how to sublimate the feelings that develop naturally between him and his pupils, that he must be in love with the youth he teaches and not with the boys entrusted to him...

I must also tell you a few words about the education of our girls, because if, on leaving us, you happen to be passing through Gomorrah, you will be in for a real treat! Our neighbours reproach us for not letting our women vote, speak in public, drink and ride horses. It's true that they play no official role here, but they reign in their homes and many of them are remarkable. The King's mother, for example, had a great influence on him for twenty years. My colleague and friend the Prince of Endor willingly follows the advice of his wife, who has given him beautiful children and who runs his household with authority. I could cite a hundred other cases. In some countries, women with bold eyes and painted cheeks are allowed to go out: this seems shocking to us. The sacred mystery of conception must not be profaned; our women understand this so well that the respect of their husbands and the love of their children are all they need. Moreover, the laws of Sodom, consistent with their fundamental inspiration, punish adultery and the prostitution of girls with the

utmost severity. You see, women cannot consider their love life in the same way as men, because it involves their bodies on a long-term basis. During their months of pregnancy and childbirth at least, they need calm, protection and stability... No one will ever be able to change that. Our habits may seem harsh at first glance, but I don't think they are. In countries where they claim to be emancipated, women only know how to alienate their freedom in choices that are more or less happy, more or less temporary, and which they are always under the illusion of believing to be definitive; men, who focus all their affections on them, pursue them and possess them, but do not respect them. So that our children are begotten with respect for the life whose guardians they will be, *we* protect any fruitful relationships from the vicissitudes of passion and the agitations of play, but we reserve for the love of boys, which bears only moral fruits, the taste for fleeting liaisons, dedication in action, spiritual and moral influence, without forgetting of course the one for the refinements of the voluptuous imagination..."

This speech leaves me wondering. Like the Prince, like Ben Bachir, the Minister of Education and the Armed Forces seemed anxious to defend Sodom against criticisms that I did not, however, make. Everything here seemed to me like an over-rehearsed concert, an over-prepared argument, and I wondered if it wasn't precisely this that I had been charged with punishing...

Eudoxe accompanied me to the School of Court Pages, but left me at the door as he had no right to enter. The Regent showed me around the well-lit rooms where the pupils studied. This part of the school was empty between four and five in the afternoon, as the pages practised every day at that time under the city walls. I heard the sound of a cavalcade; the pages who were returning called out to each other, laughing, but they all fell silent as they passed through the school gate, as if a secret palpitation had seized them at the approach of the Court of Love. The Regent's rule was that they had to wash first, so he invited me to attend

their bath. Gold-plated swan necks poured streams of hot and cold water into a pool paved in turquoise blue, which a dome supported by porphyry columns illuminated with a milky light. The young men, completely naked, invaded the bath, jostling, wrestling and pushing each other into the pool from which they emerged with their mouths open and their hair streaming. Quickly they soaped themselves up, then threw themselves into the pool, singing at the top of their voices in order to hear their voices echoing under the vault. The Regent clapped his hands: it was always necessary to remind the children that their bath time could not be prolonged. The pages vigorously patted each other down to indulge in the intimate care that was an essential part of their grooming.

My guide led me onto a terrace that surrounded a rectangular court lined with light arches. Large bronze vases held orange, pomegranate and oleander trees; pots of tuberose, carnations and basil were clustered around a fountain whose water freshened the perfumes.

When we reached the terrace, many courtiers were already there. Most of them were wearing dark capes with coloured jackets glistening underneath. Some were seated on the edge of the terrace, others were standing, their scarlet limbs exposed by the evening wind, and some were leaning against the balcony overlooking Lake Asphaltite. A bell rang; everyone leaned towards the court into which the pages were entering with the modest step they had been taught. They were dressed in white shirts that were tight around the waist and flared at the knees. Their sleeves puffed at the wrists, which, like the collars of their tunics, were marked with borders of embroidery, and their baggy trousers were gathered at the ankles. Over this uniform they wore coloured velvet waistcoats, very open and sleeveless. Finally, their hair fell, curled or fringed under skullcaps that each one put on according to his whim.

As soon as they entered, the children looked around the terrace for those who had come in the hope of charming them, those between whom they were still hesitating, those whom they were going to choose or who had already set their preference. Their reserve contrasted so sharply with their attitude at the bath that I mentioned it to the Regent. He replied by quoting a poet: “Keep your heart pure for the first man who seduces you, For nothing is more exquisite in the gardens of Sodom

Than an adolescent full of shyness
Whose soul and body are virgin...”

And he added:

"We never go down into the court while our pupils are there. They must feel free. This does not mean that we refrain from guiding their choices when we feel it is necessary. Some, driven by a strong impulse, immediately become attached to each other. Look at that charming boy, over there on the left, smiling at the young man who is leaning towards him and from whom he is receiving a kiss: from the first evening, he went towards the male face of the one who had singled him out. Others like to play with those who pray to them, to pique their desires, to arouse their jealousy. In this way, they get to know each other without any imprudence being able to distort their decision. But there are also shy and passionate hearts that need to be advised or sometimes reassured...”

Half-voiced conversations, exchanges of verses, handkerchiefs and flowers were taking place in front of us. A courtier whose black cloak was hanging over a page who was stroking his cheek was singing to him on the guitar. Further on, a child, eager to charm the beholder, was sketching out a dance step, a gesture of war or was showing off his suppleness by doing a somersault. The warmth of the air and the fading light of day enveloped this spectacle in a calm tenderness... The clever speeches I had heard came back to my memory, but the picture before my eyes forced me to doubt my conscience.

The Regent's voice continued to whisper:

“We want our pages to fall in love with manhood so that they become as virile as their lovers. Each one is everything for the other; no one has any reason or desire not to want that...”

I asked him if the school we were visiting was the only one of its kind in Sodom.

“No,” he replied. There are about ten in all, but this one, which is patronised by the court, is the most famous. The access to the Courts of Love is not entirely free; the courtiers are only admitted if they have already proven their worth and if they are under thirty. After that age, a man's responsibilities become so divided that he can no longer devote himself with sufficient exclusivity to the one he chooses from among our students. What is happening before your eyes must complete the education of the pages. During the first year of service, which is so important and so hard, the lover watches over the friend, teaches him by his example and comforts him from the day trials with his night kisses...”

“Your regulations,” I said a little impatiently, “seem to have foreseen everything...”

“Yes indeed! he said, and I don't see why it should be any other way. One of our best moralists wrote that there was no greater force in the world than that of desire. Restrained, repressed, twisted, it goes astray, giving rise to perversion and crime. Cultivated, wisely fulfilled, it inspires kindness, courage and honour. Abstinence is merely a vice of the mind or of conformation, and I am astonished that so many governments have produced codes to regulate less important aspects of human activities or to condemn with imbecilic rigour satisfactions that are as normal as they are honourable...”

“But your laws,” I continued, “cannot govern as they please the inclinations of your fellow citizens. Don't you have a lot of work to do to force them to obey them?”

“No,” replied the Regent. “In an environment where it is as normal to love men as women, we never have any difficulty in steering our young people in the direction imposed by the organisation of our society. What's more, customs, which are complexes of received habits, bind the members of the groups where they prevail, even if they hurt their most intimate fibres. Why would our people rebel against our laws, which take care of their needs, enrich them by disciplining them, embellish them by satisfying them, and never cause them any tension? Look at those happy faces, those bodies full of strength and health! Oh, I am not saying that accidents never happen. Once, in this school, a jealous child tried to stab one of his classmates. Kidnappings also happen. But the main thing we have to watch out for is clandestine meetings. Although we know that in the spring of life there can be no absolute chastity for our boys, we want their desires to become fixed. A page must love for the first time with his heart as much as with his senses, and only a certain restraint can bring him to that point. He places in the man for whom he has formed his body and whom he sees only from a distance, the ideal of maturity which he hopes to attain and will reach more easily once he is in his arms. Little romances are formed and dissolved between the pupils themselves, but living together and the equality of ages remove any danger from them...”

For a few minutes, I had only been listening with one ear to my guide's speeches: a page had caught my attention. He was sitting on the edge of the pool, deep in thought, while from the terrace a tall, gangly young man with eyes full of fever was trying to call him to himself. The child seemed determined to ignore the latter's gestures and I found myself wishing that he would persist in his indifference. The other redoubled his prayers, but wasted his efforts and made an angry gesture. The Regent, who had noted the incident, went over to the young man and said a few words to him in a low voice. As soon as the importunate courtier had moved away, the child looked up. He saw me and his gaze locked

so insistently on mine that I could hardly turn away. Was it the purity of his forehead? Was it the grace of his walk? Was it the colour of his eyes which, under thick black eyebrows, changed from grey to blue with the changing clarity of a spring? He rose like a sleepwalker, an imperceptible smile on his lips, and, moving towards me, he held out the flower he was holding in his hand, then he stood still as if waiting for me to say something or make a gesture. The longer this moment went on, the more intolerable it became. I bent down to take the carnation he was offering me; our fingers touched...

I was suddenly overwhelmed. The heart that God had lent me began to beat madly, my throat choked with an anguish whose cause I did not understand, and at the same time a sly impatience nestled in the depths of my entrails. I wish I could have held back the seconds, turned back the clock, made sure that I would continue to possess that look, that touch, that disturbance; but a taste of corruption invaded my mouth; a feeling of wear and tear and of limits made me crave for an accomplishment that I sensed would be insatiable. I suddenly felt a cruel pleasure in hearing my voice, in feeling my muscles and my skin. Yes, at last I could feel the beauty of my disguise as my own. Let it get dirty, let it be torn, let it be destroyed as long as it charms the one I desire!

What was left of my reason implored the Lord. I still had the strength to turn my head away, but this act of obedience tore so many fibres from around my heart that I nearly fainted.

“The page you noticed is called Youssef. So far he has refused all those who have courted him. Only Jaffar persists in pestering him with his advances, but this son of the mountains lacks what it would take to seduce a child like this. The term is drawing to a close, and it is unheard of for a pupil to leave this school without having decided to whom he would hand his belt. I pray to the heavens to spare me this scandal! I confessed Youssef. He dreams of a creature on whose breast he would consume himself in fiery ecstasy. A truly mad idea, but one that I could not

get out of his head! ‘I know it’ he told me, ‘I can feel it; he is approaching, he is coming! Tomorrow I shall rest on his heart...’”

These words shook me to the core. Youssef is waiting for an angel. But am I still an angel?

IV

How could I have conceived the idea of succumbing to temptation? Yet the fact was there, patent, indisputable. Ever since Youssef had raised his eyes to me, this vision that pierced me like a needle of light kept alive in me an anxiety so intense and so tender that I didn't even want to appease it. Ah, to sleep! To forget! But through my dreams, Youssef was still coming to me, his arms outstretched against a fiery sky, and when I woke up, my first thought was of him.

I heard the voice from far away.

“Beware!” it said to me. “The angel will condemn himself if he chooses, because nothing is worth separating him, nothing is worth preferring him, and Youssef, like the rest, is bound to turn to ashes. You are not far from disobeying me. Beware! Ah, beware!” I could feel my betrayal; it was tearing me apart, but the beauty of perishable forms stabbed me with the desire to possess them, if only for a moment, in the mad hope of eternalizing them by identifying myself with them, and the treacherous chill of time, present at the bottom of this ecstasy, only increased its delight a hundredfold, for like a trembling hall of mirrors, it would go on digging the depths of it indefinitely.

How far I was already from heaven! The voice that once occupied all my space was muffled beyond the horizon like the roar of a storm on the run.

I was thinking sadly in my room, where I no longer noticed the care of my servant, when a messenger came to bring me an invitation to dine that very evening at the home of Polycrates, one of the Greats of Sodom to whom the Minister of Education had recommended me. Eudoxus, warned by the Prince, came to dress me. He chose for me the finest dress, combed my hair and perfumed my wrists under Mahmoud's jealous gaze. “How

handsome you are!” he exclaimed, stepping back to admire me better. “Yes, you're as beautiful as an angel!”

Dear Eudoxe! I kissed his hair, which smelt of sunshine, and his eyes locked on mine, but what I read there awoke in my heart the impatience that Youssef had put there... Ah, how hard it is to learn to deceive!

The messenger was waiting for me at Polycrates' gate. He greeted me, and with his left hand on the hilt of his dagger, his chest clear, his torso plumb on his arched loins, his leg outstretched to show off its elegance, he led me towards the master of the house. Polycrates could have been sixty years old, and although his hair was white, his face retained a striking youthfulness of expression. Most of the guests were middle-aged men and I looked like a young man in their midst, but I suppose my status as Ambassador gave me the necessary dignity.

“Sit here in the place of honour,” said Polycrates, “and let's drink to your health!”

“I propose,” said one of the guests, “that our friend presides over this banquet. Ahmed, you invited him in the name of Polycrates, so place around his neck the necklace of flowers which is the insignia of his dignity for one evening!”

Everyone applauded and, while Ahmed was decorating me, the servants began to serve.

“You asked me,” I said to my host, “what particularly interested me here. Since I am a stranger in Sodom, please allow me to remain silent and listen to you; in this way, without bothering you with my questions, I will learn what I am curious to know.”

Ahmed put his arm round Polycrates's neck and, resting his cheek against his own, exclaimed:

“You know very well that there is only one subject of conversation here: love! Every time you invite us to dine in your garden, we look for another one, but we can't find any.” Polycrates stroked Ahmed's chin.

“Beauty,” he replied, “is always right, even when it remains silent, and all the more so when it speaks as you do. Wisdom? Philosophy? Virtue? What would they be without a love that makes them flourish and bear fruit? Yes, Ahmed, let's talk about love again, let's talk about it until the end of the centuries, because we will never exhaust its treasures! I drink to you, loves of youth! I drink to you twice, loves of mature age! Lovers of old age, I drink to you three times!”

Aemilius rose slightly on his bed to empty his cup and speak.

“If there are a thousand kinds of passions, if the love of children is not like that of old men, if there are a hundred ways of loving, the only thing that counts, when everything has been said and done, is the pleasure we take in it. The world revolves around pleasure, whether we use it, abuse it or, even more, abstain from it. Let's drink, let's drink to pleasure!”

Aemilius raised his cup to invite his friends around the table to imitate him when a voice rose to his left.

“Don't forget, Aemilius, that there are many ways of making love. Besides, if I'm to believe the rumour, you're first-rate at it.”

This jest, greeted with laughter, did not disconcert the man to whom it was addressed.

“Were my lovers talkative? After all, this reputation, whether justified or not, is flattering and I would be wrong to defend myself. Making love is a great art; it requires imagination, controlled ardour and, above all, respect! But how lovers enjoy each other is their own business. Shame on the pedants, the voyeurs and the pornographers!”

“Well said, Aemilius!” exclaimed Hephestion. “Eutycrates, who was about to describe the joys of making love, the pleasure of the straight arrow or the number sixty-nine, has just been spared his itching trouble. It has to be said, however, that many people make love without enjoying anything more than the pleasure of the skin from it, and that many curious, perverse or abnormal people seek a sensation that has nothing to do either

with the integrity of the impulse which is necessary to its virtue or with the communion that is its true reward...”

“Alas! Every temple has its merchants, every image has its iconoclast,” answered Aemilius. “After all, if sacrament did not cost so much, one would not be dealing in counterfeits. Love, in the second during which it condenses man's faculties into a unity as hard and as limpid as a diamond, gives him a short taste of the absolute, for at the moment when our forms and our sap melt into those of the beloved, we emerge from ourselves and plunge into the bosom of the eternal, and our precarious substances, by assimilating one into the other, thus reach the sublime of the undifferentiated. This is the profound meaning of enjoyment, at least for the man whose privilege of thinking gives him the costly advantage of living his experiences. No villainy can degrade the act: the gift it provokes of what we have at the same time, something most gratuitous and most precious, attests that no disorder is capable of distorting its symbol. Yes, sin only comes from the spirit. The flesh, which cannot lie, always offers its chance of redemption to those who ask it for it. One buys, the other torments, why, dear Hephestion? Without their being fully clearly aware of it, it is in order to reach, by freeing themselves from the thorns of pride and lies, that dazzling second during which, in the final honesty of their flesh, they regain for a moment their lost unity. The only deadly temptation is that of distraction, because by indulging in it, man breaks the unity of purpose that seals his being to his existence...”

A young man with straight, fine features and curly hair raised his hand to ask to speak.

“In Sodom, your sex life is divided into two parts of: that of the home, which focuses on fertility, and that of male love affairs, which takes place in the realm of poetry, honour and play. By separating love from engendering in what seems to me to be an arbitrary way, aren't you breaking the unity whose importance you have just proclaimed?”

Aemilius made a gesture to begin an answer, but Polycrates beat him to it.

“No, Porphyry, no! It is up to us to distinguish in the immense empire of love what our needs and our intelligence find there. I don't think Aemilius ever claimed that love should be excluded from engendering. What he meant was that engendering cannot monopolise a passion with which it has nothing essentially in common. Am I right, Aemilius?”

And as Aemilius nodded his assent, Polycrates continued:

“We all know what it takes to have children. But tell me, dear friend, are there many couples outside Sodom, where this usually solves the problem of our relations with women, who make love exclusively for this purpose? Besides, whether or not this is the case, they have no other power than to give a chance to the alchemy whose first pot they put on the fire. Nature is a proud dispeller! How many seeds are thrown to the wind only to produce one fruit! Enjoyment is enough in itself, and whatever the result is, man is fulfilled by it. The rest is just a consequence those who are responsible can rejoice in, but it has nothing to do with voluptuousness...

You have put it very well, Aemilius, all our problems are problems of unity: with the world, with substance, with time. To these questions, which each of us faces as soon as he is born, there is only one definitive answer, death, and only one symbolic answer, the act of love. Because our functions are as diverse as our needs, let's not allow them to compete for supremacy, of which we would be the impossible stake, but let us serve them according to their appetites by subjecting them to the control of our intelligence. In this way, we will preserve the structural balance that is as essential to our energy as it is to our happiness. If man turns himself into a wasteland where his passions struggle with his duties, his taste for destruction with his need to create, his hunger for truth with his poetic needs, then those uncertainties

will take root within him, will shatter his courage and, paralysing his efforts, destroy him long before the hour of his death...”

“What are you getting at, Polycrates?” asked Porphyry.

“To this obvious point: as artificers, we live in nature, which means that we are no less mistaken in enslaving ourselves to its laws than in stubbornly flouting them. What sense, what value can there be in a moral code that is not an acceptable compromise between these two terms? Well, the one we have adopted is proving its worth before our very eyes every day! Yes, it's a work of art, because it incorporates as much imagination as reason. I'm not claiming that it's perfect, but who wants perfection here? Perfection means immobility, death. We want life, and life is a perpetually unstable balance between opposing forces. One of my masters used to teach me that we stand on our legs by means of imperceptible and continual adjustments. A magnificent image of our condition! We oscillate between the real and the fictitious, between nature and intelligence, between our needs and our limits, between moral verdicts and the aspiration of each one of us to make our own salvation as we deem fit. In this way we cease to be animals, that's why we can walk with our foreheads raised towards the stars...”

Aemilius took advantage of the silence that greeted these words to speak again.

"You who speak so well, Polycrates, give us at last your definition of love!"

“What definitions do you want from me?” exclaimed Polycrates. “Since you need one, here is, in my opinion, the least bad: love is an indulgence of the flesh in favour of a union of mind and heart. I would not be a Sodomite if I believed in the merits of chastity. Chastity is only a matter of age, lukewarmness or powerlessness. We are creatures of continuity; the eroticism with which we will later indulge is already in full force in the cradle. What is so foolishly referred to elsewhere as children's purity only makes sense, anyway, the day they lose it. Let us

thank our legislators for having been wise and, instead of prohibiting the freedom to enjoy, for having moralised its use. A first experience of love almost always leaves an imprint on the person who lives it. Thank be to God, the conditions under which lovers chose one another here almost always guarantee that it will be the dawn of a serene day for the initiated.”

“You may be right, Polycrates,” said one of the guests, his eyes shining under fierce eyebrows, “but for me, love is an abduction. As a soldier, I would break what resists me and take the one I desire right there, wherever and however I want to! Quite often I have satisfied myself on a bed of carnage. After all, isn't choice always a pain, and doesn't the teenager who is lost in questions about his own image unwittingly desire the one who, taking him after a long fight, will relieve him from his doubts? What's the point of all the speeches and ceremonies? Why all these colleges, these belts, trumpets and mirlitons? I have made some cry, but I have marked those whom I have bruised with the bite of my passion. Rape is a virtue!”

“You make yourself more terrible than you are, Sapor,” replied Aemilius. “Everyone knows how faithful you are to the handsome Rechid whom, more than ten years ago, you brought back from the Shatt-el Arab!”

“Yes,” continued Sapor, “that is true, and I wish Rechid were here by my side right now, for his presence and absence regulate the beating of my heart. But since he is not here, I will tell you about our first meeting... We were besieging Basrah. The battle had been bloody, and when we managed to break through the city walls, our troops, who had lost many men, rushed inside drunk with vengeance. The besieged had tortured their prisoners before our very eyes and there was not an officer or soldier in our ranks who had not lost a lover, a comrade or a brother at the hands of those from Basrah. I entered the city having accepted in advance the horrors that I could not prevent. From all sides rose the flames of the houses being set on fire, the screams of the victims being

guted by our soldiers; dishevelled women and crying children fled, stumbled and crashed, while isolated groups still resisted, sheltered as they were in the rubble. At dusk, I passed the gate of a garden where a final battle was being fought and went in to direct operations. Our people entered the house through an inadequately guarded gate, but they had to conquer every court, every corridor and every room with their swords. Soon all that was left was a fifteen-year-old boy defending himself in front of the corpses of his parents. His courage and beauty struck me. I ordered that I be left alone with him. In the narrow space where he was cornered, his sword, too heavy, was in his way. I could have disarmed him in the twinkling of an eye, for he threw himself at me with a clumsy fury that would have cost him his life if I hadn't made a game of keeping him at my mercy. I knocked his sword out of his hand. He lunged for mine, but I leapt aside. He fell panting, ready for my coup de grâce. I grabbed him by the hair to force him to raise his head. Tears of rage and powerlessness were shining in his eyes. I tried to calm him down. He bit my hand until it bled. I had him tied up and taken to my tent.

What happened next is almost unbelievable. He had thrown himself on my sword to destroy himself. Was it a foreshadowing of love? Who knows? And yet, when we were alone, I untied him and, putting my sword in his hand, I said to him: you are my prisoner, the only link that now binds you to the earth is me, me who slaughtered your family, destroyed your house and your town. Life is only as good as its price. Take your revenge if you want to! - I had taken my breastplate off and, spreading my shirt with both hands, I offered him my chest. He stared at me like a madman, his hand clutching the hilt of the sword I'd just given him, and I'll always remember his face torn by the torchlight. He shrugged his shoulders, turned his head away and dropped the weapon. That night, Rechid became my lover. Of course, it was rape in any case, but neither the pain nor the pleasure he felt drew

any single moan from him. The violence of the emotions that had shaken him left him inert in my arms like a wreck thrown up on the shore, but the next morning when I woke up, he clutched me so tightly that I had to untie his embrace to get out of my bed. Yes, our love is founded on this dreadful memory and every time Rechid comes to me, it is, in truth, this bloody break from his childhood that we celebrate together...”

Aemilius interrupted Sapor.

“The circumstances in which our desires are set vary infinitely. For this, some need meditation; others, like you, find their illumination in blood. Isn't the firmness of the love that was born for you in the ruins of Basrah enough to justify your rape? By taking Rechid from a heap of corpses, you have committed yourself totally, and that's what matters...”

“But,” asked Hephestion, “couldn't Sapor have made a mistake? His rape would then have been nothing more than a crime...”

“You can be wrong sometimes, often, always, but what does it matter if the intention is sincere?”

Aemilius was interrupted by the sound of laughter, and four young men of about the same age, leaning against each other, staggered towards the table, their faces flushed, their crowns askew on their foreheads.

“Ah!” cried Polycrates joyfully, “here are the boys! Here is beauty, gaiety, youth! Ahmed, place these beautiful children among us! Fill their cups! Let them drink, let them sing, let them delight us!”

“You were looking so serious when we came in. What were you talking about?”

“We were talking about love,” replied Aemilius.

“Love, Hassan! Love, Saadi! Love, Daoud! Do you hear? Have these gentlemen reached the age where love is nothing more than a topic of conversation? Let's make love and shut up! The rest is a waste of time...”

Farraj drew his three friends into a circle. They exchanged kisses and while they were mouth to mouth and entwined one to the other by the waist, Ahmed threw a long garland of tuberoses around their shoulders. But Polycrates called them back to order and when a little calm had returned, he asked Aemilius to continue his speech. "I don't remember where I stopped, Polycrates," replied Aemilius. "These charming boys have scrambled my brains..."

Daoud then threw back his robe and, with one foot on the table, raised his cup and said:

"Let's drink to our lovers! If Polycrates allows it, I am giving you the floor, Aemilius, for you are the most talkative!..."

"You are beautiful, Daoud," replied Aemilius, "but you are standing naked before us and now we have nothing more to learn about you. Hassan, Saadi, Farraj, will you not follow his example?" The three young men did not hesitate any further. Standing on the table, they displayed their nakedness and after the guests had admired them long enough, they lay down among the flowers and fruit, offering them a new feast to which everyone was eager to lend a hand. Aemilius, who was beginning to be slightly drunk, wanted to resume his speech.

"O my beautiful children! We admire you, we caress you, we desire you, but that does not make us forget that we are idealists. I want my lover to have broad shoulders and narrow loins. I want him to be quick to be merry, mischievous, angry, I want everything to seem new to him, astonishing, desirable, I want him to love as strongly as he hates, I want him to be an enigma, a torment, a conquest always possible but always to be remade, I want..."

"A name! A name!" cried Ferraj. "Driss? Théodore? Lucien? Phaedra? Alexis? Jonathan? Corydon?"

"This vision bears the name I give it every time I love a new boy..."

“What boring nonsense!” exclaimed Daoud. “I want to be loved for who I am, not because I look anything like your vision... Come on, Porphyry, you who haven't said anything yet... son of Hellas, skilled in speeches, it's now your turn to speak!”

“You know I'm Greek, so I'm not bound by your laws. Oh, I admire them! But Athens is more liberal than Sodom. I, who am speaking to you, have often responded to the desires of which I was the object in my youth and, later, I have enjoyed the ephebes with their beautiful thighs who, after their exercise and their bath, came to lie beside me. Where I live, the love of boys is left to our imagination, and sometimes combines the pleasures of voluptuousness with the highest moral, philosophical or warlike aspirations; it often gives rise to nothing more than amusing flings; in many cases it is also an innocent form of prostitution.

But I must pick a quarrel with you. Eutycrates, Sapor and Aemilius have described their lovers to us. I have no trouble sharing their admiration. But Malek having decided, for reasons I do not understand, that all the boys of Sodom should be circumcised at the age of eight, this operation, which when not imposed for health reasons is always a crime against the body, mutilates the beauty of your men. In Greece, a long foreskin, with all its variations, is an essential element of male beauty. It protects the exquisitely sensitive rosebud, which it only uncovers when it is the right thing to do and thus symbolises the most delicate emotions of love. I confess that, however charming and spirited your boys are, circumcision spoils them for me...”

“We have been used to this for so long,” replied Aemilius, “that we no longer think about it; but all in all, you may be right! Sodom was thought out in minute detail by its founder. We accept Malek's laws in their entirety without discussing them, because they are what have ensured the survival of our State. But, then again, the foreskin, yes, why not?”

Polycrates then turned to a man whose tawny hair betrayed his barbarian origins.

“Looks like you’ve got an itch to talk...” Tristan stood up. He was tall and his white limbs, marked by bluish veins, gave an impression of excessive flesh. He was known to be as hot-tempered as he was fierce in battle, and people feared him without really understanding him.

“I left my country because I like boys and that's considered a crime there. That's also why I offered my services to Sodom and settled there. You have all spoken so well that I hardly dare open my mouth. And yet, would you believe it, I sometimes wonder whether your laws, these laws that are so wise, don't take away most of the charm of boys' love by codifying it. The severity of the punishments meted out to pederasts in my country, even though they are almost as numerous as here, encourages all sorts of rascals to persecute them for their own ends. Our love affairs thus take on a dramatic appeal that you will always ignore. One man, in order to express his feelings, has to disguise his lover with a woman's name; another one commits suicide in prison to escape the scandal caused by a love letter found in a schoolboy's pocket. You don't know about these meetings of conspirators in mysteriously designated places, these brushes of fingers, these embraces all the crazier for being cursed. You don't know what incessant alertness keeps us boy-lovers always on our toes, what passionate introversion imposes on him the insult of his tastes by the environment in which he lives. The tragic poet has one of his characters, whose crude conformism he accuses thus, say: - Lavinia is a woman... A woman is made to be courted, seduced, possessed - But how much subtlety must a boy lover possess in order to detect in a look, a gesture, an inflection of the voice, the subterranean current, often as weak as a wave but sometimes as powerful as a river, which reveals the members of the sect one to the other! How much art is needed to free the gagged inclinations of an adolescent! How many times have I, who am now speaking to you, witnessed Narcissus awakening in the heart of the village bully, witnessed the weariness that disarms him when confronted

with my virility, witnessed the secret and cherished weakness that, against all his prejudices, pushes him into my arms! Have you ever heard of those passionate kisses when the body takes revenge for the tortures of the spirit?"

"Your plea for the worst is nothing but a paradox, my dear Tristan," answered Polycrates.

His sentence was covered by the shouts and laughter that Saadi was provoking by teasing the guests. He called out to a corpulent man dozing at the far end of the table.

"Alexander," he said, "wake up!"

Alexander, already more than half drunk, was unable to get up and it was from his armchair, in which his heavy meat was piled up, that he spoke: "Young people, teenagers, children," he exclaimed in a sharp voice, "Phew! you vile pederasts, leave that to the nannies! Are you still at an age where you suck your thumb to fall asleep? I don't like kids whose arse smells of milk and who only know how to lie on their stomachs waiting for lightning to strike them between their buttocks. Tell me about chubby chins and hairy thighs! Tell me about soldiers who, having made love under every climate, know what they are talking about! Tell me about horsemen who squeeze you between their thighs and make your bones crack, blacksmiths who twist you like iron on an anvil! If you want girls, make love to your wives! What I like in men is their selfish brutality. Overwhelmed with pleasure, my arse so stuffed I can't shit anymore, my front end so pumped I can't piss anymore, what do I care if my partner despises me or if I hate him?"

"How rude and despicable! Scratched behind! Old whore! Barracks sewer! Have you no shame? We're going to teach you how to respect us!"

The four friends booed Alexander and rushed over to pull his ears. He shouted at the top of his voice, shaking his belly.

“Come, come, children, leave Alexander alone!” ordered Polycrates. “Enough teasing! Which of you four will improvise the hymn with which each of our banquets ends?”

“I will! I will! I will! I will!” they cried out together. But before their two comrades could stop them, Daoud and Farraj, who had grabbed a three-stringed harp and a tambourine, leapt onto the table. Daoud, who was the eldest, began thus:

“Will I find words to celebrate what you have done for me, O my beloved? I can only be silent when my lip comes close to yours, because then only the honey of your saliva matters to me, and my eyes are dazzled when, plunging into yours, they see the flood of your desire rising. Ah, flower of my flowerbed, I will be intoxicated by your fragrance! Ah, fruit of my orchard, I will press you against my mouth to flood my throat with your juice and quench my thirst for you!”

Farraj said in turn:

“I exist only to the extent of your happiness. Yet sing of my delights, so that, accountable for each of your joys, I may respond to them like the flute to the shepherd's lips!”

“Your face is my light!”

“Your smile is my peace!”

“Ah, let me calm my beating heart on your breast! I am but a child... I am ashamed and I desire...”

“You gave me your belt to untie. Did I not teach you about your body? And didn't the pleasure I drew from it reveal the pleasure you were going to find in it? And yet it find it delicious that you come to me each time as if you were a novice about to be initiated, that the mystery whose rites I no longer have to reveal to you overwhelms you as it did the first time and that, with the offering of your beauty, you bring me the ever-renewing virginity of your heart.”

“Yes, I belong to you, yes, I love in you the one I am becoming, yes, you turn me into the person you want me to be, yes, my insides give birth to a new you ! I was afraid of your

virility, but now I know how fiercely gentle it can be. Axis of my soul, look, I am leaning against your olive trunk... Your weapon is raised, your weapon is brandished, because I am your goal and your rest, you fill me with a happiness which is a thousand times better than life itself! Since you have chosen me as your target, pierce me with your arrows and I will be your delighted victim even before I am hit! Shoot, o my lover, keep on shooting! Let desire bend your bow and may the vibrations of your flesh penetrate my heart and beyond!”

“In each other’s arms, we will climb all the steps of pleasure until we reach the summit of exhaustion together...”

“Yes, and when you are just about to reach it, I know that you will make me suffer just enough to exalt your effusion in me and make my soul erupt between your fingers. For, if you are the strongest, you are also the best and the wisest...”

“It is because you are beautiful that I can be wise. Comparing the suppleness of your hip to that of a willow branch or the scent of your skin to the perfumes of Arabia is but a mere entertainment. Let me, instead, kiss your face with the thousand loves of your curls! How they curl around your ears, how they fall back onto your forehead, how they twist at the base of your neck! And your mouth, which alternately sucks me down to the marrow or fills mine with its flesh! And your breasts that I touch with my lips to rouse their bronze buttons!”

“Ah, let me slide into some other gardens, some thicker, more secret and more fragrant ones!”

“Solar centre, carnal abstraction where the threads of all encounters are knotted, belly, balance of the world, featureless figure where man recognises himself, I will never tire of caressing your muscular velvet! How docile it is to my kisses, fiery in passion, calm in repose! Let me sway on this lake of perfection until I rest my head in the bay where, pretending to be asleep, the solitary hero is waiting for me to touch him so that he can stand up and kiss my lips! O ever-new miracle! The anxiety of desire

stops my words in my throat. Wait, wait a little longer! Yes, one more minute to celebrate the legs that carry you, those columns of glory that erect you at the top of the world but that keep for me the recess of their hinges, those legs at the angle of which, folded on their silken wings, sleep the Phoenix whose head throbs, rolls and rears as soon as I name it! And you, knees capable of humiliation or pride, the knees of my beloved, the double face of his grace and his strength, knees that force their way between mine for abandonment or conquest!”

“You would sing until dawn if I didn't interrupt you! Look: Alexander is already snoring in his corner and your lengthy melody must have annoyed the guests since so many have already left this table...”

“What do I care? Let me get drunk on my singing. I am drunk, drunk with wine, love and beauty. Must I refrain from celebrating the grassy crossroads at the bend of your shoulder, whose thick perfume is a thousand times better than that of incense, because I am no longer listened to? Must I also commit the crime of not talking about your back? Ah, there's a faint valley there that begins at the roots of your hair, runs down the back of your neck, insinuates itself between your shoulders and then widens until it reaches the tightness of your buttocks! Let me rest there for the time of a sigh before sliding towards your loins, so supple when they bend to my will, so strong when they deepen your pleasure by sharpening mine! And what words can I find to sing of the peaches with their golden cheeks, of the twin amber moons? You only know, my beloved, the enchantment of these mountains of ecstasy when I walk through them. Let me follow with my finger the line that at first barely separates them, then deepens and curves into the no less beautiful folds of your thighs! Ah, your buttocks come to life in my hands, withdrawing and lending themselves with as much strength as gentleness, and how thrilled I am when I think of the ever-narrower path that runs deep into their splendour! Before plunging in, ah, let me search like a

mad dog for the hundred voluptuous pleasures scattered over your body to force them into this gorge! Suspend yourself, oh my heart! A second of fulfilment during which man joins the divine! Stretched out over you, I kiss you and cover you; every part of my body which has become part of yours, delights in itself in your person and we become a single form, a single warmth, a single music, cancelling each other out..."

"I can feel you getting me drunk. Speak until there is silence! We are alone, only the stars are listening..." The bushes around us were full of whispers and sighs. I watched this scandalous orgy without being able to feel any indignation against it. Two cool arms tightened around my neck. Farraj? Eudoxe? Youssef?

"Stranger," dreamy lips whispered in my ear, "you are beautiful in a way that does not belong here, in a way that is heavenly and frightening. That's why no one dares approach you. Follow me into the shadows! I'll kiss you, I'll intoxicate you, I'll disenchant you from the heavens. Come with me! I'm only a child, but only a child can teach you the terrible art of being a man!" For a long time I sat alone, at a table covered with empty bowls, crushed fruit and soiled robes. I could hear and see naked forms moving in the darkness, but although an ever more powerful flow of dissatisfaction was drawing me towards shores that were unknown to me, obscurely feared and obscurely desired, I was still only a spectator in this earthly garden. I walked like an automaton towards the door by which Ahmed had welcomed me earlier, while the fire kindled in my imagination by the stanzas I had just heard lit me up with its flames. I couldn't help feeling weakened by my inability to wander out of my way, and the imminence of my loss filled me with a delicious melancholy.

I returned at dawn. I would have liked to sleep but I was suffering intolerably from Youssef's absence. So the next day I returned to the Court of Love. This time the Regent left me alone, and as soon as I appeared on the terrace, Youssef came towards me. I was frightened by my own confusion; fearing to let the cause be guessed, I lowered my eyes, but at the same time I wished that nothing of my passion would escape the one I loved, I wanted him to know that it was only to see him that I had returned, I wanted him to know my torment, my defeat and my shame. And yet I walked along the terrace, careful not to appear to be interested in him. This lie, which created a secret between us, helped me to understand that love is the brother of night.

Jaffar, seeing that his beloved was wandering around with uncontrolled agitation, thought he had finally touched him. Youssef was looking at the part of the terrace where I was, but where Jaffar was too, with an expression of rapture that Jaffar thought was addressed to him. I hated him for stealing it from me. Jealousy, dissimulation and hatred rushed through my heart; the ties that bound me to heaven were weakening by the minute, and although I sensed the punishment I was bringing upon myself, the perdition of which I was thus becoming aware exalted, by the price I was about to pay for it, the fulfilment that this sin promised me.

I returned to the hotel even more agitated than the day before. The sight of Youssef had rekindled the superb and destructive fire that now burning me, and all I could think about was to throw in it my angel's garment. I bought a ring set with rubies and sapphires. I wrote on a thin sheet of paper the message I hoped to send to my beloved, but what could I say? I wanted to persuade myself that my words, however flat they were, would radiate irresistible warmth, but in the end all I came up with were cries:

Come, Youssef! Come, I love you! I'm waiting for you! Give me my life back, Youssef!

I returned to the Court of Love. It was busier than usual, because as the festivities were approaching, the children were getting a bit more independent. I don't know why Jaffar was absent. I bless this coincidence. Very slowly, Youssef made his way towards the part of the court overlooking Lake Asphaltite. This area was generally solitary because the terrace, supported on this side by arcades, was higher and therefore less conducive to exchanges of gallantry. Youssef leaned on the balcony just below me and seemed to be absorbed in the abyss. He couldn't see me, but I knew he felt I was there. We were already united by the identity of the picture he and I were pretending to admire. We could see the dry valley where Lake Amer was fast asleep and the stone ruins crumbling all around. Bastions of gold leaked ochre and pink entrails; jasper facades, obsidian towers, silver terraces supported by sulphurous buttresses were rising against a lapis sky. Two birds chased each other below us; on their wings, we rushed towards each other, united by silence. I wrapped the ring in the note I had prepared and dropped it. Youssef heard the discreet sound of it falling and, without anyone seeing him, picked it up. I saw that he unfolded it, read it, placed a kiss on it and put the ring on his finger. The look he gave me almost made me faint.

The next few days were interminable. I returned to the Court of Love, but sometimes Jaffar was there or some other times the Regent was with me, so I never had another opportunity to correspond with Youssef. Was I being watched? Did the headmaster suspect me? In any case, the insistence with which he told me about the punishments for clandestine relations between pages and foreigners seemed suspicious. I understood that he was speaking for Youssef, whose hesitations he was still preoccupied by, while at the same time warning me of the danger that, without perhaps suspecting it, I was posing to his pupil. But he did not frighten me. I looked for ways to kidnap Youssef before the

festivities; I imagined bribing the servants of the school, sneaking in at night, setting fire to the building, whatever; but isolated as I was by the attentions I was surrounded by, I panicked at my powerlessness. Then something happened. Ben Bachir came into my room one morning, looking very important.

“Have you heard the news?” he asked me. “The Prime Minister was almost assassinated. Eudoxe, who was with him when he was attacked, saved his life by covering him with his body, but the blade of the dagger penetrated between the young man’s shoulder blades and reached his heart. He died in the Prince’s arms. What a horrible story! Poor Eudoxe! Poor Prince!”

Eudoxe had come to visit me the day before; his gentleness had soothed me. He had left me around eight o'clock to be back before his master had arrived. Death, this death of the flesh that I had so lightly accepted and whose inevitability, at a time when I could have believed it was far off, had sharpened rather than dulled my desires, now, by making a face that I had known and loved disappear, it suddenly presented itself to me in its final horror. It seemed to me that the ground was slipping away beneath my feet, but the turmoil I was feeling warned me at the same time of the importance of indulging the passion that was driving me towards Youssef, whatever the cost, even if it kills me.

I went to see the Prince. Although he had locked his door, he gave the order to let me in. Perhaps he thought he owed me this courtesy, for I had seen Eudoxe almost every day for a week.

Night was falling. Servants, who seemed to share their master's grief, led me through a garden interspaced by canals. The Prince of Endor was sitting on the steps that joined a pavilion to the flowerbeds. He did not move or weep, but the corner of his mouth was pinched by a wrinkle of misery that was more moving than any gesture. Next to him, on a table covered with a sheet, lay the corpse of Eudoxe, who seemed to be asleep, reconciled to his fate by a higher level appeasement. Alive, in the simplicity of his heart, he had been something like a crystal or a lily; dead, lying

before his master, he was of a whiter, clearer, purer substance. His right arm lay at his side and his left hand, half closed, rested on his chest; his face, turned towards that of the Prince, seemed, through the eyelids closed for eternity, to await the return of the kiss whose memory he carried beyond the earth. The servants had withdrawn, no birds were singing, no leaves were moving. The torches cast a moving glow over Eudoxe's body which they clothed with an illusion of life, but the Prince's face, sculpted in the night, looked like death; at times the resin crackled. From the depths of the darkness, a butterfly, attracted by the light, swirled around the corpse, brushed Eudoxe's lips for a moment, as if it were about to land on them, then staggered away into the still air. The Prince sighed. Without looking at me, he stretched out his arms to show me the extent of his loss and pain. I withdrew.

The next day, exhausted by the approach of the festivities, I soothed my impatience by going to the bazaar where I met the Regent of the school. He dwelt with exasperating prolixity on the death of Eudoxe. I couldn't stand it any longer, so I cut him off and asked him with all the detachment I could muster whether Youssef had finally chosen the person to whom he would hand over his belt.

“Yes,” he replied, “he's chosen Jaffar!”

I was stunned, unable to say anything, glad that the Regent's sudden departure meant I didn't have to answer him. A cold sweat dampened my forehead. Not knowing what to think, what to believe, I hurried back to the hotel and hid my confusion in my room. Were not earthly loves, of which I had no experience, more treacherous than I had thought? I had interpreted Youssef's gestures as acquiescence. Had he already forgotten me? He couldn't leave the school as I had insanely asked him to, and if he had, where would I have hidden him? What a fool I was to give myself over to the intoxication of my passion as if it had been enough to free me from the world! My idea of love was, alas, still celestial. I had looked long and hard at the laws of Sodom, but I

had not imagined that they could stand in the way of satisfying my own desires. Ruminating on my suspicions and doubts, despairing at the impossibility of knowing what, by desiring it, I had ceased to be able to understand, divided between jealousy and passion, I was learning the hard lesson of earthly love. I invoked my wings, my angelic invisibility. Alas again, my wings were too weak to lift a body that, as it had grown wiser, had become irremediably heavier. Could I hope to regain the celestial innocence that alone would have enabled me to escape the sight of men, to enter the school and kidnap Youssef? Evening came, but how slowly! Would I have the courage to attend the festivities tomorrow, when I would see Jaffar take Youssef? I felt like a coward, I wanted to leave before everything was over, but a remnant of hope still held me back. Lying on my bed, I counted the hours that the guards announced in a cavernous voice and finally fell into a drowsiness from which I was roused by the sound of a fall. Hearing nothing else and supposing that I had, without realising it, tipped over one of the small objects on my bedside table, I turned over on my pillow to go back to sleep. To no avail. I went to look for the night-light burning in the next room to convince myself that I had been dreaming. At the foot of the wall, under one of the windows, I found three flowers weighted down with an earthenware pearl to which a note was attached.

“Youssef”, I thought immediately, my heart racing.

“Angel,” the message was saying, “I love only you! I've escaped. Leave Sodom at dawn on the day after the festivities! Go out through the eastern gate and walk for two hours towards Maan. You will then see a red cliff on your left. That's where I will be waiting for you. O my angel, take me away, quickly, far away, forever!”

My heart leapt with such joy in my chest that for a moment I thought I had regained my imponderability. Nothing concerned

me any more except the minute from which thirty interminable hours still separated me...

The next day, the sky was as light as it can be in Sodom and the city, which had been celebrating since dawn, was sparkling with gaiety. I paid no attention to the page, handsome though he was, who came to fetch me and guide me to the ceremony, nor to the streets we were passing through. I was ushered into a box where a seat had been reserved for me next to the dignitaries of the State. Honey cakes and opalescent drinks were laid out on a table within my reach. All the other boxes were occupied, except the King's, the only one whose balcony overlooked the court where the show was to take place. They were buzzing with activity. The guests, clad in velvet or silk, were talking, laughing, fanning themselves, bending down to greet their friends. Opposite the boxes, the walls were bare to a great height and hemmed in with windows framed by the faces of servants and children.

The sound of fifes was heard; a score of musicians, dressed in blue robes, white sashes and turbans, entered through a round-arched door. They were already mature men whose faces had the ascetic nobility that desert life gives. They were singing and beating out a melody by banging drums above their heads. They gathered in the centre of the court and, obeying a sign that we did not see, they crouched down in a sudden flourish of robes. There was silence: the king was entering.

Nassir stretched out his hand. Immediately, a door with elaborate wings opened on the other side of the court. Dressed as I had seen them before, but in finer fabrics, the pages paraded before us, three by three, their shoulders tight, their hands knotted in the folds of their robes. They wore the jewels their lovers had given them, some had anklets with bells on them, others had ear diamonds and some had golden snakes wrapped around their necks which followed the movement of their breathing with somnolent voluptuousness. They formed a circle around the musicians, who intoned a song whose vast monotony, punctuated

by the sound of drums and fifes, created immense spaces. The pages took up this canticle and their fresh, slightly confident voices evoked the swallows' gyrations, while the men's timbre accompanied them with voices as harsh and sombre as the organs of the earth.

The circle of pages broke. Several of them, without untying their hands or separating their shoulders, performed particular dance figures. The barely perceptible movements of their loins lent their bodies a curiously immobile suppleness; suspended from the ideal line of their shoulders, they were alternately the trembling of a veil or the shivering of desire, and shades as changeable as iridescent light varied to infinity the rhythms that inspired them; it was not a liberation from gravity, but an efflorescence so subtle that it could only be expressed with the most severe discretion. Yet I enjoyed this spectacle only through the image of Youssef. His voice sang with that of his comrades; he smiled at me from their lips. Thus repeated, spread out, Youssef alone, though absent, animated in a thousand different ways the figuration of the desire that carried me towards him.

The circle of pages tightened around the musicians. From the four sides of the court entered the lovers, whose short jackets and sticky shoes moulded their vigorous forms. They surrounded the pages who turned to face them. The two rings slid in opposite directions, as if fascinated by each other, until each was standing in front of his chosen one. Then each took the chosen one by the waist and the couples thus joined passed under the king's balcony before whom they bowed. The ceremony was over.

The king had seen me and called me. I took the opportunity to tell him of my departure, apologising for its suddenness. He asked me if my stay in Sodom had not erased the reservations I had expressed to the Prince of Endor on the day of my first audience. I blushed. It seemed to me that his question had unmasked me. I had betrayed not only my mission, but the hospitality of those to whom I had been entrusted. The fire that

consumed me fed on these betrayals; beyond heaven and earth, beyond good and evil, truth and lies, nothing mattered more to me than holding Youssef in my arms.

VI

I left the city at dawn. Ben Bachir insisted on strapping my horse and checking my fonts. As he insisted on giving me a guide, I had difficulty persuading him that I would find my way alone.

Everything was still asleep in Sodom. I saw again the gardens, the palace, the terrace overlooking the Dead Sea; this city, so learned and so wise, was nevertheless doomed. Perhaps the Lord would have forgiven it for having invented a geometry that contradicted his own, but the fact that Sodom had so easily seduced the angel was proof enough of its crime! In spite of this, nothing could divert me from my goal. Mortal, yes, I had become so. Why regret it? I had acquired the form I was going to enjoy at the price of the corruption for which all gratification is paid. Youssef was waiting for me. Ah, could I join him soon enough, could I condemn myself soon enough and die loving him? What did the destruction of Sodom matter to me? Let our passion consume it, let its fire illuminate our joys, let our pleasure shake the foundations of the world! Didn't desire bring me closer to the infinite than when I was merged in it? The void created by my fall pushed me towards Youssef with the force of a sidereal attraction. By holding him close to me, by quenching my thirst and hunger for him, I would for a moment fill the abyss of my damnation... The road went on and on. The countryside was as new as on the first day, but I only had eyes for the red rock. Several times I thought I had found it. The arid hills were coloured every shade of pink, brown and saffron or flecked with bistre like fur, but none of them was red, red-hot like the one where Youssef was waiting for me, flaming-red like the passion that drove us towards each other. It seemed to me that the scenery overlooking the valley glowed redder the further I went. And, at a bend in the path, I finally saw the rock. No, there was no mistaking it. This blazing landmark had always been in my heart. It stood before the

mountains with an aloof austerity and it was red, a single shade of red, petrified image of the fire that was setting us on fire. Yes, that's where Youssef was waiting for me. I quickened my pace. The height of the rock had deceived me about the distance that separated him from me. I cursed the detours of the path which had fun meandering around a field, running alongside canals in search of a bridge, wandering around a hut or a watering hole. The cliff was surrounded by orchards themselves surrounded by dry stone walls, and in this labyrinth it was impossible for me to make out the silhouette I longed to see. But then I heard a song, and although I didn't know Youssef's voice, I knew it was his judging from the confusion it provoked in my heart. For a long time it remained the expression of an invisible promise, and it was not until I was entering the orchard that I saw the child, motionless in the shade of the walnut trees. The space that separated us, so thin, the time that delayed our kisses, so short, paralysed us. Did the angel, determined not to die, still want to save himself? No. I looked at Youssef, to imprint forever in my eyes an image that I feared, by touching it, would fade away. He leaned against the wall of the shepherd's hut as if he had been too weak to bear his emotion and, letting his head fall back, his eyes filled with tears, he slowly held out his arms to me. This call from weakness broke every dam.

I could smell his skin as I touched it, as I caressed it, as I moulded the shapes of his muscles with my palms and lips; his body melted along mine, sending shivers through me that made me flinch and fail; his mouth hung on my lips and my soul poured into his, inexhaustibly, as if, having struck the barren rock that I used to be, a miraculous rod had brought forth the spring where Youssef drank, where Youssef mirrored himself, where Youssef refreshed his forehead, his hands and his chest. I was the water that ran down his back, his loins, his belly, the wave into which he plunged in order to caress himself; I was the sun that warmed him, the perfume that intoxicated him, the wine that made him

drunk; no longer thinking of God or men, I was nothing more than a radiant intensity which, merged with that of my lover, suspended me, with him, in an absolute whose fundamental despair filled its magnificence.

For a long time we held each other in this embrace; for a long time we untied our limbs only to re-tie them, and tirelessly letting our hands wander towards the places of our delights, we remained thus in the frozen landscape where we alone undulated under a wind of voluptuousness.

But what was the point of continuing? Youssef threw back his tunic and I saw him naked in the evening light, naked as the trees and the stones, naked in a way that put to shame the rags I was still wrapped in.

Ah! I'm burning up and I want to pour out my heart; a need for effusion stiffens me. May I immerse myself in this body that moulds itself so closely to mine that it seems to want to bear its imprint forever! A whirlwind sweeps us away to a place where our senses merge... Youssef surrenders, Youssef coos, Youssef swoons...

“I love you! Oh, why do I love you?”

“Youssef, child of man, let's die loving each other!”

“What do I care if I die in your arms? Let our bodies be sealed together and let our mingled ashes carry the taste of our kisses from earth to heaven! Come to the house where, above the bed, I have hung the belt that I only wanted to give back to you! Come! Let our souls fade in our spasms like a single perfume more delicious for being so composed! Come! Oh, come!”

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Silence fell over Sodom. The bees stopped buzzing, the streams dried up and the still landscape took on the fixed lustre of a jewel.

But what was being accomplished at the foot of the red rock, this act of love for the sheer pleasure of loving, this canticle in two voices for the sheer pleasure of singing, was calling forth the cloud of fire that would destroy Sodom, Youssef and the Angel.

Jealous of man's tricks, Jehovah punished Sodom for being wise in defiance of his laws, for turning a desert into a garden, for leading the Angel to betray eternity. And when, at the twenty-fourth hour, the Angel and the son of man became one for the last time, before the lovers could even feel that, according to their desire, they were becoming ashes, Sodom and its palaces, Sodom and its heroes disappeared from the face of the earth, burnt to a crisp by the breath of one who, because he is Almighty, can also allow himself not to forgive anything.