

Notes:

This translation was made from the original 1973 paper edition of Saint Ours's Un ange à Sodome. The original lay-out has been preserved.

The final version of The Castle of the Sands was proofread by Edmund Marlowe, whom I wish, again, to thank for his invaluable patience and kindness.

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J.M. THIAN
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The *Castle of the Sands (Oukhaidour)* is the third 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: *Le Journal d'un ange*, *Le Rapt de Ganymède*, *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 *Le Journal d'un ange*, an oriental desert for *The Castle*, Siam, Anjou or Marrakech for the others...

So far, only Saint Ours's first three short stories have been translated. *Diary of an angel* and *The Abduction of Ganymede* are both available here, on the website Greek Love Through The Ages. The third one is the one you are about to read.

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 Thailand in Bangkok 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 works of the same merits, it would be with Annie Messina's *The Myrtle & The Rose*, that's how good Saint Ours's short-stories are.

Claude Achille Clarac died on January 11, 1999.

J.M. Thian, February 2025

THE CASTLE OF THE SANDS (OUKHAIDOUR)

How often have I dreamt of that castle in the sands, that lost castle that the dry wind blows away! Yet all have described it, some as the whim of a solitary king, others as a fortress whose hollow orbits stand guard over the desert, now without any purpose. Built by dreams, was this castle ever anything other than a dream? To reach it, you have to cross the gardens shaded by date palms and the forbidden city whose minarets call the believers to prayer, you have to abandon the fickle crowds to face the solitude where the burning air creates mirages, where swirls of dust rise over the horizon, leaving behind only the vibration of silence. I had been preparing for this journey for months, fasting to break my hunger, sleeping on the ground to break my bones, learning the invocations that chase away demons. My desires dried up little by little in my body and, withdrawn into myself, I reduced myself to the bare essentials of my own destiny. I had crossed the five kingdoms, lived in the seven dwellings, cut off the hundred arms of the idols; I stood, motionless, on the threshold of the One.

Every evening I would comment with my host on the bronze verses of the Koran; we also enjoyed the evangelical fields. Appearances left me unmoved and I dazzled myself with my austerity. Was I happy? Happiness had nothing in common with the state I was in. I was nothing more than a sheet of paper on which a hand stronger than mine was writing the testimony, still illegible, of my passage through the world.

During the day I would stay in the dark house, where mats were laid out for me next to a jug filled with water. After lunch, I would go down to my underground oratory, roll the cloth I used as a belt under my head and, naked, hand my body over

to the one who had given it to me. I was then drained of all my substance; my ribs would show, my belly would hollow out between my hips, time would creep back into my brief person and, lying at the bottom of this Muslim vault, I would sink into ineffable trances.

This metamorphosis made me look strange. My eyes, deep in their sockets, shone with a magnetic fever and in the tarnished mirrors that decorated my host's living room, I met my image without recognising it. This arid face, these Spanish saint cheekbones, was it really me? I averted my eyes as if unable to withstand the inquisition that obsessed them.

But I had to meet the men again, with their unexpected graces and dubious words. My host enumerated the dangers of the road: the mirages that lead caravans astray, the wind chimneys sometimes as wide as craters, sometimes as thin as columns that suck the dust or make it dance, the pillagers, the hunger, the thirst, the cowardice of the guides, and finally the impossibility of following a path where there is only space. And if, overcoming these trials, I were to reach the castle of the sands, I would still have to brave the spirits that haunt this ruin. We talked in hushed tones in the courtyard, from which two palm trees sprang. By day, their bronze fringes sifted the burning air and, by night, their black rockets swayed between the constellations. We sat on carpets and, while the water pipes glowed and the bats fluttered noiselessly around us, the wind was fanning the fragrance of the orchards to us. Men were crouching in the darkness, with rosaries in their fingers, and from time to time a veiled woman passed by, turning her head away. The words we exchanged, interspersed with silences, were peppered with quotations and mystical allusions. Ali Reza, who had been trained in the best Muslim traditions, had,

when at rest, that distance which naturally places location and word in the universal order of the mind.

I used his advice to composed my escort. The commander of my troop, El Hadj, never opened his mouth without invoking the name of Allah and his hand was always resting on the hilt of his dagger. Browbeaten, bearded and cut like a cavalryman, he treated me with a respect that barely disguised his proud indifference. What could I say about the six men? One was one-eyed, the other was poxed. The third, as taciturn as a jailer, enjoyed controlling shady horses. The fourth, who dominated his comrades by a head, scanned the air with his hawk eye. The last two were tattooed and robust and exchanged endless confidences.

On the eve of my departure, Ali Reza said to me:

“You’ll need a servant. Saïd will go with you!”

“Saïd? Your nephew?”

The young man, who had been standing at a respectful distance, approached when he heard his uncle mention his name and kissed his hand.

“Saïd,” I said, “the road is dangerous...”

“I’ll follow you...” he replied, his hand on his heart.

“Well, be ready tomorrow before dawn!”

I got up at four and dressed quickly. Ali Reza kissed me and said, pointing to his nephew:

“I entrust Saïd to you. May Allah be with you!”

Saïd, armed with cartridge belts, his rifle slung over his shoulder, was endowed at seventeen with all the seriousness of his race. My men, who were waiting for me in front of the

house, were holding the bits of their horses, which were scratching the ground impatiently and calming them with a flick of their tongues. El Hadj led the escort. We passed through the sleeping city, a cock crowed as we were leaving the outskirts. On this side, the desert began at the city gates. We entered this realm of emptiness, where all we could hear was the sound of our horses, where we could only feel the breath of our respirations. Behind us, the city, its towers, domes and gardens were fading like a dream. Then our shadows started to loom before us, as light as dawn. Saïd turned round: the rising sun was shining on his face. "Saïd," I told him, "did you know that a woman was turned into a statue of salt for looking at the city burning behind her?" He replied cheerfully:

"The poet said: I laugh at what I am leaving..."

He spurred his horse, which galloped away, reared it up, raised his open hand to the sky and came back towards us after this display of ardour.

"Your horse is beautiful," I said to him. "What's his name?"

Saïd leaned over to smile at me and, flattering the neck of his beast with his hand, replied:

"Ghazzal is his name..."

When I turned round, the oasis had disappeared. The sun, already high, was beating down on my forehead. I pulled my kefieh over my eyes. All I could see of Saïd, who had pulled his veil over his mouth, was a brown hand clutching the reins.

The wind, which had picked up around nine o'clock, made the dunes smoke and the mirages, the sands and the vapours that trembled in space continually altered the appearance of the horizon. After eleven o'clock, our horses slowed down. They bumped against the stones, snapped out of their daze only to

reel in front of visions that our dazzled eyes tried to figure out, but all we could perceive was the blaze of the air and the burning breath of the earth. El Hadj was leading the way, impassive, a mirror image of our destiny, Saïd whispered words of patience to his horse, the day never seemed to end...

Around five o'clock, however, the sands began to turn golden, our shadows began to lengthen and cooler breezes came through the furnace. One of the men let out a moan that rose, floated, fell in a sudden sob and resumed its flight to finally resolve itself into an interminable vibration of voluptuousness. Saïd responded to this song of love and war that everyone knew, but his youthful voice was only the frail echo of this poem of violence.

Between six and seven, we reached a depression where ashes, scattered around thin tamarisk trees, marked the campsites of those who had preceded us. With great noise from their nostrils, our horses drank the cloudy water that we drew from a well whose opening was covered by three stones. For a while we let them graze freely on the sparse yellow grass, then, as night approached, we tied them to the trunks of the biggest trees. Leaving the domestic chores to my escort, I wandered off to admire the twilight in peace.

The air was getting fresher by the minute, reviving my confidence and my hunger. The hazy ripples around us froze in ochre and pink hues; the stones that dotted the desert, suddenly erected on pedestals of shadow, began to sparkle, to quiver, to bristle with holes and asperities, to crackle in the silence in which their immobility was frozen. This transfiguration, which I alone witnessed, made my heart beat faster, but before I had enough time to anticipate it, these flimsy jewels disappeared into the monotony from which the obliquity of the light had

drawn them. Venus appeared, then one, then a hundred, then billions of stars...

Saïd put his hand on my shoulder to call me to dinner. Dates, a piece of cheese and dry, crusty Arabic bread made up our entire meal. My companions, squatted in a circle around me, ate without saying a word and when they had finished, Saïd took a coffee pot out of his saddlebag. El Hadj gathered some twigs, rummaged through the folds of his robe and lit a match. A flame lit up our faces; one of the men threw a green branch into it, which crackled and gave off a pungent scent. The fire turned to ember and Saïd placed the copper pot on it. At that moment, I noticed the evasive smile on the face of the tallest of my guards. Once the coffee was hot, he drew a porcelain cup from his pocket, filled it with a stream and held it out to me on three fingers. When I had emptied the cup of the bitter, scalding sip it contained, Saïd poured me a second one and then a third. He served us all one after the other with the same ceremony, put the coffee pot back and came to sit next to me. The day's walk was over, but before we rolled up our coats to sleep, the fire, which refused to die, was an invitation for us to talk.

"Tell us a story, Saïd," I asked him.

"I'm too young to know any, and too ignorant to invent any. Excuse me, master!"

The man who had smiled at Saïd earlier resumed with feigned indifference:

"Life is an adventure, an invention, a lie. If you are too young to know this, O Saïd! you will soon learn it..."

"Mahmoud the storyteller," said the one-eyed man, "you who know..."

“The best-known tales are the ones preferred by the listeners, but tonight I’m going to tell you another one. Have you ever heard the story of the Crystal Pavilion?”

“Tell us! Tell us!”

Mahmoud spread his robe on his knees and began:

“A shepherd king, feeling death coming, gathered his people around his carpet...”

It was one of those stories full of wonders and precious stones, one in which heads fell like ripe ears of corn and adolescent girls as beautiful as moons fell in love with riders who kissed them relentlessly under jasmine arbours. Mahmoud didn’t have much talent, but his diction was pure and when he had finished, his listeners thanked him with noises of admiration.

The embers were dying under the ashes, but a fabulous glow was rising beyond the horizon. Saïd rolled up his blanket, tucked it under my neck, covered me with a coat and fell asleep next to me. I could feel his breath on my hand. And yet I was alone, miraculously alone, in an air whose purity intoxicated me. The moon rose, translucent and icy, drowning everything around us in a litanie of sapphires. As I dozed off, a merciful insensitivity liquefied my consciousness, and the light that paled my forehead already seemed to turn it to marble.

Saïd woke me up an hour before dawn. The wind had picked up in the middle of the night and it was cold. The sun, as dull as a tin plate, was smoking with a dull dust. The air grew thicker by the minute and at around ten o’clock, El Hadj, who could no longer find the trail, made our horses lie down in a square so that we could wait for the weather to clear in the shelter of their rumps. Our djellabas were flapping in the wind and our powdered eyebrows and ochre-streaked cheeks gave a

strange look to our faces. We huddled together, deafened by the whistling of the storm, squinting to protect our eyes. Around four o'clock in the afternoon, the wind dropped a little. I dozed off, dreaming of springs from which I drank the water while pushing aside the mints...

Gunshots woke me up. Our horses were struggling, entangled in their reins and Saïd, on his knees, was shooting between their legs to reach invisible opponents. I wanted to get up, but my servant held me back. It was about time: a bullet grazed my cheek. As my companions leapt onto their saddles and fled, pursued by howling shadows, Saïd led me towards a ruined tomb, the outline of which we could make out a few steps ahead. Out of breath but safe, we slipped into the narrow cell that this monument housed. Saïd shook my hand and, with a finger on his lip, motioned for me to be quiet. A lock of hair escaped from his veil and brushed my lips. He kept watch, his eyes glittering, his ears alert, as tense as a demon.

"They haven't seen us," he whispered. "Let's wait. We're fine here..."

I didn't have time to reply: a bullet ricocheted off me, chipping the stone at my feet. Saïd got down on all fours and crawled out of the tomb. I was about to follow him when a shot stopped me. Ten paces away, a Bedouin was lying face down on the ground, another one was galloping away. Saïd turned his victim over with his foot with astonishing composure and, having recognised him, gave me the name of the tribe he belonged to.

We had no water or food but I knew that El Hadj would lead the looters after him and that he would come back later to rescue us or that, if we were captured, Ali Reza would negotiate our release. Saïd took me by the hand to invite me to enter the tomb with him, but I refused to follow him and sat down on a

stone in the shelter of the ruin. He gave me a soft, earnest look and laid his head on my lap. I soon felt it grow heavy, then his hand opened, let go of mine and slid against his chest. We stayed like that for a long time, him sleeping, me watching over him, alone in the glaring publicity of the desert. The dust, which dissipated very quickly, suddenly revealed a fantastic shape a hundred paces away; a gust of wind blew it away and Oukhaidour appeared in front of me, shining like a reliquary. I wanted to run, but Saïd's head weighed down on my knees. I touched his temple. He opened his eyes.

"The castle, Saïd! The castle!"

"What castle?"

"The castle of the sands, Oukhaidour, there, in front of us! Look!"

We entered the premises, where our footsteps startled a flock of kites. A first courtyard surrounded by five storeys of twin columns separated the private flats from what must have been the audience and reception rooms. You could still make out the ornaments with which the master builder had decorated the façades. These were beading that reinforced the arches, a few shells and strong cornices that emphasised the top of the building. Rooms covered with domes resting on powerful pillars followed one another in majestic order, their perspectives broken here and there by the sunlight falling from the gutted domes. But the whole thing was well enough preserved to allow us to admire its grace and splendour. Who had built this strange masterpiece? For what disillusioned prince had the architect built this palace in a part of the desert that was not designed for such a purpose? Where had the masons and the stones come from? How had the crowds who had worked on this construction lived, without water, without

bread or without shade? There were no inscriptions to shed any light on this mystery. Anonymous, the castle of the sands was sparkling with its lonely fires and its colossal walls, punctuated with towers and crowned with battlements, now served only as a den for jackals and birds of prey. Thus abandoned to silence and the wind, this place, whose useless strength exalted its mystery, seemed to have sprung from the imagination of a prophet.

As soon as the sun went down, Oukhaidour sank into the night. Saïd, who hadn't left my side for a moment, sat down next to me on the terrace that covered the buildings to the right of the courtyard and from which, although hidden by the enclosure, we could keep an eye on our surroundings. We decided to camp on this esplanade and take it in turns to keep watch. I invited Saïd to sleep first.

"Master," he said, lying down at my feet, "is there anything you want from me?"

And as I asked him not to worry, he added:

"Master, remember that I belong to you!"

"There are no more slaves today, Saïd! What do you mean by that?"

"I mean nothing! Nothing!"

He kissed my knees and when I lifted his head to let him know that I couldn't satisfy him, his eyes locked on mine with unfathomable sadness.

We may have been condemned to die of thirst and hunger in the desert, but Saïd invited me to celebrate this funeral vigil as if it were a party. His grace was combined with the vertigo of isolation so as to seduce me. Sodom! A city that the fire of

heaven destroyed only to scatter its ashes to the four corners of the world! Sodom, which Jehovah's curse has anointed with an imperishable crown, Sodom, capital of solitude, what do you get your power from? Lying at my feet, Saïd is waiting for me to turn his rest into a night of pleasure. Could it be the awareness of this temptation that I have come to seek at Oukhaidour?

Saïd sighed, but he was young. He rested his head on his arm and fell asleep immediately.

The silence took on an infinite depth and the moon appeared, as round and as cold as the day before. A pale world emerged from the darkness in which herds of motionless monsters were swimming. The glimmers and shadows, diluted with blue ink, were turning the rubble hanging around us into senseless architectures that raised their dreamy sides and magical buttresses to the sky. The towers, the arches and the battlements were radiating with a mystery that emptied the masses of their weight and were thus drawing them towards impossible ports of call.

Saïd turned round as if, while dreaming, he was still talking to me. His dress, unzipped, was open, revealing his chest. I followed the movements of his breathing and could make out his breast, a child's breast whose freshness had something vegetal about it.

Shame rose to my forehead. I implored the Crucified One, but despite the effort I was putting into praying, my words were losing their meaning in spite of myself. A brick, loosened by the wear and tear of centuries, suddenly rolled away with an outrageous noise and silence, a more massive silence, closed in on what had disturbed it for a moment. I felt like running away. Would I be such a coward as to abandon the one who was

sharing my fate? He would wake up, look for me, call me in vain. And then, where could I take shelter from my own weakness? Please God, give me the strength to withstand this ordeal! I clung to my faith in the hope of at least ensuring my own immobility, but voices were whispering unspeakable advice all around me. I wanted to look at Saïd with indifference. Madness or foolishness? His shape, stretched out at my feet, still troubles me. Because you offered me your love in the ruins, will I have to fight until dawn to push it away? Do I have the right to deprive you of me, Saïd? Where does humility end and where does pride begin? What's the point of making paths across the sea? Ah, why, during the moment we are in, should we be forbidden to embrace other forms as fleeting as our own? Why, God of vengeance, do you deny the body you gave us the gesture that satisfies its need to stand out and blend in? Ah, if only, by holding Saïd close to my heart, I could destroy myself in him and, freed from our double wandering thanks to our double outpouring, we could mingle with the ruins of Oukhaidour!

Saïd stretched in his sleep and it seemed to me that his face was lighting up with an inner smile.

I then watched, in horror, the night becoming enchanted. The staircases, the corridors and the domes started to fill with sighs, the stars to swim in rivers of phosphorus and the towers to stand like obscene lookouts.

Then everything was resolved. Once again Saïd changed position to curl up on himself. I had a mad desire to warm him, to console him, to reassure him, but sentimentality was no more successful than the other traps of the flesh.

Must I hate you, creature, for loving me? When will my torment end? Since I reject the present, I can only exile myself from it.

Unable to reconcile my spirit with my body, I can only fear or despise the world; having refused to live, all that remains for me is to die...

Already the night is fading. One more day! Ah, when will my body finally fall down from the soul it burdens? Temptation ebbs with the night, leaving behind it a bitter fatigue. Saïd! Saïd! Tear me away from my sad virtue! Saïd! Drag me down to the bottom of the ocean where everything blends and is forgotten! Ah, Saïd, save me from the temptation of pride by submitting me, between your arms, to the yoke of voluptuousness!

I was already leaning towards him to kiss him and his half-open eyes were already closing on the realisation of his dream. When our rescuers' summons echoed through the ruins, Saïd put his hand over my mouth to stop me from responding. Yes, Saïd would have preferred to die with me in the desert. But alas! We no longer even had the freedom to lose our ways!

Now I know what I was looking for in Oukhaidour. I had thought I was escaping the frightening rupture of death by spiritualising myself more and more each day as if, by beginning my ascent here on earth, I would simply, when the time came, fade away into the bosom of the Almighty.

A worry I can't seem to calm down is gnawing at my insides. Today I am setting my ruin up in the middle of the desert. No one is haunting it. Only my lament is moaning there. Why have I not known sooner?

Satan was only a spirit.