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The Paris Season... the betting is open...



Two hands wearing elbow-length gloves hold delicately trained a pair of binoculars. The pearl grey top hat towering above the ravishing little havana straw with its gleaming aquamarine, inquires in an undertone :

« Is it the horses you are looking at ? »

« No, their owners of course ! »

And the pretty, engrossed little face brightens into a smile :

« Five millions for the winner and... a silver trophy. That's not at all bad. »

In the distance, the group formed by the ten horses still left in the race is caught up by the thousands of voices of their backers as it turns into the last straight.

The spectacle, which wavers according to the phases of the race between a Degas and a Dufy, inclines at last toward the latter, in spite of the heavy, oppressive sky. On this day of days, the longest in the year, the sky has had time enough since dawn, fixed at 0347 hrs, to adorn itself, to deck itself out in the colour of the moment — anthracite grey.

Photo AGIP



Chantilly : Prix du Jockey-Club, « Derby français ».

A moment ago, just before the start of the great Auteuil steeple-chase, it was definitely Degas who tipped the scales on the circular track of the paddock where the horses — like in the old songs of France — « font trois petits tours et puis s'en vont », turn round three times and then go off. The jockeys in their multicoloured jackets on which are figured here a Croix de Lorraine, there a large star, have made their way through the crowd with the swaying gait peculiar to their profession, adjusting a stirrup leather as they go, testing the balance of a saddle — a tiny piece of leather on a white saddle-cloth bearing a number : « Tournay », « Farfadas II », « Vertugadin », « Meli-Melo », « Sir Walter »...

On the arrival of the first man of the State and his guests, the Republican Guards in full dress uniform — brass helmets with red crests — and with drawn swords have lined the route, just as the heavy foliage lines the race-course : oaks, chestnut trees, poplars of a green recalling — oh, once you let horses get a hold on you, there is no getting away from them — that of the light cavalry of the Imperial Guard.

In the distance, almost as if suspended between heaven and earth, the pale and wan Sacré Cœur, the Eiffel Tower looking like a cross between a battleship and a spider's web, the domes of the Invalides and the Val-de-Grâce, and the spires of Sainte-Clothilde. Each of these famous edifices seems to dominate, one might almost say preside over, one of the big obstacles of the steeple-chase : the water jump in front of the stands, the bullfinch, the « eight » water jump, the oxer, the double fence, the rail ditch, all bristling with hazards along the « Veronese » turf...

In an uproar, a veritable surge forward, the struggle for first place, to the accompaniment of the cracking of the whips as they rend the air, comes to an end between the two red disks that mark the finishing-post.

With a rustle, binoculars are lowered ; the bronze taffeta of a coat reminiscent of Watteau, motionless for so long, moves again, at each step flaring out over a light shantung sheath.

Why is it stopping already at the foot of that flight of steps with its Edwardian flourishes, down which pour morning coats and grey toppers ? Oh, here we are : a kissing of hands all round marks the prelude to a conversation half mundane, half equestrian, between that long draped tunic, looking as though it had fallen from the sky, that mink stole which so beautifully frames the pleats of a beige woollen dress and that vast hat from under whose broad brim escape ripples of pearly laughter which seem to cascade down... like the three strings of pearls twined about the throat, as well as at the left wrist.

The circle has broken up, the grey top hat has moved further on, framing with its short shadow the dry, cynical features, making its way with difficulty through the serried ranks of betters. It hesitates a moment, on the point of turning back. No, its mind is made up, for a pretty hand

has just beckoned, with a wave of lace, the foam white bodice cut by the stem of a skirt in heavy black faille.

« A chair, my dear? »

« No thank you, if I sat down I should not be able to see half of what is going on and should miss the comings and goings in the President's box. I say, look at that ivory-coloured sari, how lovely it is ! And that pastel blue organdie framing that bronzed face... »

The insistent ringing of the bell starts off a general movement back towards the stands. Here, as on a watch tower, the owners and trainers ; there, in their reserved seats, shimmering outfits indicate those who are in the habit of having their jockeys wear their own bright colours : pink for a dowager, a lemon yellow which goes wonderfully well with a suntanned complexion, clusters of black spots on a deeply cut white silk, while on the course, in step with their mounts,

Photo AGIP



Auteuil : Grand steeple-chase.
Robe de Maggy Rouff.

almost identical jackets go off towards the start at the Carrefour des Cascades... Another race is about to begin.

The sight-seers, the idly curious crowded outside the gates of the race-course have been waiting there a long time in the hope of catching a glimpse of the President of the Republic as he comes out, and of the fashionable women who will soon appear, like water-lilies on the surface of a sea of jackets and dark coats.

Sumptuous limousines drive up and present their flanks, doors wide open, while the police on motor-cycles, with their white gauntlets, get ready to start off in close formation, strange puppets of a shadow world in the shimmer of the nearby Seine.

At the opposite side, at the Porte d'Auteuil, buses of all sizes wait patiently for the passengers drawn by the shouts of the drivers : « Clichy... Porte des Lilas... Nation... » Like an egg breaking in two, Auteuil has disgorged on one side all the elegance of the enclosures and the grand stands, and on the other the masses from the public enclosures.



Chantilly : Prix du Jockey-Club.
Une robe en imprimé qui fut fort remarquée.

The blasts of the police whistles punctuate the movement of the cars and pedestrians. In the crowd, the large straw hats, the little toques, laces and flowers become petals of all colours drifting away on the stream... The Grand Prix of the Auteuil steeple-chase is now a thing of the past... as are all the hopes I had placed on « Vertugadin », which came in a good last ! The betting is closed !

Philippe Orville.

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Chantilly : Prix de Diane (1952).