

CLAUDE SIMON was born in Madagascar in 1913 and was brought up in Perpignan in the south of France, first by his mother, until she died of cancer in 1924, then by his grandmother, his father having fallen in the First World War. After studying in Paris, Oxford and Cambridge, he travelled extensively and assisted the Republican cause in Spain during the Civil War. At the outbreak of the Second World War he was drafted into the 31st Dragoons Regiment: he fought in the Battle of the Meuse and was later captured by the Germans, only to escape and join the Resistance in Paris. His first novel, *The Trickster*, which he wrote during this period, was published in 1945. After the War, he continued to write and publish novels, including *The Wind* (1959), his first to be translated into English, while at the same time running a vineyard and producing wine in the Languedoc-Roussillon region. His most famous novels include *The Grass* (1958), *The Flanders Road* (1960), *The Palace* (1962), *History* (1967), *The Battle of Pharsalus* (1969), *Triptych* (1973), *The Georgics* (1981) and *The Trolley* (2001). In 1985 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. His writing, blending narrative and stream-of-consciousness, has been associated with the Nouveau Roman school, although it includes many elements – plot, characterization, history, autobiography – which diverge from that movement. He died in Paris in 2005.

The Flanders Road

Claude Simon

Translated by Richard Howard



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Contents

Introduction	vii
The Flanders Road	1
<i>One</i>	3
<i>Two</i>	63
<i>Three</i>	155

Introduction

In the extreme north-eastern corner of France, close to the Belgian border, a road runs dead straight for a few miles over undulating terrain, a rural landscape of meadows and hedges with small copses dotted here and there. The villages and small towns are built of drab brick and slate. It is solid farming country, with little to attract the tourist. The road in question runs more or less east to west, from Solre-le-Château to a place called Les Trois Pavés, where it joins the N2, which links Avesnes-sur-Helpe to the south with Mauberge in the north, and ultimately takes you to Brussels, Antwerp and the Hook of Holland.

Before it joins the N2, the straight road I am talking about, the D962, passes close to a village called Sars-Poteries which, as its name implies, is a small industrial centre containing several ceramics workshops. It was on the outskirts of Sars-Poteries that, in the middle of May, 1940, the event occurred which lies at the heart of this epic novel. The weather then was perfect: day after day of warm sunshine with virtually clear skies from dawn to dusk. It was ideal weather for the German panzer divisions, which were pouring across the ill-defended Meuse river, and for their supporting aircraft. It was vile weather for the hapless French cavalry who were trying to stop tanks with frightened, disoriented troops mounted – of all things – on *horseback*. From the German point of view the campaign was a dazzling, almost unbelievable triumph; for France, a humiliating rout which was to determine the course of history in Europe for the rest of the century, as there can be little doubt that if the French had been less soundly and decisively beaten at the Battle of the Meuse, the rest of the war and its aftermath would have turned out rather differently.

One of the luckless troopers retreating from east to west in the carnage and confusion of those sun-drenched spring days was Claude Simon, a conscript then aged twenty-six. He was riding with another trooper behind two officers, a captain and a lieutenant, and as they were leaving Sars-Poteries on the road to Avesnes the captain was shot dead by a sniper hidden behind a hedge. The others made their escape as best they

could. Simon was eventually rounded up with thousands of other French soldiers and sent to a POW camp in Saxony, from which before long he succeeded in escaping. For many years the memory of that episode on a road in Flanders ripened in his imagination, and in 1960 he published this novel, which develops the incident into a deeply moving meditation on war, on human suffering, on time, and on mankind's craving for love and for the illusory permanence it affords.

When *The Flanders Road* was published in France, the lieutenant on the fateful day in 1940 – by then a retired colonel of dragoons by the name of Cuny – wrote to Claude Simon to compliment him on the accuracy of the descriptions in the novel of the events leading up to the murder of his brother officer (called in real life Captain Rey). It was a remarkable and indeed moving testimonial not only to Simon's powers of recall but also to his skill in recreating the experience which he and Cuny shared. Like all great novelists, Simon possesses the gift of making the ordinary memorable and the extraordinary seem natural. It would be difficult to improve, for instance, upon his tellingly graphic descriptions of the rout, what he here calls "that disaster, that blind patient endless debacle", and of the detritus spread over mile after mile which characterized it, "exuding not the traditional and heroic odour of carrion, of corpses in a state of decomposition, but only of ordure, simply stinking, the way a pile of old tin cans, potato peelings and burnt rags can stink, and no more affecting or tragic than a pile of rubbish..."

So far as I know Captain Rey was a stranger to Simon, someone he met by chance during the confusion of the retreat from the Meuse. For this is a work of fiction, and Captain de Reixach (the name given in the novel) is not a real historical person: only the Flanders road, running "almost exactly east-west", truly exists. The rest is imaginative reconstruction of a high order: an achievement which Tolstoy would recognize as being in the tradition of *War and Peace* and of its consummate balancing of the microcosm – individual Russians with their emotions and sufferings – and the macrocosm: the conflict of nations, the struggle (just as epoch-making in its way as Hitler's blitzkrieg) between Tsar and Emperor.

The ambush on the Flanders Road in which Rey/de Reixach dies is in any case not the only important element in the story. There is also the steeplechase, in which de Reixach insists on riding in place of his jockey Iglésia (later his wife's lover and later still his orderly in Flanders), and his

humiliating failure in the saddle, which represents in little the infinitely more serious defeat of the mounted troops in the battle with which, almost exactly half-way through the novel, the race is textually “spliced”. There is, too, the powerfully erotic account of the night of love which Georges, the demobbed trooper who is the author’s representative in the story, spends with de Reixach’s widow Corinne in a doomed attempt to “pursue upon her body in his body” the reconstruction, the imaginative recreation, the reliving, of the traumatic episode on the Flanders road. And there is, finally, the ancestral portrait, the painting which seemed to Georges in his childhood to show an eighteenth-century forebear bleeding from the temple because the latter had read too much Rousseau and had been cruelly disappointed by human frailty when he returned unexpectedly from the wars and found his young wife energetically making love to a farm boy endowed with a “muscular back”, as Corinne was later to copulate frenziedly in the stables with Iglésia. The difference, Georges thinks, is that the disciple of Jean-Jacques blew his brains out with his own shotgun, whereas in May 1940, as befitted a less heroic and self-conscious age, Captain de Reixach chose instead to ride into a German ambush and disguise his suicide as death in action.

Or was it really so? asks the text in the closing pages, in a striking attack of self-doubt which shows that Simon is as much a disciple of Faulkner as he is of Tolstoy, and a true member of the *nouveau roman* movement which has induced us to recognize that words are not safe, and that literature is a quest rather than a discovery. Just as John Fowles (another contemporary novelist engaged in warning us that writing is exploration, not cartography) advises the reader not to assume that any of the possible endings of his novel *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* is the “right” one, but to accept them all simultaneously, Claude Simon implies that Captain de Reixach could equally well have been killed by accident (because the enemy sniper would naturally pick out the senior member of the group). After all, when Georges grew up and got to know the family portrait better, he realized that the “blood” pouring from his ancestor’s temple was something much more banal: a crack in the impasto of the picture which had widened so much over the years as to reveal the brownish primer underneath.

So it is, the novel suggests, with all human endeavour abandoned “to the incoherent, casual, impersonal and destructive work of time”, the gnawing of termites which reduces all things to the same dust from

which they originated, just like the dead horse which is the novel's central symbol: inexplicably covered in mud despite the dry weather, it is already being absorbed by the earth out of which it was created. Claude Simon proposes an unsentimental stoicism in the face of this enduring strength of the natural world as compared with the puny efforts of mankind to secure permanence through love and literature. As Georges his spokesman tells the professor his father, if all that written in the volumes held in the great Leipzig library was so signally incapable of preventing the evil which led directly to the library's destruction, then perhaps it was not worth much, or at least not to be weighed in the same scale as those "objects of prime importance" to POWs, such as warm clothes, footwear, soap and cigarettes. But though Simon is unsentimental over matters like these, he is not lacking in humanity: the scene in the POW camp, where the gambler faints with hunger because he pays his daily rations over to the banker, is conveyed with discreet but powerful feeling. The "someone" who is watching and who says "You bastard" to the banker is also someone close to the narrator, and indeed someone who voices aloud what the reader feels. And while showing that certain people will always exploit the weakness of their fellows, the text at the same time reveals the dignity of the gambler, who prefers to starve rather than suffer the humiliation of being seen to default on his debts.

A final word about Simon's style. This will hold no terrors for the reader who has read Faulkner, from whom Simon learnt so much: especially the trick of avoiding a precise narrative tense (by using the present participle instead of a finite verb), the elaborately rich similes, the explanatory parentheses and the generous profusion of adjectives. And a useful tip: if you get lost, do not despair. Simon opens parentheses liberally, but he never omits to close them, so if you are bogged down in an aside, skip to the next closing bracket, and start again. Although the prose is dense and rich, and works largely by association of ideas rather than chronological sequence, it is never perverse, never out to baffle the reader on purpose; on the contrary, as Simon once said, far from evolving a difficult style in which to wrap up simple things, he has forged for himself an instrument, which is as straightforward as he can make it, to render intelligible matters which are infinitely complex.

– John Fletcher

The Flanders Road

One

*I thought I was learning how to live,
I was learning how to die.*

Leonardo da Vinci

He was holding a letter in his hand, he raised his eyes looked at me then the letter again then once more at me, behind him I could see the red mahogany ochre blurs of the horses being led to the watering trough, the mud was so deep you sank into it up to your ankles but I remember that during the night it had frozen suddenly and Wack came into the bedroom with the coffee saying The dogs ate up the mud, I had never heard the expression, I could almost see the dogs, some kind of infernal, legendary creatures their mouths pink-rimmed their wolf fangs cold and white chewing up the black mud in the night's gloom, perhaps a recollection, the devouring dogs cleaning, clearing away: now the mud was grey and we twisted our ankles running, late as usual for morning call, almost tripping in the deep tracks left by the hoofs and frozen hard as stone, and a moment later he said Your mother's written me. So she had done it in spite of the fact that I told her not to, I could tell I was blushing, he stopped and must have tried to smile but probably that was impossible, not being friendly (he certainly wanted to be friendly) but eliminating that remoteness: the effort merely stretched the hard little pepper-and-salt moustache somewhat, he had that tanned lustreless skin of people who live outdoors most of the time, something of the Arab in him, probably the traces of one Charles Martel had forgotten to kill, maybe he claimed descent not only from His Cousin the Virgin, like his neighbours the petty nobility of the Tarn, but even from Muhammad into the bargain, he said I think we're cousins more or less, but in his mind I suppose that as far as I was concerned the word probably meant something more like mosquito insect midge, and I could feel myself blushing with fury again the way I had when I first saw that letter in his hand, recognized the stationery. I didn't answer, he must have seen how furious I was, I wasn't looking at him but at the letter, I wished I could snatch it away and tear it up, he gestured with the hand that was holding the letter folded, the corners fluttered like wings in the cold air, his dark eyes showing neither hostility nor contempt, cordial even but distant too: perhaps he was only as annoyed as I was, resenting my irritation while we went on with our

little ceremony standing there in the frozen mud, both of us making that concession to custom to convention out of regard for a woman who unfortunately for me was my mother, and finally he must have understood for his little moustache moved again while he was saying Don't hold it against her It's only natural for a mother She was right Personally I'm delighted to have the chance If you ever need, and I Oh thank you Captain, and he If something goes wrong don't hesitate to come and see, and I Yes Captain, he waved the letter again, it must have been around minus seven or minus ten degrees that early in the morning but he didn't even seem to notice it. After they had drunk the horses trotted off again in pairs, the men running between swearing and hanging on to the bridles, you could hear the noise the hoofs made on the frozen mud, he repeating If something goes wrong I'll be happy to do, then folding the letter putting it in his pocket looking at me again with an expression that in his mind must have been a smile and that merely pulled the pepper-and-salt moustache to one side again after which he turned on his heel and walked off. From then on I simply made sure I did even less than I was doing already, I had reduced things to essentials, unhooking the stirrups when I dismounted, unbuckling the harness after I had changed the water once or twice and then taking off the whole bridle, dipping it in the trough while the horse was still drinking, and then the horse went back to the stable by itself while I walked beside it ready to grab an ear, and after that all I had to do was wipe off the steel and now and then use sandpaper when it was really too rusty, but it didn't matter much anyway since my reputation on that point had been established long since and no one bothered me about it any more and besides I suppose that as far as he was concerned he couldn't have cared less and to pretend not to see me when he inspected the platoon was a favour he did my mother without too much bother, unless the polishing was also one of those futile and irreplaceable things for him, one of those reflexes and traditions so to speak ancestrally maintained at Saumur and then later reinforced, although according to what people said she (in other words the woman in other words the child he had married or rather who had married him) did everything she could in their four years of marriage to make him forget or in any case forswear most of these traditional traditions, whether he liked them or not, but even supposing he had given most of them up (and

probably not so much because he loved her but because he had to or better still because he had to because he loved her) there are some things that the worst renunciations the worst capitulations can't make you forget even if you want to and usually such things are the silliest or the most senseless ones the things you can't reason about or have any control over, for instance his reaction of drawing his sabre when that burst of gunfire came from behind the hedge: there was a second when I could see him that way his arm raised brandishing that useless ridiculous weapon in the hereditary gesture of an equestrian statue which had probably been handed down to him by generations of swordsmen, a dim figure against the light so that it looked as if he and his horse had been cast together out of one and the same material, a grey metal, the sun glinting for a second on the naked blade then everything – man horse and sabre – collapsing together sideways like a lead soldier beginning to melt from the feet up and leaning slowly to one side then faster and faster, vanishing sabre still held outstretched behind the carcass of that burnt truck abandoned there, indecent as an animal, a pregnant bitch dragging her belly on the ground, the punctured tyres slowly rotting, giving off that smell of scorched rubber the sickening stink of war hanging in the brilliant spring afternoon, floating or rather stagnating, viscous and transparent but somehow visible like putrid water in which the red-brick houses the orchards the hedges had been standing: for an instant the sun's dazzling reflection caught or rather condensed all the light and the glory on that virginal steel... Only, it was a long time since she had been a virgin, but I suppose that wasn't what he asked, desired of her the day he had made up his mind to marry her, undoubtedly knowing perfectly well from that moment on what lay in store for him, having accepted in advance having assumed having so to speak consumed in advance that passion, with this difference that the site the centre the altar wasn't a naked hill but that smooth and tender and hairy and secret crease in the flesh... Yeah: crucified, agonizing on the altar the mouth the cave of... But after all wasn't there a whore at the other crucifixion too, presuming that whores are indispensable in such things, women in tears wringing their hands and penitent whores, supposing that he had ever asked her to repent or at least expected hoped that she would that she would become something else than what she had the reputation of being and so expected of this marriage

something else than should logically follow from it, even foreseeing or at least having perhaps imagined as far as that final consequence or rather conclusion, that suicide which the war gave him the opportunity of perpetrating so elegantly that is not melodramatic spectacular and nasty like the housemaids who throw themselves under the Métro or the bankers who dirty their whole office but disguised as an accident if you can still consider being killed in the war an accident, somehow taking advantage with discretion and a sense of the opportune of the occasion provided in order to finish off what should never have begun four years before...

I understood that, I realized that all he wanted hoped for in that moment was to get himself killed and not only when I saw him there planted on his horse fixed clearly exposed right in the middle of the road without even bothering or seeming to bother to get his horse under an apple tree, that fool of a little second lieutenant thinking himself obliged to do the same thing, probably supposing that it was the last word the *ne plus ultra* of elegance and chic for a cavalry officer without suspecting for an instant the real reasons that impelled the other man to do it, in other words that it was a question neither of honour nor of courage and still less of elegance but a purely personal matter and not even between him and her but between him and himself. I could have told him, Iglésia could have told him even better than I. But what was the use. I suppose he must have been convinced that he was doing something absolutely sensational and besides why should we have disabused him since that way at least he would die content even ecstatic, dying beside and like a de Reixach, so it was better for him to believe it better for him to be a fool not to ask what was behind that face only slightly bored slightly impatient waiting making us or rather making the campaign service regulations and the orders in case of low-flying aircraft strafing the roads the concession of waiting until they were some distance away and we climbed out of the ditch, turning slightly on his saddle a little exasperated but obliging himself to be patient showing us that still impenetrable expressionless face merely waiting for us to get back on our horses again while they disappeared no larger than dots above the horizon now, then once we were mounted starting again, urging his horse forward with an imperceptible pressure of his legs, the horse apparently starting of its own accord and still at a walk naturally

without haste yet not slowly either and not even casually: simply at a walk. I suppose he wouldn't have started trotting for all the money in the world, that he wouldn't have driven his spurs into the horse wouldn't have moved faster if a gun had gone off in his ear and that's exactly what happened there are expressions that are convenient: at a walk then, and that too must have been part of what he had started four years before and had decided, was in the process of ending or rather of trying to put an end to walking calmly, impassively (in the same way that, according to what Iglésia said, he had always pretended to notice nothing, had never betrayed the slightest emotion neither jealousy nor anger) along that road that was something like a death trap, not war but murder, a place where you were cut down before you had time to know it, the snipers sitting behind the hedge or some bush as though at a county-fair shooting gallery and taking all the time they needed to get you in their sights, in other words a massacre and for a moment I wondered if he didn't want Iglésia to get his there too, if at the same time he was ending it all for himself he wasn't also taking a longed-for revenge, but all things considered I don't think so I imagine that by then everything had become indifferent to him supposing he had ever had anything against Iglésia since after all he had kept him in his service and now he bothered as much or rather as little about him as about me or about that fool of a second lieutenant, probably not feeling any further responsibility not so far as we were concerned personally but in regard to his role his function as an officer, probably thinking that what he could do or not do from that point of view no longer had any importance whatever at the stage we had reached: delivered then released relieved so to speak of his military obligations from the moment his squadron had been reduced to the four of us (his squadron itself being virtually all that had managed to survive of the whole regiment along with maybe a few other dismounted cavalymen stranded here and there around the countryside) which still didn't keep him from sitting as straight and stiff on his saddle as if he had been reviewing his men in the Fourteenth of July parade and not in full retreat or rather rout or rather disaster in the middle of this collapse of everything as if not an army but the world itself the whole world and not only in its physical reality but even in the representation the mind can make of it (but maybe it was the lack of sleep too, the fact that we had had almost no sleep at all in ten days

except on horseback) was actually falling apart collapsing breaking up into pieces dissolving into water into nothing, and two or three times someone shouted at him not to go on (I don't know how many, nor who they were: I suppose wounded men, or men hidden in houses or in the ditch, or maybe civilians who incomprehensibly kept wandering around dragging a broken suitcase or pushing those perambulators ahead of them loaded with some kind of luggage (and not even luggage: things, and probably useless: probably just so as not to be wandering around empty-handed, to have the impression the illusion of taking something of possessing something anything as long as there could be attached to it – the split pillow the umbrella or the coloured photograph of the grandparents – the arbitrary notion of price, of value) as if what counted was to be walking, whether in one direction or another: but I didn't actually see them, all I could see, was still capable of recognizing, like a kind of target, a landmark, was that bony back thin stiff and very straight placed on the saddle, and the serge tunic slightly shinier over the symmetrical bulges of the shoulder blades, and I had long since stopped paying any attention – stopped being able to pay attention – to what could be happening along the roadside); voices, then, unreal and whining crying something (a warning, an alarm) and that reached me across the dazzling and opaque light of that spring day (as if the light itself were dirty, as if the invisible air kept in suspension, like contaminated water, that kind of dusty stinking filth of the war), and he (I could see his head move each time appearing in profile under the helmet, the dry hard outline of the forehead, the eyebrow, and underneath the notch of the eye socket then the firm dry immutable line falling straight from the cheekbone to the chin) looking at them, his expressionless incurious eyes resting for a moment (but apparently without seeing) on the man (or perhaps not even that: only on the place the point the voice came from) who had called to him, and not even reproving severe or annoyed, not even frowning: merely that lack of expression, of interest – at the most maybe astonishment: a little nonplussed, impatient, as though in a salon someone had suddenly spoken to him without having been introduced or had interrupted him in the middle of a sentence with one of those non sequiturs (for instance indicating that the ash of his cigar was about to fall off or that his coffee was getting cold) and perhaps making an effort, a show of goodwill of patience

of courtesy to try to understand the reasons or the interest of the remark or if the latter could be related in some way or other to what he had been saying, then giving up any attempt to understand making up his mind without even a shrug of the shoulders probably deciding it is inevitable to meet everywhere always and in any circumstance – in salons or at war – stupid and ignorant people, and that done – in other words decided – forgetting the interrupter, effacing him, no longer seeing him even before looking away, then no longer looking at all at that place where there was nothing, raising his head again and resuming with that little second lieutenant his calm conversation of the sort two cavalymen riding through the countryside might be having (in training or on manoeuvres) about fellow cavalymen about promotion about hunting or about racing. And I felt as though I was there, saw it: the green shade with women in bright-coloured print dresses, standing or sitting on iron garden chairs, and men in pale riding breeches talking to them, leaning over them, tapping their boots with their Malacca riding crops, the silks of the horses and those of the women and the tawny leathers of the boots making brilliant spots (mahogany, mauve, pink, yellow) against the deep-green foliage, and the women of that particular class to which do not belong but which is constituted by (to the exclusion of all others) the daughters of colonels or of men with a particle in their name: rather insipid, rather insignificant and frail, keeping until late in life (even married, even after the second or third child) that virginal look, with their long delicate bare arms, their short white girlish gloves, their boarding-school dresses (until they turn suddenly – in the middle thirties – into something rather masculine, rather horsy (no, not mares, horses), smoking and discussing races or horse shows like men), and the faint hum of voices suspended beneath the heavy branches of the chestnut trees, the voices (women's or men's) capable of remaining decorous, even, and completely futile while speaking the coarsest or even the rawest remarks, discussing copulations (animal and human) money or first communions with the same inconsequent, agreeable and cavalier ease, the voices then melting into the constant and confused trampling of the boots and the high heels on the gravel, stagnating in the air, the iridescent and impalpable clouds of gilt dust suspended in the calm green afternoon smelling of flowers, dung and perfumes, and he...

“Oh yes!...” Blum said (now we were lying in the darkness in other words intertwined overlapping huddled together until we couldn’t move an arm or a leg without touching or shifting another arm or leg, stifling, the sweat streaming over our chests gasping for breath like stranded fish, the wagon stopping once again in the dark and no sound audible except for the noise of breathing the lungs desperately sucking in that thick clamminess that stench of bodies mingled as if we were already deader than the dead since we were capable of realizing it as if the darkness the night... And I could feel them sense them swarming slowly creeping over each other like reptiles in the suffocating odour of excrement and sweat, trying to remember how long we had been in that train a day and a night or a night and a day and a night but that didn’t have any meaning time doesn’t exist What time is it I said can you see the, What difference does it make to you he said What difference will it make when it’s morning Are you so eager to see our filthy prisoners’ faces Are you so eager to see my filthy Jew’s face they, Oh I said shut up shut up shut up), Blum repeating: “Yeah. And then he took that burst of machine-gun fire at point-blank range. Maybe it would have been smarter on his part if

“No: listen... Smarter! God what do you think smart... Listen: he bought us drinks once. I mean, not exactly for us, I suppose: because of the horses. I mean he thought they must be thirsty and so at the time...” And Blum: “Bought drinks?”, and I: “Yes. It was... Listen: it was like one of those posters for some brand of English beer, you know? The courtyard of the old inn with the dark-red brick walls and the light-coloured mortar, and the leaded windows, the sashes painted white, and the girl carrying the copper mugs and the stable boy in yellow leather leggings with tongues and turned-up buckles watering the horses while the group of cavalymen were standing in classical postures: hips arched, one boot forward, one hand holding the crop resting on a hip while the other raises a mug of golden beer towards an upper window where you notice half-glimpse behind a curtain a face that looks as if it came out of a pastel... Yes: with this difference that there was nothing of all that except the brick walls, only dirty, and the courtyard looked more like a barnyard: an air shaft behind a bar, a tavern, with piles of empty siphon cases and wandering chickens and laundry drying on a line, and instead of a white apron the woman was wearing one of those flowered linen smocks the kind

they sell in open-air markets and her legs were bare in slippers and apparently not surprised by what she and we were doing there, as if it had been a perfectly natural thing for each of us to be standing there in full uniform calmly drinking down our beers, he and the second lieutenant a little to one side as was to be expected (and I don't even know if he drank, I don't think so, I can't see him drinking his pint from the bottle), and we holding our bottles in one hand and in the other the reins of the horses drinking from the trough, and this beside that road along which there was a dead man (or a woman, or a child), or a truck, or a burnt wagon almost every ten yards, and when he paid – for he did pay – I could see his hand slip into his pocket under the resilient grey-green stuff of the elegant jodhpurs, the two bulges formed by the index and middle fingers bent while he grasped his wallet, pulled it out and counted the coins into the woman's hand as coolly as if he had paid for an orangeade or one of those fashionable drinks at the bar of some paddock in Deauville or Vichy..." And again it was as if I were seeing it: silhouetted against the deep, almost blackish green of the opulent chestnut trees, the jockeys passing while the bell tinkled on their way to the gate line, perched high, monkey-like, on the delicate elegant mounts, their many-coloured silks following each other through the lozenges of sunshine, like this: yellow, blue braces and cap – the blackish-green background of the chestnut trees – black, blue St Andrew's cross and white cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – blue-and-pink check, blue cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – yellow, red-and-yellow striped sleeves, red cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – garnet, garnet cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – yellow, green-striped sleeves, red cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – blue, red sleeves, green armband and cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – violet, cerise Cross of Lorraine, violet cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – red, blue polka dots, red sleeves and cap – the blackish-green wall of the chestnut trees – brown with sky-blue stripes, black cap... the brilliant silks slipping by, the dark-green wall of leaves, the sparkling silks, the dancing lozenges of sunlight, the horses with dancing names – Carpasta, Milady, Zeida, Naharo, Romance, Primarosa, Riskoli, Carpaccio, Wild Risk, Samarkand, Chichibu – the young fillies setting down their delicate hoofs one after the other and picking them up again as if they were

scorched, dancing, seeming to be suspended above the earth, without touching ground, the bell, the gong chiming, still chiming, while one after the next the iridescent silks slipped silently by in the elegant afternoon and Iglésia passing without looking at her and on his back that pink silk that seemed to leave the scented wake of her own flesh behind it, as if she had taken one of those silky pieces of lingerie of hers and had thrown it over him, still warm, still impregnated with the odour of her body, and above his yellow, mournful, bird-of-prey profile, and below his little legs bent, knees high, crouching on that golden chestnut with the majestic, opulent gait, with the opulent haunches (even that opulent stiffness of the hindquarters, limbs made not for walking but for galloping, moving one after the other with that rigid distinction, that arrogant clumsiness, the long blond tail swaying, glinting in the sun), and the last silks seen from behind now (dark blue with a red St Andrew's cross, brown with blue polka dots), vanishing behind the scales, the building with the whitewashed roof, the false Norman beams, and she (she hadn't turned her head either, hadn't shown that she had seen him) sitting on one of those iron chairs in the shade, and perhaps in her hand one of those yellow or pink sheets with the last odds written on them (but not looking at that either), talking desultorily with (or listening desultorily to, or not listening to) one of those men, one of those retired colonels or commandants never seen except in such places, wearing striped trousers, a grey bowler (and probably stored away somewhere, fully dressed, for the rest of the week and taken out only on Sundays, quickly dusted off, smoothed out and set here along with the baskets of flowers on the balconies and the staircases of the grandstand, and immediately afterwards stored away in their box again), and finally Corinne standing up casually, moving calmly – her vaporous and indecent red dress swaying, swirling around her legs – towards the grandstand...

But there was no grandstand, no elegant public to look at us: I could still see them silhouetted ahead of us (Quixotic shapes diminished by the light that gnawed, corroded the outlines), ineffaceable against the blinding sunlight, their black shadows sliding beside them on the road like their faithful doubles, now foreshortened, hunched or rather telescoped, dwarfed and deformed, now stretched, spindly and distended, repeating in miniature and symmetrically the movements