

side the saint, curling their tails around themselves. She grew pale. "Your husband, dear child, must be very busy to leave you alone so often?"

"My husband," the lady replied in a sharp voice, "is very tired. He's having a rest."

"Well then," replied the Mother Superior, "no doubt he's having it on the Riviera? Remember the temptations of the flesh. If my husband were not Our Lord, if I had instead chosen amongst the poor sinners of this world, I would hardly feel easy with him on the Riviera, especially if I weren't in the first spring of youth anymore, let's be frank."

The lady trembled with rage, and clenched her fingers. "My darling little husband adores me. He does silly things, but we're made for each other."

The moment had come for the roast to be carried in, and everyone looked with anticipation at the door that led to the kitchen. Sister Ignatius stood up and blew a long, melancholic note on a small leather trumpet: "The boar!"

The door crashed open and all the beasts of the forest entered crying, "Kill him, kill him." In the turmoil that followed one could barely make out a human form sitting on a wheel that turned with incredible speed, who shouted with the others: "Kill him!"

(1937-40)

PIGEON, FLY!

"There's somebody on the road. Somebody's coming to see me, someone strange, though I can only see him from afar."

I leaned over my balcony and saw the figure getting rapidly bigger, for it was approaching at great speed. I thought it was a woman, for its long, straight hair fell down upon its horse's mane. The horse was large, with rounded, powerful bones, and it was a strange kind of pink with purple shadows the colour of ripe plums: the colour called roan in England. Of all animals, the horse is the only one who has this rosy colour.

The person on the horse was dressed in a pretty untidy manner that reminded me of the coat of a mountain sheep. On the other hand the colours were rich, almost regal, and a gold shirt was just visible between the strands of loose wool. True the shirt was full of holes and some-

Ferdinand laughed softly. The horse had come to a halt. We were in a huge courtyard a few hundred yards from a large house. This house, built in dark stone and of ample proportions, was so sad in appearance that I felt a keen desire to turn round and go back home. All the windows were shuttered, there wasn't a wisp of smoke from any of the chimneys, and crows were sitting here and there on the roof.

The courtyard looked as deserted as the house.

I thought that there must be a garden on the other side of the house, for I saw trees and a pale sky through a big wrought iron gate. The gate was strange, the wrought iron showed a gigantic angel sitting in a circle, its head thrown back in an anguished profile. On the right, towards the top of the circle, a little wave of water, also in wrought iron, flowed towards the angel's face.

"Where are we?" I asked. "Have we arrived?"

"We are at Airlines-Drues," Ferdinand answered after a moment's silence.

He looked at the house without turning his head. It seemed to me that he was waiting for somebody, something, or some event. He did not move. The horse stood very still, also looking straight ahead.

Suddenly bells began to ring: I've never in my life heard such a ringing of bells. The drawn-out echo hung all about

us in the trees like a metallic liquid. Distraught, the crows on the roof flew off.

I was about to question my companion when a coach drawn by four black horses passed by us with the swiftness of a shadow. The carriage stopped in front of the gate, and I saw that it was a hearse, sumptuously fixed with carvings and flowers. The horses were of the same breed as the herald's, round and sleek, but these were black as muscat grapes.

The door of the house opened and four men came out carrying a coffin.

Ferdinand's horse began to whinny and the black horses replied, turning their heads towards us.

The men carrying the coffin were dressed the same way as Ferdinand, the only difference being the colour of their flowing robes: purple, black, and a very deep crimson. Their faces were very white and made up like Ferdinand's. They all had long heavy hair, badly combed, like wigs of long ago that had lain in an attic for years.

I'd hardly had time to observe all this when Ferdinand gave his horse a tap with his whip and we were plunging at full gallop headlong through an avenue, throwing up earth and stones behind us.

This journey went so quickly that I wasn't even able to look around me. But I had the impression that we were travelling through a forest. In the end, Ferdinand stopped his

horse in a clearing surrounded by trees. The ground was covered by mosses and wildflowers. An armchair stood some yards from us, draped in green and mauve velvet.

"Get down, won't you," Ferdinand said. "Set your easel up in the shade. Are you thirsty?"

I told him I would like a drink of some sort and slid from the back of the horse. Ferdinand offered me a flask containing a very sugary liquid.

"They'll be along soon." He went on looking into the depth of the forest. "The sun will soon set. Put your easel along here, this is where you'll paint the portrait."

While I was busy setting up, Ferdinand took the saddle and bridle from his horse, then lay on the ground, the horse beside him.

The sky became red, yellow, and mauve, and dusk fell. It began to rain, and large raindrops fell on me and my canvas.

"There they are," Ferdinand suddenly called out.

Soon the clearing was full of people. These people, who were veiled, looked more or less like the men who had carried the coffin. They made quite a large circle around me and the armchair. They talked together in low voices, and every now and again one laughed shrilly. There were about forty of them.

Soon a high, clear voice came from behind the circle:

"Like this, Gustave. No, no, no, my poor friend, to the left. . . ."

"Who would have thought she was so heavy," another, lower voice answered. "And yet she wasn't fat."

The laughter sounded like bleating sheep, and looking around me, I had the vivid impression I was surrounded by a flock of bizarre sheep dressed for a gloomy ritual.

Part of the circle moved aside, and the four men I had seen previously entered backwards, carrying the coffin.

A tall, narrow individual followed them, speaking in a high, clear voice: "Put her beside the armchair. Have the draperies been scented?"

"Yes, Monsieur des Airlines-Drues, those were your orders."

I looked with interest at the gentleman. I could not see his face, but I could see one of his white hands gesturing like an elephant's trunk. He wore an immense black wig, which fell in stiff curls down to his feet.

"Is the painter here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, she's here."

"Ah, so I see. It is very kind of you, dear lady, to honour us thus. Be welcomed."

He came close to me and pushed aside the strands of hair hiding his face. It was indeed the face of a sheep, but covered in soft white skin. His black lips were very thin, and

what dirty when examined closely, but the general effect was impressive.

She stopped below my balcony and looked up at me.

"I have a letter which needs an immediate answer."

The voice was a man's voice, and I found myself at a complete loss in making out the person's sex.

"Who are you?" I asked cautiously.

"I am Ferdinand, emissary of Célestin des Airlines-Drues."

The rider's voice, very soft, was unquestionably a man's voice: a scent of heliotrope and vanilla mixed with sweat rose to my nostrils. I leaned down to him and, taking the letter from his hand, used the opportunity to look at his face, half hidden. It was a very white face, the lips painted reddish purple. The horse shook its fat neck.

"Madam," the letter said, "please have the great kindness to help me in my deep distress. In consequence, you will learn something much to your advantage.

"Entrust your honourable person, as well as your canvases, your brushes, and everything you need in your profession of artist to my emissary.

"I beg you, dear lady, to accept my deepest and most sorrowful respect." Signed, "Célestin des Airlines-Drues."

The writing paper was heavily scented with heliotrope and decorated with several gold crowns transfixed by plumes, swords, and olive branches.

I decided to accompany Ferdinand back to his master, since the promises the letter contained interested me very much, though I'd never heard of Célestin des Airlines-Drues.

I was soon sitting on the broad hindquarters of the emissary's horse behind Ferdinand. My luggage was attached to the saddle.

We took the road to the west, a route that crossed some wild country, rich in great dark forests.

It was spring. The grey, heavy sky dropped a tepid rain; the green of the trees and fields was intense. From time to time I dozed, and on several occasions I could easily have fallen from the horse, but I hung on to Ferdinand's woolly clothes. He didn't appear to worry about me, thinking of other things, and singing "The Sighs of the Dying Rose."

*Its petals cold against my heart
My hot tears could no warmth impart
To the velvet
Of the soft skin of My Rose
OH MY ROSE.*

These last words woke me completely, for he screamed them with excruciating brutality into my left ear.

"Idiot," I shouted, furious.

strangely mobile. I took his hand with a certain amount of repugnance, for it was too smooth, much too smooth.

"I've admired your work so much," Monsieur des Airlines-Drues murmured. "Do you think you could get a really perfect likeness?" He gestured towards the coffin, which was now open.

Two men took out the corpse of a young woman. She was beautiful and had a mass of silky black hair, but her skin was already phosphorescent, luminous, and vaguely mauve. A rather unpleasant smell wafted towards me. Monsieur des Airlines-Drues, seeing me wrinkle my nose involuntarily, gave me a charming smile of apology.

"It's so difficult," he said, "to part with the remains of those one has loved . . . adored. I was sure I'd have your sympathy in this matter. My wife died two weeks ago, and with this heavy, humid weather we've been having . . ." He finished the sentence by gesturing with one of his beautiful hands.

"In short, esteemed lady, please be forbearing. Now I shall go and leave you to your Art."

I squeezed the colours from the tubes onto my palette and began to paint the portrait of Madame des Airlines-Drues.

The sheeplike individuals around me began to play pigeon, fly: "Pigeon, fly; Sheep, fly; Angel, fly . . ."

Dusk seemed to last an interminable time. Night, which

had appeared imminent, did not fall, and the dull light in the clearing remained strong enough for me to continue to work. I did not notice until later that the light imprisoned in the circle of trees came from no other source than the body of Madame des Airlines-Drues. The forest was in total darkness. I was completely absorbed in my painting and did not notice that I must have been alone with the dead woman for quite a long time.

I was pleased with the portrait, and I stepped back a few paces to see the whole composition. The face on the canvas was my own.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Yet as I looked from the model to the portrait there was no denying the truth. The more I looked at the corpse, the more striking became the resemblance of these pale features. On canvas, the face was unquestionably mine.

"The likeness is extraordinary, my compliments, dear lady."

Monsieur des Airlines-Drues's voice came from behind my left shoulder.

"It's exactly noon now, but one isn't aware of the sun in this forest. Anyway, Art is a magic which makes the hours melt away and even days dissolve into seconds, isn't that so, dear lady? Do you think you'll be able now to finish the portrait without the model? My poor wife, you understand,

has been dead three weeks. She must be pining for her well-deserved rest. . . . It's not often that one has to work three weeks after one's demise."

He laughed a little to underline his joke.

"I can offer you a pleasant and well-lit room at Airlines-Drues. Allow me, dear lady, to take you there in my carriage."

I followed the enormous walking wig like a sleepwalker.

The studio was a big room, with a large cupboard taking up the farthest end. The room had once been luxurious, but the embroidered silk draperies were now torn and dusty, the delicately carved furniture broken, and the gilding had flaked off in places. Several large easels in the shape of swans or mermaids stood about here and there, like the skeletons of other things. Spiders had spun their webs between them, giving the room a fossilized look.

"This is Madame des Airlines-Drues's studio. This is where she died."

I rummaged through the cupboard. A great number of clothes, wigs, and old shoes were jumbled together in great disorder. They all looked like fancy-dress costumes, and some reminded me of the circus.

"She must have played at dress up in her time alone in the studio—it's said she liked acting."

Not the least interesting of my discoveries was a diary

bound in green velvet. Her name was on the title page, the handwriting neat but curiously childish.

"Agathe des Airlines-Drues. Please respect this book, its contents are for no other eyes than those of Eleanor. Agathe des Airlines-Drues."

I started to read.

Dear Eleanor,

How you will cry when you read this little book. I'm using patchouli to scent its pages, so that you'll remember me better. Our sharpest memories are of perfumes and smells. How you will cry! Anyway, I shall be glad. I should like you to cry a great deal.

Today is my birthday, and of course yours too. What fun to be the same age. I'd like so much to see you, but since that's not possible, I'll tell you everything in this diary—everything. (My God, if Célestin could hear me!) Marriage, of course, is a dreadful thing—but mine! My mother writes, "I'm knitting some tiny things for you, or rather for somebody very close to you, my darling. For a little being who'll surely make his appearance soon."

Oh, Eleanor, I'll sooner have children by one of the chairs in my studio than by Célestin. Listen! The Wedding Night (!), I lay down in the huge bed draped with acid pink curtains. After more than half an hour the door opened and I saw an

apparition: an individual dressed in white feathers, with the wings of an angel. I said to myself, "I'm surely going to die, for here is the Angel of Death."

The angel was Célestin.

He threw off his clothes, dropping his gown of feathers to the ground. He was naked. If the feathers were white, his body was blindingly so. I think he must have painted it with some phosphorescent paint, for it shone like the moon. He wore blue stockings with red stripes.

"Am I beautiful?" he asked. "They say I am."

I was too fascinated to reply.

"My dear Agathe," he continued, looking at his reflection in the mirror, "you see you aren't amongst country folk anymore. . . ." (They call me "madam" here.)

He put on his feathers and wings again. I suddenly felt so cold, my teeth began to chatter. And now listen to me carefully, Eleanor. The more I looked at Célestin, the lighter he seemed to me, light as a feather. He began to walk around the room in a strange way. His feet seemed to touch the ground less and less. Then he began to glide through the door into the corridor. I got up and hastened to the door. Célestin vanished into the darkness . . . his feet weren't touching the ground . . . I'm absolutely sure of what I'm telling you. His wings beat very slowly . . . but . . .

So you see what the start of my marriage was like!

I didn't see Célestin for a week. Furthermore, I saw hardly anybody except an old servant called Gaston. He brought me things to eat, always sweet things. I lived in my studio, and I've lived here ever since. I am so sad, Eleanor, so sad that my body has become transparent, I've shed so many tears. Is it possible to dissolve into water without leaving a trace? I am so often alone that I have struck up a sort of love affair with my mirror image. But Eleanor, here's the worst of it—recently I've found it very difficult to see myself in the mirror. Yes, it's horrible, but it's true. When I look at myself, my face is all hazy. And . . . I believe . . . no, I'm sure, that I can see the objects in the room behind me through my body.

Now I'm crying so much I can't see the paper on which I'm writing anymore.

Every day, Eleanor, I lose myself a little more, yet I've never loved my face more. I try to paint my portrait so as to have it near me still, you understand. But . . . I can't. I elude myself.

And here is another thing: the objects around me are becoming terribly clear and vivid, much more alive than I. You know, Eleanor, I'm afraid . . . Listen, the chairs in this room are very old, and so is all the rest of the furniture. Last week I saw a little green bud on one of these old chairs, the kind of bud that appears on trees in the spring. And now . . . how horrible . . . it has become a leaf . . . Eleanor!

A few days later:

The room is full of them. All the furniture has sprouted new green growth, many chairs have already got leaves, small, fragile leaves of a tender green. It's ludicrous to see such young leaves growing on such old, dusty furniture.

Célestin came. He didn't notice anything, but he touched my face with those smooth hands of his . . . much too smooth. . . . He said, "You will always be a child, Agathe. Look at me. I am terribly young, aren't I?" Then he stopped and laughed. He has a very high-pitched laugh.

"Do you put on performances all by yourself?" he asked.

That isn't true, Eleanor. . . . I only put on fancy dress to make myself more solid, more substantial . . . so as not to . . . guess what I was going to say! . . .

"Agathe, when you were a little girl, did you ever play pigeon, fly?"

Célestin asked me this strange question while looking into the mirror. I replied that it was a game that very much amused me when I was little.

Now the room was full of bizarre individuals dressed like sheep. But, Eleanor, they were naked. . . . Their clothes were nothing but fleece. All of them were men made up like whores.

"The lambs of God," Célestin said.

We sat down at a round table, and about twenty pairs of hands suddenly appeared from between the strands of hair. I noticed their nails were varnished but very dirty. The hands were pale, greyish.

This was only a moment's impression, for I really had eyes for nothing but Célestin's hands. I swear to you, Eleanor, that his hands were running with moisture . . . and so smooth, and their colour was strange, like mother-of-pearl. He too was looking at his hands with a secret smile.

"Pigeon, fly!" he cried, and all the hands went up in the air, waving like wings. My hands too were fluttering in the air.

"Sheep, fly!" Célestin called.

The hands trembled on the table but didn't lift.

"Angel, fly!"

So far nobody had made a mistake.

Suddenly Célestin's voice rose in a sharp cry, a terrible cry, "CÉLESTIN, FLY!"

Eleanor, dear Eleanor, his hands . . .

At this point Agathe's journal suddenly stopped.

I turned to her portrait: the canvas was empty, I didn't dare look for my face in the mirror. I knew what I would see: my hands were so cold!

(1937-40)