

"Never mind! Uncle is older than you are!"

But this was no answer, and Diana knew it. She was talking to a woman whose passion was welling from the exhaustless fountain it had sprung from in her youth.

"Well," said Diana, "we're sure of one thing. You must go to sleep. Drink this. Yes, you must. You don't want uncle to behead me in the morning."

When the old lady was settling down among her pillows she opened her eyes wide again and said, fiercely: "But it's unjust. It's one of God's injustices. I gave everything I had. He is my husband. I want him in this world, in the world to come. And she's always stood between us."

"Don't think of it now, dear. Don't try to account for anything. Let it all go."

"That's why I told you, Diana. And don't let me see her. I'm not strong enough. Let your uncle see her if she comes—all he can, dear, all he can. But keep her away from me."

She fell into fluttering sleep, and Diana, watching while the cold dawn painted the sky, reflected upon the strangeness of life. Diana never split hairs. Again it seemed to her incredible that any woman who could live beside the man she loved should treasure cobwebs such as these. To sit at table with a man, to see him come home at night—these were the solid joys she coveted. Then with a sigh she began to muse again over this flimsy tissue woven from a dream.

Next morning Uncle Ralph came in in haste, so renewed by sleep that it seemed amazing not to find his Delia better. He regarded her with some pathos of rebuke, and she smiled wanly back at him.

"It's really ridiculous," said she. "I am an old fool, but I can't help it."

Diana breakfasted with him, and then put on her hat without delay. It took more than one night's wakefulness to destroy her bloom, and she was very sweet and wholesome as she stood at the front door surveying the morning, her uncle sadly there beside her.

"I'm going to have a little walk," said she. "That will set me up. Better than sleep, oh, dear, yes! Don't tell her I'm

out of the house, will you? As for you, uncle—well, if I were you, I'd spend most of my time making love to her."

"I always have done that," said the old man, simply. "I suppose you mean, Diana"—his voice broke—"I suppose you mean I'd better make the most of every minute, now."

Diana turned upon him. "Don't let yourself think of such a thing!" she said, angrily. "Die! Aunt Delia die! She's good for twenty years, if we've got any sense about us. But I tell you this: we've got to clutch her petticoats and drag her back."

Diana went down the garden walk, looking very splendid, as if she and the morning were in league together. In an hour she came back, all radiance and bloom. Her brown hair was curled the tighter from her haste, the red in her cheeks had deepened as if the sun had sunken into it. Little darts had awakened in her eyes and played about her mouth.

"Heavens, Diana! what's happened?" asked her uncle when she walked into the sick-room. "Who's left you a fortune?"

"Nobody," said Diana, in great tenderness putting her cheek to the invalid's hand. "They've left it to Aunt Delia. It's a pot of gold."

"Enough to make her very rich?" said Uncle Ralph. He liked to play at fairytales.

"Rich! I should think so. Not a competency, not your old annuities, but rich forever and two days after."

Then she sent her uncle out to walk, exiled the nurse, and assumed her reign again. All that forenoon she took perfect care of the invalid. She gave her food by the smallest quantities, and left her long intervals in quiet. After luncheon she sat down by the bed-side and held Aunt Delia's hand.

"Sweetheart," said she, "what do you think I did this morning? I took a walk. My shoe hurt me, and I went into the Blayne girls' to rest. They were just getting up from the breakfast table. I saw Natalie Meredith."

"Diana!"

"Yes, dear, I did. I couldn't help it, could I? Didn't my shoe pinch me? Dear, I could have wept. I did laugh.

I went into a gale. They said you must find me excellent company!"

"So you have seen Natalie Blayne!" said the old lady, wonderingly.

"Yes. I've seen Natalie Blayne, and she's no sight at all. I hoped to find her a monster, rotund, busked, glittering in jet,—but she's not. No; she's simply a very well preserved woman, with great evidence of facial massage and a look of exquisite care. Oh, she was pretty! I can see that. She's pretty still. Her hair isn't such a glory as you describe, but it's lovely hair. She's got white hands that look as if they could play anything anybody ever wrote, and a great many rings on them. But, dear me, sweetheart! she's only a woman, after all. You've exalted her into something between a Cleopatra and a seraph. She's nothing of the kind."

Aunt Delia was looking steadily out at the red and gold maple-tops, a solemn sadness on her face. Diana began to wish she had caricatured Natalie Blayne.

"Well, dear," said Madam Gilbert, presently, "I'm glad you've seen her. I hope it won't come in my way. And we mustn't talk about her any more."

That afternoon at four o'clock Diana sent the nurse to walk, and left her uncle in the sick-room. She took up her own station on the veranda, and sat there until Natalie Meredith came up the garden path. Diana went to meet her, and the stately woman greeted her with a simple grace.

"I feel as if I had deceived you," said Diana, sweetly. "I told you Aunt Delia would be cheered by visitors, and now she proves to be too tired. I'm so sorry. But Uncle Ralph wants cheering, too, poor dear! Let me call him. Talk to him, do! Draw him out of himself!"

Natalie Meredith was exactly what Diana had painted her, save, perhaps, a shade more telling. She was the product of a high civilization, charming by nature, and with another charm added to that. She talked well, yet with a sympathetic regard to her listener; she was one of the women who take the active share of entertainment upon themselves. Presently Diana rose, with a pretty air of apology.

"You must let me call uncle," said she.

When she entered the upper room he

was sitting by his Delia's side, pathetically essaying the nonsense that, in lighter seasons, made his joy.

"Uncle," said Diana, "I wish you'd come down and talk to a caller. I don't know what to do with her. She is a Mrs. Meredith. She's visiting at the Blaynes'." A hot look throbbed into Madam Gilbert's eyes, but she kept them steadfastly on the tree-tops.

"Meredith? Meredith?" said Uncle Ralph, fractiously. "I don't know any Meredith."

"Why, yes, Ralph, yes!" put in his wife, eagerly. "You know her—Natalie Blayne!"

"Natalie Blayne? Oh yes! She was one of the granddaughters. Heavens, Diana! didn't you tell her your aunt is sick and we're not seeing people?"

"Why, it's Natalie Blayne!" insisted the old lady. Her voice had a piercing quality he had never heard in it, her sombre eyes besought him. "Why, you remember, Ralph! It was summer, and you walked with her in the columbine meadow."

The old man turned on her a look of piteous apprehension. Then he spoke very gently, as we speak to those in pain: "Yes, dear, yes! I don't remember, but I dare say I did."

"You don't remember?"

"No, dear, but I've no doubt it's just as you say. Diana, you run down and tell her to go home. She must be a fool to come at a time like this."

"No! no!" cried Madam Gilbert. "No! you go down, Ralph. You must go. I insist upon it."

Diana got him out of the room and down the stairs. Meantime she whispered to him: "Does she seem to you as well, uncle? Is she sinking?"

"Don't say that!" cried the old man, sharply. "Don't say that! Let me get rid of this Meredith woman—"

Natalie Meredith stayed a long time. She liked to talk, and, as she justly thought, these two anxious people needed cheering. She told them a great deal about Germany and the music there, the charted freedom and the atmosphere of pleasure. She did it very gracefully and sweetly, while Uncle Ralph rumbled his hair and fidgeted. So it went on until Diana, warned by the sympathetic ten-