

# Natalie

By Renée de Coutans

THE room was dark, but the door had purposely been left wide open into the hall, and the furniture and her father's and mother's big bed were dimly visible. Natalie lay snugly curled upon herself like a soft kitten, in her white bedstead with high white bars round it, that she might not fall out.

The most beautiful music she had ever heard her mother play rose from the drawing-room, and she was listening to it in a half-sleepy, half-wakeful enchantment. *Tum—ta tum, ti tum, tum tum*—her mother went over the passage, over and over again. The phrase was so vehement, so strong, she felt a little afraid; yet it pleased her very much. *Tum—ta tum, ti tum, tum, tum*—then followed a shower of pearls, rubies, water-drops; over and over again her mother played this too, until the liquid, jewelled notes seemed to ripple from her fingers. Then she went back, and combined the two passages, and then repeated them many times. Yet Natalie did not tire of listening, and each time her ear flew to the opening bar before her mother's fingers had returned to it.

Suddenly, poor Natalie was dissolved in tears. The piano now rose in a phrase so exquisitely sweet, searching, tender, so vibrant of pitiful love, that this little girl of six was pierced with its emotion;

emotion ; she trembled, and a needle-like pain darted from her breast to her heart.

She wept quietly while her mother played and repeated the phrase. Each time it seemed to enclose her in a more delicious and more intimate emotion ; it spoke into her ear a wish to suffer, yet be happy. At the same time her child mind was puzzling and wondering. "Why do I cry ?" she asked herself, "and why is the pain a pleasure ?" She fell asleep still wondering, with those tears of pain and pleasure on her rosy cheeks, long before her mother had ceased playing.

At tea-time the next day, called to the drawing-room, she begged her mother in a whisper, and though there were strangers, to play what she had played the night before. But when her mother did so, seeming pleased and proud that Natalie had asked, to her surprise the music gave her neither the pleasure nor the pain of yesterday. The notes spoke melodiously, plaintively, but in a vaguer way. And their meaning spread out, she seemed to notice, over the other people in the room, as though each one took a parcel of it which might have been all hers, had she been lying alone upstairs in the half darkness in her little bed.

Days passed before Natalie heard her mother play again, and she ceased to wonder at her new experience. But one evening, when she had had her warm bath, had been cosily tucked in bed and kissed, her mother passed downstairs to the drawing-room, and she heard her strike some chords at the big piano which stood close to the door leading to her father's study. Natalie, drowsily enjoying the comfort of her bed, seemed to see her mother beside the piano, shining and lovely in her blue evening-gown. She could see the open study-door, and her father reading by the light of the pretty silver lamp with the green shade. Then, *Tum—ta tum, ti tum, tum tum*—and in a moment the rippling notes fell  
down

down the keyboard. *Tum—ta tum, ti tum, tum tum*—her mother was not practising this time. How beautifully she played, Natalie thought. On and on she went. Then the phrase of despairing loveliness, and it seemed to Natalie she had lost the whole world—father, mother, beauty, sunshine—even her Grimm's fairy book. The grieving melody sent the same sharp thrill to her heart. On her mother went, through other and still other phrases, brooding of a mystery which quivered through and all about Natalie's bed; she seemed floating in a region of fearful anguish and of great joy.

A wail rose above the music, and the sound of sobbing. "Mother, mother," Natalie cried, in a voice that struck through her mother's heart, "I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it—oh, do not play it any more!" Yet soon Natalie was sleeping and smiling peacefully, the faint trace of tears wiped away with kisses, resting on her cheeks. Mothers have such cunning ways of knowing how to soothe and comfort!

Natalie never heard her mother begin again that beautiful but dangerous *Tum, ta tum, ti tum, tum tum*. Sometimes she wondered why her mother never played it, but she never dared to ask, and slowly the music faded, faded from her thoughts.

Many years after, one day, the same piercing thrill went through her breast again, exquisitely, and again pain and joy were intimately commingled, and she trembled and shed tears of heavenly anguish. And all the world seemed to throb with mysteries too great to understand. Then suddenly came a memory of music, and of the little Natalie listening from her white bed while her mother played. And she knew why poor Natalie had wept and trembled, and why the music of a poet's love had been a music too great for her little child's soul to bear.