

The Heart of Things.

She had just returned from the crowded concert hall, where she had enjoyed a veritable triumph. Her face was flushed and smiling, and she still held in her hands the great bouquet of roses—her favorite flower—which had been given her as she left the platform. She was recalled to her surroundings by the voice of her maid, Fanchon.

"There is a telegram for you madam on the table," she said. Denise picked it up; it was addressed to "Mrs. Fielden," which was unusual. She was known to the London world and her friends as "Mme. Elena." She opened it sharply. It was brief and to the point.

"I think it right to let you know that the boy is seriously ill."

"Michael."

Unconsciously she crushed the message in her hand, and her thoughts flew to the Lincolnshire village, where it had been written. She saw again the flat fen-land, the long stretches of empty wastes, which she had grown to loathe, almost to fear; all the grayness and barrenness which were so antagonistic to her gay, beauty-loving nature. Then the scent of the roses smote her sharply, she saw the luxury of her own surroundings, the signs of taste and money everywhere, and, turning to the maid, she cried:

"Bring me an 'A. B. C.' and pack a bag. I am going into the country."

"Shall I attend, madam?"

"No. I don't know how long I shall be away. I will write." Her lips twitched as she thought of the fashionable French maid in the bare manor house with old Hannah for company.

"I wonder if he is really very ill?" she pondered, as she sat in the train. "I think Michael would scarcely have sent for me unless he were. The meeting will be as awkward and uncomfortable for him as for me. Poor little Michael—what a name to give a child! I wonder what he is like now? He was not a pretty or interesting child. I remember he was always crying."

There was no one to meet her when she arrived, but that she did not expect, though the village fly had been sent to the station on the chance of her coming.

After a drive of nearly an hour she recognized a familiar gateway; she remembered the old coat-of-arms cut in the stonework, though she could not see it now, with the motto, "I live! I die!" Yes, that was all the Fieldens had been doing for generations. It was a decaying race, and they had not the energy, or perhaps the power, to stop the ruin that was creeping on them, and the man who lived there now had grown sour and bitter with his balked life.

"Master is upstairs," old Hannah said, distinctly, in reply to Denise's greeting. "He hoped you would excuse him coming down, but the child is very restless to-night, and can't well be left. If you will please to sit down and take something I will tell him you are here." And she opened the door of a room where a frugal meal was laid.

"I don't want anything, thank you," Denise said, hastily. "I will go up at once, if I may," and before Hannah could raise any objection she was half way up the stairs.

She heard a murmur from the oak bedroom, where the head of the house was always born, and where most of them had died, and tapping lightly on the door, she went in. No one had heard her, and for an instant she stood as if arrested on the threshold. What a great room it was! And how solitary those two figures looked in it!

"I am sorry to trouble you," the man said, getting up as she moved. "I am afraid you have had a long, tiring journey; but I thought you ought to know."

"You did quite right," she said, thickly. What a pitiful little shrunken form it was, looking almost lost in the vast oak bedstead, of which it was a tradition that each successive Fielden should carve a panel, so that it had almost seemed to Denise a weird resting-place, belonging to the dead rather than to the living. She had woke up

more than once on a moonlight night fancying ghostly fingers had come back to finish what here and there had been left incomplete.

"Oh, you poor little soul!" she cried, a sob in her voice, and the next moment her arms were over the bed, and the little figure was gathered to her breast where she crooned over it, calling him her baby, her little Michael, whom she had treated so badly, reproaching herself and showering soft kisses on the wan face in the same breath.

"He is very weak; you must not excite him," a warning voice said, and the calm, measured tones were like a rebuff. The old feeling of restraint and fear held her for a moment, but the mother love, which had woke up for the first time at sight of the forlorn suffering child, rose stronger than anything else.

"I shall not hurt him," she said, holding the boy closer to her breast. "See, he is already more content." The little face certainly looked less tired and troubled, and one wasted arm had gone round her neck, while he made himself at home as a matter of course in those unknown arms.

"Has he been long like this?" she asked. "You ought to have told me before."

"He was never strong, as you may remember," he answered coldly. "He does not take after my family, he pines for warmth and sunshine, as you did. I must remind you that you have never given me reason to think you took any particular interest in him. I was not at all certain that you would come now."

"Not come?" she exclaimed. Then she remembered. "I beg your pardon," she said humbly; "you are quite right. It is I who am to blame—I who am wrong. But—but," her voice growing husky, "I did not know he wanted me so badly. I was so young when I went away—I am not very old now—and I did not understand many things. Perhaps if you reasoned with me—if you had pointed out—"

"Do you think I wanted a captive instead of a wife?" he said harshly. "I saw how you fretted and pined like a caged creature; I knew you would wear your life out in a little if it went on."

"It was so dull—so dreary," she murmured, "and nobody wanted me, not even you, I think, after a little while. I interrupted your studies, I was restless and disturbed your routine, so when my legacy came it seemed to open a way of escape. I thought it was better for us to go our own road before we learned to hate each other. I had a gift—only one—but it would not let me rest until I had tried what it was worth I ought not to have married."

"No doubt it was a mistake, but in justice I must say that that was more my fault than yours. I was years older and I took advantage of your youth and ignorance to fasten a bond on you of which you did not understand the import. No doubt you knew yourself best. You have the life that suits you; you were free to go your own way."

"As you yours."

"As I mine." Something in the voice made Denise more uneasy. For six years the man and the child had lived here together; her husband, her child. For six years she had nearly forgotten them both; not quite, though she had tried to do so. The man and the child had been growing old together—without love or happiness—while she had laughed and sung. There was nothing young in the house—not even the little form she held in her arms.

A week passed, and little Michael, thanks (as the doctor plainly said) to his mother's devoted nursing and the interest she created in the child's mind, was picking up his frail life again. He was never tired of looking at her, of admiring all the pretty things that gathered about her as a matter of course; he had never seen so many flowers, so much dainty luxury, in his brief existence.

"You use these every day?" he asked, in an awed voice, as he amused himself with the silver pots and bottles on her dressing table.

"Yes, every day," she said, with a gay little laugh. "Do you think I am very extravagant?"

"Father hasn't anything pretty in his room. I like to be here best," he said, lying back luxuriously among the bright cushions which

his mother had ordered from a neighboring town. She opened her lips to speak, but closed them again without a word.

Denise was sitting alone one evening in the faded drawing-room when her husband came in. As a rule she saw very little of him; they seemed to avoid each other by tacit consent.

"There is something I wish to say to you if you are at leisure," he began. She thought how worn and gray he looked, though he was a man in the prime of life, as he stood before her, the hard light from the setting sun showing up the lines on his cold, stern face, as it showed up the patches of damp on the wall paper and the unloveliness of the beautifully designed room. He and it both seemed thrown away under their present circumstances.

"I am quite at your service," she answered. "Little Michael is in bed and asleep, and I have nothing to do."

"It is about him I wish to speak," he said, as he sat down. "He is almost well again now."

"He is very delicate still," she said, quickly. "He needs a great deal of care—he could not stand much." Could he mean that they wanted her no longer? she asked herself, with a thrill of fear.

"As you say, he needs a great deal of care," he answered, slowly. "He also needs more comfort and different surroundings to what I can give him. I have wondered—I have wondered," he repeated, "if you would like to take him with you when you go?"

"Like to take him?" she echoed, her face lighting up with joy. "Need you ask me?"

"No, perhaps not. I have thought that you seemed attached to him."

"Attached?" she repeated again, with a laugh. "I love him with all my heart. I couldn't bear to be parted from him now. But don't you mind?" looking at him with inward resentment at his indifference. "Won't you be very lonely without him?"

"It will be best for the child to be with you for a time at least, I think, as you are willing to have him. As you say, he is not strong enough to stand any shock, and he will miss you. I suppose your engagements will necessitate your returning to town soon?"

"Yes, I ought to have gone before," flushing at his evident anxiety to get rid of her. "We will go as soon as the doctor says we can travel." Then, as he was leaving the room, "I—I should like to thank you very much for trusting me—for letting me have him."

"There is no need. I have been thinking it over and it seems best for the boy," he answered, as he closed the door.

"Of course there would be no thought of me in it," she said to herself, bitterly. "I wonder why he hates me so much now? Once upon a time," the rose color in her cheeks growing deeper, "I am sure he cared for me more than a little in his curious, restrained way."

It was still early when she went upstairs to bed, and she was tired of her own company. As she lit the candles the boy opened his eyes—he slept in a little bed in her room now—and called to her.

"I'm not a bit sleepy. Come and talk to me, mother," he said. She sat down in the low chair and laid her head on his pillow, as he liked to have her.

"I've got something to tell you, sweetheart," she said, tucking one of his hands under her cheek. "What do you think has happened? You are to come with me to mother's home. How do you like that?"

A wiser and more prudent mother would have hesitated to excite the child at that hour, but Denise was a creature of impulse.

"Go away with you and see all the beautiful things you have told me about? Do you really mean it, mother? How lovely!" springing up in bed with shining eyes. "And is father coming too?"

"Father does not want to come, darling. The childish face grew grave.

"It will be dull for father all alone here," he said, seriously. "You ask him to come, mother, he'll come for you."

"Not for me, for me perhaps least of all," she murmured, forgetting that she was talking to a child; but little Michael was wiser than his years.

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"Go now, mother," he said coaxingly. "Try . . . Wait, I'll tell you a secret; it can't be wrong to tell you. Father keeps a picture of you locked up, and I saw him looking at it one night, and—and," in an awed whisper, "he kissed it before he put it away. People must love a person very much to kiss their picture, mustn't they, mother?" Kisses had been rare luxuries in his life.

"Kissed my picture? Are you sure, little Michael?" The child nodded, watching her intently. Denise thought of how she was going to make the desolate home more desolate, and the tears rushed to her eyes.

"I'll try, my sonny—I'll try for your sake," she cried, and she went from the room. Her heart was beating fast with fear and excitement as she hurried down the stairs before her courage failed her. What if he should be angry; what if he should repulse her? She shivered at the thought.

She softly opened the library door, where he was in the habit of sitting at night. A lamp was burning dimly on the table in the centre of the room, and its light fell on the bowed head of a man; some books and papers had been overturned as he threw out his arms and mutely emphasized that aspect of despair. Denise forgot her fears.

"Michael!" she cried, in a sobbing voice, her arm round his neck, her cheek to his—"Michael, I've been a bad wife, but I want to be a better one. Will you take me back?"

He looked up, and she saw that his eyes were wet.

"Is that you?" he said, heavily. "What is it?—what has happened?"

"Nothing," softly, "except that I have found out that I want you. We both want you—little Michael and I. You won't send us away—or you will come too?"

"Want me—you?" he said, in a husky whisper. "Is it really true, Denise?" He held her in his arms as one holds something very precious that one is half afraid to touch. "I had almost given up praying and hoping."—Black and White.

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