

THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

An infant is deserted by a woman who leaves it in the store of Angers and Son. It is adopted by Celia Brown, who takes it home to "The House of Windows." The child is given the name of Christine Brown. Some time before the desertion, Adam Torrance, the real owner of Angers and Son, has his only child kidnapped. Of this occurrence Celia is ignorant. Adam Torrance hears that his child has died. His wife also dies, and he lives abroad. Sixteen years pass and Christine continues to live with Celia and her blind sister, Ada. Celia is in financial distress and Christine determines to apply for position of "reader" to Miss Torrance. Mark Wareham, nephew of the latter, follows the unsuccessful Christine, and contrives to make her acquaintance. Adam Torrance, who has returned to the city, sends Mark, his nephew, out to British Columbia. Christine secures a position in "the Stores." Christine is followed by a sinister-looking old beggar woman, and is further annoyed by the attention of Gilbert Van Slyke. The woman, whose daughter's employment in "the Stores" long ago, had led to moral disaster, is determined to wreak vengeance on Christine, whom she had stolen. Adam Torrance visits "The House of Windows" in order to relieve the sisters' distress. He shows them great kindness. On his return home he finds a letter informing him that his daughter is alive and in peril. He sets out to find her, and, in the meantime, his nephew, Mark Wareham, returns and is injured in an accident. To complete the catastrophe, Christine disappears suddenly. They find that Christine has been taken off to the old woman's hut and removed thence to an unknown hiding place.

CAUTIOUSLY Christine pushed the smothering cover from her face. It might be of some use if she could find out the way they went. But the sides of the cart were high, and try as she would, she could not lift her head. All she could tell was that they were passing slowly through dark streets, over pavements of whose roughness every bone in her body gave instant evidence. Even these partially lighted ways were left behind, and they passed into the thick blackness of the night.

The mystery of the whole thing enveloped the girl more closely, more ominously, than the blackness of the night. It terrified, it paralyzed, it crushed out every spark of hope in her heart. Here out in the open, with every scent eloquent of the wide, wet country about her, the terror of the thing seemed even more monstrous, more hideously impossible! Perhaps, too, the long strain was telling; her thoughts grew feverish, disconnected. Now she thought of Celia and Ada, and the tears came freely; now it was of Tommy she thought, with a flash of hope; now she shuddered and moaned at the recollection of the old woman's face peering into hers; but most of all it was of Mark that she thought, of his return to find her gone! This was pure torture. What would he think? What could he think? She could see the puzzled wonder on his handsome face, the disappointment, and perhaps disillusion in his eyes. Would he care to think twice of a girl who was the centre of some vulgar mystery? Even as she shrank from this picture some whiff of country perfume brought back that perfect day when they had driven out to the Inn on the Dalby Road. How happy they had been! Somehow as she thought of him as he was that day the other thoughts lost their power to hurt her. Her memory of him was not that of a man easily daunted. Perhaps in him, after all, lay her greatest hope. He was strong, brave, clever! But she was growing weaker; a jolt of the wagon was now enough to turn the current of her thought.

They were going faster. The horse had been whipped up. The clouds were clearing a little; it might be moonlight soon. The two upon the front seat had fallen into grim silence. Christine's head seemed ready to burst with pain; she wished it would rain again to cool the fever in her blood.

Presently her impressions grew less and less distinct. She dreamed of curious things, and was still dreaming when the cart stopped with a jerk. This was important, she knew; she realized hazily that she ought to be quick to notice and keen to remember, but she could not rouse herself. Even when they lifted her out of the cart she opened her eyes only for a moment. In that moment she had a vision of a door with curious posts which seemed oddly familiar. But the impression faded as quickly as it had come. She knew that she was carried through the door and up some stairs—then she smelled the sickly scent again and remembered nothing more.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MR. JOHNSON held the little grey glove in the palm of his hand, and an expression of admiration spread itself over his broad face. "Clever!" he said, "Very clever. That young lady has certainly got brains. Also," he made a bow in Mark's direction, "someone else who shall be nameless. Almost you convince me there is

something in those story-book methods. This will put fresh heart into the search. Wonderful how comforting it is to know that one is on a live trail! Well, we've done all we can do here, and the neighborhood seems to be waking up. Let's try our luck outside."

"Question the neighbors, do you mean?"

"We'll go through this neighborhood with a sieve and a microscope. There is sure to be someone who can tell us something—unless the kidnappers possessed the art of making themselves invisible. They live in terror of the police in these parts, and it will be easy to get them to speak. Talk about honor among thieves—bah! it doesn't exist!"

"Then I suppose you wish this part of the enquiry left entirely to you?"

"Well, Mr. Wareham, I think that we should get better results. And if you will excuse me, I might mention that you are beginning to look pretty well done up. I will be home and bed for yours if you are wise. I'll run right around with the news as soon as we get any."

Mr. Torrance, who had been watching Mark's growing pallor with anxiety, readily agreed to the detective's suggestion, and even Tommy heaved a sigh of relief when the invalid was safely stowed away in the motor. He was eager to hurry with the news to Brook Street, and glad that for once he must be the only messenger, as Mr. Torrance could not leave Mark. Tommy was too simple, and too loyal a soul to feel jealousy, yet it was with a lightened heart that he watched the two men out of sight and turned his steps in the direction of the House of Windows. And Adam Torrance was conscious of a pang which was very like envy as he thought of how the blind girl's face would brighten at Tommy's news.

"Fine chap, that!" said Mark, as if in answer to his thoughts. "By Jove, he's been better than a brother to those girls. He wanted to marry one of them once, but somehow it never came off."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Torrance; and then, after a perceptible pause, "Which one?"

"Which? Oh, well, I think it was Miss Celia."

"Is that so? Well, I am not surprised. Miss Celia is a charming woman. It would be most suitable."

"But like many other suitable things, it has apparently failed to suit," said Mark carelessly, but as he noticed the sudden complacency with which his uncle approved of Tommy's choice, he turned aside to hide a smile. "If Aunt Miriam had seen that," he thought, "it would have made assurance doubly sure!"

As has been observed before, Mr. Johnson was a man of energy, and so well did he and his assistants work, that by lunch time Hill Street had been thoroughly investigated and hung, so to speak, as limp and empty as an old sleeve, turned inside out.

At one o'clock he presented himself, notebook in hand, placid and self-confident again, at the Torrance home.

"Well," he began, without preliminaries, "we know what there is to know—and it's not much. Granny Bates and the man who passes as her son have lived in the shanty on Hill Street for the past five years. The man is a bricklayer, and makes good wages when he is working, but that is seldom. He is incurably lazy, a born loafer apparently, but harmless unless drinking hard; when in drink, the neighborhood feared him, and even the old woman kept out of his way. But curiously enough he is not an habitual drunkard. He has, it appears, 'spells,' which are often a month, or even two months, apart. He is known as Tough Wilson. The old woman is popularly supposed to be shy in the upper story. The children are frightened of her (and it takes something to frighten a Hill Street child). Not one of them would venture near her house or follow her in the street. It seems that at first the youngsters played a few tricks—just as a sort of friendly introduction into the neighborhood, you understand, but the reprisals were so swift and terrifying that even the boldest gave it up. The mothers, espousing the children's cause, declared her to be a witch and a devil, and other choice things, and refused the social amenities. Granny became, in fact, a pariah in Hill Street, and as she never made the slightest attempt to be 'friendly,' that position must have suited her to a nicety. I may say the female portion of Hill Street society is frankly delighted with the prospect of her being wanted by the police. They told me all they knew with a lavishness which wasted a few

valuable hours. However, boiled down, we learn that:

"First—On the night of Christine's disappearance, Granny Bates was seen slipping down the street at about six-thirty, or thereabouts, with a wonderful lady with shining hair. Little Timmy O'Hagan was the only one who noticed them, but he noticed to some purpose. He says the lady was so pretty that he slid along after them just to have another look. She was walking quickly, he says, and smiling. Evidently she went willingly. Timmy saw her turn and say something to the old woman just as they got to the door. The hag opened the door and the lady went in. Then the door was shut. Timmy was too frightened of Granny to peer in the keyhole, and the window was dark—possibly they had pinned something over it. That is all Timmy knows, except that he waited around about an hour in the rain for the pretty lady to come out, but she did not come.

"Second—Bill Connely remembers the night, because that was the night he got roaring drunk, and was taken in by the police. He remembers starting out for the saloon about nine o'clock, and in passing Granny's hovel was surprised to see the shadowy outline of a horse and cart drawn up by the pavement. Tough Wilson was standing by the cart. The door of the hovel was open, and by the dim light from it he saw the horse, and recognized it as the old white mare belonging to a gentleman named Mike Donlan, over on Everleigh Street. Being in a facetious mood, he stopped and said, 'Hello, Tough! Going home to visit the old folks?' And that pleasant personage had replied with unusual good nature, 'You bet I am.' (Not a very illuminative conversation, unfortunately). Bill Connely did not notice anything at all unusual about the cart, save the fact of its being there at all. He could not say whether or not there was anything in it. He only noticed the horse, because it was a white horse, and the light fell on it.

"Third—Two other men noticed the horse and cart in front of Granny Bates' door, and one other at least spoke to Tough Wilson in passing, but only to pass a word about the weather. One man noticed the cart drive away with two figures on the front seat. The occurrence was discussed in the street, of course, and the general impression was that Tough and Granny had 'lit out.'

"Fourth—Mike Donlan, owner of the white mare well remembers renting the animal to Tough Wilson. He didn't know what for. Never thought to ask. Tough wouldn't have told him if he had; folks on Everleigh Street mind their own business. Tough wanted the mare over night. Paid for her and got her and brought her back at noon next day. She seemed rather tired, but not very much so. She was muddy, but not too muddy. She was hungry, but not more hungry than she often was, having a ravenous appetite at the best of times! Tough hadn't let drop a word about where he had been or what doing—why should he? It was his own business! So much for that interview.

"Fifth—The owner of cart found and interviewed with almost precisely the same result. Tough had rented the cart without reason and returned it without explanation, paid for it, and departed. Yes, the cart was muddy, but it naturally would be muddy after a rainy night. The bottom of the cart was not wet because it had been covered with an old rubber rug, black. There was nothing else in the cart, either when it went away or when it came back.

"That is the sum of the evidence. Problem, what was in the cart, and where did the cart go?"

Mr. Johnson laid the notebook upon his knee and looked up complacently.

"It seems to me," said Mark, irritably, "that we are just exactly where we were—except that we know that there was a cart in the case. We know, of course, who was in the cart. Christine must have been in it—somewhere under that filthy rubber robe, and—"

"Pardon me. I did not say that the problem was *who* was in the cart, but *what* was in the cart."

"We do not need to quibble about words." But Mr. Torrance rose in uncontrollable agitation. "Why, Mark, don't you see what he means? What if—if—"

Mark shrank back as though he feared a blow. "Not that!" he said hoarsely. "You don't mean to imply that she may have been already dead?"

The detective nodded sympathetically. "Not that it's my own opinion that she was," he added. "My