

THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS

By ISABEL ECCLESTONE MACKAY

ILLUSTRATED BY C.W. JEFFERYS

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 attentions 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.

SHE answered him that she was quite able to help him with any information which she might have, and that talking did not tire her at all.

"I want to ask you, Miss Brown," began Mr. Torrance, "whether you remember a girl called Alma Stone, and if you can tell us where she went when she left—er—my employment? I may say that my enquiries are entirely for the young lady's benefit—in short, and not to make a mystery, we have learned that she is an adopted child, and it is believed—that it is possible, that we may be able to restore her to—" he hesitated, "to—her home."

Ada looked up with quick interest. How good he was, she thought. How kind of him to take such an interest in the stores. His kindness to Christine had been only the beginning. Even Celia brightened a little as her naturally generous nature realized the prospect of good fortune for a friend.

"I knew Alma quite well," she told him, "though I cannot tell you where she is. Surely it ought to be an easy matter to trace her, but as she often confided in me, perhaps I may be able to tell you some things you wish to know. It is quite true that Alma was adopted when a baby by Mrs. Stone, and she never knew who her real parents were."

"Ah!" The exclamation was almost a gasp and both girls looked up. Celia noticed that her visitor's face was very pale.

"Pardon me! You see, this enquiry is a very important thing. The finding of this young girl means a great deal—to me. I think I am hardly myself when I speak of it. Will you continue, Miss Brown?"

Celia was now thoroughly interested; for the first time since her breakdown she tried to sit up straighter of her own free will. "I think I can tell you all that Alma knows herself," she went on. "She often spoke of it for, though Mr. and Mrs. Stone were very good to her, Alma had the idea that she was—that they were—well, not as high in the social scale as her own parents."

"I don't like that," said Mr. Torrance uneasily. "It sounds rather—"

"Snobbish? Yes. But girls will romance about a mystery. Alma is not really snobbish. And you see even Mr. and Mrs. Stone knew nothing of Alma's parentage, and they rather encouraged her in imagining things. It lent color, I think, to all their lives. Mr. Stone was a country clergyman, and Alma was left at his door when she was a baby about—well, just cutting her first teeth."

Mr. Torrance wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"As far as she can guess she is now about eighteen years old—"

"Eighteen? Are you sure of that?"



"Yes—Alma has often told me. It was eighteen years ago and just before Christmas that she was deserted on the Stores door-step. Ada, dear, get Mr. Torrance a glass of water."

"Thank you, I do not need it. I am ashamed of myself. These enquiries unnerve me. I think I shall leave the more serious enquiries to an agent after this. I used to pride myself upon my self control, but you see I have none. When you began your story I thought we might have at least come upon the right clue. But the young lady's age proves differently. If you are sure of the eighteen years it practically settles the matter. We shall not drop the case, of course, until we are quite sure; but what you have told me is fairly conclusive. She can scarcely be the young girl for whom we are looking."

"I am sorry," said Celia, "for she had a hard life since her adopted parents died. She could not stand the work in the Stores and had to give it up. I did not know where she went. I ought to have kept in

touch with her, but I was not well myself and at night I was always so tired"; she sighed. "She was a dear little girl."

"Well, we shall find her and see that she is taken care of."

Celia looked up with a touch of her old bright shrewdness. "If you are going to father the Stores you will have a large family," she said.

"I know that," he answered soberly. "And a month ago the idea appalled me. Now it seems an easy thing. If only—if only this other anxiety were lifted I think I could father all the world and not feel the burden heavy."

When he had gone, the blind girl left her knitting and came over to the sofa where Celia lay. For a moment the two clasped hands without speech, as they often did, and then Ada said softly:

"Oh, Grandma, what great eyes you have!"

It was the old childish formula with which Celia had taught her to ask when she was a little child for information which her lack of sight shut out.

"The better to see with, my dear," answered Celia, smiling. "What is it, dear? Mr. Torrance?"

The blind girl nodded.



"Well, I think you would like his looks, Ada. He is tall but not stiff. His face is pleasant, even handsome. His eyes are dark and his hair also, except for a dash of grey at the temples. It is a distinguished face, straight nose, firm mouth. He looks very pale and worried just now."

"I wonder why?"

"I don't know," listlessly. "About the search, perhaps. His interest seemed very keen."

"Isn't it odd," mused Ada, "that since we adopted Christine we have always been hearing of other people who have done the same thing. Adopted a baby, I mean? Sometimes it seems as if half the world were adopted!"

"It is on the same principle that when you go to have a tooth out, all the world appears to be at the dentist's. We notice more the things which interest us, that's all. I wish you wouldn't talk of it, Ada. Christine is our own—she was never anything else."

The blind girl nodded. "Yes, I feel like that. Of course Christine is different. Do you suppose they will find Alma? It is odd that Mr. Torrance should be so worried. In any case, the lost child could not be anything to him. Tommy says he has no children."

For the second time that day Celia raised herself out of her cushions. A soft red of excitement glowed in her cheeks. "Why, how stupid of me! Of course he had a child. I remember long ago hearing about it. Long before anyone knew that he was the owner of the Stores. He had a baby—why! I remember it all now—it was kidnapped!"

The girls' hands clasped tighter.

"How strange!" said Ada. "Oh, Celia, what if he were looking for his own daughter?"

"If he were, that would explain why he looked as he did—like a man under torture."

"Oh, Celia, how dreadful he must have felt!"

Celia had gone very pale. "I am glad I did not tell him quite all I knew about poor Alma," she said.

CHAPTER XXIII.

ONE wonders what psychological fact lies back of such commonplaces as "It never rains but it pours," and "Troubles never come singly." Is there indeed a power in trouble to attract trouble? Has sorrow some ~~same~~ affinity for sorrow? Or is it all just chance that joy so often comes to the joyful and grief to those already stricken? To Adam Torrance making his way slowly home from Brook Street, it seemed that he at least was safe from new calamity. Fate had surely expended all the slings and arrows that the most outrageous fortune might demand. Things would brighten soon; Johnson would find a clue, Mark would soon be home; this nightmare of uncertainty and suspense must end before long! He heard the newsboys calling "Extra!" as he went along, but so sure was he of the safeguard of his own misery that he did not even glance at the paper.

As he entered the hall of his own home, Benson, the solemn butler, came forward with something almost like anxiety upon his well-trained face. "What is it, Benson?" The question was uninterested.

"Mr. Mark is here, sir. He arrived on the afternoon train, sir!"

"Mark! That's good news—"

"Excuse me, sir. Mr. Mark has had a little accident, sir. He has been hurt. Not seriously, we hope, sir. We tried to get you everywhere on the 'phone!'"

Fortune had evidently not finished with Adam Torrance yet. "Mark hurt!" he repeated in a dazed way.

"Not seriously, sir, we hope. The doctors are with him at present. Miss Torrance—"

"Come in here, Adam!" sounded the unmistakable voice of Miss Torrance from the library. "You can't go up to the boy yet. The doctors are making an examination."

Mr. Torrance handed his hat to the butler and went slowly back into the library. After the sharp shock of the news about Mark the presence of Aunt Miriam seemed a minor wonder.

"There's nothing to look so white about!" said that lady sharply. "The boy isn't dead! He'll be as good as ever in a week or so."

"How did it happen?"

"Dear knows—or the street railway company! Didn't you hear about the accident? The newsboys have been shouting it for the last hour. A street car collision, no one killed."

"And Mark?"

"Not seriously hurt, the doctors say—not that they know anything about it. Benson telephoned me, said he couldn't get you anywhere. I suppose you are wondering how I got here? It just goes to prove what I said all along, that I am not such an entire invalid as it suits the doctors to suppose. My place was here—and I came!"

Mr. Torrance smiled faintly. "You were always wonderful, Miriam," he said.

"What puzzles me," continued Miss Torrance, "is how Mark happened to be in the car at all. Why didn't he telephone for the auto? Although I suppose that if he had done so the auto would have exploded. I am not a fatalist, but I believe in fate in those cases. And why weren't you at the station to meet him? Didn't you know that he was coming home to-day?"

"No, he did not telegraph. I expected him any time."

"That's odd; Adam, is there anything between you and Mark? Any unpleasantness—over that letter of mine?"

"No, nothing! Mark knew nothing about it."

The little old lady gave a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness! I was beginning to imagine things. It is against my principles to interfere in other people's business. I wrote that letter in spite of my principles and I am surprised that I did not do more harm. I am not a pessimist but I suppose the trouble is yet to come."

"There will be no trouble. Mark would not quarrel with me for the sake of a girl."

Miss Torrance closed her eyes. "No one has ever quarreled with anyone for the sake of a girl, of course!" she said sarcastically. "The question is—hush! I hear the doctors coming!"

The quick ears of the invalid were not mistaken for there was a murmur of voices upon the stair and next moment the two doctors entered the library. Their faces were grave, but not, as the anxious watchers were quick to note, sombre.

"He will do well, I think," said the older doctor, shaking Mr. Torrance's hand. "The broken arm is a simple matter and the injury to the head is not of so serious a nature as we at first supposed. In fact, I think we may relieve you of all anxiety."

"That is good news indeed," said Adam Torrance. "You say there is an injury to the head?"

"Yes, but you must not let it alarm you. There will be delirium. Try to keep his mind at ease. If he has any fancies, gratify them. He must not excite himself. Otherwise there is really no cause for anxiety. The nurse has arrived and knows her duties."

Miss Torrance sniffed audibly. She did not approve of nurses.

"If the patient appears to worry she will let you know at once," went on the doctor. "Although I think it unlikely. So fortunate a young man is not likely to have many ungratified fancies."



"Think so?" snapped Miss Torrance. "That just shows how little you doctors know. Mark is just as likely as the rest of us to want something that he can't have." She threw a slightly malicious glance in the direction of her brother, who calmly ignored it.

"Well, well!" said the doctor, smiling. "We will hope not. People with broken heads must be indulged. A deplorable affair, this accident, Mr. Torrance. This street railway company is the curse of our city. Their negligence of the most elementary precautions is notorious. Shameful!"

"I am afraid we do not think of it save when our own suffer," said Mr. Torrance. "I must confess to the common failing. Is the boy conscious yet? Might I—will it be possible to see him soon?"

Dr. Mackenzie looked at his colleague, who nodded solemnly.

"Perhaps for a few moments," he decided. "But do not allow him to talk. He may know you or he may not. In the latter event do not show alarm. It