

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 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.



"ARE you all alone?" he asked Ada. "Have you — no brother?"

She shook her head. "No," she said, "but there is Tommy. He is like a brother. He is such an old friend—"

"My godfather," explained Christine. "He does everything unpleasant for us, sees the plumber when the bill is too large, and sees that the coal man sends us decent coal. There are times," she

remarked thoughtfully, "when one really needs a man."

Adam Torrance laughed.

"You increase my respect for my sex immensely," he told her.

"Oh, Tommy does much more than that," said Ada, quick in defence. "He helps us in every way. It is he who keeps up my garden. No one else would bother. If you will come to the window you will see what he can do."

To Christine's consternation their visitor at once crossed to the window. With a proud air Ada drew back the curtain. "It is not at its best now," she said, "you should see it when the roses are out." Adam Torrance looked out eagerly and caught back an exclamation! The tin cans and the waste paper looked even worse than usual to-day. A starved cat sat on the broken fence. An ugly dog worried an unhealthy-looking bone.

Christine laid a timid hand upon his arm. "It is Ada's garden," she said slowly. There was entreaty in her look.

"It—it is remarkable! said Mr. Torrance.

Ada dropped the curtain smiling. "One is naturally surprised to see it in so busy a street," she said. "But," he floundered, "don't you—do you never walk in it?"

"Oh, no!" she answered. "It is closed. No one is allowed there. But that does not matter. I can imagine it all so well. No doubt it would be nothing but a wilderness if it were not for Tommy."

"No doubt," said Adam Torrance. In his heart he found himself feeling a curious envy of Tommy. The making of Ada's garden was an achievement of which any man might be proud. And this fellow appeared to be something of a gentleman. How old might he be? he wondered. If he were Christine's godfather he was probably old. Nevertheless curiosity pricked him. "I wonder," he remarked casually, "if I happen to know your friend. You said his name was—"

"Mr. Burns," said Christine. There was a dimple of mischief in her cheeks. "No, I do not think that you know each other. He left the Stores years ago. He is now managing a department in Brindley's Bookshop."



Here was another blow. He, Adam Torrance, had been guilty of feeling enviously toward a clerk—where was this thing going to end?

"You amaze me," he said. "I would have thought that a man capable of—er—thinking out—such a garden would be possessed of some imagination."

"Oh, he is a poet, too," said Christine carelessly. "He has simply piles of imagination."

"Then why is he in a bookshop?"

"Why shouldn't he be?" The girl's voice was puzzled. "He never neglects his work to write poetry. And he loves books."

"Oh, Tommy is very clever," added Ada earn-

estly. "Mr. Brindley simply could not get along without him—must you go?"

"I am afraid I must." He felt if he stayed much longer he would begin seriously to doubt the stability of his scheme of things. "For once in my life I am a busy man. I am, as you know, investigating the state of things in the Stores. Perhaps you will allow me to call again when Miss Celia is better. As it is, you have given me many things to think about." Again he took the small hand she extended to him and again it seemed to change miraculously from the hand of Miss Brown into the hand of some delectable princess. He bowed over it as a courtier might have done.

Upon the stairs it was already growing dark, and Christine, mindful of the third step from the top, lighted the lamp and held it so that he might not have to feel his way. When safely past the pitfall he looked back, laughingly, to thank her, but the laugh died on his lips. He put out a blind hand grasping the greasy bannister, for it seemed that he was at home, in the old home of his early youth, and it was Mona who stood there looking down upon him from the dim stair with the lamp-light like an aureole round her head.

"Good-bye," called Christine cheerily. The vision faded, and he stood alone upon the dark landing.

CHAPTER XIX.

IT was getting on for supper time in Brook Street when Adam Torrance came slowly out of the House of Windows. An aroma of frying fish was in the air. Through a dirty window, from which the draggled curtain had been jerked aside, he could see the table destined to receive this delicacy; its cloth, white once, was soiled and stained, its edges were ragged, its sprawling crockery ugly and chipped. Mr. Torrance had not seen such a table for many years, indeed he had almost forgotten that such horrors existed. A vision of his own beautiful dining-room came to him, and, mingling with it, pictures of all the dining-rooms to which he was accustomed, their soft light, their pictures, their polished tables, their shining glass and silver and porcelain, their soft masses of flowers, the silent tendance, the delicate food. A sense of angry shock went through him. What was Providence thinking about? What did He mean by allowing people to live in places like this, to eat from tables like that, to be part and parcel, in fact, of Brook Street, and everything which Brook Street stood for?



As he stood there a little child came up to stare at him, and then another and another. They seemed to rise out of the ground and their sole business in life seemed to be staring. Mr. Torrance was irresistibly compelled to return the stare and what he saw surprised him not a little. These children who lived here and ate fried herring were just like any other children. They were dirtier and more ragged, but for the rest they were just little plump, round-faced children with childish eyes.

"Going in to supper, kiddies?" he asked casually, buttoning his glove.

The starrers did not seem interested in supper. "Say, are you the doctor?" asked one little fellow curiously.

"I said he ain't," sang out another. "I told you he's the preacher."

"Well, he ain't," echoed a third. "He's a undertaker. Look at his gloves."

This seemed conclusive. They all looked at his gloves.

"I'm afraid you are all wrong," said Torrance, laughing. "I'm the ice cream man. That's what I am."

How the eager eyes searched his face. "Ah, what's yer givin' us?" said one sceptically.

"I keep my ice cream in a store at the corner," said the ice cream man. "You'd better run and get some before it's all gone."

But they were not going to take a big thing like this on trust. Before he knew it two dirty little hands were slipped in his and the remainder of the escort lined up behind.

"You come too," said the spokesman. "They won't give us nothin' unless they sees you."

"You surprise me," he said gravely, "I did not know that the scepticism of the age was affecting the ice cream business."

"Can we get the pink kind?" inquired the spokesman.

"Certainly. If I have any pink kind left. I think I have some left," he added quickly.

The escort gave a faint "Hooray!" quickly checked. They entered the store at the corner in good order. Not for worlds would they have imperiled their promised treat by want of decorum.

"We have come for ice cream," said their conductor. "The pink kind."

"Five or ten-cent dish?" asked the waitress briskly.

A dozen eager necks craned forward.

"Ten-cent, of course!" said the ice cream man.

A long sigh of contentment passed around the circle. He was a really ice cream man after all.

Mr. Torrance's last sight of Brook Street was a dingy ice cream parlor crowded with happy children and presided over by a hard-faced woman, who, for once, seemed strangely human and not above the extravagance of putting an extra peak upon those gloriously pink ten-centers.



"Good-bye, Ice Cream Man!" shouted the children, and it is significant of yet another change in the outlook of this personage that as he waved good-bye, he quite forgot to pity the youngsters or to feel his own manifest superiority in the scheme of creation. "Nice little kiddies," he thought comfortably, as he swung himself on a car, and, chuckling a little, he removed the now soiled gloves of the "undertaker."

In the quiet of his library he thought of it again, and again he chuckled, wondering what Mark would have said had he been there to see. Mark—Mark was almost a child himself. A child longing for something which he could not have—that was why he had been sent away. With an impulse of loneliness he rang the bell and asked if there were any letters.

"No, sir," answered the correct Benson. "That is to say, yes, sir—there is this, sir. It did not come by the regular mail, sir."

"This" was an object upon which any well-regulated servant might look with scorn. It was an envelope of sorts, but so dirty, so dog-eared and so scrawled upon that one did not wonder that the "regular mail" had scorned to deliver it. Lying upon its silver salver it looked like a very bad joke or—a message from the fates.

Mr. Torrance regarded it with disfavor. It was a begging letter, of course, and as such was not his affair. "Give it to Mr. Jones. Tell him to attend to it."

But Mr. Jones, it appears, had attended to the regular mail and had, then gone out. There was nothing for it but to open the unsavory communication himself or to wait until Mr. Jones should return. Ordinarily, he would most certainly have waited, would have thought, indeed, no more about it, but the influences of the afternoon were still strongly with him.

Strangely enough, he had no premonition of horror, no foreboding of any sort, as he picked up the soiled thing lying on the salver. We call that sixth sense which sometimes gives us warning of the approach of great or terrible things "strange." But is it not far stranger that these things should steal their step should be silent, their approach unheralded? Is it not passing strange that one moment a man may stand facing the future, head up and with a smile, while hidden from him by only a few moments, a few ticks of the clock, is some undreamed-of blow of fate which will bring his life a clattering ruin about his feet.

Adam Torrance opened the soiled letter with a rather tired smile, but with a comfortable feeling in his heart that he was really doing his duty at last. No more shirking of unpleasant things, no more passing over of responsibility to Mr. Jones.

Not until he had the single sheet of paper which his reading lamp did the first dim warning sound. Then some instinct at the back of his self-satisfied brain seemed to stir. "There is trouble here," it awoke, his heart began to beat more rapidly. "Danger, danger!" telegraphed the inward monitor, but its warning was not very loud, and Mr. Torrance himself was conscious only of an unexplained premonition of evil. Carefully and still smiling he adjusted the glasses which he really did not need in black across his world.

"Mr. Adam Torrance. Sir—" he read (the writing looked like that of a bad hand at its best or a good hand purposely made almost illegible.