

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.

THEN, using her fingers for memory posts, she began with admirable patience to sort the knowledge she had gained in so reprehensible a manner. It ran something like this: There was very little money. Money had been lost somehow, with the result that her schooling expenses would prove a serious drain, if not an impossibility. There had been something said about her going into a shop and both her sisters wept at the prospect. (Query, why? Celia worked in a shop.) She had gathered that in any case she was not to be consulted or allowed to aid. (This indignity alone absolved her conscience in the matter of listening.) Something had been said about Tommy Burns helping, but from Celia's voice, Christine gathered that this was out of the question. (Her quick intuition immediately showed her a possible reason for Celia's objection.) So far, all was plain enough, but the rest was mystery. Celia had said something about bringing her, Christine, home. (Query, where had she been? It did not sound like a home coming from an ordinary visit), and a letter had been mentioned, an "awful letter." What could that mean? There was certainly mystery there. Never, since she had been old enough to take any interest in the affairs of the little household, had there been any awful letter. Perhaps it was that Celia had received to-night from Mr. Banks? She sighed impatiently. It was really too bad of the girls to exclude her from a possible family secret. Secrets are such interesting things! She had not been able to hear what Celia had confided to Ada between sobs and the part of Ada's answer which had penetrated to her ears was consoling but not enlightening. All she could gather was a general idea that her sisters were much concerned that she should have her "chance." (Query, why should they worry so about it? Because she was the youngest? That seemed to be the only possible explanation.) With her pretty brows drawn into a frown, Christine sat there in the moonlight which flooded the davenport bed and thought it all out. She was a girl of quick decisions, and, as she thought, her pretty lips grew firm and her eyes more determined. She looked anything but sleepy. Indeed, both Ada and Celia were peacefully dreaming before Christine slipped under the covers with a mind made up. "It's about time they found out," she murmured, "that this family performs best as a trio and not as a duet!"

CHAPTER VIII.

NEXT morning the sisters breakfasted cheerfully. The unburdening of her heart had done Celia so much good that she was more like herself than she had been for some weeks. Ada, whose inner peace no trouble seemed able to disturb for long, was as serene as usual, and Christine was so gay that it would have been a gloomy nature indeed which would have refused to respond to her bright spirits. Nevertheless, when the dishes were put away and Celia had gone to the Stores, Christine informed Ada that she felt the need of a long walk. "And I am not going to ask you to come with me, dearest," she added, laughingly, "because I am going to walk fast and furious."

Ada smiled. She was used to these sudden whims. "In fact," went on Christine, pinning her best grey hat over her bright hair, "I am going to take a holiday and I may not even be home for lunch. It would be fun, wouldn't it, to surprise Celia, and have lunch with her?"

Ada colored faintly. "Celia took her lunch with her this morning," she said. "One gets so tired of having it down town."

"Does one?" asked Christine, innocently. "I hate a cold lunch myself. Well, if I don't come home you are not to worry. I haven't many more days now before going back to school." This last was said with a touch of girlish malice, in revenge for being treated as a baby and excluded from family counsels. But the quick sadness in Ada's face brought swift remorse and Christine had hard work to keep herself from blurting out her secret then and there. That would have spoiled everything. She must not speak too soon. Half of the flavor of the enterprise she had decided upon during the night was in the grand surprise which its success was to be to these two unappreciative sisters. For her idea was at once to show them how short-sighted their conduct had been, and,

by a grand coupe, to place the family fortunes once more upon an easy basis.

The grand coupe, as planned, was something in the fairy-god-mother line, with coals of fire added. Christine would go out for an inconsequent stroll and would return the proud possessor of a "position," with adequate salary attached—in other words, she would have become a bread-winner.

Exactly how this was to come to pass she did not know, but there is none so hopeful as those for whose ignorance difficulties do not exist. Christine was very young, quite inexperienced and ready to believe that the whole world was her oyster. The opening of the oyster ought not to prove a difficult task. Already she had thought of one promising means and that was the advertising sheet of the daily paper. At breakfast, under cover of reading the City news, she had picked out of a long list three desirable positions, any one of which seemed especially intended for her.



Standing on the door-step she carefully slipped the first clipping from her glove and read it with renewed appreciation.

WANTED—A young person of good address and pleasing voice to read aloud to invalid lady, three hours daily. Generous remuneration to right person.

Could anything be more apropos? Christine felt no doubt as to being the right person. She was not quite sure what good address might mean, but she glanced down over her trim blue skirt, white blouse, and neat shoes, with an innocent air of full approval. Her voice she knew was pleasing. Tommy had often told her so and more than one of her collegiate friends had remarked upon it. It was soft and low, that most excellent thing in woman, and ought to be exactly what the invalid lady was looking for. Three hours reading would, she felt sure, be just so much pleasure! Better than all there was to be "generous remuneration." Christine rather let her imagination run riot in this direction. "Generous" means many different things, but to Christine's hopeful mind it meant everything.

"Sure, 'tis a foine day again, Miss Christine," said the cheerful janitress in passing. Then with warm admiration, "And it's foine you're lookin' yourself!"

Christine slipped the clipping into her glove with an embarrassed air.

"Really, Mrs. Halloren? Do I look nice? Is my skirt straight? I want to look particularly nice today."

Mrs. Halloren put down her pail for a better look. "It's perfect ye are," she declared. "If ye were me own daughter I couldn't wish ye to look finer."

Christine smiled with pleasure. She saw nothing incongruous in the remark, and the tone of the compliment was unmistakably sincere. Christine was innocently pleased with her own good looks, but as yet quite unconscious of anything singular in her beauty. The loveliness of youth is a fairy thing, as illusive as sunlight on water, as potent as wine, and Christine had in full measure the charm and glory of it. Her hazel eyes, dark grey in certain lights, were set rather widely apart under delicate brows. Her nose was straight and fine, her lips curving and faintly red—the only trace of color in the warm paleness of her face; add to this a sweetly rounded chin and a glory of hair, honey-colored and sweeping back on either side of her brow in heavy shining rolls, and you have a description of Christine's beauty; but not its essence. One had to see her, to know her, but having seen, one was not likely to forget. Already Tommy Burns had noticed with somewhat proud annoyance that Christine was apt to be stared at upon the street. He had a special scowl for anyone who dared it, a terrific scowl, and lately he had worn it so often that Christine had declared that she would not go walking with Tommy if he looked so cross.

This morning, Tommy being absent, anyone might stare to their heart's content. Christine herself would never notice it, or if she did she would not have thought to ascribe the admiring glances to a personal cause. She floated down the streets of the city, happily dreaming, a vision of spring in autumn. And so far from self-consciousness was she that when a young man stepped quickly from a motor car and allowed an involuntary "By Jove!" to escape him, Christine thought that he had dropped something, and turned with a child's interested eagerness to see if he picked it up. In doing so she had a momentary impression of dark eyes in a strong face, oddly flushed; then, passing on, she forgot all about him.

The young man, however, seemed not to have dropped anything. For a moment or so he stood on the pavement looking after her, a curiously arrested expression upon his face. Then, with an air of quick

decision, he re-entered the car, ordering the chauffeur to go ahead, slowly. The man did not attempt to hide his surprise at the order and even ventured a protest. "This here is the address you gave me, sir," he said. "The Van Slykes live in here."

"I know—go ahead—and slowly."

The big car went on. It passed Christine again just as she turned in at the address of the invalid lady, a few blocks farther down the avenue. Christine did not notice it. Her mind was quite occupied with admiring the home where in future she hoped to spend three hours a day reading for a generous remuneration. It was a handsome place of grey stone, of no particular beauty, yet imposing and withal comfortable.

"By Jove," murmured the young man again. "It's Aunt Miriam's! she's going in—what luck." But having the wisdom of the serpent he did not at once follow her.

Christine rang the bell. She was not exactly frightened, her inexperience pictured nothing but courtesy behind that handsome door. To the maid who opened it she said that she would like to see Miss —she remembered that she did not know the name.

"Miss Torrance sees no one in the morning."

"Oh, is she worse? I thought the advertisement said to call in the morning."

The maid's face changed perceptibly. The deference faded out of it. "Side entrance," she said, abruptly, and closed the door.

Christine colored faintly. She thought the maid rude. However, she went at once to the side entrance and rang again. Another maid opened the door and looked at her with undisguised surprise. Christine again asked if she might see Miss Torrance, and added that she was answering the advertisement in the paper.

"Miss Torrance will see you, I think," said the girl. "You're the sixth this morning, but she isn't suited yet. You'll have to wait." She led the way up a flight of stairs and into a small room at the end of a corridor. "I'll tell you when she's ready." She added and went out.

Christine's spirits began to sink. The room in which she sat was plain and gloomy—not what one might expect from the appearance of the house at all. It struck her that it must be a special room for tradesmen or servants. It had never before occurred to her that in applying for this place she had forfeited some of the rights of caste. Social distinctions had troubled Christine as little as they trouble most sensible Canadian girls. She had thought as little about her position as a duchess might; now for the first time she felt troubled and uneasy. Some of the first fine flavor of her adventure was evaporating. She sat on pins and needles, flushing and paling, while three maids came down the corridor upon various pretexts, each one managing to indulge in a long stare at the new applicant. She could hear them giggling together afterwards, and her whole body grew hot. It was a great relief when word came that Miss Torrance was ready for her.



"The mistress will see you now," said the English maid, who had let her in. Christine arose with alacrity, but even as she did so a bell rang sharply and the maid gave an indignant exclamation. "There she is again!" she said. "You'd better wait till I see what it is. She never knows her own mind from one moment to another. There's the door bell, too!"

Christine resumed her chair with a sigh. There was more ringing. The saucy maids were sent flying in different directions and then the door opened downstairs and Christine heard a man's pleasant voice in the hall. The English girl poked her head in at the door and whispered, "A visitor—you'll have to wait."

The visitor was evidently at home in the house for he came up the stairs two steps at a time. Christine saw him pass the end of the corridor and, after knocking lightly, enter the room where the maid had disappeared. "Oh, dear!" sighed Christine, "He is sure to stay for ages!" And she felt an impulse of dislike toward the young man with the pleasant voice.

Meanwhile, in the other room, Miss Torrance surveyed the intruder with unaffected surprise.

"You—Mark!" she exclaimed, offering a frigid hand. "Is anyone dead? Of course someone is dead. Martha hand me my salts! Don't try to break it to me, please!"

The young man shook her cold hand heartily, and not content with that, kissed her soundly in continental fashion.

"Bless the boy! Don't you know that I'm an invalid. Who is dead?"

"Lots of people, Auntie. But no one we know. Can't a prodigal nephew call upon his only Aunt without being mistaken for an undertaker?"

The only Aunt surveyed the prodigal nephew searchingly through her glasses.

"Hum! Well. So you came to see me, did you."