

THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS

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place. There was a round table with a moss-green cloth in the centre of the room, the old-fashioned chairs were upholstered in green, a green rug half covered the floor, which was painted to match, and the paper was pretty and quite in keeping. The room, which had once been large, was now divided by a board partition which did not quite reach to the ceiling. Not an abode of wealth, surely; but to Miss Eden, who knew the rooms of many girl clerks, it displayed a home-like comfort which was surprising. "If only I had a room like this," she thought. "I could invite—"

then her thoughts strayed off to what Miss Brown had said in the store about "having a little" and she sighed. Some girls were so fortunate! "The baby is perfectly fine!" said Celia Brown. "Look how the little monkey has pulled my hair! She did that when we were bathing her. Ada's is worse than mine. Ada is getting her ready for bed. You may see her for a moment before she goes. You don't know, do you, just *when* a baby of her age ought to go to bed?" She looked anxiously at Miss Eden, and even at Mr. Burns, who tried not to blush.

"How old is she?" asked Miss Eden, importantly.

"Well, naturally, we don't know, she hasn't any teeth yet—"

"Can you tell their age by their teeth?" asked Mr. Burns, much interested. The girls giggled.

"Oh, no! But—yes, I suppose you can, in a way. It tells you in books when they get their first one. I must get a book. Oh, Mr. Burns, you are in the book department. Do you know of anything?"

Mr. Burns, who prided himself upon his exhaustive knowledge of his stock, brightened up. "Why, yes, there are several. I remember one that we are often asked for, 'Children: Their Mental and Moral Growth.' Then there is 'What To Do for Baby,' and 'The Infant's First Year,' and 'From Cradle to School,' and 'Handy Helps for Homes' (there is a lot about babies in that), and 'The Young Mother.' We are often asked —" Here Miss Eden giggled, and Mr. Burns came to a full stop. Celia, however, was not laughing. "I think 'What To Do for Baby' and 'The Young Mother' would be best," she mused. "I'll run over to your department at noon to-morrow and look at them. Are they very expensive?"

"Not at all expensive. In fact, they are my present to the baby—if you will be so kind."

"Another present for baby!" interrupted a new voice. "Oh, Celia, if everyone is going to give her presents we shan't have anything to give her ourselves."

The speaker, who came rather slowly into the circle of light, was a tall girl of rare and touching beauty. Enough like Celia to be known as her sister, she was Celia glorified and set aside from ordinary life. To give an idea of her charm is hard, for to tell of the sweet oval of her face, her masses of brown hair with curling tendrils, her perfect mouth, delicate nose and great mysterious eyes leaves the main secret still untold. A stranger would scarcely have guessed that she was blind, a friend would never forget it.

"My sister Ada," said Celia quietly. "Ada, Miss Eden and Mr. Burns. They have called to see how the baby is getting on. Is she asleep?"

"Not yet, just going. Listen! There she is. She wants me back. I'll bring her in for a moment—but she must not be kissed or giggled over or she won't sleep."

The callers solemnly promised not to kiss or giggle, and with much delightful flutter the baby was produced. She was a very little baby; unnaturally little, Mr. Burns thought; "just too dinky for words," according to Miss Eden. She lay quite still in Ada's careful arms, surveying the glances bent upon her with calm disdain and sucking a wrinkled thumb.

"You shouldn't allow her to do that," said Miss Eden, rebukingly.

"I think she is beginning to get a tooth. One of the girls gave her a rubber ring, but she won't have it, and she has to suck something, don't you, darling precious? Isn't she lovely, Mr. Burns?"

Mr. Burns, whose eyes were fixed up-

on the glowing face of the blind girl, could scarcely find words to express his admiration. In fact, so incoherent was he that the child's proud foster parents were justly offended, and the baby itself began to howl.

"She's hungry, poor dear," explained Ada. "Does the dearest darling want its bottle then? Oh, I can't tell you how relieved we were to find she had been a bottle-baby!"

"By Jove!" said Mr. Burns, startled, "whatever would you—" but Miss Eden interrupted hastily with, "Do you give her milk or food?"

"Oh, food, we can't depend on the milk." But at this the baby howled in real earnest, and was hastily taken back to bed.

"How wonderfully your sister minds her!" said Miss Eden, watching the disappearing forms of baby and nurse. "And now, won't you tell us all about it? I am dying to know. It's just like a romance. Did she have a locket around her neck or anything? Have you any clue?"

"No," said Celia gravely. "There wasn't anything like that. She isn't a story book baby. Anyone could see that she had been ill-cared for and perhaps half-starved. Her clothes were the poorest of poor; the go-cart a rickety second-hand affair which practically fell to pieces on the way home. She is just a poor little deserted baby, someone that nobody wanted."

Miss Eden unaffectedly wiped away a tear with her cotton glove. "Isn't it dreadful! And there wasn't anything with her at all?"

Celia hesitated and then said frankly, "Yes, there was a note. A horrible note; I will show it to you and then I am going to forget all about it. We found it pinned to her dress."

Crossing to an old desk at the other side of the room she took from it a folded piece of rather dirty paper and handed it to Mr. Burns. With the girls looking breathlessly over his shoulder he held the paper to the light and read in sprawling and illiterate characters these words:

"She was one too many. Her father won't keep her, and I can't. She ain't been named yet."

Mr. Burns in a sudden impulse of indignation struck the piece of paper with an emphatic finger. "By Jove, that's cool! A case of cold-blooded desertion if ever there was one!"

"Horrible!" agreed Miss Eden.

Celia, blushing, snatched the paper back. "I think I'll burn it."

"No!" Mr. Burns' tone was one of startled protest. "You mustn't do that, you know." For a moment he had an impression that all women were fools (except, perhaps, that lovely blind girl who had come into the room like a vision.) "You see, that paper is evidence. You never can tell when it might be wanted. If you do not want the little one ever to see it, hide it; but one doesn't burn evidence, you know. By Jove, no!"

Celia wavered. She considered Mr. Burns rather a pleasant young man, but his sudden tone of authority inclined to give offence. Nevertheless he was a man, and perhaps in this case he represented the masculine point of view, and at any rate if the paper were securely hidden it could do no harm.

"Very well," she said, "but it seems cruel to keep it. Poor baby. Well, she shall never want for care and love here."

"And, oh," added Miss Eden, "how she will love you both when she knows!"

Celia's pretty mouth set itself firmly. "She shall never know," she declared. "You read in the note that the baby had not been named. We are going to name her, Ada and I. Did you know that we had a baby sister of our own a year ago? She died, with our mother, when she was two weeks old. She was to have been called Christine. This little one need never know that she is not our real little sister, Christine Brown."

Mr. Burns' honest countenance beamed with admiration at this proposal, and as for Miss Eden, her feelings compelled her to jump up and kiss Celia at once. "You dear thing," she murmured.

"It would be too dreadful to have her live to find out that—well, what the

letter says," said Celia, "and of course if she knew she was merely adopted she would never be contented without some knowledge of her own people."

Mr. Burns nodded sagely. "You're right there; still I would not destroy the letter," and then he made a remark very like the one which Mr. Harcourt Flynn had already made that evening. "Things are sure uneven," he mused. "Here is someone throwing away a perfectly good baby, in a manner of speaking, and up there at the Torrance house they are going crazy over the loss of one."

Celia and Miss Eden assented vaguely. They were not vitally interested in the woes of the Torrance family. The rich gain little sympathy in trouble from their poorer neighbors.

Then the whole subject was forgotten in the deeper interest of listening to Ada singing a lullaby on the other side of the partition.

Presently another tap came to the door and, with a finger on her lips, Celia tip-toed across to open it.

It was Miss Martin, of the ribbon counter, come to see how the baby was, and behind her peered the prim but kindly face of Miss Amelia Flynn.

Celia gave a startled exclamation. "Oh, Miss Flynn!" she said. "How did you—"

"I didn't, my dear. I just guessed. Mr. Flynn doesn't know and does not need to, unless you ever wish to tell him yourself. A man can be very blind when he wants to be." She gave Celia a little reassuring pat on the arm. "But I just sensed how it was, and I couldn't rest easy until I had seen that baby!"

CHAPTER IV.

AT the moment when the baby worshippers at 1620 Brook Street were hushing their voices while Ada sang the new little Christine Brown to sleep there was fresh dismay in the Torrance home on Amberly Avenue. Just what had happened the frightened servants hardly knew, but the mistress of the mansion had passed from hysterical weeping into deathlike stupor, and back again into hysterics, and the master had come downstairs with a face so ghastly that they dared not question him. He was now shut up in the library with a detective, and so far not one of them had plucked up courage to listen at the door.

Indeed, the detective himself was startled out of his usual placidity by the sight of his client's face. Adam Torrance, the distinguished, the debonaire, looked like an old man. His shoulders stooped. The hand he offered shook like an aspen. "What is it?" asked the detective anxiously. "Have you news at last?"

"News? Yes—All the news that there ever will be. The search is ended, Johnson. My child is dead!"

"Nonsense! What possible purpose—"

Adam Torrance raised his hand. "You know that I have always been afraid that this was not a case of kidnapping for money," he said quietly. "I had no reasons to give, but I felt that it was so."

"But you said that you had no enemies?"

"None that I knew of—none who would do that! But a man in my position must have enemies of whom he does not know, and it seems that I have had one enemy at least, a cruel one." His tone was so controlled that the detective marveled. "Read this," he went on, handing him an envelope. "It is all that we shall ever know."

The detective took the envelope eagerly—at last there was a clue! It was an ordinary envelope, not too clean. It had come by post, stamped the previous day, and contained a single sheet of paper. The paper was of the cheap ruled variety, with nothing to distinguish it in any way. The writing on it was blurred and sprawling—either the production of a good writer trying to write badly and succeeding very well, or a poor writer doing his best to be legible and succeeding but poorly. From the general sloppiness of the letters, it was more probably the latter.

This was the letter.

"Mr. Torrance,

Sir.—You and your father ruined my father and us. My girl had to go into Angers' store. I was sick and couldn't help. She couldn't make enough to live. She was so pretty, and pretty girls get hungry just like ugly ones. She's dead now and a good thing for her she is. I don't need to speak plainer. You and your stores killed her and worse. I've lived to pay you back and I've done it. I found out that you

was Angers & Son, the devil that owns the stores that don't pay a living wage. We're even now. You'll never see her again. She's dead. I've paid you out."

"Horrible!" The detective's ruddy face had paled. "But you surely have not taken this at its face value?"

Adam Torrance, who had sunk into a chair, made no reply for a moment, and then, without looking up, "I think I do, Johnson," he said. "Don't you?"

"No, certainly not. That is—er—" the detective hesitated. "Of course, I can't say definitely, off-hand. It seems too awful. Who is this woman?"

"She doesn't say," listlessly.

"But—was there anyone—"

"Whom my father and I ruined? Probably. In the way of business some always go to the wall. I believe we have always tried to act honorably, however. I think that neither he nor I ever willingly ruined anyone. As to the other—what she says about the girl—"

A look of horror came into his tired face—"that can't be true, can it, Johnson? I admit that I have never interfered very much in the management of the stores, but once I remember reading something about inadequate wages being paid to girls, and I spoke about it to Davies. We went into things—a little, and he convinced me that we were paying what we ought according to profits; but it seemed very little. I told him, then, never to employ any girls but such as had their own homes and something else to depend upon, so as to avoid the possibility of that—that sort of thing. I gave positive orders."

Johnson touched the letter with his fingers. His detective instinct began to assert itself.

"This girl, apparently, had a home," he remarked. "If we are to accept the letter, she lived with her mother—that would come within your orders all right."

The other man's face seemed to grow still whiter. "My God, I never thought of that! And the mother was ill—an added expense—and—oh, horrible!"

"Probably the whole thing is a fake."

"Do you think so—candidly?"

"Can't say off-hand. It must be looked into."

"You have no clue whatever?"

"None. It was done the slickest I ever saw. If that woman did it she's a wonder! And yet if she'd been watching her chance—perhaps it was done easier than it looks. That nurse, she may have left the baby longer than she said, and babies are so much alike, and there are so many of them. A change of dress and—there you are!"

"Do you think any person would write like that for—for a joke?"

"Not unless the person were a fiend," promptly.

"Nor do I. And that is why I—oh, I—I believe it, Johnson!"

The detective turned away under pretence of re-examining the letter.

"If it's a fake," he said, slowly, "its probable that the one who wrote it is a little shy in the upper storey. I've seen revenge letters like this before. They generally come from those who are hardly responsible. That would account, partly, for the cunning of the thing. Does—does Mrs. Torrance—know?"

"I've told her that I have reason to fear that the child is dead."

The detective made no comment.

"She fainted. But on the whole I think the strain is lessened. If our child is dead—at least no harm can come to her. She is beyond harm now—" His head sank into his hands again, but he aroused himself. "Do all you can to find out the truth," he said, "and let us know—soon! Johnson, how do you account for the fact that she knew about Angers & Son?"

"Can't say. Perhaps she shadowed Davies. Perhaps she found out by accident."

"I must find out. I must sift all that she says about the stores. If it is true, then Davies—"

"Davies is a good manager, Mr. Torrance. You may be unjust. You are hardly fit to judge just now, if you will permit me to say so. If there are reforms needed, make them, but don't take things by hearsay—find out first, Mr. Torrance, *find out first*." The detective's tones were so earnest that they surprised himself. It was not often that he permitted himself to offer a client advice not strictly in the line of business, but Adam Torrance seemed to be in a state of mind in which men do unreasonable things. It would be too bad, thought Mr. Johnson, if he should turn Socialist or anything like that.

(To be continued)