

THE HOUSE OF WINDOWS

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CHAPTER I.

IN the bustling stores of Angers & Son, the ribbon counter, so lately the storm centre of a throng of struggling shoppers, was slowly resuming its normal aspect. The shimmering piles of ribbons which had collapsed under the onslaught of frenzied women were being deftly rebuilt by the weary clerks. Order was emerging out of chaos, and something like neatness reigned once more in the glass cases and on the open shelves. In a word, the Bargain Sale was over, for the day.

It had not been an ordinary, one-day-a-week Bargain Sale—far from it. The clerks, standing knee-deep in paper from the unwound bolts of ribbon, were proof enough of its exceptional nature.

GREAT SEMI-ANNUAL SALE.
SACRIFICE OF ALL RIBBONS WITHOUT
RESERVE.
EVERYTHING SLAUGHTERED!
9 to 5 DAILY.

This had been the announcement of the hand-bills, and apparently the demand for slaughtered ribbons had been bloodthirsty, for now the clerks were straightening up, knee-deep, so to speak, in corpses of the slain.

"My! But I'm tired! Say, don't some of them give you a pain?" asked Miss Eden winding baby ribbon.

"Who?" Miss Twiss paused in her winding of pyramids to stifle a yawn.

"Those bargain women! Their eyes—horrid!"

"Gracious! I have no time to watch their eyes. It takes me all my time to watch their hands. Did you see the gay one in green try to sneak a bolt out of the fifty-cent division? Pretty nearly did it, too. Oh, Miss Brown, while you are up that step would you mind handing me down that top box?"

Miss Brown obligingly handed down the box.

"All their eyes look alike," went on Miss Eden. "Greedy—I should say! They make me sick."

Miss Twiss yawned again. "I've enough to make me sick without bothering about eyes," she began, then as a belated but impatient customer tapped sharply upon the glass, "No, madam, I am sorry. The ribbon sale was from nine till five. This ribbon is now seventy-five cents a yard. My, didn't she look mad," she added, as the disappointed one moved away.

The other clerks giggled. They were tired, some of them to the verge of exhaustion, but they were so used to the sensation that it left their general interest in life quite unimpaired. Miss Brown, who was a new girl, looked blue about the lips, and once she said, "Oh, if I could only sit down!" emphasizing the *down* despairingly.

"Well, you can't," said Miss Twiss. "And don't slouch your shoulders. Straighten up! Here comes Slippers."

Slippers, otherwise Mr. Harcourt Flynn, the floorwalker, had the reputation of not standing any nonsense. He considered slouched shoulders nonsense; girls behind a ribbon counter should be straight and alert. Therefore, as he passed, all the girls' shoulders miraculously straightened and they became very alert indeed.

"And yet he isn't a bad sort, really," whispered Miss Twiss, reflectively. "He acts like that for the same reason that he waxes his moustache: thinks he needs it in his business."

"Miss Twiss!"

Miss Twiss jumped, for she had not noticed that Mr. Flynn had paused beside her, and his voice was stern, unmistakably the voice of one who has discovered some nonsense, and will not tolerate it. "Miss Twiss, why is this baby carriage here?"

Miss Twiss leaned over the wide counter.

"Why, it's a go-cart!" she said stupidly.

"Why is this—er—go-cart here?"

"I didn't know that it was there, Mr. Flynn. It is so small that I did not see it. What a tiny one!"

"It's size," said Mr. Flynn, "is not important. Why is it here? I think this is your department, Miss Twiss?"

Miss Twiss flushed. "Did any of you girls see a lady leave this go-cart?" she demanded of her subordinates.

Three of the girls shook their heads with decision, but Miss Brown, the new girl, seemed to hesitate.

"Do you know anything about this, Miss Brown?"

"Yes, I saw the woman leave it," she admitted, adding "I did not know that it was not permitted."

The floor-walker frowned. There had certainly been some nonsense here! He pulled one end of his waxed moustache severely.

"I think this is your department, Miss Twiss," he continued with elaborate sarcasm. "Miss Brown

is new, I believe, but apparently she has not been instructed in her duties. This go-cart—"

The go-cart, finding itself the centre of interest, seemed suddenly to wake up. A feeble wail issued from it. Mr. Flynn stepped back so hastily that the girls tittered. This was *lese majeste*, and the manner of the floorwalker became more awe-inspiring than ever. He consulted his watch.

"It is now," he remarked, "just five minutes off closing time. Miss Twiss, you might ask Miss Brown at what time this go-cart was left here."

"At two o'clock," answered the new girl, speaking for herself. "I noticed a woman leave it, but then the rush began, and I forgot about it. It is screened, as you see, between the two counters. I naturally supposed that she had taken it away again."

Mr. Flynn glanced once more at his watch. "What Miss Brown supposes is not material, Miss Twiss. I need hardly point out that it was your duty to have informed her of the rules. Young ladies, it is not necessary for me to tell you what the presence of this go-cart means." His tone was frigidly polite, but they all felt that someone had been guilty of nonsense, and that he wasn't going to stand it.

"It means desertion, I suppose," said Miss Twiss. She knew in her heart that it meant also dismissal for her, or at least the losing of her place as head of the ribbon counter.

"Exactly; you will at once report the matter at the office."

Mr. Flynn replaced his watch. Miss Twiss bowed. She knew what reporting at the office meant, but she had her pride, and would have gone without a word had not Miss Brown interposed with an excited question.

"What will they do? Where will they take it?" She asked of the floorwalker. The majesty of Mr. Flynn was surprised at the question, but he answered as befitted his dignity.

"Don't know, I'm sure. That's hardly in my department."

"They'll take it to the police station, of course," volunteered Miss Eden.

"To the police station—that little mite of a baby? Oh," with a sudden impulse, "I don't think they need do that! I will—I mean, I think I know who left the baby. She didn't intend to desert it. She—I'll take it home to her myself."

Mr. Flynn was surprised. He was also suspicious, but above all, he was desirous of having things go smoothly in his department, and this seemed an easy way out of an awkward situation. He looked for a moment at Miss Brown's flushed cheeks (her lips were not blue now) and shrugged his shoulders. Then as the clang of the closing bell rang through the store, he gave his verdict.

"Very well, Miss Twiss, as Miss Brown is willing to take the responsibility of returning this—er—go-cart, you need not report the matter at the office. See that it does not occur again."

He moved away, and the girls in a sudden flutter began hastily to spread their dust cloths over the reconstructed pyramids. They looked at Miss Brown out of the corners of their eyes. Had she not been a new girl, they would have descended upon her in an avalanche of questioning, but ribbon counters have their etiquette, and the young ladies felt that they did not know Miss Brown well enough to question her. They felt quite at liberty to show their disapproval of the mystery, however, by a certain aloofness of manner shown in the flirt with which they spread their dust cloths and extricated their skirts from the entangling corpses of the slaughter sale. Miss Brown, still rosy with suppressed excitement, volunteered no information. She spread her dust cloths rapidly, and hurried away to put on her coat and hat.

When she had gone the girls gathered around the tiny go-cart, and a chorus of exclamations broke forth.

"Oh, what a little one!"

"It must be starved!"

"Whatever did Brownie tell that lie for?"

"What do you suppose she is going to do with it?"

"You don't suppose she really knew—"

"Hush! here she is."

Miss Brown came hurriedly up, and for the first time, peeped under the little black cover of the go-cart. She appeared to do something for the comfort of its inmate, for the tiny thread of wailing ceased. When she looked up there were tears in her nice blue eyes.

"Girls," she said, as if upon impulse. "I may as well tell you—I don't know a thing about the woman. I saw her when she wheeled the go-cart up—and I'll never forget her face. It was such an ugly face. It was like—well, it was just ugly. She looked poor and half-starved. Of course she meant

to leave the baby! Look at its eyes—it has been drugged! But I just couldn't let it go to the police station. I'm going to take it home with me."

The girls, all friendly now, gathered closer.

"Oh, say!"

"How spunky of you!"

"Well, I declare!"

"But," said Miss Twiss. "Can you—"

"Yes, I can, somehow. You know my sister is always at home. She is blind and very lonely. This will be just what she needs. Of course I would be afraid to risk it if I had only what I can earn, but we have a little. We get along quite nicely." She laid her hand in its cotton glove resolutely upon the handle of the go-cart.

Little Miss Eden pushed herself to the front of the group.

"Oh, Brownie," she said, "I think you're great! And say—can't we all help? May we call and see it? Why can't we have a departmental baby? Say—"

"Hush!" interrupted Miss Twiss. "You'll give it away if you talk so loud! Look, here comes Slippers!"

CHAPTER II.

AT the time of the ribbon sale, made memorable by the finding of the baby, the great departmental stores of Angers & Son occupied one solid block of the best business property in the city. Three sides of the block were lined with plate glass windows, displaying everything from a sauceman to a Paris gown; the fourth side was lined with delivery autos, each bearing the simple legend, "Angers & Son." The same name was carved in the stone over the main entrance and stamped upon every bit of paper and every bag or box in the great stores, and yet, as a matter of fact, Angers did not exist, neither was there any such person as Angers' son.

Once there had been both Angers and his son, and they had owned the stores and piled up the wealth it made for them. But it is just the same old commentary upon life that the store should be there, a firm and strong reality, while both Angers and his son were memories. All that remained of them was their name, and that remained because it was an asset. None knew just who stood behind the name of Angers & Son—that is to say, the people who were most concerned did not know. The clerks in the store did not know, the floorwalkers, the managers of departments, the buyers, the superintendents, did not know. To them all, there was no higher up than Mr. Davies, the general manager. If Mr. Davies knew, he did not tell. He always spoke of the "higher up" as "the Board"; from which everyone guessed that Angers & Son was really a syndicate; and guessed wrongly.

There is no reason why the reader should not be taken into the secret, however; the truth was that Mr. Adam Torrance held Angers & Son in the hollow of his hand. Mr. Adam Torrance had been a rich man before he had bought out the stores from the trustees of the Angers estate; he was now a very rich man, even in a city of rich men, and was daily becoming richer. He was young, too, to be so rich, only thirty-four—almost a boy! If the stores had known about him they would have been delighted. It is certainly more pleasant to be owned by a young and fine-looking proprietor than by a Mr. Davies, who is middle-aged and ugly, and a Board which is simply nothing at all. In the old days there was a legend that Angers & Son had sometimes inspected the stores personally; had known the heads of departments by name, and been acquainted with the superintendents, but none remembered whether these things were so. Certainly, Mr. Davies knew everyone and everything, and his eyes were everywhere, but Mr. Davies was simply an employe, at the head of other employes; and as for the "Board," it seemed to have neither eyes nor ears nor any real existence. One could not, for instance, see it driving a four-in-hand or speeding a motor car and say, "See, there goes the Boss!" or point to its palatial residence and remark carelessly, "The old man does things in style, eh?" But these, and many similar pleasures the stores might have had if they had only known about Mr. Adam Torrance.

The Torrance residence alone would have furnished a mine of inexhaustible interest for the stores if a justifiable personal connection could have been established. The feudal spirit is alive in many of us yet, and although we would feel it meaningless to acknowledge it, the man to whom we give our service is not quite as other men. He must always be a little more or a little less. After all, there are only a few hundred years between the peasant gazing upon the castle of his over-lord with feelings of loyalty or envy according to his nature and the clerk passing by the modern palace of his