

## THE MAN OF THE HOUSE.

BY PANSY.

(Author of "3. rs. Solomon Smith Looking On.")

## CHAPTER XXVI.—Continued.

Since the attempt to steal Samson for a night's ride which Reuben had spoiled, a padlock with a very peculiar look had been placed on the barn; to this lock there were two keys; one for Mr. Barrows, and one for Rupert, the trusted hired man. For nearly a week Rupert had been sick in his bed, and Reuben had taken more care than ever before of the horse, and had been trusted to carry the other key, that he might pay Samson a visit when necessary while Mr. Barrows was absent. This morning the barn had been found locked as usual, but the poor horse was holding up one trembling leg, and groaning sadly. Mr. Barrows, thinking it all over, had believed that the temptation to take a horseback ride had been too much for Reuben, and that he had gone in the night, and getting into trouble, had hurried the horse back to the stable, locked the door, and left him in his misery. This had been a hard thing to forgive, but, as he talked with Reuben, he decided that the boy had not known before that Samson was injured. This was bad enough, but still not so dreadful as the other; now, if he would but confess it all!

But here he stood, boldly denying that he had any knowledge of the trouble.

"Reuben," after a moment of solemn silence, "where is the padlock key I allowed you to carry?"

"In my jacket pocket, sir, that hangs by my corner in the workroom."

"I know it. I took pains to learn that it was there. And mine is in my pocket; and you and I know that only those who have been very carefully taught can turn that lock; Rupert and you and I know how Rupert is sick in bed, my key is here on my chain where it has been all the time; the lock is not broken, yet the horse has been out during the night, and has been ruined; and has then been brought home and locked alone in his misery. Now, Reuben, will you confess the whole miserable story? I cannot feel that I have acted in a way to make you so terribly afraid to tell me the truth. I have loved you, my boy, because you reminded me of my own boy who is gone; but he was truthful and noble."

Not a word said Reuben. If he had suddenly been turned to stone he could not have stood stiller, or been more silent.

Mr. Barrows watched him and waited. His face was pale, very pale, and his eyes had the troubled look of one who does not see his way clear. One, two, five minutes, and they seemed to him afterwards like hours; then he spoke:

"Mr. Barrows, everything is against me. I don't see how you can believe me. I know I have that key safe in my pocket, and I know the lock can't be turned with any other kind of a key, or by people who don't know how; and I can't tell anything about it, only this: I never took Samson out of his stall. He was as well and happy as could be last night at eight o'clock, when I locked him in for the night, and I haven't seen him since; and I don't know how he got hurt; and oh, I am so sorry for him! But, Mr. Barrows, everything is against me, and I don't see how you can believe me."

Said Mr. Barrows, with a disappointed sigh:

"You are right, Reuben; I can't." Then began a sad time for Reuben. Samson had to be killed, and that almost broke the boy's heart; but, worse than that, he found no way to prove that he had nothing to do with the trouble. But you should have seen Beth. She was furious. The idea that Mr. Barrows should not believe every word that Reuben said, was to her mind an insult too deep to be borne. She urged Reuben not to do another hour's work for him, but to tell him to look out for a boy that he thought he could trust. She urged her mother to move at once out of the house, and to refuse to have anything more to do with him, and had only a burst of tears in answer to the question, Where would they go?

As for the mother, she did not help her very much. She believed in him. Oh, yes, indeed! It did not once occur to her to think that he had spoken other than the truth. You see she had known Reuben so long, and been able to trust him so fully, that the habit was formed; but she fretted,

and said some things that were hard to bear; such as this:

"It serves you right, Reuben, for meddling with the horse at all; if you had kept away from him, as the other boys do, you wouldn't have got into any trouble. Why doesn't he suspect them?"

Then would Reuben try to explain that his employer had given him duties about the horse, trusted him to his care, and that it was as much a part of his work at times to care for Samson as it was to go to the shop.

But the mother would answer: "Oh, yes, a part of your work! I know that; but if you hadn't always been hanging around the horse, and petting him, and showing yourself so eager and able to take care of him, Mr. Barrows would not have thought of such a thing, and you such a little fellow!"

Then would Reuben sigh, and look utterly discouraged, and the mother would hasten to say:

"Not that I blame you; you did it all for the best, I dare say; and if the man had common sense, he would know he could trust you; but it is all very hard—you had such a splendid chance, and I thought he would send you to school."

Meantime Miss Hunter was the cheeriest friend he had.

"It'll all come right," she would say, nodding her wise head. "Trust Him; he never makes mistakes, nor forgets. Just keep telling him all about it, as though you knew he would take care of it, and he will."

And Reuben would smile and feel his heart warm within him at the remembrance of his powerful friend.

Beth was apt to torment him with questions hard to answer. As for instance: "Reuben, haven't you the least kind of a notion who might have taken the horse?"

"What's the use of notions without proofs?" would Reuben answer. "Notions are mean; they make a fellow suspicious."

"But Reuben, I most know you guess who it might be. Somebody did it, of course. I wish he would get awful sick, and get afraid, and have to confess it."

"That's like a story in a book," would Reuben answer with a little curl of his wisen lip. "Things don't happen like that out of books."

But then Miss Hunter had a word to say:

"Things don't 'happen' at all, my boy; God looks after them. He can take care of you not only, but of the one who did the mischief, and he'll do it."

"But, Miss Hunter, don't you think it is awful mean in Mr. Barrows not to believe Reuben? He never told a lie in his life."

"I don't think it is strange that he doesn't believe me," declared Reuben. "You see it is all against me. I've got the key, and the only key there is besides the one that he carries himself; and I know how to turn the lock, and I was the only one besides Rupert who did; and Rupert was sick in bed, and somebody took the horse out and lamed him and then put him back there to suffer. I think that was the meanest."

But when Reuben went on in this way, trying to clear Mr. Barrows of meanness for not trusting him, Beth's patience gave out entirely, and she was apt to get almost as angry with Reuben as she was with his master: so among them all, Reuben really had a very sad time.

Quite a large number of the handsome boxes were being manufactured, and all who saw them were pleased, but Reuben had almost entirely lost his pleasure in them. It seemed very strange to him that Mr. Barrows did not discharge him. Every morning he went to his work wondering whether it would not be his last day in the box-shop. The truth was that Mr. Barrows, though he still believed him guilty, was sorry for him; he believed that he had been led away by a great temptation, and had been frightened by the sad consequences into telling falsehood after falsehood; but he thought by keeping him in his place and being steadily kind to him, Reuben would grow ashamed of his silence, and get courage to confess the whole: so he waited.

And Reuben waited, and prayed, and wondered how it would all end. In spite of his prompt answer to Beth, "What's the use of having notions?" he had one all the same, and could not get away from the thought that in some way his special tor-

ment, Andrew Porter, had to do with the trouble. Not that he could make even a guess how it could have been done. He had never shown Andrew his key or boasted of it in any way; if he had, that would not have taught the boy how to use it. "And if he tried ninety-nine times to unlock it, he would have been as far away from doing it the hundredth time as he was the first; besides I had the key to the stable myself all the time in my pocket."

So would he argue to himself, growing more and more puzzled as he thought it over, and feeling more and more that Mr. Barrows was not to blame in suspecting him. "But then," would the boy continue, "somebody unlocked that barn and took out that horse—dear old fellow!—and brought him back again and locked him up, and you see I know that I didn't do it, and that thing Mr. Barrows doesn't know; so there I have the advantage of him."

The days went on, and nothing occurred to help him out his trouble. Mr. Barrows had questioned and cross-questioned Reuben, and was growing every hour more puzzled and anxious.

"I loved the boy almost well enough to give him part of the place of our boy who is gone," he said to his wife. "I meant to do well by him, if this thing hadn't come up. I don't understand it."

"Papa," would Grace Barrows say, with a firm little set of her lips, "Reuben Watson Stone never did it, never!"

And the father would smile, and find himself wondering if Grace were not right; but then, in that case, who did?

Meantime the boy Andrew walked the streets as well and strong as ever; though as often as Reuben looked at him he could not help remembering Beth's words: "I wish he would get awful sick, and get afraid, and have to confess it."

Nothing looked more improbable than that Andrew Porter would get "awful sick." This Reuben thought as he overtook him one evening just at the corner, and Andrew turned suddenly and went the other way. As Reuben walked on, he went over again for the hundredth time, the possible reasons he had for suspecting Andrew.

They were very weak ones. He was a mischievous boy, an untruthful boy, and was very fond of horses, and almost equally fond of teasing Rupert Stone. Yet Reuben had to own that he saw no possible way for Andrew to have accomplished this teasing. "If he did it," he told himself with a sigh, "he will keep his secret. He is not the boy to tell of himself, and as for getting sick, there isn't a healthier-looking boy in this town."

Yet the very next morning there was news.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## JUSTICE AT LAST.

The boys were full of it when he reached the shop. Hal Reuben heard? Did he know about the great fire? Surely he must have heard the fire bells.

Yes, Reuben had heard the fire bells, but his mother had objected to his going to the fire, so he stayed in.

"Humph!" said one of the boys; "I guess Andrew Porter wishes his mother had objected, and he had paid any attention to her."

Reuben turned quickly.

"Why, what about him?" "Why, he went to the fire. It was the machine-shop, you know, burned to the ground—ever so much money lost. Andrew climbed up somewhere—he's always climbing—and the wall gave way, or the stairs, or something, and he fell hundreds of feet, some say; anyhow, they picked him up for dead, but he isn't dead. The doctor just came from there, and I heard him tell Mr. Stuart that the boy was breathing, but that was about all."

As Reuben stood silent for a full minute before turning to his work to think over this wonderful and terrible news, there came to him a curious, pained feeling, that somehow he was to blame. Had he really wished Andrew to get "awful sick"? Oh, but he had not wanted him to die! Suppose he should die without ever speaking another word! And suppose he had done it! All day Reuben's heart was heavier than ever, but he prayed a great many times that day for the life of Andrew.

The boy did not die. As the days passed,

it was found that his life was not in present danger; but with this news came some that seemed to the boys almost as sad as death itself. There was a hush in the shop all the morning after Clarke Potter gave the news. He himself had heard the doctor that very morning tell Andrew's uncle from Eastport, that the fall had hurt his spine in some way, Clarke had not understood how; only this he knew: that the doctor had said positively that the boy would never take another step.

It was three days afterwards that Reuben decided to go and see Andrew Porter. It was not because he had any hope of hearing news from him concerning poor Samson, in fact he did not think of Samson when he decided to go. It was because Clarke said he heard that Andrew was awful lonesome, and complained that the boys did not come to see him.

I really have not time to tell you much about the next three weeks, only in a general way. Reuben carried out his resolve, and went that very evening to ask after Andrew, and found him sick and suffering.

His mother, who had had orders to let "every fellow in who looked like a boy," took Reuben to his room without warning.

A very short call he made; but he felt so sorry for Andrew, that on the next day he went again, and again; and at last it grew to be a settled thing that not a day would pass without his spending all the time he could get with Andrew. The books suffered a little. He learned a lesson every night, but it was shorter than it used to be, and his mother wondered if he were going to "learn to nurse sick folks" instead of being a scholar; and Beth asked many questions as to why he had grown fond of "that Porter boy," all of a sudden. Reuben owed that he was not fond of him, but that few of the boys came to see him—he seemed not to have many friends; and he was so lonesome. "He is getting used to me now, and likes to have me come; at first he did not seem to want me." This was all the explanation Reuben had, and Beth tossed her head, and thought it was very queer.

As for Mr. Barrows, as the days passed, and Reuben was faithful to his work and respectful, yet came no nearer to that confession for which the gentlemen longed, he told himself that he did not know what to think. How could he trust a boy, and do for a boy as he had meant to do for him, who had deceived him? How could the trouble have happened in any other way than through him! Yet, on the other hand, how could a boy who was so faithful in all other things have so dreadfully deceived him once?

Mr. Barrows was in almost as much trouble as the rest of them. Meantime what Andrew thought as he lay day after day on his bed, much of the time alone, he kept to himself.

It was a lovely summer evening. The windows of Andrew's room were both thrown wide open, and the bed on which he lay was wheeled as near to them as it could be got, and he lay looking out on the lovely fields, green and quiet, thinking perhaps what a strange, sad thing it was that he should never scamper over them again, for his face was very sober.

Reuben, book in hand, waited to go on with the story which he was reading to him, but he put out his hand and motioned the book away.

"No, I want to talk; that is, I've got to talk. I've made up my mind; it has taken me weeks to do it, and I never thought I should; and I suppose I might have waited to hear the last of the story, for you won't want to read it to me when I'm done my talk; but I'm going to tell it right here this minute."

"All right," said Reuben, "talk away." "But you won't say much more to me in that good-natured way, old fellow, when you've heard my talk. I've got something awful to tell you. Reuben, it was I that took Samson out that night and brought him back again."

"I thought as much," said Reuben, his voice very quiet and matter-of-course. He had not thought over this whole thing for weeks without learning to keep his face quiet when there was need.

"You did?" In spite of the poor back there was a little start from the boy on the bed that made a quiver of pain shoot all through him.

"Yes, I did. Do be careful, Andrew! don't make the least bit of a move again.

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