

THE MAN OF THE HOUSE.

BY PANSY.

(Author of "Mrs. Selamun Smith Looking On.")
CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

It was not until dinner-time that Mr. Barrows met Reuben again, just as he was leaving the Box Factory, and said:

"I suppose, my boy, the first piece of paper went off on the wind, did it?"

Then Reuben with a red face fumbled in his pocket.

"I forgot to give it to you, sir; Samson and everything sent it right out of my mind."

"Then you really picked it up!" the surprise in his voice gave Reuben a queer sense of delight that he could not have explained if he had tried. "It is worth a thousand dollars, my boy. But you saved something for me this morning that is worth a thousand worlds, if I had them."

"My!" said Reuben. "It was his only way of expressing astonishment; not over the 'thousand worlds'; he was prepared to believe that Grace Barrows was worth a great deal more than that, but over the fact that that simple-looking bit of paper could actually be worth a thousand dollars!"

"I don't see how you got in," continued Mr. Barrows, staring down at the piece of paper. "Those buckles haven't been unfastened in six months, and I noticed yesterday that they were rusty."

There was a mischievous twinkle in Reuben's eyes, and he felt exactly like saying that he didn't get into that piece of paper, and there were no buckles on it so far as he could see, but he controlled his tongue and answered respectfully:

"Tugged at 'em, sir. You see I knew they had to come unbuttoned so I could get in. I didn't think I could climb over the top end and get down that way in time to save mischief; besides, there was the danger of scaring the horse more by doing that."

"My boy, did you know that the lake was less than a quarter of a mile away in a straight line with the direction that the horse took?" Mr. Barrows' voice was husky and his eyes were dim.

"Yes, sir," said Reuben, looking down so that he might not seem to see the tears in the gentleman's eyes; "that was the reason I had to hurry so."

Mr. Barrows turned away abruptly; he could not trust himself to say any more just then.

On his way back from dinner, Reuben discovered that the work of cleaning had begun on the little house. The windows were out, two pairs and a broom stood in the doorway, and a thick smoke was puffing out from the chimney.

"I wonder where she got a stove to make a fire in," said Reuben, as he stood hands in his pockets, staring up at it. Somehow, that smoke seemed like a little piece of home.

He wanted to go in and look around, but the clock in the church-tower just then gave a single, solemn stroke, and he took his hands out of his pockets and ran.

Several things not before mentioned had happened during the days that Reuben had been away from home. Among others, it had rained steadily and fast a day and a night, taking away every bit of the sleighing; then the ground had frozen and the lake had skimmed over as though it really meant, if the weather did not change its mind too soon, to give the boys a chance at skating; though as the water was deep, this did not happen except in severe winters.

The boys discussed the chances as they worked. They were about equally divided in their opinion of Reuben; part of them disposed to admire him, and the others to envy what they called his good luck.

"I'll tell you what it is," young Wesley said, with an emphatic shake of his head, while Reuben was gone to the office, "it took something more than luck to climb into the back of that carriage and stop that horse. My father says there isn't one boy in ten who would have thought of it at all, and half of them would have been so scared they couldn't do it. I think he showed himself a plucky fellow, and I say, let's all give in and be friendly. I'm going to ask him to go skating with us to-night."

Not a boy approved of this; some of them were really out of sorts about Reuben's coming, and some of them liked to disagree with whatever was proposed; so they argued the question hotly, declaring that Reuben was a little dried-up city dance, and they would have nothing to do with him.

The more they talked, the more determined was Wesley to carry out his plan, and the moment Reuben came back he said:

"It's freezing hard; the ice will be prime to-night; want to go to the lake and have a skate?"

Reuben's eyes glistened his thanks for the invitation, but his answer was prompt:

"There's two reasons why I can't go; one is, I ain't got any skates, and the other is, I never skated a rod in my life."

If you could have heard the shout of laughter that greeted this answer, you would have thought that the strangest and most ridiculous thing in life was a boy who could not skate.

"Poor little fellow!" mimicked one in a tone that he might have used to a boy of six. "Didn't his mudder ever let him go on the ice? It's a shame, so it is! Poor little boy! we'll stop on the way down and buy him a stick of red-and-white candy, so we will."

These were some of the sentences those rude and silly boys giggled out at Reuben. His cheeks were pretty red; no boy likes to be laughed at; still he answered good-naturedly:

"You can't pity me any more than I've pitied myself. I s'pose you haven't much notion of how I've wanted a pair of skates; but the honest truth is, boys, it was a choice between skates or bread, and when it comes to that, it doesn't take a fellow long to choose. Fact is, I'm poor. Always have been ever since father died, and I haven't got around to skates yet; maybe I shall some day."

There was something in this manly little explanation that seemed to please Wesley, although he had been laughing as hard as any of them. "Quit bothering him," he said. "He's a plucky fellow, and a friend of mine. I won't have him abused."

Nevertheless the fun about the skating went on. Not to know how to skate was something so strange to these country-bred boys that it seemed as though they could not get over laughing about it. Presently, came Andrew Porter to call on the boys, and he brought news which turned their thoughts into another channel.

"You here yet?" was his greeting to Reuben in a tone of mock surprise. "I thought you would be some home to your mother by this time. Had any more scares?" Then he told his version of the stage-coach story. "He came up in the four-horse with me, and rode outside till he got so awful scared at the horses that he had to creep inside, and let a fellow take his place." I think the boys would have been more ready to believe this story if they had not known about Samson's performance that morning, and Reuben's share in the matter. As it was, knowing Andrew as well as they did, now boy believed that he told the truth. Yet they laughed. Then Andrew produced his news. "Say, boys, are any of you going to the rigmagig at the Hall to-night? I peeped in there this afternoon and saw some of the pictures while they were fixing the canvas; just splendid, they are! Great big things! cover all one end of the Hall, and just as natural as life. A hundred pictures! Don't you know about them? Why, it's the nicest thing that ever came along here; everybody says so. Of course I'm going. The tickets are only fifty cents."

Andrew talked exactly as though fifty-cent pieces grew on the bare branches of the winter trees. If the boys had only known how many twists and turns he had to make, turns that were not even quite honest in order to get that fifty cents, they might not have envied him so much. As it was, they patted away and looked disgusted, some of them. Not a boy there who could by any means afford to pay fifty cents to see pictures. Yet they were very fond of pictures.

Andrew went on with his extravagant account of the wonderful "peeps" he had taken that afternoon, and of this and that, and the other favored boy who was going; all rich men's sons. Skating might be well enough, but it was fast losing its charm for that evening. Every boy wanted to go to the Panorama.

In the midst of Andrew's description, Reuben was summoned to the office again. Andrew paused long enough to say: "Now, old fellow, you're going to get your walking paper. I heard Barrows as I was coming along, telling what an awful nuisance you were." Then he went on with his description. Reuben went away smiling; he

was too sadly used to all sorts of bad boys in the city, to be shocked with Andrew; and he could afford to smile on his own account. He knew very well how far Mr. Barrows was from considering him a nuisance. He came back with eyes shining, and worked with double speed the rest of the afternoon. If you had been in the office with him, this is what you would have heard Mr. Barrows say: "My boy, here are a couple of tickets to the exhibition this evening at the Duan Street Hall; I think you will like to go. Perhaps there is some boy in the shop, or out of it, that you would like to take with you, since Beth isn't here. And Reuben, one thing more; I would rather you wouldn't go into the little house until after the cleaning is done. I just wait until I give you permission, will you? The person working there doesn't like to be disturbed."

Over this last Reuben pondered as he worked. He felt a longing to see the little house with clean floors and windows. "She must be a touchy body," he said, thinking of the "person" who was hired to clean the house. "Just as if I would disturb her! But I suppose she thinks if I come the other boys will. I can wait." And he whistled over the thought of all his joys.

"Look here," he said to Wesley, as the two went down the hall together with a pack of pasteboard on their shoulders. "I'm real obliged to you for asking me to go skating to-night; I'd like no better fun. But seeing I can't, suppose you go with me."

"Go where?"

"To that picture exhibition at the Hall." "Just so. I'm agreed. Where shall we steal the tickets? Have you made your plans?" with a mischievous twinkle in his black eyes.

"Yes, sir," said Reuben. "Got 'em all made. Look here!" And he showed two green tickets.

Then Wesley whistled.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOME NEW EXPERIENCES FOR REUBEN.

It was Saturday night, just after the great clock in the church-tower had struck six, that Mr. Barrows gave Reuben the key to the little house, with permission to look in and see that everything was all right.

He stood on the little stone door-step and looked about him a few minutes, key in hand. It seemed so new and business-like to be standing before a door which belonged to a house that he had rented, and into which he was to move his family so soon; for now he felt sure that his mother would come. He had dreamed often and often of the time when he would rent a house and move his family, but even his wildest waking dreams had put the time a few years ahead. Yet, here he stood all ready to do it.

"What a nice place this would be to keep a cow!" he said to himself, looking around on the bit of a yard with a neat shed at the back, looking wise and manly, and trying not to notice that his heart was beating like a sledge-hammer. "I wonder if we can't manage one of these days to have a cow? I wonder what Beth would say to that—whole tumblerful of milk! I wonder what Beth will say to everything!"

And he drew a little sigh. It began to seem a long time to wait from now until Monday before telling Beth about things.

The night was cold, so he decided very soon that it was foolish to stand outside, when he might as well go in. How nicely the key fitted in the lock! He threw the door open and stepped into the bit of a hall. There was a neat oil-cloth on the floor. He stopped and looked at it in surprise. He had not noticed it when he was there before.

"Maybe it goes with the house," he said aloud. "I hope it does. How nice it looks! Mother couldn't afford any now. I don't see where the money to move is coming from. That's what bothers me."

This he said just as he was opening the parlor door. For the next few minutes he said not a word. If you could have seen his face, you would have wanted a picture of it to take home with you and keep. He swung his lantern aloft, to get from it all possible light on the scene, and stood still. On the floor was a red-and-brown carpet, small, bright leaves growing on a woody ground, looking to him, somehow, like the stories of the woods that he and Beth had read together.

Soft the carpet was. He lifted one foot carefully and set it down on a bright

autumn leaf, then drew it back. He could not have that leaf stepped on. There were curtains at the windows, some warm, bright color, making him think of sunshine. There was a little round stove by the mantel, and a fire burning in it. The room was warm. There was a round table drawn out in the centre of the room, and some chairs around it, as though people had just been sitting there, and had gone away for a few minutes. There was even a little old-fashioned, cushioned lounge.

Reuben did not know that it was old-fashioned, but he knew it was beautiful. Not a word did he say. He went on tiptoe through the room into the pretty kitchen. How pretty it was! The floor had been painted; he saw that at a glance. He saw everything at a glance. A stove set up and glowing, shining with blacking outside and coals inside. The little cupboard stood open, and there were dishes ranged in rows, as if people had just eaten supper, and washed and set away the dishes. How quietly and yet how brightly the fire burned in the stove! Reuben thought of the one at home that always smoked, and sulked, and glowered.

"Well!" he said at last. "Well, if this isn't the queerest way to clean!" Then he tried to whistle. He had always whistled before when anything surprised him; but something was the matter with his throat. He choked and coughed, and tried to make a clear sound come; then he actually sat down on one of the neat chairs, of which there were several in the room, and cried. What was he crying about? He couldn't have told you if you had been there and asked; in fact, I suppose if you had been there, he wouldn't have cried; but his heart was so full of astonishment and delight, and some other queer feeling of which he did not know the name, that the tears would not stay back.

"Reuben Watson Stone, you're just a simpleton, that's what you are!" he told himself at last, very much amazed over the tears. Then without more ado he went upstairs. What could it all mean? He began to feel afraid that some dreadful mistake had been made, and some other family not belonging to him had moved in. Here was more carpet on the floor, and a bedstead set up, and curtains at the windows, and a little rocking chair, and a pretty oval table.

"Look here," said the boy at last, setting down his lantern on one chair and himself on another, "wake up, can't you? I say, old fellow, you must be dreaming. This isn't your house! Where did all these things come from, and who are they for? You don't own any of them. What are you going to do about it? This is just the queerest never, anyhow, that was ever heard of; there is never any telling what will happen next. I only wish Beth could see the flowers on this carpet! She would pick 'em as sure as the world." Then suddenly remembering the wonderful fact that Beth would see them very soon, that queer lump began to come into his throat again, and he started up suddenly and seized his lantern and hurried away. He didn't know what to make of himself, but he meant not to cry again.

"Well," said Mr. Barrows as he appeared at last in the kitchen where Reuben was putting away his lantern, "been over to the new house, have you? Has the cleaning been done to your mind?"

"Cleaning!" repeated Reuben. "I never heard of stoves and carpets and things being cleaned into a house before. Mr. Barrows, I don't know, I can't think— and there he stopped, and that ridiculous lump began to swell and swell in his throat again.

How was he ever going to be able to talk with that lump coming up to choke him?

"All right," said Mr. Barrows smiling, "you needn't think anything about it; I'll guess all you were going to say."

"But, sir," said Reuben, "I meant, I didn't mean—you know, sir—" here Reuben stopped again.

"Of course," said Mr. Barrows. "I know all about it. You didn't mean anybody should help you support your family. You didn't expect any help, and you're quite right. You'll be able to do it nicely, I haven't a doubt; but see here, my boy. Never be afraid to take a little hearty lifting from your friends, when they can do it as well as not, and like to, and it will make things easier for your mother. Nothing very wonderful has been done. The carpet was some that we had; didn't want to use it, and it might as well go down there and