

THE MAN OF THE HOUSE.

FANSY.

(Author of "Mrs. Solomon Smith Locking On.")

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE LITTLE HOUSE AT HOME.

"Hark!" said a voice inside. "What was that?"

"The wind, I suppose; I didn't hear anything. I say, Jim, wait a moment here. If I'd known you was so scared I'd never have undertaken this job with you."

"Well, hurry up, or the undertaking won't do you any good. I don't believe the key is here at all. That horse is a vixen, anyhow. He won't let us touch him, I don't believe. What ails them matches? Why don't they barn?"

"I don't believe he will," said Reuben to himself, in answer to their remark about Samson. "So you are after him, you scamps. I'm glad I hung the key where it doesn't belong. Now for getting back."

The fact was, the little noise one of them had heard was the turning of the key in the lock. It slipped into place as noiselessly as anybody could wish, turned with just the least bit of a click which the wind might have made in a dozen ways, and Reuben drew it out again, and tiptoed over the snow, climbed to the coal-box, wound his spry young limbs around the gutter-pipe, scuttled over the shed roof, and was back in his room again in a jiffy. Moving very softly still, not waiting for clothes, even yet, but wrapping himself in the grand overcoat that had kept him warm all day, he opened the hall-door, and felt his way down the hall, to the front stairs, down those stairs and another hall, carefully feeling his way, and knocking softly at last at what he guessed was Mr. Barrows' room.

There was no answer, and he had to knock a little louder.

"Halloo!" came at last from inside.

"Who's there? What's the matter?"

"It's me," said Reuben in a soft whisper. "Won't you please to let me in? I want to speak to you?"

A few words of talk inside, a little waiting, and then Mr. Barrows threw open the door.

"What's up, my boy? Are you sick?"

"No sir," said Reuben, stepping inside and quietly closing the door; "but there's somebody in the house."

"Oh no," said Mr. Barrows. "I guess not. You've been dreaming and got frightened; and Reuben knew by the sound of his voice that he was smiling.

"No, sir," said Reuben. "It's them that are scared, I guess, or will be pretty soon. I don't think they know yet. They're in the kitchen, sir, hunting for the barn key; and I've locked 'em up, only they don't know it."

"In the kitchen! Who are? You've locked them up! Are you talking in your sleep?"

And Mr. Barrows fumbled for his matches, touched the gas jet, and took a look at the boy done up in an overcoat, and with bare feet and legs.

"No, sir," said Reuben again; and he giggled in spite of himself. "He knew he looked funny. 'It's quite a long story, sir, I heard 'em. I know they are there, and I don't quite see how they can get out until you or I let 'em. There's the key. They waked me up talking about their plans, and I knew I had the kitchen key, so I slipped down the roof and locked the door. They thought I was the wind, and kept on hunting for the barn key."

A more astonished-looking man than Mr. Barrows it would be hard to find. There was much about the story that he did not understand, but it was plain to be seen that Reuben was wide awake, and knew what he was talking about. So, without more ado, Mr. Barrows hurriedly dressed himself, Reuben quietly stepping into the hall.

"Better go up-stairs, my boy," Mr. Barrows said as he passed him. "You have done your share; and if the scamps are young fellows, as I suspect, it will be better for you not to appear."

"I'll wait here," said Reuben, taking a seat in the hall.

Mr. Barrows went on through the hall, through the dining-room, stopping there to turn on the gas, which, when the door was opened, would send a flood of light into the kitchen. Then he quietly opened the door, and said:

"Well, boys, good morning!" and took a seat.

Reuben, listening, thought he would give almost anything to see their faces just then. He heard their smothered exclamations of dismay and terror, and their dash for the door which, of course, was locked, to their utter confusion.

Just what passed in that kitchen after that, Reuben does not know to this day. He heard the voices, low and steady, but could catch no word. By and by he heard the key turn in the lock, heard Mr. Barrows say "Good-by!" and then presently he came back to the hall.

"You have done a grand night's work, my boy," he said, placing his hand on Reuben's head. "One that you can brag about forever. Those fellows meant to take Samson and have an all-night frolic. They would have ruined him, without doubt, but they would have done worse than that. Samson is a good horse when people know how to manage him, and a bad one when they don't. They would have taken the whip to him, and then he would have been unmanageable at once, and the probability is they would have been killed. Now come where it is warm, and let me hear the whole story of how you found them out; and he led the way to the sitting room.

"I don't suppose they meant to steal?" Reuben said in an inquiring tone.

"I don't suppose they did," said Mr. Barrows. "At least they didn't call it that; and yet you see they were preparing to steal the use of my horse; and they stole the last hours of the Sabbath day for their own pleasure. In point of fact, they were thieves, the worst kind of thieves: stealing from God. People often fail to call things their right names. Is your question decided yet, my boy?"

"No, sir," said Reuben, looking down.

And then Mr. Barrows caught sight of his bare feet, and sent him to bed with directions to sleep as late as he could in the morning.

But when Reuben had tucked himself into bed again, it seemed to him that his eyes were wider open than they had ever been before. He went over every little circumstance connected with the night, and wondered for the twentieth time who those fellows could be. He thought of all the little things that had happened beforehand to make it possible for him to prevent the mischief.

"Exactly as though somebody who knew all about what was going to happen, had planned all the other things and made them fit," he said.

And then he gave a little start and his eyes seemed to grow bigger as he remembered that God knew about all things before they came to pass. Another thought made his cheeks grow red. Mr. Barrows had called the fellows thieves, and said they stole from God. Had not his teacher said that day that he belonged to God? Had he not stolen himself from God, and used his time and his strength as he pleased? Was it possible that he, Reuben Watson Stone, was a thief?

"I'll give myself back to him," he said decidedly. "I'll never steal another hour. I'll decide the question now, this minute. And I'll tell him so, and ask him to take me."

A second time on that cold winter night did Reuben Stone hop out of his warm bed. This time it was to get on his knees.

In the little house at home, things were not getting on any too well during Reuben's absence. The mother was secretly very much astonished over the number of things that one small boy could do to make the days pass more easily. She had not known before just what a help and comfort her "man of the house" was.

But missing him was not the only trouble. Work suddenly grew very scarce. Whether all the boys in the world were supplied with shirts, Mrs. Stone did not know. She only knew that when she carried the last bundle back, a thing she was not used to doing — it was two years since Reuben had allowed her to carry any bundles through the streets — the foreman told her the package to carry home would be lighter; that he had only a very small one; work was scarce, and it had been as much as they could do to divide it among their faithful workers so as to give all some. This made Mrs. Stone look very grave. It was as much as they could do to get along when she sewed every minute; and the very little that Reuben had been able to earn — so little

that she had not supposed she could miss it, was really missed a great deal. She walked home very slowly, saving the five cents that she would have cost to ride part of the long way in the street-car, and tried to con-
drive some way to save money, or to earn a little more. To make matters worse, what did Beth do but meet her at the door with news:

"O mother, the agent has been here and given notice that the rent on this house will be raised a whole dollar the first of next month!"

"A whole dollar!" repeated Mrs. Stone. "Then we must starve."

And then she said what Beth never saw her do before, she sat down in the little sewing-chair behind the stove and cried. This was only two days after Reuben went away. From that time mother and daughter scrimped, and pinched, both with coal and potatoes, and tried in every possible way to save a penny.

Miss Hunter was just as good as she could be, and had invited them twice to dinner, and once to tea, but the second time Mrs. Stone would not go.

"We can't invite her back," she said grimly to Beth; "and she does it out of charity, anyhow. I ain't used to charity. You can go if you want to, child; but her nice white bread would choke me."

But Beth wouldn't go without her mother, not even to save an evening's meal.

So it was not much that Miss Hunter could do for them. In fact, she could not find out how much they needed doing for, though she suspected, for Beth's eyes were often red. She knew, too, that work had failed, but that was no more than had happened to her, skilled workwoman that she was. She shed no tears over it for two reasons: In the first place, she had a snug little bit of money laid aside for future use; and, in the next place, it gave her time to make over the blue merino into a perfect fit for Beth. She got the exact measure by offering to cut out a calico for her that the mother was making out of hers.

"There's that ten dollars, mother," reminded Beth as they sat together in the evening, talking drearily about the future.

"Yes," said Mrs. Stone, but she spoke gloomily.

She didn't often feel so dreary, but it seemed a dreadful thing to have work fail her, and rent raised the same week. It was Sunday evening. And they had passed a dreary day. A good deal of it had been spent in bed. To be sure, Beth went to Sunday-school with Miss Hunter, and in her new calico, and lovely fur cape and hood, looked as neat as wax. Miss Hunter would have liked her to wear the blue merino, but she had not found a good excuse for giving it to her yet. She was waiting for Reuben to come back to make a smooth road for so nice a present.

"If I'd known about her birthday, and had it ready, I might have given it to her then," she said meditatively. "But then, dear me! I wasn't acquainted with them then. Besides, if I had been, I wouldn't have found out it was her birthday. It is so queer in the little chick to talk about Reuben's birthday, when she was born herself the same day and hour. It shows what an unselfish little thing she is."

After Sunday-school, which Beth had not liked as well as Reuben did his (she had sat beside two little girls who whispered and giggled over the queerness of wearing furbloods and capes and calico dresses), she found the fire out and her mother in bed.

"It went out," the mother said, raising herself to speak to the little girl; "and I thought I would let it go until it was time to get something to eat. It would save coal, and the coal is getting very low. Come and lie down and take a nap."

But Beth had slept well all night and her eyes were wide open. The last thing she wanted to do was to take a nap. She thought of the glimpse she had had into Miss Hunter's cheery room, and a great longing came to her to sit down inside, and read her Sabbath-school book.

"Mother," she said, "couldn't I go into Miss Hunter's room? She asked me to come; and it is so nice and warm in there!"

But the mother answered her sharply. "No, child, no! Don't beg fire until you have to. Come and lie down."

So Beth, with a sigh, laid away her hood and cape, and slipped under the quilts beside her mother, and lay very still so that the mother could sleep, but did not sleeping herself, and wished the dreary day was

done, and that Reuben was at home again. It seemed at least a month since he went away. So this evening they sat drearily over the dying coal, and Beth reminded her mother of Reuben's ten dollars.

"Yes," the mother had said. "I wanted to keep that to buy you and Reuben some spring clothes. I don't know how you are to get along without some. He is just in rags, and he out-grew every single thing he had last summer; but it will have to go, of course, for coal and rent, and then, how long will it last? Ten dollars isn't a fortune, I tell you. If I don't get more work this week, I shall have to spend some of it right away; for these shirts won't buy potatoes and salt enough to last us through the week."

"Mother," said Beth, after another gloomy silence, "don't you truly think anything at all will come of Reuben's going out there to stay a week?"

The mother gave a provoked little "Humph!" as a beginning to her answer. "Of course not! What could come of it? He is nothing but a child. Small for his age, too. I don't see what possessed me to let him go off like that. I've had my pay for it. I haven't slept two good hours a night since he has been away. If he only gets home safe, without learning any dreadful habits, I shall be satisfied. It was a wild idea to think of our moving away out there. Where would we get the money to move? And just as though anybody would let us have a house without paying for it beforehand!"

"But the man said we could earn it," persisted Beth.

"Oh, yes, the man said a great many things. He took a fancy to Reuben, and felt good-natured just then, and thought he would bestow him a kindness to let him take a little journey; and he knew well enough, I suppose, that Reuben would find out he couldn't do the work, and would come home satisfied. I hope he will. I never want him to go out of my sight again."

Poor Beth sighed, and proceeded to covering the coals and making ready for bed as her mother directed. But for all that talk, she couldn't quite get over her faith in Reuben's journey, and her belief that something would come of it.

It was high time for something to come; for, on Monday morning, the shirts were carried home, and, behold, there was not one to carry back again.

"Dreadful slack times!" the foreman said, and he spoke as though he was really very sorry. "We've never seen tighter times since we've been in business. Had to turn away a good many of our hands three weeks ago. We've hung on to our best ones as long as we could. And you shall have work again as soon as we have it, maybe in three or four weeks, maybe not so soon. The pinch won't last long. It never does. Keep up a stout heart."

Yes; but on what? Three or four weeks was time enough to starve and to freeze. Mrs. Stone did not really expect to do either. She believed she could beg enough to save her from death. She believed that cheery Miss Hunter, who had already been so very good to them, would find some way to keep them from starving. Why, for the matter of that, there was the ten dollar gold piece, and the rent not due yet for a week. A good many things might happen in a week. But Mrs. Stone was not in the mood to cheer herself without any hope of the future. It all looked as dark as night to her. She did not cry again; but she went under her room with so sad a face that Beth cried whenever she looked at it.

Once the child ventured a suggestion: "Mother, Reuben said he would come on the first train. He will be here by dinner time. Won't he be real hungry?"

"I suppose so; but we must give him some of the baked potatoes and bread. I don't dare to spend a cent for butter now, or meat. We must save for the rent, child, or we'll be turned out into the streets. This is a strange time to raise poor folks' rent."

It was just at that moment that the train which was bringing Reuben home, steamed in at the depot three miles away.

CHAPTER XX.
A GENERAL SURPRISE.

Reuben jumped from the platform just as the engine gave its final yell. His cheeks were red as roses, and his eyes were bright. He had been gone a whole week; and what a week it had been! He looked taller and

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