

THE MAN OF THE HOUSE.

BY PANSY.

(Author of "Mrs. Solomon Smith Looking On.")
CHAPTER V.

MISS PRISCILLA HUNTER.

"Good-morning," said a very pleasant voice. It seemed to be speaking to Reuben Stone, though whose it was, or where it came from, he couldn't decide. He stood with his hands in his pockets to keep them from freezing, looking about him, to settle what to do first. He looked up and down, and across, and at last discovered the owner of the voice,—a trim, kindly-faced woman, with her head reached out from the upper window,—looking down at him.

"Did you think I was a snow-bird?" she asked him. Then, without waiting for his answer, "I suspect you are a neighbor of mine, and I thought I would introduce myself. I've just moved in. Don't you live in this house?"

"Yes'm," said Reuben, "I live in the north-corner room, second floor."

"Just so, and I live in the south-corner room, second floor; we are very near neighbors, you see. I wish you a happy last day of the year."

Reuben laughed, then looked grave. "I'm not likely to have a very happy one, as I can see," he said, and sighed a little in spite of his determination not to.

"Is that so? Now that's a pity. I always like to have a year end well, it makes such a good beginning for the new one. Suppose you make it end nice whether it wants to or not?"

This made Reuben laugh again; her voice was so cheery, that he could not help being rather cheered by it.

"The brisk voice went on again; "suppose you come up here, and show me how to unfasten the spring to my window, and tell me what is going to be the matter with your day?"

"I'll tend to the window," Reuben said, going briskly in, and mounting the stairs two at a time, "but as to what is going to be the matter with this day, I wish I knew;" this last, he said to himself.

The window, fastening was turned without any trouble, and the window, when Reuben put his strong arms to it, went up as if by magic.

"See what it is to know how?" said his new friend, admiringly. "I suppose I fussed at that window for maybe ten minutes before I made up my mind to apply for help. Well, now, what is your objection to this day?"

"Why, I haven't any objection to it," Reuben said, laughing; "but it doesn't begin as though it liked me very well."

"What do you want of it?"

"I want it to give me some work to do."

"Work to do! Well, now, I never! Why the world is just as full of work as it can be. I don't know there was anything so easy to find as that."

"It keeps itself snug away from me, then," said Reuben, growing grim; "I've been looking for some these,—well, ever so many days."

"And you haven't found any?"

"No'm; none to speak of."

"Well, that's just astonishing! it must be you are particular; what kind of work do you want?"

"No'm, I'm not the least bit particular; I'd take any kind of work that folks would pay for."

"Oh, you want pay, do you? That's another thing; though to be sure, I never knew anybody to work without pay, though they don't always think of the pay at the time."

"I have to think of it," said Reuben, stoutly; "I need it, you see; it isn't as though I worked for fun, or to get some spending money for myself; I do it to support the family."

"So you have a family on your hands, have you? How many? A father and mother, I suppose; any brothers and sisters?"

Reuben looked out of the window and waited a minute before he staid his voice to say, "There's no father, ma'am; I'm the man of the house, and I have a mother and one sister to support. At least I want to support them, and mean to, sometime; mother has to work hard now, and so does Beth; but I don't mean it to be always so."

"Good for you," said his new acquaintance looking at him approvingly. Mean-

time she had been at work getting a fire started in her bright little cooking-stove, and Reuben had lingered because it was such a bright pleasant room that he hated to go. How cheery it was to be sure. Not so very much larger than their own, but very different. In the first place, there was a carpet on the floor, only spread down, for the new comer had moved in but the day before; but it was a warm-looking carpet, and would cover the entire floor nicely. Then there were already curtains up to the windows, white ones too; Reuben did not know that they were only the coarsest of muslin costing but a few cents a yard, and would not have cared, if he had. Also, there was a lounge, bright-covered, and a chair, which must have been the one that Beth had admired so much. There was a plant or two already seated on a low window-sill, and the morning sun was getting ready to shine on them. South windows in this room, two of them; no wonder it was pleasant.

But the pleasantest feature of the room was that trim figure, filling the small shining tea-kettle with water. Reuben watched her admiringly, and knew now that she was very pretty; he had not discovered it at first; he could not have told now what there was about her that he liked so much; he only knew that he liked her. He sprang forward when the kettle was filled, and lifted it quickly and skillfully to its place on the little stove.

"Thank you," said his hostess, watching him with a satisfied air. "So you mean to support your mother and Beth? I shouldn't wonder if you would do it. I kind of feel it in my bones that you will. I had a glimpse of Beth, I guess, yesterday. She is a nice, pleasant looking little sister, but, as though she ought to be supported. How are you going to do it?"

"That's the rub," said Reuben, his face growing grave; "there seems to be nothing that a boy can find to do. Odd jobs, you see, don't pay. You take half your time standing around looking for them, and may be half the time you don't find them."

"Just so; and then, according to that calculation, the whole of the time is gone. There's one thing though that is more important than to discover what you are going to do: that is to decide what you are not going to do."

"I'm going to do anything," said Reuben stoutly. "I don't care what it is; anything under the sun that folks will pay for, and I can do, I'm ready for. I picked out the kinds of work that I would like, for a good while, and hunted for them, but I gave that all up long ago. Now it is anything."

"I'm sorry to hear it," she said gravely shaking her grey head, as she drew out a cunning little round table, and spread a white cloth on it.

"I'm very sorry indeed to hear it; because I know of work that folks will pay for that if you were my boy I'd rather not be supported than to have you do."

"What, for instance?"

"Stealing, and lying, and killing folks, and all that sort of thing."

"Oh! Well of course I didn't mean that; folks don't get paid for doing those things."

"Don't they! There's where you're mistaken; they get paid in more ways than one. If you're talking about money pay, they get lots of that; I'm not sure but it appears to pay almost better in that way than any other business."

"But it's against the laws to do such things."

"Well, anybody with common sense would suppose so of course; but this is a queer world you know, and has queer laws; and I'm ashamed to have to own that you are mistaken; the law winks at the whole thing."

"Winks at stealing and murder?" exclaimed Reuben, beginning to feel that he had made the acquaintance of a lunatic.

"I don't know what the laws are where you came from; but in New York State such things can't be done without folks suffering for them, if they are caught at it."

"Bless your heart, my boy, I wish that were true. I've lived in New York State for seventeen years and seen the business going on all the time. I know men who, have stolen houses, and horses, and cows, and furniture, and books, and I don't know what not, and murdered more wives and children than I can count, and the law hasn't peeped. Oh, yes it has, too; it has given every one of the creatures permission to keep on doing it, year after year."

"Oh," said Reuben, the look of astonishment passing from his face, "I know what you mean now. Yes, liquor-selling is mean enough business, I suppose; in fact I know it is. I should never do it for myself."

"For yourself! Oh no, of course not; but how would it be if you had a chance to do errands for a man who sold it! Carry home beer, or wine, or even stand behind the counter and sell the vile stuff by the glass?"

"Well," said Reuben, thoughtfully, "I've never looked for work in any of those places; but I suppose I'd take work if it were offered me; might as well, you know; lots of boys stand ready to do it, and if I didn't take the place somebody else would. Yes, sir, I'm in for work; I've got to work. You don't catch me refusing it; though I'll risk my having such good luck as to have it offered me."

"I hope not," said his new friend in great gravity. "If those are your principles, I sincerely hope no one will lead you into temptation; you use just exactly the argument that might be used about stealing. Lots of folks stand all ready to steal, and I dare say a good deal of stealing will be done, whether you do it or not. Why shouldn't you have your share?"

"Oh well, now," said Reuben staring at her in great astonishment. "That's entirely different, you know. Maybe the very thing that I'd steal won't get stolen; but I know that every man who wants a clerk to sell his brandy and things can get one; so what difference does it make, whether it's me, or somebody else?"

"Look here," said the gray-eyed woman, laying down her knife and the loaf from which she was cutting beautiful slices of bread, and facing round to Reuben, her eyes looking larger and grayer than they had before; "suppose that sister of yours,—you love her don't you?"

"I should rather think I did!" was Reuben's prompt answer.

"Well, now, suppose she had made up her mind to poison herself to-day, and was sure to do it, whether you helped her or whether you didn't, wouldn't it make a speck of difference to you, when you thought about it afterwards, whether it was you mixed the poison for her and held it out to her, or whether it was somebody else?"

Over this question Reuben paused thoughtfully for a few seconds, then said, the color rising slowly on his brown cheeks, "Yes, ma'am, it would. I'd rather it would have been anybody else?"

"Just so," said the gray-eyed woman with an emphatic nod of her grey head.

"Now I'll tell you something; it's a thing that I don't like to tell very often, nor to think about. I had a father, and a brother, and a friend, and every one, were poisoned to death with rum. Murder, I call it, though a good many people helped in it, and nobody was hung for it; but I'm glad that you wasn't one of the helpers; and I hope, with all my soul, that you will never lift your finger to help any other body's father or brother or friend to take poison."

To this appeal Reuben seemed to have no answer to make. The bread-cutting went on in silence for a few seconds; then his new friend said, in a changed and cheery tone,—

"Well sir; I think it is time you and I introduced ourselves if we are to be neighbors and friends. I'm Miss Priscilla Hunter, a tailoress by trade, and I expect to make a great many vests and coats and pants for folks of about your size, or a trifle younger. Now if you are the head of the family, what is your name and business?"

"I'm Reuben Watson Stone, and my business, you see, is to take care of my mother and sister, but I haven't found how to do it yet."

"You'll do it," with an emphatic nod of her head. "I'll risk you. I shouldn't wonder if you should have a pretty good run of business this very day. Had your breakfast?"

"No'm," said Reuben his cheeks growing hotter. Did she suppose he was going to tell her that they had but half a loaf of bread left, and he had saved it for mother and Beth, and started out intending to earn his own before he ate it? They were in closer quarters than usual just now, but he did not mean to tell anybody if he could help it. So he said, "No'm, I haven't eaten it yet."

"Pretty early, that's a fact" said Miss Hunter; "but seeing I was moving, I thought I'd be on hand early. If you are

not in too great a hurry I wonder if you wouldn't buy some tacks for me, and a few single nails, and a tack-hammer,—I broke mine taking the tacks out with the claw-end,—and a spool of black linen thread while you are about it, and let me pay you with a cup of coffee and a slice or two of my best toast?"

"I'll buy the things in a jiffy," said Reuben, his mouth watering at the thought of the hot coffee and toast. "But you needn't pay me; I'll do it to be neighborly."

"Business is business," said Miss Hunter, briskly. "But, never mind, we'll begin by being neighborly; you sit down and have some breakfast with me, for my part, and then go do my errands for your part, and then we'll both be neighborly and even. Don't you see?"

"No ma'am," said Reuben, laughing. "I have to go right by the stores and can do your errands as well as not; and it isn't worth a cup of coffee and a piece of toast to do them."

"Not! Well then, I'll have you get some buttons, and match a piece of clothing for me at the trimming store on Broadway. Know where that is? All right; I'll be even with you, you see, somehow." All this time she had been dashing around her neat kitchen, putting two plates on the nice round table, putting her coffee to bubble—for the pint of water in the small bright tea kettle boiled with a swiftness that would have astonished Beth,—toasting her beautiful slices of bread, and in a wonderfully short space of time Reuben Watson Stone found himself seated at the nice round table, with its white table-cloth, taking a lovely breakfast with Miss Priscilla Hunter. He laughed while he ate, to think how all this would astonish Beth; and concluded that she couldn't be more astonished about it than he was.

During the breakfast, the talk went on. Reuben found himself telling Miss Hunter the most unexpected and astonishing things,—how the cow was sold, and he wanted to send Beth to school but couldn't; had wanted to go himself, but had given that up long ago. Wanted to buy his mother a house one of these days, wanted, meantime, to pay the next month's rent, and get a whole bushel of coal; but would fail even in these, if he got no work. "I'd like to buy my coal by the bushel, if I could," said this "head of the house," "because, you see, people who buy at wholesale get things cheaper, I have heard."

"Just so," said Miss Hunter, taking grave bites of her toast, and uncovering suddenly a mysterious little tin dish that she had lifted from the stove. "Look here, what a present I had yesterday from one of my old neighbors who lives in the country. She keeps a hen who lays eggs on purpose for me, and as soon as there are six of them, my neighbor brings them along." And she plumped a lovely white morsel just out of its creamy shell on Reuben's plate.

"Oh!" he said, breathless for a minute, then—"this is too much."

"One egg isn't much;" said Miss Hunter, composedly. "I know a boy who used to eat two at every single breakfast;" which fact so astonished Reuben that he said not another word. But if there had been any way of putting that egg into his pocket, or his hat, or somewhere, and slipping away with it nice and warm and white to his mother, how he would have liked it!

"So the cow is sold," said Miss Hunter, meditatively. "That's bad, I suppose, for the people who owned her, but I must say, it makes my way look clearer; you see I have a friend, about a mile away from here, who has milk brought to her from a farm in the country every morning, and I buy two quarts a day of her,—I'm rather fond of milk,—but the thing is, now that I've moved, to get it. She used to have her boy bring it to me on his way to school, but his way won't be down this street; now if I could find a boy or a girl who would like to tramp after it for me, and be paid in milk, a quart a day, don't you see I would be fixed?"

"We could do that," said Reuben, eagerly. "Beth and I. She likes to take walks, and mother likes to have her, only she hasn't any regular place to go, and mother doesn't like to have her wandering about; but whenever it was nice and pleasant, she could get the milk, and when it stormed, or was too cold for a girl, I could go."

"Just so," said Miss Hunter nodding her head, "Then we have so much fixed."

(To be continued.)