

THE MAN OF THE HOUSE.

BY FANSY.

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

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"What has happened," she asked, in a voice which though excited was low, as of one who was often obliged to keep troublesome things to herself. "Who are you? And where is Spunk's master?"

Reuben had a faint idea that Spunk had been his own master for a long time, but he hurried to explain. "I'm Reuben Watson Stone, ma'am; Spunk's master offered me a ride, and Spunk got wild and ran away, and his master went to sleep; he's all safe, I guess, I kept him tucked up as much as I could, but he's sound asleep as a nut."

"Asleep!" repeated the lady, and her tone was full of horror and dismay.

Reuben felt sure that she knew, without any other explanation, just what was the matter with him.

"Wait," she said, "I'll get a lantern," and she glided into the house. Back again in a few minutes, with a lantern which she set down in a sheltered place on the piazza; then she came close to the sleigh.

"Boy," she said, still speaking in that low tone, "Are you strong? Do you suppose that you and I could get him into the house and to his room without any other help? There's no man in the house but Mike, the new servant, and I don't like him, and don't want to trust him to see Edward sick in this way. He is sick, of course, or he would never have gone to sleep when the horse was running. And she turned and tried to look sharply into Reuben's face.

"Yes'm," said Reuben, simply, "I'm strong; I think we can manage it;" and he felt as if there was the strength of a young lion in his little body just then! He was so sorry for the lady! He wondered if "Edward" was her son, and what his mother would do if her son should ever come home in such a fashion. "I never will!" never, never!" he said to himself, and set his teeth hard. Then he hopped down like a squirrel and began tugging at the stupid lump which had slipped to the floor of the sleigh. How heavy he was! Yet he was a very slightly built young man; Reuben wondered how he could be so hard to lift; the mother—if it was his mother—tugged with all her might; fortunately the bottom of the sleigh was about on a level with the broad piazza, so after much puffing and panting, they had the sleeping mass pulled well across the piazza inside the brightly-lighted room, Spunk standing still and looking on with as much quiet patience as though he had never thought of dancing or running.

"Now do you think we could get him on this bed?" the lady asked, and she threw open the door leading to paradise—at least it looked somewhat so to the cold, tired boy. He took in the picture almost without knowing that he saw it; a great, beautiful room, with rich crimson curtains at the windows, dropping in glowing masses to the very floor. A large, beautifully-carved bedstead, made up in spotless white; a great crimson-covered easy chair,—the crimson of the same strange brightness of the carpet, which made him think of the woods aflame with red-gold leaves in autumn,—and two mirrors turning around whenever he did, and making three or four of him in different corners of the room!—At least this was the way that Reuben's fascinated eyes took it in, during the moment that he stood staring.—Then he said, "Yes'm, I guess we can," and turned toward that senseless fellow on the floor.

"How very small you are!" said the lady in surprise, seeming to look really at him for the first time. "I don't believe you can possibly lift him; why, you must be very young."

"I'm going on eleven, ma'am," said Reuben, drawing himself up, and looking as tall as he could; there seemed no need to tell her that, but the day before had been his tenth birthday!

Then he stooped to prove his lifting powers; the lady came to help him, and though he told himself that if he had been his mother he would never let her lift like that, and though he declared to himself, that that beautiful white bed, fit for a prince, was no place for such a lump as this! still they put him there, he helping only by turning over just when he ought to have kept still, thereby nearly pitching himself out of bed, and muttering something about being let alone.

Oh, such a sigh as that poor mother gave when it was finally accomplished, and she stood looking at him! It went to Reuben's heart, and fixed certain resolves which had been growing stronger every minute for the last few hours. What was to be done next? The strange lady acted as though she had already forgotten him, and stood with such an utterly mournful gaze fixed on her son that Reuben could hardly bear to see it.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, ma'am?" he asked at last, and she started and turned towards him. "You, poor boy!" she said, pityingly, "how tired you look! Where do you live?" and when he told her, she declared promptly that he must not think of going home; "it is more than three miles from here, and it is after midnight now; you are too cold and tired to think of going; it would be dangerous; you might freeze to death. Do you think I could let you go? I suppose you have saved my poor Edward's life. Boy, do you know what is the matter with him?"

"Yes'm," said Reuben, simply. What else could he say?

"And have you a mother?"

"Yes'm, I have; I'm her only son, the man of the house; and I ought to be home this minute; she will be scared to death."

"It won't kill her; I have waited for my Edward until morning, many a time; you can make her heart glad over the whole story to-morrow. Look here, Reuben,—did you say your name was Reuben?—Well, do you never go home to your mother as my only son has come home to me to-night!"

"No, ma'am," said Reuben, solemnly, "I never will." Then he gave his attention to business. "What about Spunk, ma'am? He ought not to stand out there like this, after such a trip as he has had."

"True enough," said the lady with another great sigh. "I have forgotten the poor beast. I suppose I must try to rouse Mike to take care of him."

Whoever "Mike" was, she evidently disliked him, and dreaded so much to call him on the scene, that Reuben said, "If you would like ma'am, I think I can fix Spunk out all right for the rest of the night; we are pretty well acquainted; ought to be by this time."

"Are you sure you are not afraid of him?" the lady asked anxiously.

"Not a bit, ma'am;" and as he slung the lantern on his arm and went in search of the barn, he said to Spunk, "Do you suppose I intend to be afraid of you, or most anything else, old fellow, after to-night?" Much troubled was Reuben about his mother, and Beth. While he was putting Spunk to bed, he felt so wide awake and ready for anything that he told himself he meant to go "right, straight home;" but the lady was watching for him when he came back, and opened the door, and then opened another door and pointed up stairs, and told him to go right up and to bed, he would find everything comfortable for him. And by this time, the excitement in which he had been living so long, having cooled down, the warm room, and the stillness, and the thought of the bed, made the poor ten-year-old boy feel so very tired that he knew that he could not make his feet drag over the frozen distance between him and mother.

"I guess I shall have to give it up," he said, wearily, "I meant to go home, so mother wouldn't be scared all night; but I'm afraid I couldn't get there."

"Of course you couldn't," his hostess told him promptly; "it would be just committing suicide to try it. Go right upstairs and get to rest; in the morning bright and early you can make it all right with mother. If I had anybody to send, I would let her know this minute that you are safe; but we have just lost our faithful hired man, and this Mike is a new servant, and—she came closer and spoke low—I think he drinks; indeed I am sure he had been drinking to night when he came home, and I am afraid of him."

"Ugh!" said Reuben aloud, when he got safely into the up-stairs room. "Two drunkards! I ought to stay all night to take care of her. Reuben Watson Stone if you needed a temperance lecture I think you have had one to-night."

"Hail Columbia!" this remark followed an amazed stare which he took around the beautiful room into which he had been directed. Soft carpet, soft curtains, soft bed, bright fire, bright gas-light! Reuben had never in his life been alone in such a room before. For fully five minutes he

wandered up and down, examining, admiring, delighting his eyes with a sight of all the beauty; trying to charge his memory with the details, in order that he might describe it all to Beth. Then the tears suddenly gathered in his eyes as he thought of Beth watching, waiting, crying; of his mother growing pale with watching and fear.

"I oughtn't to have staid!" he said, remorsefully; "I ought to have gone right straight home, even if I had most froze." At that moment his eyes rested on a little stand which was carefully covered over with a napkin showing irregular mounds of something underneath. He raised the napkin curiously; bread and butter, and the wing and the leg of a chicken, and a piece of frosted cake, and a dish of canned strawberries! Then Reuben discovered that he was hungry. Why not? When was it that he had that breakfast with Miss Hunter? "Seems three days ago, at the very least," he muttered, and he felt in his pockets for the packages she had sent by him to get. Yes they were safe. "She'll think I went to Greenland to get 'em!" he chuckled; "and I did most."

Tears and laughter were both very easy for Reuben to-night. He fell to eating the bread and butter, and decided that not even Miss Hunter's was quite equal to it. While he ate he pulled off his boots, and decided that his feet were very tired. Presently the jacket was thrown aside, and in less time than it takes me to tell it, he was in the middle of the nice bed. He had decided to rest himself just a little while, and then get up and slip away home. He would not go to sleep at all, he told himself, for fear he should not be able to waken in a few minutes. But the bed was so soft, and the room was so warm and bright, and his head and feet and arms and hands were so, very, very tired! He had just time to say to himself, "What a lovely, lovely bed this is! If I should go to sleep I don't believe I could wake up again;" and then that was the last he knew of himself for hours and hours.

CHAPTER VIII.

TEMPTATION RESISTED.

The next thing that Reuben knew, the sun was shining directly into his eyes. He sat up straight and looked around. "Halloo!" he said, utmost amazement in his face, "what's all this? Who am I, and how did I get here? Beth?" but of course, Beth being three miles away didn't answer. "This is the biggest dream I ever had!" he said; then memory began to wake up, and take him back over that long, wild ride, of the night before. "I declare it's morning!" he said at last, much astonished; "and here I am in bed, instead of being at home." Whereupon he hopped out to the middle of the floor, and began to dress in haste. His plan was to slip out and away, and get home before the people in this grand house would know anything about it. But the sad faced mother down stairs did not intend any such thing. He opened his door very softly, but she also opened one on the opposite side of the hall, and smiled a good-morning. "I want you to come in and take some breakfast with me," she said, as they went down the wide staircase together, "and after that, my son would like to see you for a few minutes."

"I ought to get home just as fast as my feet will take me," declared Reuben, dismayed at this new delay. "I meant to go last night, after I had rested a little bit; but I got asleep. I don't know how I came to do it, and I don't know what mother will think."

"She will think you did just right when you tell her about it," the lady said smiling; "you see if she don't. It will not take you long to eat some breakfast, and by that time the South-side cars will begin to run, and they will take you faster than your feet."

"Yes'm," said Reuben, "but my feet will do it cheaper." But he followed her into the elegant dining-room; there did not seem to be anything else that he could do, just then. As he did so, the memory of his breakfast the morning before, flashed over him. "I declare! I take my breakfasts out now-a-days," he said to himself, laughing over the queerness of it all. This was a very different dining-room from Miss Hunter's. It was handsomely furnished, and the table was set with silver and china, and gilded with a dozen pretty things of which Reuben did not know the name. It was set for two, and Reuben presently found himself seated opposite the pale lady and

waited on, by a deft servant, to steak and toast and coffee and canned fruit and griddle cakes and maple syrup and well,—a number of other dishes with which he was unacquainted. Never had he taken breakfast in such style before. Indeed, I may say he had never expected to be surrounded by such elegance; but looking around on it all, it took him but a second to decide that he liked it; and, in about one second more he had resolved on having his dining room furnished in just this way when he became a man.

"So you are the man of the house?" said his hostess, as if being able to see his thoughts.

"Yes'm," he said, blushing over the thought of what she would say should she know how he was planning to furnish his house. "I have a mother and sister to support. I haven't been able to do it yet; mother has to work, and so does Beth; but then I help, and one of these days I expect to do it all."

"I believe you will," she said, looking at him earnestly. It was much the same words that Miss Priscilla Hunter had spoken to him the morning before. It was certainly very encouraging to find that these two women neither laughed at him, nor were doubtful about it; they evidently believed in him. I can't say he enjoyed this breakfast quite so much as the one in Miss Hunter's south room. The truth was, he felt a little embarrassed by the largeness of his napkin, and the weight of his silver fork, and the careful attention of the servant. Still he managed to eat quite a hearty breakfast, in haste though he was, for of course it would not do to go until Spunk's master, or rather Spunk's owner saw him, since he wanted to do so.

The grave-faced lady was very pleasant, and was very much interested in his mother and Beth. About the latter, especially, she asked many questions, as to her age, size, appearance, and the like. And Reuben, who thought his sister was a beauty, had no objection to describing her; so the conversation went on nicely. At last the lady arose from the table and said, "Now we will go in and see Edward a moment." Through the hall, across another room, large and elegant, into the same bright spot where he had landed the night before. Edward was still in the bed where he had been rolled and tumbled by Reuben himself; but all trace of disorder had disappeared. He was awake and himself; though very pale, with heavy rings of black under his eyes. "Well, my boy," he said, as Reuben stood in the door, and waited, "I hear that you and Spunk had a time of it last night. Ran away did he? the scamp! I remember something about his being restive, but one of my hard headaches came on in the afternoon, and I was soon beyond having much idea of what was going on. How came you to be with me, my boy, I don't remember!"

"You asked me to ride, sir," said Reuben, "and I remembered Spunk, and thought I would like a ride with him."

"You remembered Spunk!"

"Yes, sir; I held him for you, one day, and you gave me a shiner by mistake."

"Ah, yes, and you ran back to me with it. I remember your face now; I thought it looked familiar. Well, let me see, didn't you finally send off before I paid you? Or didn't I go off? How was it? Anyway, I don't believe you got any pay; that was a regular cheat,—wasn't it? Well, we must try and make it right. How far did you travel last night?"

Reuben, as well as he could, described the route and the plan of getting home, Mr. Edward occasionally interrupting him to say, "Is it possible?"

"I declare!" he said when the story was finished, "you are a plucky fellow; very few strangers can manage Spunk, though he is well behaved, generally, too. Well, I owe you a great deal of thanks for your skill, and good sense. Now, what else do you need, besides thanks. Mother tells me you have a family to support."

"Yes, sir," said Reuben, gravely; "a mother and a sister."

"Pretty heavy burden at your age; what do you do for a living?"

"Hold horses, and all such things," said Reuben, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Then you have no regular employment."

"Yes, sir, my regular employment all winter has been to look for steady work; but I haven't found it yet."