

The Gap Between

By FRANK H. SWEET

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THE town was dilapidated, even disreputable in its neglect. As the stranger stepped from the ancient carryall which he had hired from the station platform seven miles away he felt the incongruity of it all. Only nine miles from Wall street, and it might as well have been on the opposite side of the world. He looked about with an air of questioning reminiscence, as though wondering if he could have been familiar with any of this in a less critical period of his life.

But the history of it was an open book. The young blood and the old man were in search of the car of progress, and many of the older people had flocked to help or lean on them. The ones left were those who had neither outside interest nor inside ambition. He returned to the owner of the carryall who was still regarding the dollar in his hand with pleased interest.

"Can you tell me where Joseph Allbone lives?" he inquired. "No-no; not round here. An' still, the man's face wrinkling into intense thought, "the name does sound nat'ral." "He used to live in that little house across the street," the stranger said, pointing with his cane, "the one whose owner has fallen in."

"Oh, them Allbones," with an air of familiarity. "I thought the name had something in it. But we ain't spoke two names round here since I don't know 'em. It's old Joe, an' fat Tom, an' the an' big John, that a-way. Before the doctor an' preacher died we did not know their whole names, jest to be sure, but it's too much work right now. I ain't heered the name Allbone for twenty year. But say, stranger, his voice becoming more animated, "that house has a big history. One o' the boys went off an' got himself scan'alous rich, so he could buy broads an' palaces an' an' ships on the ocean. When we heered we looked for him to send a wagon full of gold to his brother Joe, but he never

"Where does Joe—Joseph live?" the stranger asked eagerly. "Something in the voice made the carryall owner look at him wondering, then walk twice around him, snapping his fingers from time to time and nodding the tailor made clothes and hat and gloves with frank admiration and awe. At last he stopped directly in front and looked curiously at the stranger's face. "Be ye him?" asked.

"Where does Joseph Allbone live?" patiently. "Be ye him?" anxiously and without the least notice of the question. Then: "Out of course ye be. The clothes show it." He puckered his face conciliatingly and thrust it to within a few inches of the stranger's, whispering: "How'd ye do it? I want to be scan'ous rich myself; always have wanted be."

"Will you tell me where my brother lives or shall I ask some one else?" "Ye be him then," joyously. "Co'se I want to see Joe right off. It's nat'ral. But I'll foller ye down soon's I get the mail sorted, an' find out how it's done. Ye see, I'm mail carrier an' postmaster both, an' sheriff an' town constable. But it's 'mazin' hard to work, an' when ye show me 'bout gettin' scan'alous rich I shan't do a stitch. I have mail come in here twice every week. See this street?"

"Yes." "Waal, foller it right on two miles, an' ye'll find a little hut on the right hand side in the woods. The street ain't a path then; it's a path. But the hut's there. It's Joe's. An'—"

But the stranger had turned abruptly and was hurrying down the street. The carryall owner looked after him thoughtfully.

"Funny how he went from here right among folks, drummers an' all sorts, an' got richer'n they did—scan'ous rich, folks say. Funny! When I was to the city I git skinned every day. But he does look old—older'n his brother Joe. An' if I 'member right it was Tom who was youngest. Waal, I'm glad I didn't tell him I was Lish's kin, the boy who whipped him before he run off. Maybe 'twould 'a' hurt me gettin' rich. He, he!"

The hut was easily found, for, besides the seven or eight houses left standing in the village, it was the only building the stranger saw. And the carryall owner had been right about its being in the woods, for there had been no attempt at clearing or cultivation. The trees and bushes grew close to the hut on all sides, and a tangle of wild vines and taken possession of two-thirds of the log step. As the stranger saw it and his eyes took in the surroundings he paused with strong emotion.

"Poor Joe! Poor Joe!" he said com-

passionately. "Why didn't he let me know? I never dreamed of this or of the village being in such ruin. It was fairly prosperous when I went away. And Joe always wrote such bright, cheerful letters, telling how happy he was with his animals. I thought he had a nice big farm that was well stocked. He would never let me help him. He had everything he needed, he wrote, and more. And now this! Poor Joe! Poor Joe! I have been to blame, for I ought to have come down and seen how things were going. I have been too busy accumulating money. And it was Joey who let me have all his little hoard when I went away. How people forget! But he shall never want anything more. I will take him back to the city with me and let



"FOLLER THIS STREET RIGHT ON TWO MILES."

him have all the things that money can give."

A man was coming slowly around the hut, with head bent, humming the air of some boyish wood song. The stranger sprang forward. "So old and bent as that," he thought. "Poor Joey!"

But as he advanced the man suddenly raised his head, his shoulders squaring. There was nothing old looking about Joe Allbone. His complexion had the ruddy color of its youth, and his hair had scarcely commenced to turn. Force might be lacking in his face, but it was a face of perfect contentment and happiness, gentle, loving, thoughtful, benign, the face of a poet and dreamer, of a philosopher. The stranger gazed at him with wondering recognition, then opened his arms.

"Joey! Joey!" His voice choked. "You look just the same as when I left, only larger."

At the familiar name Joe Allbone started, his face kindling. He had not recognized the white haired, careworn figure before. But first he carefully placed a rabbit, which seemed to be hurt, upon the ground. It was this he had been looking at when he came round the hut with bent head. Then



HE SUDDENLY THRUST AN INQUIRING BILL INTO THE BLOUSE POCKET.

he caught his brother in his arms, his face strongly expressive of the pity and grief he felt.

"Tom, little Tommy," he said, the love in his voice mingled with deep self reproach, "I oughtn't to have let ye stay off there so long a-workin' an' a-worryin'. I knowed it all the time, but I was easy an' you was set, an' it seemed less trouble that a-way. But I oughtn't, Tommy, poor little Tommy. I was older an' should 'a' had my say. Ye've growed old an' tired out, while I've jest lazed my life away here in the woods. But ye shan't go off any more, Tommy. There ain't no need. It's nice here in the woods, an' there's plenty for both, an' the house's plenty big. We'll set on the log step an' look round at the birds an' things an' talk. It'll be nice. Do ye 'member how we used to set snares an' climb trees an' watch squirrels? We'll do it ag'in, only we won't ketch 'em any more. They're

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nicer to look at. Law, law, it doesn't seem forty-seven years ago sence ye went off, Tommy. Ye was thirteen then an' me fifteen."

All the time his hand had been patting his brother's back as though he might be a boy who needed petting and comforting after some youthful trial or an unusually hard day's work.

Suddenly there was a low whirr of wings, and a blue jay dropped lightly upon Joe's shoulder and from there

hopped to the crook of his elbow and thrust an inquiring bill into his blouse pocket. Then a movement on the stranger's part caused the bill to withdraw quickly and the wings to half rise. But the tips of Joe's fingers touched the wings caressingly, reassuringly.

"There, there, Jaybird," he said soothingly, "it's all right. That's my brother Tom, who's comin' home to stay with us. You mustn't mind him. Now go a little deeper," opening his blouse pocket with one of his fingers; "you'll find the seeds there all right."

The blue jay had cocked his head on one side in an attitude of listening. Now, as though understanding or recognizing the opening behind the finger as significant, he suddenly thrust his head into the blouse pocket, drawing it out a moment later with the bill full of seeds. With these he flew to a nearby limb. Joe chuckled.

"Jaybird 'll be back ag'in in a few minutes," he declared. "He wouldn't 'a' left my elbow if I'd been by myself. But he'll soon git used to ye bein' here an' mebbe git to let ye feed him. We must fill up your pockets with seeds an' things." Several odd, impatient chirps came from different directions, and Joe glanced knowingly from one to another. "Jaybird 'll have to hurry," he observed, "or there'll be a lot o' bills gettin' in ahead o' him. They'd been here 'fore now if it hadn't been for studyin' you. I have to fill my pockets 'bout twenty times a day. An' 'tain't only birds. Jest come with me a minute, Tom." He turned gleefully into the bushes, going aside from the house

path. Tom followed with an odd look of amusement on his face.

Twenty or thirty yards on and Joe stopped beside a tiny treadlike path which none but practiced eyes would have noticed. But Tom, even over the



SAW THE RABBIT HOP TO JOE'S SIDE.

forty-seven years of estrangement, recognized with a quick thrill a rabbit run.

"Bunny, Bunny, Bunny!" Joe called. But he was obliged to repeat it several times before a soft rustling was heard in the bushes and a pair of big soft eyes looked at them from the foliage.

"He sees you, Tom," whispered Joe. "S'pose ye step back jest a little."

Tom did so, and a moment later saw the rabbit hop to Joe's side and raise itself upon its hind legs, feeling about Joe with its nose. But it did not attempt to reach the blouse pocket that

contained seeds, as Bunny did not care for seeds. Instead it poked its nose into a capacious lower pocket where there were pieces of apple and lettuce leaves and green vegetables, which were more to its liking. When it became satisfied and returned to the bushes with a large lettuce leaf in its mouth Joe rejoined his brother.

"Do all the wood creatures know you like that, Joe?" Tom asked, almost enviously.

"Most, but some of 'em's more shy. The hermit thrush and scarlet tanager won't eat 'less I go deeper into the woods, an' sometimes I have to coax a good long spell 'fore the partridge or the wood mole will come out in sight. But generally we're good friends here in the woods. Ye'll learn to know an' like 'em jest as well as me pretty soon. Ye're bound to. I 'member ye did when a boy."

"That was a long, long time ago, Joe," was all Tom said. But it was very wistfully.

Two hours later the old men arose from the log step upon which they had been sitting. Tears were in the eyes of both.

"I am sorry, Joe," Tom said, as he held his brother's hand. "I had hoped to take you back with me. I have a big house, with servants and carriages, and was looking forward to you and I spending the rest of our lives together. But we must see each other often."

"Yes, often," agreed Joe, with voice trembling. "Ye must come down. An' for all ye've said, it still seems to me this is the best place for ye to live. Money gettin' has made ye old an' worn out. I've lazed most o' my life, but I've been happy an' had a good time, an' I b'lieve I've helped to give everything roun' me a little easier time in some way, humans an' critters. An' I've kept young. I don't feel a bit older'n I did twenty years ago. But, o' course, I ain't knowin' o' your ways. Yes, ye must come down often."

And so they parted, each to remain in the path which his life had made.