

A JITNEY in the CLOUDS

A FUTURISTIC story of the Soho Block on Gable St. How Abner Lee, Machinist, a worm of the 20th Century in Wabigo, found himself driven to turn and carry on for the sake of the crowd.

By ROLAND JENNER

ABNER LEE knew he was a rebel when he asked to see the manager of the Crimp Housing Association. As a rule a man with the grimy pollen of a foundry machine shop on his clothes never got in to see Mr. Barnabas Hugo.

"Oh, Mr. Abner Lee? Fifth house from the corner. Scho block on Gable St. About that \$2.50 a month increase in rent? No, nothing to do with your raise in wages at the shop. If you had an income of two hundred a week and still preferred to reside at 85 Gable we should assess you exactly as we are now doing—under the same conditions. But, of course, you know."

Mr. Hugo tilted back, thumbs in his vest-arms.

"This city is growing at a tremendous rate."

"And the more houses go up the higher the rents go."

"And the taxes," added Mr. Hugo, blandly rubbing his hands. "Don't forget the taxes. Let me see—your new baby is now two weeks old. Yes, Girl, I believe. Quite so. Fourth child. Wait now—I believe it is some seven years since the third arrived. Yes. And your wage increase came a year ago."

Abner felt pardonably complimented at this census-like knowledge of his affairs. He didn't know anything about Mr. Hugo's family.

"Yes, but what's the connection between my fourth child and \$30 a year extra rent? Does one child do a house \$30 a year damage?"

Hugo leaned forward and bobbed a paper-knife. Looking solemnly into the machinist's face,

"Mr. Lee, the corporation of Wabigo through its Treasury department taxes the Crimp Housing Association for every dollar of improvement we make. The vacant lot next to one of our improved premises goes practically scot free. We help to pay his increment of value. Now—any connection?"

Abner's long, benign face took a gleam of sudden insight. Even though he read current magazines and remained a devout member of a very orthodox evangelical church, he was no mean thinker along certain radical lines.

"I get you. You're taxing improvements."

"Pre-cisely. On the principle that every man's children are an improvement on himself."

II.

AFTER that interview, Abner Lee had what he called his second sight into the Soho Block and Wabigo and the Crimp Housing Association. Twenty years in that block he had paid the C.H.A. at least \$5,000 in rent. With that in his mind Abner took a close look at the house, which but for a small coal-pit cellar and a furnace, a tin bath-tub and once in ten years a coat of paint, was the same as it had been the year he first moved in. In fact, as Abner noticed now, it was the exact replica of every other in the block; outside, ugly brick front with a two-chair porch and a bay window; roughcast back tapering down to a leanto shed that ran off into a plot

of grass and a junk-lot boxed off by high, black board fences rotting at the posts and overrun by homeless cats. These yards were neither gardens nor playgrounds. The children had all their games on the boulevards. Inside, narrow dark hall, crib of a parlor with one place only for the piano, if any, a glum little dining-room lighted by a toy window in one corner where the kitchen jutted off to the shed just under the bathroom. There had been tales of drunken men who come home to the wrong house. They were not houses. They were stalls. They were ugly as sin. All the color and

poetry of any of them came from the washings on the lines and the children at play. Estimating the actual cost of this house, the land when bought, the upkeep, insurance and taxes, comparing that with the \$5,000 he had paid in rent to Mr. Hugo in his touring car and his grey silk-aline coat and cool fedora, Abner Lee began to realize that he was somebody's victim.

In sundry conversations among the neighbors he deduced that since the advent of the gas range, the electric light, the furnace and the cement walk, very few of these Sohoites were as happy as he used to be when he was a young man. Civilization had put a few stray licks on Soho. Every fresh dab meant extra cost extracted from the tenants. The cost of all things was going up faster than wages. Citizens of Soho burned as little coal as possible; went to bed early to keep warm; had no refrigerators because the ice-man had no beat on Gable St. past the grocery at the corner; none of them had telephones; one or two had cheap pianos, others little reed organs; sewing-machines were rare; the garbage man came once a week along the ash-heaped lane to the rear; and as he lay awake in the early morn Abner counted nine milk-wagons, each delivering at an average of four houses, in no case more than a quart and in his own seldom more than a pint except when a baby was born.

Yet Abner Lee was proud of having been born in Wabigo; that he had seen it grow from a big town of less than 100,000 to half a million; that he knew every street in it except the new ones. He saw temples of business, of finance, of religion, government and education rise in Wabigo and with pride he pointed them out to admiring visitors. Whenever he read in a newspaper that some after-dinner orator or visiting magnate called Wabigo a beautiful city he felt his heart burn within him. But the greater the temples and palaces—of whom Mr. Hugo's was by no means the least—the more crammed the street-cars and the show-houses and the churches, and the greater the restless moving picture of the automobiles, the more hopeless and dingy and neglected Gable St. became. Gable St. was in a backwater. The tide was rushing all round it.

"How do you explain it?" he asked the young preacher, a bit of a socialist.

The Parson advised him to read Progress and Poverty.

That book was the beginning of Abner's crude but radical studies in economics. The more he learned the more he knew why the inhabitants of Soho were but the joint slaves of industry, the corporation of Wabigo and the Crimp Housing Association, which he found out was only a euphonious title for the business end of the Builders' Exchange and that butted over into the Real Estate Association. So Wabigo danced.

III.

ABNER'S only son Harold, just out of one term at High School, was bent on a course in the S.P.S.

"Cut out the last S and the rest goes, my son," said Abner, with an odd mixture of

severity and intimacy. "The S. P. S. you better go to is the Vulcan Works that pay me my income. They're no better and no worse than any

other. You've got mechanical brains. Iron and steel might make you—rich. But I hope not."

The youth was in the back yard under the hang-over of a neighbor's little tree in a sort of sandheap workshop. He had been fiddling here at odd times since he was a child. Odd wooden models he had carved out and covered with bits of silk. In his room he had books on gasoline engines.

"I don't want to be a wheel in a big power plant, Dad. You're that. So are thousands more. I'm going into the automobile game."

"That won't make me popular with you, Dad—Mr. Hugo says—he can get me right along after I go into the Messenger Garage; he's Pres—"

"Oh, I know none of us in the Soho have motor-cars, dad," the lad wound up dismally. "I know you can prove from statistics that if the money spent in motors could be spent on improving the conditions of industry and housing and all that, there might be something doing in civilization. But that isn't the way out for me. I've got to pull a rope where nit dangles under my nose, or up goes the rope."

Abner made it a rule never to argue the case. Harold understood his deep-rooted enmity to the motor-car as the symbol of the overlording rich. The boy was a crank on the air-craze. He knew almost as much about airplanes as his father knew about revenues and taxation. Air-conquering was then in its primaries. Harold intended to be a flying-man, not for business but for recreation. He had no thought of war in the air.

IV.

IN the groping for light amid much fog, the social reformer on Gable St. clung to the idea of man's innate imperfection; his perpetual need of salvation and the need of a constant ethical awakening of mankind; the abolition of poverty, of slums, of child-epidemics, of moral rottenness. Abner searched the Scriptures, for in them he found the way of life. He found nothing there to justify man's physical conquest of the earth, unless such conquests could help along the moral redemption of mankind.

"God made man upright, but he sought out many inventions," was a text upon which he asked the minister for a sermon.

The skyscraper and the moving picture he condemned because one was a challenge to God, the other a menace to man unless it was treated with reverence. He exempted the phonograph, the telephone and wireless because he could see how these had already benefited humanity.

But of all things invented by man, the airship was to Abner Lee the most sacrilegious, because it was an attempt to overcome a fiat of the Creator by the use of a motive mechanism which had already been used to mark the enslavement of a part of mankind. The gasoline engine in the automobile had made more sheep and more goats in society than any other agency. Thousands of men who made cars could not themselves own cars. The gasoline en-

