

A LONDON 'UNCLE'

BY W. R. TITTERTON

I AM not sure if Sol Abrams is typical, for, although I have often appeared at the 'saloon bar' to exchange a watch or other trinket for a handful of silver and a coupon, he is the only pawnbroker with whom I have touched glasses. I come of a class in which it is shameful to have dealings with the pop-shop: dealings there are, but they are *sub rosa*. We had none of the frank reliance on Uncle you find in the class half a semitone lower in the scale. So that when there was a prospective hiatus between the last sovereign and pay day the Carnival excursion with wrapped-up valuables was made under cover of darkness and a shabby domino. A pawn ticket which I surreptitiously read, let me into the secret of the nature of the sally and its destination: 'Sol Abrams, Pawnbroker, Jeweler, and Marine Stores, 243, Old Mandy Street, Stepney.' Stepney, I may observe, was a parish or two away. So, when my turn to bet on the future came, I went to Sol.

I could not have gone to Mr. J. W. Morton, the big local man, though him I knew intimately — not that he ever touched glasses, except to test if the crystal rang true. He was a pillar of our local conventicle, and a by-word for respectability. He was, I am sure, a very good man, and a kindly, even on occasions a merry, one. But you could not very well pawn things with a man who has lately led you in prayer.

So I went to Sol. With a Jew of an alien parish you could be on fighting terms, and these, I considered, in my

folly, to be the normal relations of pawnier and pawnee.

I found his shop in a long, narrow, crooked dirty street between a greengrocer's and a *cul de sac*. The three balls, the dingiest I had ever seen, hung anyhow from a drooping bracket.

Of course, I was blushing hotly, and so I halted to look into the window, and for some time saw nothing but flippant odds and ends of glitter, dancing jigs, and reels. Then I saw placards, 'real gold,' '16 — 14 — 8 carat gold,' 'rolled gold,' 'sterling silver,' 'English lever,' 'genuine Swiss,' 'valuable antique.' My eyes focused themselves on the 'valuable antique.' It proved to be one of those crinkled South Sea shells, Victorious, placed upon the mantelpiece.

Choosing a moment when I had no near neighbors in the street, I darted through the shop door, almost blinding and choking in a press of second-hand clothing hung out as an ensign above it. Inside was darkness and a merry babble of voices — one rich female voice above the rest exclaiming, 'Now, Uncle, you know I always liked your face.' In front of me I saw a stretch of indecently obvious shop, but I knew there were cubicles. I turned to the left, and groped past door-handles — seizing and releasing each in turn; from behind each door came that merry chorus.

At last I surmised a silence, gave a gulp, turned a handle, and stumbled into an empty cubicle. At No. 1 there was a draggled fragment of man pendant from the counter. The man did not

turn, but hung with his face and his chin on the wood, a huddle of clothes spread before him. The choral symphony, with its counterpoint of insult and cajolery, was deafening now. As I entered, an old, bent, bearded man, standing a few feet along on the further side of the counter, turned his incisive beak and keen, wrinkled eyes sharply towards me, and moved my way.

Without wasting words, he held out a claw. Suppressing an insane impulse to shake hands warmly, wish him good-day, and vanish, I dropped my watch and chain in his palm. He held the guards close to each eye in turn; he smelled them, he felt them, he donned a watchmaker's eye, and vivisected the watch in ways I had not dreamed of. He rubbed watch and chain with a stone. But my interest in his careful scrutiny was somewhat disturbed by the sudden vision of a large, red, jolly face crowned with frizzy hair, thrust like a Punch and Judy figure round the party wall.

'Wish yer luck, dearie!' said the owner. 'Don't you let him do you in! He's a bad man is Uncle. You watch him, dearie.'

Uncertain whether I ought to kiss the lady or courtesy, I mumbled acquiescence.

'Fifteen bob; take it or leave it.'

Sol Abrams was pushing the watch and chain towards me as if he had much rather I took the watch and left the money. But his eye watched me.

I pushed the shining heap towards him again (in my frivolous state of nerves it seemed like a game of draughts), and said I'd take the money.

Sol made a gesture, and the booty disappeared, and I was helping him to fill in the ticket.

As he handed me the ticket he beamed at me amiably. 'Any little ting you would have kept safe for you,

mister. Wrap it up in lavender and rose leaves!' At that his eyes twinkled; and there was a shout from the hidden audience, and a cry of 'Oh, come off it, Uncle!'

'That scarf pin, now!' he insinuated, with a swift hungry glance at a sentimental indiscretion of my paternal grandmother.

'Well, well,' he added, with a sigh and a waving of the hands, when I had declined the negotiation. 'Always ready to oblige a gent. Pawn or sale. Sell the same to Solomon Abrams.'

As I opened the door he turned with a sudden glance of wrath on the non-descript with the burnt-offering of clothes.

'I told you last time that I would n't take no more of your rubbish. I've wasted ten shillings on you already, so welp me!'

When I came to redeem my pledge, I found him fingering lovingly a really fine intaglio. I have no knowledge of such things, but a certain love for them. We fell a-talking. It appeared that he had both knowledge and passion.

'If you'll wait a few minutes,' he said, 'I'll close the blooming shop. And we'll have a chat over a glass of something warm.'

At that time of day the proposal was irregular, but Sol was omnipotent.

With furious generosity he settled the claims of a dozen clients in less than as many minutes. They left the place wondering if Uncle had gone off his dot. Uncle trailed shutters behind the back of his last customer. Soon I was sitting with him in a back room, a dingy, poverty-stricken room, and sipping a steaming glass of grog.

Sol showed me wonderful things—some of them priceless. And the knowledge of the man was more remarkable than his treasures. His fingers trembled with affection as he undid the ragged

coverings, and some jewel of craftsmanship bloomed in the pig-sty. He swore he would never sell them, no, not for gold. Some few of them, he said, tapping his long nose with a skinny forefinger, and closing an eye, he could not sell.

These were the few pickings of thirty-five years of chaffer. The rest? Well, clothes mostly, that came in on the Monday, and went out again on the Saturday. Even bed clothes occasionally! And adventurous families had been known to stagger in with an unshipped bedstead.

These things came and went. Others — cricket bats, stuffed birds, metal ware, mantel ornaments, firearms — came to stay. The fate of watches was uncertain. Jewels? Well, we would n't talk about the jewels. And then the skinny forefinger was once more laid against the nose.

'I'll tell you what, though, mister,' said Sol, 'They may tell you Uncle is a hard man' (he chuckled), 'but I swear to God it makes my heart bleed when a woman brings me her wedding ring. I never give much on wedding rings. I don't want to keep 'em, you

Everyman

see! I did n't want your watch and chain; they're rotten.'

I asked him if he allowed any time of grace when the statutory period was up, and he asked me if I thought he was a sanguinary fool. Where would he be if he did? Still, I have my doubts. I know that though he is regarded as a hard old file, he is a wonderful convenience. After all, he is the poor man's only credit-bank.

Sol is a widower. He has two boys. Both of them went to good schools, and are stock-jobbers now in a large way of business. I met one of them once in Sol's back parlor, and found him repulsively vulgar. It surprised me that a man so dignified and simple as Sol Abrams and such a judge of gems should be enraptured with this insolent paste diamond. That was before I had met Sol out walking on a Sunday afternoon, and he beamed at me from between a hideous topper and a hideously new suit, rings all over his fingers, and wearing an ultra-fashionable pair of shoes. I greeted him, of course, and we had a friendly chat together, but I had felt inclined to pass by on the other side.

ECONOMICS, TRADE, AND FINANCE.

THE DELUSION OF SUPER- PRODUCTION

BY MAJOR C. H. DOUGLAS

It is hardly necessary to draw attention to the insistence with which we are told that in order to pay for the war we must produce more manufactured goods than ever before — a powerful section of the press would have the whole military, political, social, and industrial policy of the Allied Governments directed to the purpose, that, when by a complete victory we have acquired control of raw material and disposed of our most dangerous competitor, we may adjust our internal differences and settle down to an unfettered era of commercial activity, from which all other desirable things will, it is suggested, proceed naturally.

There are an almost infinite number of aspects to this proposition, which is not dissimilar, so far as it goes, from that with which Germany went to war: it is possible to attack it from the point of view of the historian, the psychologist, or even the physiologist. It is even possible that certain quite indispensable suffrages have still to be obtained for it. But it is sufficiently interesting to take it as it stands on a frankly material, 'practical' basis, and see what are its logical consequences.

A fair statement of the argument for unlimited and intensified manufacturing subsequent to the war would no doubt be something after this fashion:

- (1) We must pay for the war.
- (2) This means high taxes.
- (3) Taxes must come from earnings.
- (4) High earnings and low labor costs can only be continued if the output is increased.

Before dealing with these points, let it be thoroughly well understood that, as compared with the economic power of absorption, the world was over-manufacturing before the war in nearly every direction. If any person capable of independent thought disagrees with this statement, he will no doubt be able to explain the immense development of advertising; why the cost of selling a sewing machine, among many other instances, was higher than the manufacturing cost; why a new model, not novel in any real essential, appeared from most of the motor car works each year, thus automatically depreciating the value of the previous year's fashion, and why, in spite of all these and countless more desperate efforts to stimulate absorption at home, aided by the barter of trade gin to our black brother abroad, the stress of competition to sell was daily growing more insupportable, the main pressure, of course, appearing in the guise of labor troubles, unemployment, strikes for higher wages, etc., but being quite definitely felt all over the social structure and being focused from a national point of view in the struggle for markets; of which struggle war was the inevitable and final outcome.

Bearing this selling pressure in mind, let us consider what will be the post-war situation, assuming any reasonably early termination of hostilities, and in the absence of any radical modification in the economic structure.

It is almost impossible to form any accurate estimate of the extension of manufacturing plant which has taken place in the British Empire since 1914, but on a gold standard basis it is almost certainly to the value of not less