



MR. PHILLIPS

MR. LEWIS

MR. GHENT

The Day of Discontent

First of the Series of Cosmopolitan Table-Talks in which Vital Problems are Discussed in a Vital Way

BY invitation of the editor of the COSMOPOLITAN, Alfred Henry Lewis, W. J. Ghent and David Graham Phillips met at luncheon in a room in the Hotel Astor, New York, the other day to discuss the social unrest in America—an unrest admitted by the most optimistic of our latter-day philosophers. The gentlemen represented various shades of opinion. Mr. Ghent, as the author of "Benevolent Feudalism" and "Mass and Class," is well known as one of the leading scientific socialists of the day. Mr. Phillips is known as a writer of stirring political novels of a reform nature and Mr. Lewis not only as an author but as a strenuous individualist.

Each of these gentlemen was prepared to urge in a radical manner the principles

he represented and the result was a highly interesting argument on the question of our social discontent, its cause and its cure.

At the beginning of the three-cornered interview, Mr. Ghent was asked if in his opinion there was any valid reason for the restive state of the masses.

"I suppose," he replied, "that the best generalization on the subject is that of Alfred Russell Wallace. He says that our civilization is absolutely condemned by the fact that while in fifty years there has been a hundredfold increase in wealth, the sole result has been to add to the luxury of a few, while the great mass of the workers is as deeply steeped in poverty and misery as ever. According to Frederic Harrison, ninety per cent. of all the workers have no home to call their own beyond the end of the week. They are doomed to a con-

dition in which food, warmth and necessary clothing are simply not obtainable. This condition has been particularly evidenced during the last ten years in Germany, France and England, and to a certain extent in America. It is due in great part to the expansion of factory production, the dislodging of the country people and the forcing of them into the towns. The newcomers gravitate to the meanest, the most squalid quarters, like our East-Side here, and there have to battle for jobs with those already on the ground. It is shown that in London, year after year, one person out of every four dies in an almshouse or hospital, or on some form of public charity."

"How about this country?" asked Mr. Phillips.

"Well," said Mr. Ghent, "Mr. Hunter and others have attempted to show the extent of poverty among us. Out of the little statistical material available Mr. Hunter has made a very good book. He shows that there are ten million persons in America who are constantly living at or below the bare margin of normal existence. Shortly after the appearance of Mr. Hunter's work there came up a question of the number of underfed school children in New York city. Mr. Hunter asserted that there were seventy thousand of these. The statement was denied up and down by hundreds of persons. Since then three different investigations have shown that Mr. Hunter probably spoke very conservatively. There is a rising wave of discontent, due to this privation, which expresses itself in many ways. Still, the great majority of the workers of America live in a sort of hope that by some means they are going to beat the game."

PHILLIPS: You really think then that there is a deep discontent in this country?

GHEENT: Not only among the workers, but among the middle class as well. The middle class feel that they are being put out of business.

PHILLIPS: At whom is this discontent aimed?

GHEENT: It is very largely an instinctive and uninformed revolt, not at all certain of its point, but in general it is against present conditions. Of course, it is greatly aided by the exposures of the insurance investigation and others of that kind.

LEWIS: You speak of discontent on the part of the poor as a probable cause

of coming revolt. Do you think the rich are contented?

GHEENT: I don't know at all. But their kind of discontent would not be the sort we mean when we are speaking of the discontent of the poor. It is that of the poor man living at the margin of existence.

LEWIS: Don't you know that there are thousands of rich men living at the margin of existence? Because a man is walking down Fifth Avenue, well dressed, and well fed, does that mean that he is a contented man? Also, you speak of the starvation and the sickness on the East Side; I have gone through the East Side many times, and looked into the faces of the children. They were healthy, happy-looking children; they didn't seem to be sick or discontented or starved.

GHEENT: Your observation in the street would not be worth as much as that of a hospital doctor who has seen them when they were ill.

LEWIS: I've no peculiar faith in doctors or their observations. I have seen perfectly healthy men killed by doctors.

GHEENT: No number of personal impressions can stand up against the figures of an actuary or the records of a hospital which receives poor patients.

LEWIS: Let us go back to the discontented man. Take John D. Rockefeller. He is a discontented man. He hasn't all he wants; he is trying to get more. The fact is, I can't find a contented man outside of savagery. I never saw a contented white man.

GHEENT: What do you think of socialism, Mr. Lewis?

LEWIS: In the first place, I think socialism is hampered by the term. You try to cover too many eggs at once. It is good for the public to do some things, good for the individual to do some things. Speaking of socialism, I take it to be axiomatic that everything the public does as a body is socialism. The post-office is socialism. A police force is socialism. I saw something the other day from Minot J. Savage telling his congregation not to vote for "municipal ownership." He suggested that the Post-Office Department didn't pay. This non-paying element he seemed to think an argument against government ownership of such trinkets as railways. Of course it doesn't pay. Neither does the army pay. If you are to

speak of money, nothing that the government does ever pays. That, however, is not a proper argument.

GHEENT: To what do you attribute the different political uprisings of late years?

LEWIS: To the wolf in the man. A man is selfish. Also he is destructive as a matter of instinct.

GHEENT: We have nearly every year, whether or not there is any unusual suffering on the part of a section of the public, a political uprising. We had a People's party in 1892 which polled over a million votes, and in 1894 nearly two million votes. In 1896 we had something like six and a half million persons who voted for a radical candidate for President. Last year the Socialistic candidate, Debs, polled more than four hundred thousand votes. What could these instances mean other than a vote of discontent against existing conditions?

PHILLIPS: The reason the farmers raised the uproar in 1892—when they elected Cleveland, and again in 1896—when, in my opinion, Bryan was elected—the reason for the farmer revolt appeared in the enormous number of farm mortgages. It is not among the very poor that you now find, or will find in history, the discontent that makes itself effective. The French Revolution was started, was directed, was carried to success by the middle classes. About being cheerful—a tramp is more or less cheerful; he is sinking down into the mire comfortably and cheerfully. I think the discontent that amounts to something is the discontent of the great, intelligent middle class, with its high and rising standards of living and with its ever stronger sense that the division of property isn't fair. It refuses to believe in the justice of the masses having to work for what they get, while a small class gets more than enough without work. For, you can't call the chicane of the financiers and their lawyers work. Swindling—no kind of swindling is work. If literal starvation were the cause of our discontent, the plutocracy might be secure. Our discontent is the dangerous anger that has civilized ideas of what constitutes a square meal.

LEWIS: There are only nine meals between mankind and anarchy.

GHEENT: The intellectual leaders you speak of, Mr. Phillips, are simply the for-

mulators of the working-class demands. The revolt against existing conditions, in so far as it is conscious and directed at a certain goal, remains a working-class movement, even though its philosophy is formulated and expressed by men from another class. These men come into the working class and accept its instinctive attitude as that of their own.

PHILLIPS: But I think a programme as precise as the socialist programme is an attempt to prophesy. And I've no great faith in prophecy, especially in politics.

GHEENT: Not more so than to predict in general terms the overthrow of the capitalist mode of production and the installation of coöperative production. There is no scientific socialist in the world who will attempt to give you more than guesses at the details. He can tell you no more of the details of what is to follow than Washington or Franklin could have told at the outbreak of the American Revolution.

LEWIS: Our Revolution worked no tremendous change, beyond providing for self-government. We have got a Senate and they in England a House of Lords, and they have a king, we have a president. Our president has forty times as much power as their king. I don't see anything very democratic in this government. If there were, the workingman could not be so truly referred to as one whom we "always respect and avoid."

PHILLIPS: I don't think that whether a man will or will not associate with me intimately has anything to do with his democracy, or with mine. Association in that sense is a matter of personal taste.

LEWIS: Mr. Ghent, what better conditions would we have if the socialists were in power?

GHEENT: It staggers the imagination to picture the difference. The sense of security of every person from a haunting fear of privation would of itself greatly better human character. There would be a definite elimination of the frightful massacre of human beings which goes on all the time under the name of peace. In the recent Japanese war, according to the official statistics printed in September, 46,000 men were killed in battle, 11,000 died of wounds and 16,000 died of sickness; and we look upon this slaying with horror. But we have a fatal-accident list in American industries every year of

somewhere between sixty-five and eighty thousand. The railroads and trolleys alone kill about 12,500 and injure about 150,000 yearly. There is furthermore, under present conditions, a terrible mortality from unhealthful occupations at which men, women and children are forced to work, and from adulterated foods, drinks and medicines. Socialism, by organizing industry coöperatively, and producing for social use instead of for profit-making, would simply revolutionize the methods of production.

LEWIS: One trouble with socialism is that it goes on the theory that men are all alike, and as a matter of fact, the difference between men and men is a vast one. Unless your socialism is prepared to play the modern Procrustes, it would assuredly fail with man as he is. Nor do I find fault with that discontent against which you preach. The way to get men to work is to make them discontented, and even make one fellow try to get more than the other. I fear that socialism would produce lots of human canal boats. Present conditions produce steamers.

GHEENT: Admitting, for the moment, that this incentive of discontent does keep things going, it also keeps going this frightful mortality.

PHILLIPS: Mr. Ghent, what is this frightful mortality of which you speak?

GHEENT: According to Mr. Booth's investigation in London and Mr. Rowntree's in York, it is shown that about one-third of the population of these cities is constantly at or below the bare margin of normal existence. The most recent figures of the Board of Trade of England show an unexampled state of prosperity. At the same time it is shown that the state of unemployment in London is worse than it has been before since 1882. We can thus see that an increase of wealth may attend the most frightful privation among the poor. Thorold Rogers shows that the best day of the English peasant and laborer was that part of the feudal age between 1480 and 1525; he has never had so much food and comfort since.

PHILLIPS: But how about his self-respect? He had none. He was a well-cared-for slave, not a man. There never was a time in the history of the world when self-respect was so widespread and so deep as it is to-day. And that sense of

personal dignity, of the rights of man, is the force that will prevent the coming again of the conditions into which the happy serfs of the feudal age fell soon after Mr. Rogers's "golden age."

LEWIS: The most unhappy man I have ever seen was and is one of the ten richest men in the world. And yet his trouble is really his ignorance—the natural ignorance of one who has been rich a long time. Most of the trouble of to-day lies not in the discontent of the poor, but in the ignorance of the rich.

PHILLIPS: We have a great mass of intelligent people getting more intelligent all the time. They will correct the ignorance of the rich. But, to go back to socialism, Mr. Ghent. Its grave scientific defect is that it can not suggest how men are to be kept at the healthful, necessary routine of work, if they appoint their own bosses. Take any of our government services, for example. And where there is hard work done in them, it is done by the poorest paid. The postman has to work, but not the big fellows.

GHEENT: If the government as an employer is lax, the private employer, on the other hand, goes to the other extreme. There is a tendency on the part of all employers to "speed up" machinery to the limit of a man's or child's capacity to tend it.

PHILLIPS: But at the same time, I don't think hard work is killing any class.

LEWIS: I see as many pale faces in Fifth Avenue as in Third. Shifting discussion a trifle, I should say that one great evil in the final influence is this tipping system, this trying to get something for which you have not worked. It culminates finally in our McCurdys and Depews. They are only big tip-takers. And yet, I suppose tip-taking and tip-hunting are forms of pillage natural to our human nature.

GHEENT: Human nature is about the most plastic thing we know of, and it undergoes marked changes along with the changes in the form of production and the form of government. Under socialism, where private interest will be abolished, no one will feel the impulse to fly at the throat of his neighbor. Instead he will cultivate the better traits of his nature—traits that now lie dormant within him, but which have no proper field in which

to develop. Under socialism everyone who works will be secure. He will not have that haunting fear for himself or his dependents. He will then, instead of seeking at all times to beat out his neighbor, seek to aid his neighbor. He will seek to do for the welfare of all, as he now seeks to do for himself to the detriment of others. This different attitude toward life means a change almost revolutionary in human nature and consequently in human conduct. Thus socialism would abolish fear.

LEWIS: Fear is inborn, and not from the outside.

GHEENT: The nature of one's fears depends upon one's environment. In Arizona one would be likely to fear Apaches; in a community like London, where one person out of every four dies on public charity, he would be most likely to fear starvation.

LEWIS: And yet Shakespeare wrote, "He that is down need never fear to fall." Now I have talked with poor people; they don't seem to be afraid. And to tell the truth, I don't see why they should be. If a man is pinched down to one dollar and thirty cents a day, why should he be afraid to lose that? Now a man drawing a one-hundred-thousand-dollar salary, like our hysterical James Hazen Hyde, ought to be afraid. If he loses it he'll never get another. But why a fellow who is getting one dollar and thirty cents a day should be afraid, I can't understand; he can get it next door.

GHEENT: The chances of getting re-employment decrease all the time.

LEWIS: If that be so, then death is your only remedy. And why not? What do you do with a bed of onions when they grow too thick? You thin them out.

PHILLIPS (Laughing): This is a terrible attack on your friend Roosevelt. This is worse than race suicide.

LEWIS: Mr. Ghent, I'll tell you how you social philosophers are misled. The minute you go to the East Side they lie to you. They picture themselves as in want, hoping thus to make you give them something. They will point to their poor rooms thinking you will put your hand in your pocket. And yet these people are living as they desire. Most of them have money in the bank.

PHILLIPS: We want them to live in a better way.

LEWIS: Well, begin at Ellis Island.*

PHILLIPS: An occasional bath for the East Side would be an advancement.

GHEENT: They take baths there now; and the death rate for certain diseases has been greatly reduced since the municipality opened its cheap bath-houses. Dirt and the death rate go hand in hand.

PHILLIPS: But after all the principal degradation is the spiritual degradation of the man himself—cringing before another man for a chance to work. That has always existed in the world, and what we should most want to see is the end of that.

LEWIS: Isn't it a fact that our Choates and Roots are quite as cringing?

PHILLIPS: They are a lot of parasites, courtiers, cringers. The hope of the country lies in that great mass that does not yet cringe and must not learn to do so.

LEWIS: I have seen but one uncringing independent man in New York; that was Richard Croker.

PHILLIPS: The man that takes the tip doesn't like to take a tip; he is forced to it by the conditions. If he could get a decent wage, he would take it any time in place of a larger sum in tips. He doesn't like to be cringing and to submit to insult and abuse.

GHEENT: When William Dean Howells, in a letter written some years ago, criticised the cab drivers of this city for taking tips, they held a meeting at which they discussed the matter. Many of them frankly acknowledged that accepting tips was degrading and asserted that if they could get better wages they would stop it. They could not get better wages, and therefore had to take tips.

PHILLIPS: Do the socialists advocate or tolerate violence?

GHEENT: The Social Democratic party, wherever the workers have the franchise, advocates the ballot as the sure means, about which there can be no mistake, for the overthrow of capitalism. Of late the general industrial and political strike has won favor as another means. The socialists have generally opposed it, except as a last desperate resort, out of a fear that it might do more harm than good. But Bebel, the leader of the German Social Democrats, in his recent speech at the

* The immigrant landing-station of the port of New York.

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Jena Congress, has frankly accepted the general strike as a weapon and has served warning on the German government that it will be resorted to if the government attempts to withdraw the franchise from the workers. Just now we are witnessing the effects of the general strike in Russia. Armed violence the socialists have almost invariably discountenanced, not out of any innate scruples against it, but out of a sense of its uselessness.

LEWIS: If they steal the vote as they did the other day in this city, I could not regard the ballot as much of a remedy. Moreover voting is often accompanied by violence as the hospital wards will indicate.

GHEENT: There were about six hundred thousand votes polled in New York, and so far as I am aware, no persons were killed and but few injured in election rows. But this is not the point. In this country or in Germany, perhaps in Belgium, the overthrow of the capitalist system may come about like the overthrow of slavery. It would be attended by violence, but that would be no fault of ours. A popular majority for the Socialist party may be followed by a revolt of the capitalist power, just as Lincoln's election was followed by the slaveholders' revolt. The Socialists, who will then represent the government, will be forced to suppress the insurrection.

LEWIS: I do not like the term socialism. You try to include too much. I believe that the government should do for me whatever it can do better and cheaper than the individual. For example: I believe the country should own the railroads. Even if I were then robbed as I am now, I would rather the plunder went to the conductors and the other employees than to the Goulds, the Hills, and the Belmonts. I would rather be plundered for a thousand men than for one, if I am to be plundered.

PHILLIPS: They talk about these public utilities being run better by private enterprise; where has there been with any public enterprise any such scandal as with private enterprises—railroad companies, insurance, etc.?

LEWIS: Still there is a graft that goes with government.

GHEENT: That is private interest preying upon government.

PHILLIPS: Exactly. Compare graft in

the Post-Office Department with the graft in the three life insurance companies, or take the graft of hundreds of millions in merely the making and floating of the United States Steel Corporation. Where is there anything equal to the latter in public affairs?

LEWIS: What is the government appropriation for this year?

PHILLIPS: About six hundred and eighty million dollars, I believe.

LEWIS: In 1860 it cost only about fifty-five million dollars to run this government. Andrew Jackson ran it for thirteen million. Doesn't the difference between now and then smell of graft?

PHILLIPS: I want to make one point about the public utilities. Under the present system we have two sets of grafters, private and government—for our political parties are simply the tools of grafters. Under government ownership we should have only the one. It is simply a question of getting directly at the grafters. At present, with private ownership, we have the public utilities owning the government. We would be better off if the government owned the public utilities. Then, if we dismissed the party in power, we would dismiss all the grafters. Now, we dismiss only the agents of grafters and are at once saddled with a new set.

GHEENT: There is a great difference between public graft and private graft. Real public graft amounts to little more than occasional embezzlements of public funds. What is considered public graft is simply the invasion of private interests into the government service. Practically all the corruption of public servants is due to private interests attempting to prey upon the government.

LEWIS: One sort of graft is in place-making. Take our Treasury. In Martin Van Buren's time the amount of salaries paid in that building was under five hundred thousand dollars. Now it is over five million. It is the result of place-making. You can run this government with twenty per cent. of the people at present employed in it. The other eighty per cent. means graft.

PHILLIPS: You sometimes hear that there is less graft in the European governments. But the truth is that there is more there. As it is imbedded in law and custom, they don't call it graft but the right of the upper classes.

LEWIS: One reason why the robbery

called graft is committed in this country is because we won't take the time and trouble to collar the thief. We're too busy getting rich. We see a man stealing, but we won't leave our business to go after him.

PHILLIPS: It seems to me that in no country in the world is the discontent so keen as it is in this. It is intelligent discontent here. It is a very healthy discontent, and I think it will continue and grow greater. Our politicians are most amusing just now. They are all trying to dodge or shift the issue. The Socialist party, it must be admitted, is the only one that squarely faces the issue—which is the distribution of wealth, the division of the products of labor. But, eager though the politicians are to keep political discussion to the old, stupid, silly lines, they are being forced by the people toward the real issue. That is why we are beginning to hear our statesmen discuss timidly but nervously the taking over of the great public utilities, the railways, the telegraphs, insurance. All this is, of course, socialism.

LEWIS: And on that point my idea would be to have the public do everything that it can do best and cheapest. Let every tub stand on its own bottom. Is it a good thing for the public to own a railroad? I think it is. Is it a good thing for the public to own a gas company? I think it is. But I would not call these things socialism.

PHILLIPS: The socialists were the first to advocate these things.

LEWIS: The trouble is that the socialists go too far and grasp at too much. Like the fabled monkey who reached in the jar they grab fifty propositions at once, and then they can't get their hand out. They should cease to call themselves socialists; and, as mere American citizens, tackle one thing at a time.

PHILLIPS: There is no workable scheme that anybody can devise for government control of the freight rates of privately owned railroads. One little railroad will have volumes and volumes of rates, and one little case can be kept in the courts for years. It is foolish to talk about government control of things so intricate, so subtle as that; the only possible move in the direction of solution is for the government to take over the roads. And no one knows this better than the crowd that is swindling itself into wealth by manipulating freight rates.

LEWIS: Every public gets the kind of

government it deserves. A public is the architect of its own troubles. If a legislature takes bribes, you should not forget that the public elects the legislature. If I had been McCall of the New York Life, I would have stood pat. I would have said, "I have been blackmailed by the legislature, because the public elected blackmailers." But beyond that, given a great criminal, the public condones the offense. It is that condonation which is the great reason of both public and private wrongdoing. Take the McCalls, McCurdys and Depews. What happens to these people? Nothing. Everyone is glad to see them. The preacher still calls them "pillars of righteousness." They are as well off socially, religiously and professionally, in spite of their testimony, as they ever were.

GHEAT: I am disappointed in this: While you, Mr. Lewis, and you, Mr. Phillips, admit about all we socialists charge, as to the prevalence of graft, swindling, oppression and hunger, you have no remedy to offer. We socialists have a programme and a goal.

PHILLIPS: But we do not accept your remedy.

LEWIS: You are in error, Mr. Ghent. For the "oppression" you speak of, I offer the remedy of manhood and individual independence; for the "hunger," work; for the "graft and swindling," Sing Sing. There isn't, take it any way you will, an evil named by socialism that an honest, thorough enforcement of existing law wouldn't cure. If the law be not enforced, that is the public's fault, and I for one shall not sit up nights to protect a public from its own criminal indifference. I am aware that my pose seems one of cynicism and selfishness. So be it: it is the result of my own inquiries and my own experiences. I have found the rich as ignorant as are the poor. I've found the poor as thievish, as mendacious, as tyrannical within their narrower power as are the rich. Everywhere, and not at all dependent on either poverty or riches, I've found good and bad, happiness and misery, love and hate, laughter and tears. Nor shall you ever change these things—which are the very reasons of life. You speak of the threat that lurks in a "popular discontent"; and when questioned, that "popular discontent" would appear to be an individual eagerness to make money and better the individual's

financial condition. You say that socialism would do away with that "discontent"—a discontent which in its analysis turns out to be no more than just a fierce spirit of competition. To my thought, this competition, this discontent, so far from being a disaster, is the seed of health and strength and final human purity, like the current of a stream. You would eradicate the discontent, paralyze the current with socialism. What would be the outcome? Stagnation, and the rottenness and falling to destruction which attend it as inevitable corollaries. That is where you lead me, as I see my way through, by the torch of your argument. Socialism is to be the synonym of

stagnation, and stagnation the synonym of humanity in putridity—humanity gone to moral, mental and physical decay. As for Mass versus Class—the so-called laborer against the so-called capitalist—I'm free to say, as the result of my observation, that there is but one greater fool than the workingman and that is the fool he works for. Fools? Yes; fools because neither is honest, neither upholds the law, while both are wolves rending each other to the widest limits of their jaws, their ignorance and their opportunities. And now [rising to go and speaking to the waiter] where is that member of the proletariat who took my overcoat and hat?

Cupid's Binocular

BY JULIAN DURAND



Drawn by Ralph T. Willis

Said Cupid, in a jocular
And tempting sort of way,
"Pray look through my binocular
And see your hearts at play."

We looked; and She, with laughter that
Approved the magic done,
"Remarked to me just after that,
"Sweetheart, I saw but one!"