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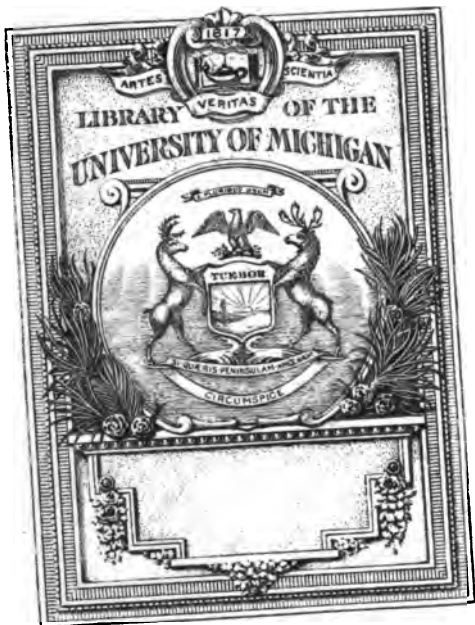
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MEN VS. THE MAN

LA MONTE AND MENCKEN

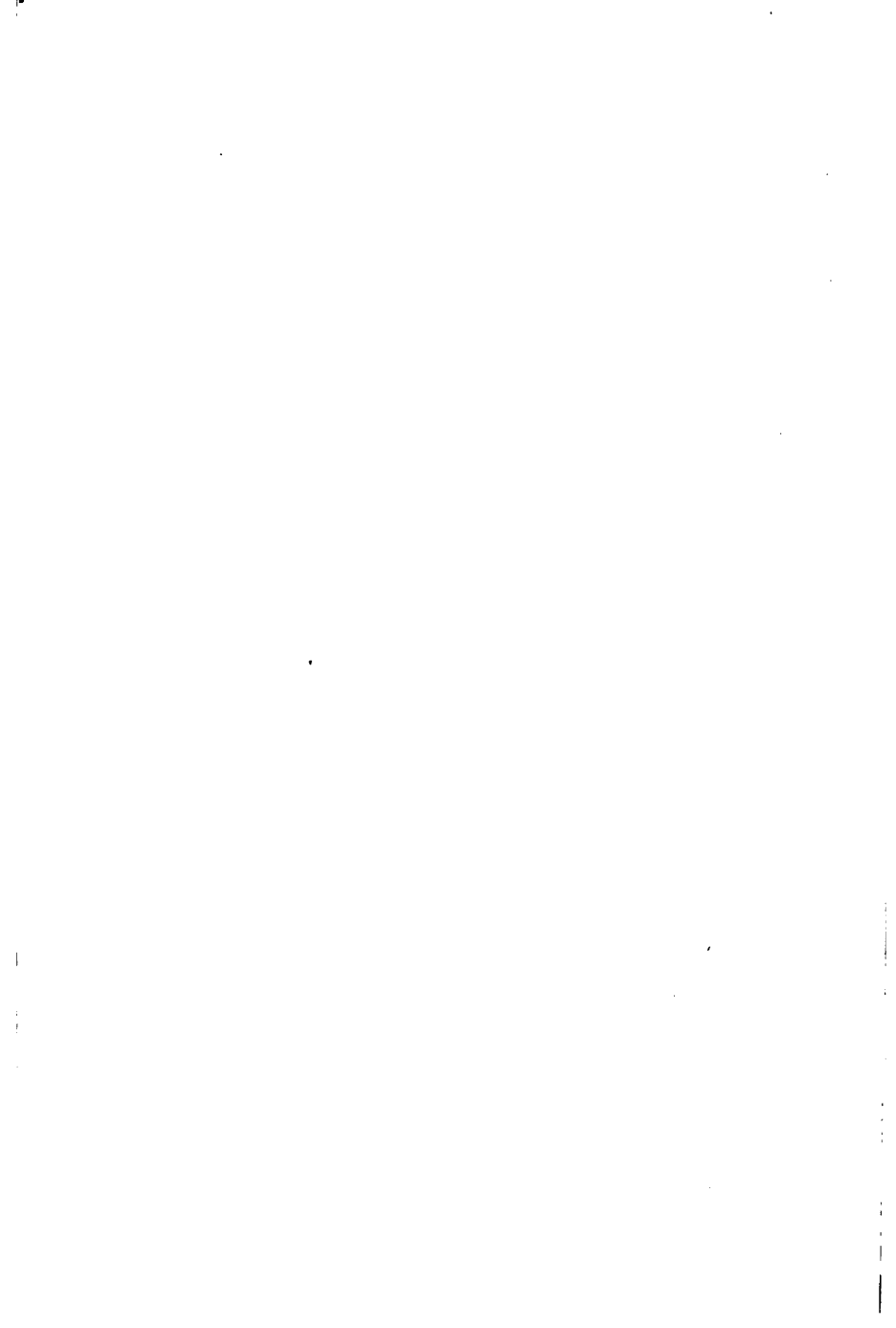


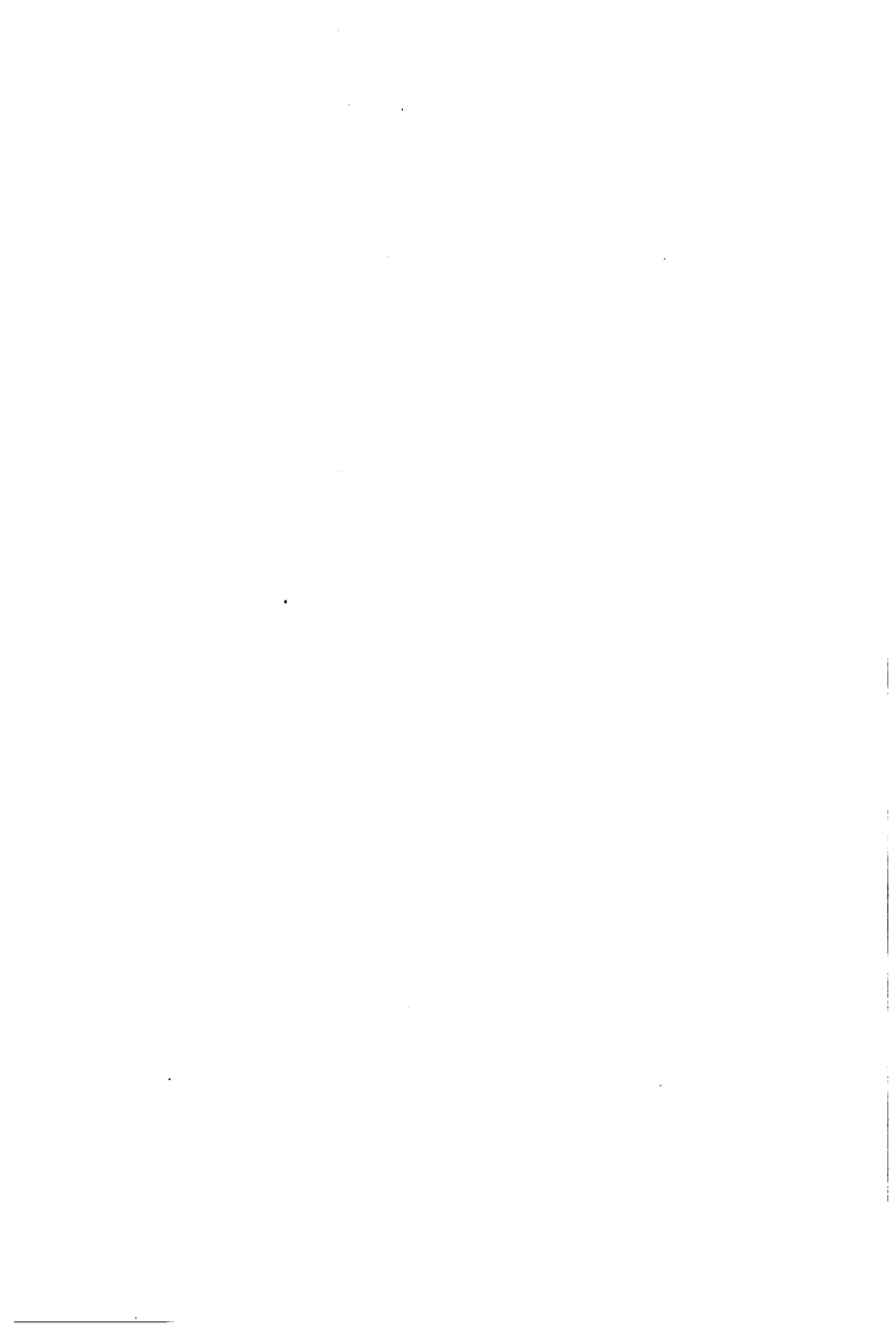


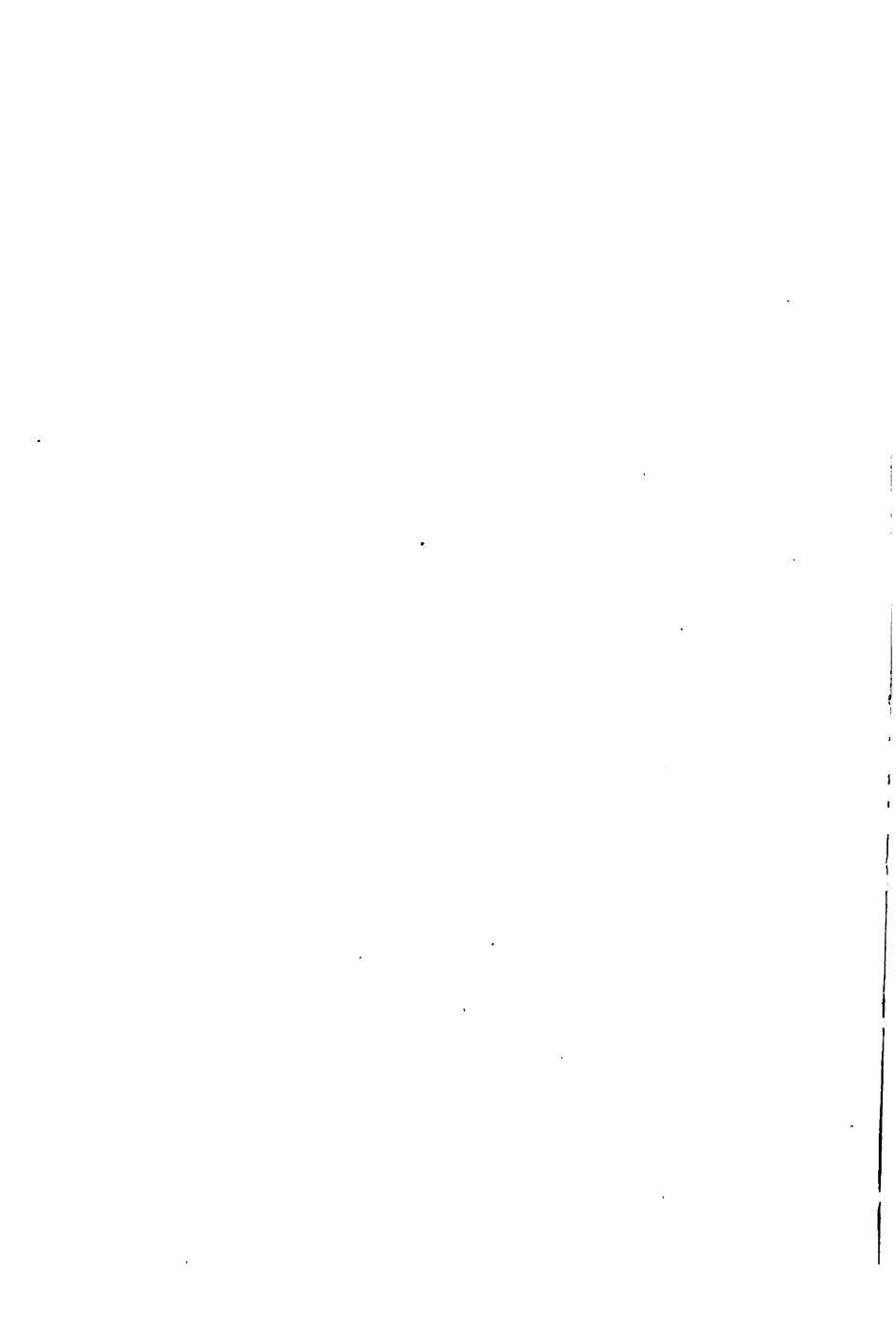
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MEN *versus* THE MAN

A CORRESPONDENCE

BETWEEN

ROBERT RIVES LA MONTE, Socialist

AND


H. L. MENCKEN, Individualist



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INTRODUCTION

THIS book is precisely what it pretends to be: a series of letters between friends. They were written because the general subject of the organization of society was one which vastly attracted both of us, and because a space of three hundred miles made a more intimate discussion impossible. Into them there went, not so much a learned review of the evidence and the prophets, as a record of personal, and often transient opinions and impressions. Changes of position are to be noticed in more than one place, but inasmuch as the purpose of each disputant was to shake the stand of the other, this proof of occasional success may be accepted, it is hoped, without impatience. It was thought best to print the letters without attempting to transform their epistolary freedom into a more sedate dialectic manner. They offer few new contributions of either fact or theory to the great questions they presume to discuss, but it is possible that they may be of some interest as showing how variously the accepted facts and theories appear and appeal to two somewhat eager inquirers.

LA MONTE.
MENCKEN.



MEN VS. THE MAN

LA MONTE'S FIRST LETTER

MY DEAR MENCKEN:

You and I are fairly typical of the hosts of educated young men and women of upper and middle class antecedents who are so far from satisfied with life as it is that the man in the street who styles us "knockers" does not come very wide of the mark. But yet we differ, and differ widely; you, in spite of your sturdy independence of mind, are in the main a disciple of Nietzsche, or, in other words, you are an Individualist whose ideal is a splendid aristocratic oligarchy of Beyond Men ruling over a hopelessly submerged rabble; I am a Socialist and a faithful disciple of Marx—not that I believe Marx to have been superhuman or infallible, but simply that I have found him to be right in so many cases, that I feel that there is a strong presumption that he is right even where I cannot clearly see that he is.

Let us first examine the grounds of our basic agreement, and then it will be easier to recognize the reason for the very wide divergence of our con-

✓ clusions. We are both idealists in the sense that Don Quixote and Jesus Christ and Thomas Jefferson were idealists, but there are idealists and idealists. The difference depends upon the nature of the ideal. If the ideal be one capable of attainment or at least of reasonably close approximation, the idealist is what we call a practical man—he may even be a scientist, a materialist, or an atheist, as are many of the most effective and ✓ determined fighters for Socialism. If the ideal be one hopelessly beyond reach of attainment, if the idealist hitches his wagon to a star without having studied astronomy sufficiently to ascertain whether the orbit of the star is along a road over which his poor man-made wagon may pass in safety, then we ✓ call him a dreamer, a visionary, a Utopian, or a madman. It is probable that in our secret hearts this is the view each of us takes of the other.

You, recognizing that within historical times there has ever been a rabble of well-nigh sub-human men and women, believe that the only ideal that ✓ you, as a practical man, can accept is one including such a rabble. To you the man who proposes the abolition of this sub-human herd is a mystical dreamer who ignores the stern teachings of history. It must be admitted that much of the current Socialist literature—H. G. Wells' "New Worlds for Old," for instance—which presents Socialism as a scheme for human amelioration which Society is free to adopt or reject as it will, as a

sort of patent panacea for human ills which the patient may or may not elect to imbibe; it must be admitted that the great bulk of this literature of polite propaganda goes far toward justifying your view.

But the typical Socialist of Germany, France, England, and America, the man or woman who gives his or her energies to educating and organizing and disciplining the wonderful, world-wide army, ever growing, ever marching forward, undismayed by defeat, sure of ultimate victory, already thirty million strong—the largest army under a single banner the world has ever seen—this typical, work-a-day, militant Socialist does not look upon himself or herself as a patent medicine vender, but as a John the Baptist proclaiming with no uncertain sound the advent of a New Order. Such an army inspired by a common faith, even though the faith be a delusion, animated by a common purpose, even though the purpose be incapable of realization, is a force that you as a practical man must reckon with.

But is the faith a delusion? Is the purpose incapable of realization? Let us see. If it is impossible for the Old Order to persist, then it follows that a New Order must come. I will postpone for the present discussing what that New Order is to be, and will proceed to show you that the Old Order *cannot* continue. I will give you as little history, political economy, and statistics

as may be for two reasons; first, I know very little of such things myself; second, I wish to be agreeable to you, and I have found by experience that practical people have an extreme distaste for exact facts.

In a broad way the great difference between the economy of the Middle Ages and the economy of to-day, is that then production was chiefly for use—for local use—while to-day production is almost solely for sale. So that the smooth working of our modern industrial and commercial complex depends upon the possibility of an adequate and uninterrupted sale of goods. Whenever the sale of goods is interrupted, as it was signally in 1873, 1893, and 1907, we have great panics.

Since the latter part of the eighteenth century we have had a continuous series of great mechanical inventions which have revolutionized and are day by day revolutionizing ever more rapidly our mode of production. The great net result of these changes is that the productive power of man has been hugely multiplied. I think I am well within the mark in saying that one hour's work to-day produces as much as one hundred hours' work in Adam Smith's day. Let us see what the concrete effect of this is. If we turn to the statistics gathered by our government at Washington, we find that in 1900 the average annual product per worker employed was in round numbers \$2,000, while the average wages were about \$400. The diffi-

culty of disposing of the product is already beginning to appear. It is obvious that a man with \$400 cannot purchase \$2,000 worth of goods. Over fifty per cent. of our population actually belong to the working class. Add to them the farmers, whose purchasing power is not proportionally much greater, and you have all but a handful of our people. It is obvious that if our total product were composed of articles of personal consumption, and if we were limited to the home or domestic market, the disposition of the product *by sale* would be impossible. But we have foreign markets, and we produce pig-iron as well as pig-meat. The dependence of the first great manufacturing country, England, upon her foreign sales was recognized in her proud boast that England was the workshop of the world. But to-day in every market in the world England is meeting the ever-fiercer competition of Germany and America, while Japan is wresting the markets of the Orient from both Europe and America, and the coming industrial development of China—the true Yellow Peril—is already the nightmare of every far-seeing European and American conservative. The foreign market has been an immensely serviceable safety-valve, but inexorable economic development—or Fate or Kismet, if you will—is rapidly screwing it shut.

The other safety-valve—the application of capital and labor to the production of pig-iron instead

of pig-meat—has been greatly developed in the past decade, and as a means of partial relief promises to outlast the foreign market safety-valve. The more capital and labor can be withdrawn from the production of articles of common everyday consumption, and employed in producing permanent industrial or transportation plant, the less becomes the *immediate* difficulty in disposing of our annual product. There can be no doubt that our recent period of prosperity was prolonged and the panic of 1907 postponed by the wholesale employment of capital and labor in such vast undertakings as the tunnels under the East and North rivers. But once such works are completed, they facilitate the production and distribution of goods, or save time or labor in some way, and thus in the long run accentuate the difficulty they temporarily relieve.

In our separate productive establishments a part of the capital employed must always be invested in permanent plant and a part paid out for wages day by day and week by week. Competition between rival plants has always compelled the constant improvement and development of machinery, and has thus compelled the owners constantly to invest larger and larger portions of their total capital in permanent plant. This change in what economists call the composition of capital has been forced upon the captains of industry irrespective of their wishes, and its effect has been to in-

crease steadily and tremendously the disproportion between the value of the product and the purchasing-power of the wage-earners employed. Alike in the separate industrial plant and in the nation as a whole the constantly progressing change in the composition of capital—a change necessitated by the process itself and that must go on—in the long run makes ever more difficult the sale of the total product.

We are thus confronted by a condition, not a theory. The masses of the people are unable to purchase more than about one-fifth of the annual product, and this fatal lack of purchasing power is destined to increase steadily irrespective of any human will.

Are we not forced, my dear Mencken, to the conclusion that we are upon the threshold of economic changes so vast that no word short of Revolution is adequate to describe them? I sincerely believe that purely as a matter of economics the progressive and inexorable change in the technical composition of capital makes a Social Revolution inevitable, and further that this revolution is so close upon us that it behooves you and me, as prudent men, to prepare for it.

What sort of a revolution is it to be? Will it place in power an oligarchy of Nietzschean Immoralists—ancestors of the Beyond Men to-be? Something of this sort was predicted a few years ago by W. J. Ghent in his "Our Benevolent Feu-