

**THE BREAKING OF  
BONDS: A DRAMA OF  
THE SOCIAL UNREST**

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The Breaking of Bonds: A Drama of the Social Unrest by Arthur Davison Ficke

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A DRAMA OF THE SOCIAL UNREST



BY

ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE



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## Preface

. . . "Hark, the rushing snow!  
The sun-awakened avalanche! whose mass,  
Thrice sifted by the storm, had gathered there  
Flake after flake, in heaven-defying minds  
As thought by thought is piled, till some great  
truth  
Is loosened, and the nations echo round,  
Shaken to their roots, as do the mountains now."

SHELLEY, "PROMETHEUS UNBOUND"

"Enter: here, also, there are Gods."

HERACLITUS

No theme presents itself to a writer of our generation with more compelling interest or greater difficulties of treatment than does the story of modern social unrest. Before our eyes is being enacted, slowly in time but very surely in effect, one of the critical upheavals in the history of civilization; yet because of the immensity of this movement's scope and the scattered nature of its manifestations, we seem at a loss to embody in our literature more than mere episodes of either its present condition or its future consequences. Economic treatises and partisan tracts we have; but scarcely a single imaginative work of our time has attempted to comprehend and express the vital spirit of this change in any such measure as, for in-

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stance, Shelley expressed the burst toward liberty for mankind which marked the history and the thought of the beginning of the last century. Such an undertaking is one of large proportions, and large difficulties. It appalls even while it fascinates. I have many misgivings as I make the attempt; yet I am emboldened by the feeling that this region of modern life cries aloud for its preemptors; and that no writer need fear that he is trespassing on fields which should have been left for a greater than he: since we may be sure that it will be the task of many men, gradually, to create the epic of the future social order.

An explanation seems to me desirable at the beginning of this undertaking; lest at the end the reader, having expected too much, should reproach me for failing to throw any useful or practical light on those bitter relations of class-hostility which are today around us on all sides, or to answer the many questions that arise and possess the mind of everyone who dwells much on these things. Let me suggest at once that this poem portrays a condition and one of its possible developments; it does not attempt to provide remedies. Poetical imagination must fail altogether if it descends from its natural sphere and assumes work which is properly that of economic or political experience. Nor can it

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usefully urge its own peculiar intuitions as things of practical validity. Though a hundred Platos should relate their precious visions of Utopian Republics, such projects could never influence directly the machinery of legislation or the facts of social progress. These works fertilize the mind of the legislator; they do not themselves bring forth laws or systems. As stimulating types, and as types only, are they efficacious. To apply their theories practically would mean disorganization of government. All this we know well. Yet we must recognize this distinction:—there is no weakness or evil inherent in Utopianism; it becomes weak and evil only when it offers itself for immediate practical acceptance. Powerfully impressed by these limitations, I have expressed in the following pages neither a political plan, nor a carefully rounded and utterly impossible scheme urged on the world for adoption. I have merely taken as a beginning the social hostility of today; I have transported it into the world of imagination; and there let the dramatic forces inherent in the situation work out what I conceived to be their natural equilibrium.

Nor shall there be any attempt at prophesying in these pages. Though I depict one line of events, I am aware that the future holds a



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thousand other equally possible lines. To express a force, however, you must embody it in an action. By so doing, you specifically define, and hence narrow the force; but you also reveal it. Writing, at bottom, of forces, I have been obliged to clothe them in imaginary events,—not as practical truth, but as possibilities of truth. When Shakespeare brings it about that Othello kills Desdemona, he writes truth; because that Othello should kill Desdemona is a logical dramatic possibility. Shakespeare does not mean to advance the proposition that every Othello in real life will act similarly; on the contrary, the actual facts may happen to turn out quite differently. It is very possible that the hero will cool off, see reason, and live happily ever after with his faithful spouse. Still, beyond and above this contradiction of reality, the murder of Desdemona would be poetically true, in that it formulates justly and finely one of the many possibilities of the situation, and expresses, as nothing else could, the potentialities of the nature of the Moor. For art can be true without being literal. So Aristotle, in distinguishing between the poet and the historian, uses words which may serve equally well to set the poet apart from the prophet. "The business of the poet," he says, "is to tell not what has happened, but what should happen, and

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what is possible, either from its probability, or from its necessary connection with what has gone before." By all this I mean that though you may convince yourself, if you will, that the incidents herein described will never occur in fact quite as I describe them, yet when you penetrate past the incidents to the forces which pulsate beneath them, you will find the reality of these, their latent menace and their possible conflict, to be conclusions irresistible to every observer of the contemporary social unrest.

Labor and Capital meet at a point which has become precisely the one where a whole host of remoter, invisible social evils produce their visible and oppressive effect. The burdens of the unearned increment of land, of the trusts, of the tariff, of the chicanery of finance, of the increased cost of living, are all concentrated here, —are all unobserved yet active forces which propel the laborer with concentrated violence against the one point of impingement—his relation to his employer: hence this point is so critical, so charged with ulterior electrical potency. Extrinsic imperfections here lend their effect to those which are inherent in the relation of employer and employed. In a word, though a thousand leaks in the mill-dam may drain the pond dry, it is at the miller's door alone that there arises the cry of want of bread.

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Only visionaries will imagine that one remedy can correct infinitely varied evils. Students of fact are even now busy tracing to each remote source the malignant causes; and the slow patience of social evolution must work the cure. But to the poet remains the right to depict the point of crises,—to call up before the reader two great opponents each sustained by partial justice, each weakened by partial iniquity,—and to illuminate the scene with the light of imagination, which, powerless itself, has before now been source of many powers.

As to the form of this play, its complete divorce from realism, and its use of embodied abstractions as protagonists, I shall not comment: since, in any art, form is peculiarly a matter to be apprehended and appraised by the spectator according to the dictates of his personal sensibilities; and the artist's explanation as to why he chose one means rather than another is an impertinence which neither wards off whatever aversion nor increases whatever pleasure the work itself may arouse. But I cannot refrain from calling upon the reader for assistance in one thing—the full vigor of his visualizing power; without the exercise of which the curtain now being lifted will disclose only a barren stage peopled by grotesque shadows.

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