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Voltairine de Cleyre
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1897

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The Gods and the People

Voltairine de Cleyre

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What have you done, O skies,
That the millions should kneel to you?
Why should they lift wet eyes,
Grateful with human dew?

Why should they clasp their hands,
And bow at thy shrines, O heaven,
Thanking thy high commands
For the mercies that thou hast given?

What have those mercies been,
O thou who art called the Good?
Who trod through a world of sin,
And stood where the felon stood

What is that wondrous peace
Vouchsafed to the child of dust

For whom all doubt shall cease
In the light of thy perfect trust?

How hast Thou heard their prayers
Smoking up from the bleeding sod,
Who, crushed by their weight of cares,
Cried up to thee, Most High God

* * *

Where the swamps of Humanity sicken
Read the answer in dumb, white scars!
You, Skies, gave the sore and the stricken
The light of your far-off stars!

The children who plead are driven,
Shelterless, through the street,
Receiving the Mercy of heaven
Hard-frozen in glittering Sleet!

The women who prayed for pity,
Who called on the saving Name,
Through the walks of your merciless city,
Are crying the rent, of shame!

The starving, who gazed till the plenty
In which they might not share
Have died in their hunger, rent by
The anguish of unheard prayer!

The weary who plead for remission,
For a moment only release,
Have sunk, with unheeded petition —
This the Christ-pledged Peace.

These are the mercies of heaven,
These are the answer of God
To the prayers of the agony-shriven,
From the paths where the millions plod!

The Silent scorn of the sightless!
The callous ear of the deaf!
The wrath of Might to the mightless!
The shroud and the mourning sheaf!

Light — to behold their squalor!
Breath — to draw in life's pain!
Voices to plead and call for
Heaven's help — hearts tip bleed — in vain!

* * *

What have you done, O Church,
That the weary should bless your name?
Should come with faith's holy torch
To light up your altered fane?

Why should they kiss the folds
Of The garment of your High Priest?
Or bow to the chalice that holds
The wine of your Sacred Feast?

Have you blown out the breath of their sighs?
Have you strengthened the weak, the ill?
Have you wiped the dark tears from their eyes,
And bade their sobbing be still?

Have you touched, have you known, have you felt,
Have you bent and softly smiled
In the face of the woman who dealt
In lewdness – to feed her child?

Have you heard the cry in the night
Going up from the outraged heart,
Masked from the social sight
By the cloak that but angered the smart?

Have you heard the children's moan,
By the light of the skies denied? –
Answer, O Walls of Stone,
In the name of your Crucified!

* * *

Out of the clay of their heart-break,
From the red dew of its sod,
You have mortared your bricks for Christ's sake
And reared a palace to God

Your painters have dipped their brushes
In the tears and the blood of the race
Whom, living, your dark frown crushes
And limned – a dead Saviour's face!

“And the Hand of Belshazzar's Feast
Writes over, in flaming light,
‘Thought's kingdom no more to the Priest;
Nor the law of Right to the Might.’”

* * *

Hark! Low down you will hear
The storm in the underground!
Listen, tyrants, and fear!
Quake at that muffled sound
“Heavens that mocked our dust,
Smile on, in your pitiless blue!
Silent as you are to us,
So silent are we to you!
“Churches that scourged our brains,
Priests that locked fast our hands!
We planted the torch in Your chains:
Now gather the burning brands!
“States, that have given us law,
When we asked for the right to earn bread —
The Sword that Damocles saw
By a hair swings over your head!
What ye have sown ye shall reap:
Teardrops, and Blood, and Hate,
Gaunt gather before your Seat
And knock at your palace gate!
“There are murderers on your thrones,
There are thieves in your Justice halls!
White Leprosy cancers their stones,
And gnaws at their worm-eaten walls!

Ye have seized, in the name of God, the
Child’s crust from famine’s dole;
You have taken the price of its body
And sung a mass for its soul!
You have smiled on the man, who, deceiving,
Paid exemption to ease your wrath!
You have cursed the poor fool who believed him,
Though her body lay prone in your path!
You have laid the seal on the lip!
You have bade us to be content!
To bow ‘neath our master’s whip,
And give thanks for the scourge — “heaven sent.”
These, O Church are your thanks:
These are the fruits without flaw,
That flow from the chosen ranks
Who keep in your perfect law!
Doors hard locked on the homeless,
Stained glass windows for bread!
On the living, the law of dumbness,
And the law of need, for the dead!
Better the dead, who, not needing,
Go down to the vaults of the earth,
Than the living whose hearts lie bleeding,
Crushed by you at their very birth!

* * *

What have you done, O State,
That the toilers should shout your ways?
Should light up the fires of their hate
If a "traitor" should dare dispraise?

How do you guard the trust
That the people repose in you?
Do you keep to the law of the just,
And hold to the changeless true?

What do you mean when you say
"The home of the free and brave?"
How free are your people, pray?
Have you no such thing as a slave?

What are the lauded "rights,"
Broad-sealed by your Sovereign Grace?
What are the love-feeding sights
You yield to your subject race?

* * *

The rights? — Ah! the right to toil,
That another, idle, may reap;
The right to make fruitful the soil,
And a meagre pittance to keep.

The right of a woman to own
Her body spotlessly pure,
And starve in the street — alone!
The right of the wronged — to endure!

The right of the slave — to its yoke,
The right of the hungry — to pray,
The right, of the toiler — to vote
For the master who buys his day!

You have sold the sun and the air,
You have dealt in the price of blood,
You have taken the lion's share
While the lion is fierce for food!

You have laid the load of the strong
On the helpless, the young, the weak!
You have trod out the purple of wrong; —
Beware where its wrath shall wreak!

"Let the voice of the People be heard!
O — " You strangled it with your rope,
Denied the last dying word
While your Trap and your Gallows spoke!

But a thousand voices rise
Where the words of the martyr fell;
The seed springs fast to the Skies
Watered deep from that bloody well!