

# **Voltairine De Cleyre**

Emma Goldman

1932

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## Written In Red

Bear it aloft, O roaring flame!  
Skyward aloft, where all may see.  
Slaves of the world! our cause is the same;  
One is the immemorial shame;  
One is the struggle, and in One name —  
*Manhood* — we battle to set men free.

*Voltairine De Cleyre*

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The first time I met her — this most gifted and brilliant anarchist woman America ever produced — was in Philadelphia, in August 1893. I had come to that city to address the unemployed during the great crisis of that year, and I was eager to visit Voltairine of whose exceptional ability as a lecturer I had heard while in New York. I found her ill in bed, her head packed in ice, her face drawn with pain. I learned that this experience repeated itself with Voltairine after her every public appearance: she would be bed-ridden for days, in constant agony from some disease of the nervous system which she had developed in early childhood and which continued to grow worse with the years. I did not remain long on this first visit, owing to the evident suffering of my hostess, though she was bravely trying to hide her pain from me. But fate plays strange pranks. In the evening of the same day, Voltairine de Cleyre was called upon to drag her frail, suffering body to a densely packed, stuffy hall, to speak in my stead. At the request of the New York authorities, the protectors of law and disorder in Philadelphia captured me as I was about to enter the Hall and led me off to the Police Station of the City of Brotherly Love.

The next time I saw Voltairine was at Blackwell's Island Penitentiary. She had come to New York to deliver her masterly address, *In Defense of Emma Goldman and Free Speech*, and she visited me in prison. From that time until her end our lives and work were frequently thrown together, often meeting harmoniously and sometimes drifting apart, but always with Voltairine standing out in my eyes as a forceful personality, a brilliant mind, a fervent idealist, an unflinching fighter, a devoted and loyal comrade. But her strongest characteristic was her extraordinary capacity to conquer physical disability — a trait which won for her the respect even of her enemies and the love and admiration of her friends. A key to this power in so frail a body is to be found in Voltairine's illuminating essay, *The Dominant Idea*.

"In everything that lives," she writes there, "if one looks searchingly, is limned to the shadow-line of an idea — an idea, dead or living, sometimes stronger when dead, with rigid, unswerving lines that mark the living embodiment with stern, immobile, cast of the non-living. Daily we move among these unyielding shadows, less pierceable, more enduring than granite, with the blackness of ages in them, dominating living, changing bodies, with dead, unchanging souls. And we meet also, living souls dominating dying bodies — living ideas regnant over decay and death. Do not imagine that I speak of human life alone. The stamp of persistent or of shifting Will is visible in the grass-blade rooted in its clod of earth, as in the gossamer web of being that floats and swims far over our heads in the free world of air."

As an illustration of persistent Will, Voltairine relates the story of the morning-glory vines that trellised over the window of her room, and “every-day they blew and curled in the wind, their white, purple-dashed faces winking at the sun, radiant with climbing life. Then, all at once, some mischance happened, — some cut-worm or some mischievous child tore one vine off below, the finest and most ambitious one, of course. In a few hours, the leaves hung limp, the sappy stem wilted and began to wither, in a day it was dead, — all but the top, which still clung longingly to its support, with bright head lifted. I mourned a little for the buds that could never open now, and pitied that proud vine whose work in the world was lost. But the next night there was a storm, a heavy, driving storm, with beating rain and blinding lightning. I rose to watch the flashes, and lo! the wonder of the world! In the blackness of the mid-night, in the fury of wind and rain, the dead vine had flowered. Five white, moon-faced blossoms blew gayly round the skeleton vine, shining back triumphant at the red lightning... But every day, for three days, the dead vine bloomed; and even a week after, when every leaf was dry and brown ... one last bud, dwarfed, weak, a very baby of a blossom, but still white and delicate, with five purple flecks, like those on the live vine beside it, opened and waved at the stars, and waited for the early sun. Over death and decay, the Dominant Idea smiled; the vine was in the world to bloom, to bear white trumpet blossoms, dashed with purple; and it held its will beyond death.”

The Dominant Idea was the *Leitmotif* throughout Voltairine de Cleyre’s remarkable life. Though she was constantly harassed by ill-health, which held her body captive and killed her at the end, the Dominant Idea energized Voltairine to ever greater intellectual efforts raised her to the supreme heights of an exalted ideal, and steeled her Will to conquer every handicap and obstacle in her tortured life. Again and again, in days of excruciating physical torment, in periods of despair and spiritual doubt, the Dominant Idea gave wings to the spirit of this woman — wings to rise above the immediate, to behold a radiant vision of humanity and to dedicate herself to it with all the fervor of her intense soul. The suffering and misery that were hers during the whole of her life we can glimpse from her writings, particularly in her haunting story, *The Sorrows of the Body*:

“I have never wanted anything more than the wild creatures have,” she relates, “a broad waft of clean air, a day to lie on the grass at times, with nothing to do but to slip the blades through my fingers, and look as long as I pleased at the whole blue arch, and the screens of green and white between; leave for a month to float and float along the salt crests and among the foam, or roll with my naked skin over a clean long stretch of sunshiny sand; food that I liked, straight from the cool ground, and time to taste its sweetness, and time to rest after tasting; sleep when it came, and stillness, that the sleep might leave me when it would, not sooner ... This is what I wanted, — this, and free contact with my fellows ... not to love and lie, and be ashamed, but to love and say I love, and be glad of it; to feel the currents of ten thousand years of passion flooding me, body to body, as the wild things meet. I have asked no more.

But I have not received. Over me there sits that pitiless tyrant, the Soul; and I am nothing. It has driven me to the city, where the air is fever and fire, and said, ‘breathe this’; — I would learn; I cannot learn in the empty fields; temples are here, — stay.’ And when my poor, stifled lungs have panted till it seemed my chest must burst, the

soul has said, 'I will allow you then, an hour or two; we will ride, and I will take my book and read meanwhile.'

And when my eyes have cried out the tears of pain for the brief vision of freedom drifting by, only for leave to look at the great green [and] blue an hour, after the long, dull-red horror of walls, the soul has said, 'I cannot waste the time altogether; I must know! read.' And when my ears have plead for the singing of the crickets and the music of the night, the soul has answered, 'No, gongs and whistles and shrieks are unpleasant if you listen; but school yourself to hearken to the spiritual voice, and it will not matter ...'

When I have looked upon my kind, and longed to embrace them, hungered wildly for the press of arms and lips, the soul has commanded sternly, 'cease, [vile] creature of fleshly lusts! Eternal reproach! Will you for ever shame me with your beastliness?'

And I have always yielded, mute, joyless, fettered, I have trod the world of the soul's choosing ... Now I am broken before my time, bloodless, sleepless, breathless, — half blind, racked at every joint, trembling with every leaf."

Yet though racked and wrecked, her life empty of the music, the glory of sky and sun, and her body rose in daily revolt against the tyrannical master, it was Voltairine's soul that conquered — the Dominant Idea which gave her strength to go on and on to the last.

Voltairine de Cleyre was born in Nov. 17, 1866, in the town of Leslie, Michigan. Her ancestry on her father's side was French-American, on her mother's Puritan stock. She came to her revolutionary tendencies by inheritance, both her grand-father and father having been imbued with the ideas of the Revolution of 1848. But while her grand-father remained true to the early influences, even in late life helping in the underground railroad for fugitive slaves, her father, August de Cleyre, who had begun as a freethinker and Communist, in later life, returned to the fold of the Catholic Church and became as passionate a devotee of it, as he had been against it in his younger days. So great had been his free thought zeal that when his daughter was born he named her Voltairine, in honor of the revered Voltaire. But when he recanted, he became obsessed by the notion that his daughter must become a nun. A contributory factor may also have been the poverty of the de Cleyres, as the result of which the early years of little Voltairine were anything but happy. But even in her childhood she showed little concern in external things, being almost entirely absorbed in her own fancies. School held a great fascination for her and when refused admission because of her extreme youth, she wept bitter tears.

However, she soon had her way, and at the age of twelve she graduated from the Grammar School with honors and would very likely have outstripped most women of her time in scholarship and learning, had not the first great tragedy come into her life, a tragedy which broke her body and left a lasting scar upon her soul. She was placed in a monastery, much against the will of her mother who, as a member of the Presbyterian Church, fought — in vain — against her husband's decision. At the Convent of Our Lady of Lake Huron, at Sarnia, Ontario, Canada, began the four-years' calvary of the future rebel against religious superstition. In her essay on *The Making of an Anarchist* she vividly describes the terrible ordeal of those years:

"How I pity myself now, when I remember it, poor lonesome little soul, battling solitary in the murk of religious superstition, unable to believe and yet in hourly fear

of damnation, hot, savage, and eternal, if I do not instantly confess and profess; how well I recall the bitter energy with which I repelled my teacher's enjoinder, when I told her I did not wish to apologize for an adjudged fault as I could not see that I had been wrong and would not feel my words. 'It is not necessary,' said she, 'that we should feel what we say, but it is always necessary that we obey our superiors.' 'I will not lie,' I answered hotly, and at the same time trembled, lest my disobedience had finally consigned me to torment ... it had been like the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and there are white scars on my soul, where ignorance and superstition burnt me with their hell fire in those stifling days. Am I blasphemous? It is their word, not mine. Beside that battle of my young days all others have been easy, for whatever was without, within my own Will was supreme. It has owed no allegiance, and never shall; it has moved steadily in one direction, the knowledge and the assertion of its own liberty, with all the responsibility falling thereon."

Her endurance at an end, Voltairine made an attempt to escape from the hateful place. She crossed the river to Port Huron and tramped seventeen miles, but her home was still far away. Hungry and exhausted, she had to turn back to seek refuge in a house of an acquaintance of the family. These sent for her father who took the girl back to the Convent.

Voltairine never spoke of the penance meted out to her, but it must have been harrowing, because as a result of her monastic life her health broke down completely when she had hardly reached the age of sixteen. But she remained in the Convent school to finish her studies: rigid self-discipline and perseverance, which so strongly characterised her personality, were already dominant in Voltairine's girlhood. But when she finally graduated from her ghastly prison, she was changed not only physically, but spiritually as well. "I struggled my way out at last," she writes, "and was a free-thinker when I left the institution, though I had never seen a book or heard a word to help me in my loneliness."

Once out of her living tomb she buried her false god. In her fine poem, *The Burial of my Dead Past*, she sings:

"And now, Humanity, I turn to you;  
I consecrate my service to the world!  
Perish the old love, welcome to the new —  
Broad as the space-aisles where the stars are whirled!"

Hungrily she devoted herself to the study of free-thought literature, her alert mind absorbing everything with ease. Presently she joined the secular movement and became one of its outstanding figures. Her lectures, always carefully prepared, (Voltairine scorned extemporaneous speaking) were richly studded with original thought and were brilliant in form and presentation. Her address on Thomas Paine, for instance, excelled similar efforts of Robert Ingersoll in all his flowery oratory.

During a Paine memorial convention, in some town in Pennsylvania, Voltairine de Cleyre chanced to hear Clarence Darrow on Socialism. It was the first time the economic side of life and the Socialist scheme of a future society were presented to her. That there is injustice in the world she knew, of course, from her own experience. But here was one who could analyse in such

masterly manner the causes of economic slavery, with all its degrading effects upon the masses; moreover, one who could also clearly delineate a definite plan of reconstruction. Darrow's lecture was manna to the spiritually famished young girl. "I ran to it" she wrote later, "as one who has been turning about in darkness runs to the light, I smile now at how quickly I adopted the label 'Socialism' and how quickly I casted aside."

She cast it aside, because she realised how little she knew of the historic and economic background of Socialism. Her intellectual integrity led her to stop lecturing on the subject and to begin delving into the mysteries of sociology and political economy. But, as the earnest study of Socialism inevitably brings one to the more advanced ideas of Anarchism, Voltairine's inherent love of liberty could not make peace with State-ridden notions of Socialism. She discovered, she wrote at this time, that "Liberty is not the daughter but the mother of order."

During a period of several years she believed to have found an answer to her quest for liberty in the Individualist-Anarchist school represented by Benjamin R. Tucker's publication *Liberty*, and the works of Proudhon, Herbert Spencer, and other social thinkers. But later she dropped all economic labels, calling herself simply an Anarchist, because she felt that "Liberty and experiment alone can determine the best economic forms of Society."

The first impulse towards Anarchism was awakened in Voltairine de Cleyre by the tragic event in Chicago, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November, 1887. In sending the Anarchists to the gallows, the State of Illinois stupidly boasted that it had also killed the ideal for which the men died. What a senseless mistake, constantly repeated by those who sit on the thrones of the mighty! The bodies of Parsons, Spies, Fisher, Engel and Lingg were barely cold when already new life was born to proclaim their ideals.

Voltairine, like the majority of the people of America, poisoned by the perversion of facts in the press of the time, at first joined in the cry, "They ought to be hanged!" But hers was a searching mind, not of the kind that could long be content with mere surface appearances. She soon came to regret her haste. In her first address, on the occasion of the anniversary of the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1887, Voltairine, always scrupulously honest with herself, publicly declared how deeply she regretted having joined in the cry of "They ought to be hanged!" which, coming from one who at that time no longer believed in capital punishment, seemed doubly cruel.

"For that ignorant, outrageous, blood-thirsty sentence I shall never forgive myself," she said, "though I know the dead men would have forgiven me. But my own voice, as it sounded that night, will sound so in my ears till I die, — a bitter reproach and shame."

Out of the heroic death in Chicago a heroic life emerged, a life consecrated to the ideas for which the men were put to death. From that day until her end, Voltairine de Cleyre used her powerful pen and her great mastery of speech in behalf of the ideal which had come to mean to her the only *raison d'être* of her life.

Voltairine de Cleyre was unusually gifted: as poet, writer, lecturer and linguist, she could have easily gained for herself a high position in her country and the renown it implies. But she was not one to market her talents for the flesh-pots of Egypt. She would not even accept the simplest comforts from her activities in the various social movements she had devoted herself to during her life. She insisted on arranging her life consistently with her ideas, on living among the people whom she sought to teach and inspire with human worth, with a passionate longing for freedom

and a strength to strive for it. This revolutionary vestal lived as the poorest of the poor, amongst dreary and wretched surroundings, taxing her body to the utmost, ignoring externals, sustained only by the Dominant Idea which led her on.

As a teacher of languages in the ghettos of Philadelphia, New York and Chicago, Voltairine eked out a miserable existence, yet out of her meagre earnings she supported her mother, managed to buy a piano on the installment plan (she loved music passionately and was an artist of no small measure) and to help others more able physically than she was. How she ever did it not even her nearest friends could explain. Neither could anyone fathom the miracle of energy which enabled her, in spite of a weakened condition and constant physical torture, to give lessons for 14 hours, seven days of the week, contribute to numerous magazines and papers, write poetry and sketches, prepare and deliver lectures which for lucidity and beauty were master-pieces. A short tour through England and Scotland in 1897, was the only relief from her daily drudgery. It is certain that she could not have survived such an ordeal for so many years but for the Dominant Idea that steeled her persistent Will.

In 1902, a demented youth who had once been Voltairine's pupil and who somehow developed the peculiar aberration that she was an anti-Semite (she who had devoted most of her life to the education of Jews!) waylaid her while she was returning from a music lesson. As she approached him, unaware of impending danger, he fired several bullets into her body. Voltairine's life was saved, but the effects of the shock and her wounds marked the beginning of a frightful physical purgatory. She became afflicted with a maddening, ever-present din in her ears. She used to say that the most awful noises in New York were harmony compared to the deafening pounding in her ears. Advised by her physicians that a change of climate might help her, she went to Norway. She returned apparently improved, but not for long. Illness led her from hospital to hospital, involving several operations, without bringing relief. It must have been in one of these moments of despair that Voltairine de Cleyre contemplated suicide. Among her letters, a young friend of hers in Chicago found, long after her death, a short note in Voltairine's hand-writing, addressed to no one in particular, containing the desperate resolve:

"I am going to do tonight that which I have always intended to do should those circumstances arise which have now arisen in my life. I grieve only that in my spiritual weakness I failed to act on my personal convictions long ago, and allowed myself to be advised, and misadvised by others. It would have saved me a year of unintermittant suffering and my friends a burden which, however kindly they have borne it, was still a useless one.

In accordance with my beliefs concerning life and its objects, I hold it to be the simple duty of anyone afflicted with an incurable disease to cut his agonies short. Had any of my physicians told me when I asked them the truth of the matter, a long and hopeless tragedy might have been saved. But, obeying what they call 'medical ethics,' they chose to promise the impossible (recovery), in order to keep me on the rack of life. Such action let them account for themselves, for I hold it to be one of the chief crimes of the medical profession that they tell these lies.

That no one be unjustly charged, I wish it understood that my disease is chronic catarrh of the head, afflicting my ears with incessant sound for a year past. It has nothing whatever to do with the shooting of two years ago, and no one is in any way to blame.



I wish my body to be given to the Hahnemann College to be used for dissection; I hope Dr. H. L. Northrop will take it in charge. I want no ceremonies, nor speeches over it. I die, as I have lived, a free spirit, an Anarchist, owing no allegiance to rulers, heavenly or earthly. Though I sorrow for the work I wished to do, which time and loss of health prevented, I am glad I lived no useless life (save this one last year) and hope that the work I did will live and grow with my pupils' lives and by them be passed on to others, even as I passed on what I had received. If my comrades wish to do aught for my memory, let them print my poems, the MSS. of which is in possession of N. N., to whom I leave this last task of carrying out my few wishes.

My dying thoughts are on the vision of a free world, without poverty and its pain, ever ascending to sublimer knowledge.

*Voltairine De Cleyre*"

There is no indication anywhere, why Voltairine, usually so determined, failed to carry out her intention. No doubt it was again the Dominant Idea; her Will to life was too strong.

In the note revealing her decision of ending her life, Voltairine asserts that her malady had nothing to do with the shooting which occurred two years prior. She was moved to exonerate her assailant by her boundless human compassion, as she was moved by it, when she appealed to her comrades for funds to help the youth and when she refused to have him prosecuted by "due process of law." She knew better than the judges the cause and effect of crime and punishment. And she knew that in any event the boy was irresponsible. But the chariot of law rolled on. The assailant was sentenced to seven years prison, where soon he lost his mind altogether, dying in an insane asylum two years later. Voltairine's attitude towards criminals and her view of the barbarous futility of punishment are incorporated in her brilliant treatise on *Crime and Punishment*. After a penetrating analysis of the causes of crime, she asked:

"Have you ever watched it coming in, — the sea? When the wind comes roaring out of the mist and a great bellowing thunders up from the water? Have you watched the white lions chasing each other towards the walls, and leaping up with foaming anger, as they strike, and turn and chase each other along the black bars of their cage in rage to devour each other? And tear back? And leap in again? Have you ever wondered in the midst of it all, *which particular drops of water would strike the wall?* If one could know all the facts one might calculate even that. But who can know them all? Of one thing only we are sure; some must strike it.

They are the criminals, those drops of water pitching against that silly wall and broken. Just why it was those particular ones we cannot know; but some had to go. Do not curse them; you have cursed them enough ..." She closes her wonderful expos, of criminology with this appeal: "Let us have done with this savage idea of punishment, which is without wisdom. Let us work for the freedom of man from the oppression which makes criminals, and for the enlightened treatment of the sick."

Voltairine de Cleyre began her public career as a pacifist, and for many years she sternly set her face against revolutionary methods. But the events in Europe during the latter years of her life, the Russian Revolution of 1905, the rapid development of Capitalism in her own country, with all

its resultant cruelty, violence and injustice, and particularly the Mexican Revolution changed her view of methods. As always when, after an inner struggle, Voltairine saw cause for change, her large nature would compel her to admit error freely and bravely stand up for the new. She did so in her able essays on *Direct Action* and *The Mexican Revolution*. She did more; she fervently took up the fight of the Mexican people who threw off their yoke; she wrote, she lectured, she collected funds for the Mexican cause. She even grew impatient with some of her comrades because they saw in the events across the American border only one phase of the social struggle and not the all-absorbing issue to which everything else should be subordinated. I was among the severely criticised and so was *Mother Earth*, a magazine I published. But I had often been censured by Voltairine for my “waste” of effort to reach the American intelligentsia rather than to consecrate all my efforts to the workers, as she did so ardently. But, knowing her deep sincerity, the religious zeal which stamped everything she did, no one minded her censorship: we went on loving and admiring her just the same. How deeply she felt the wrongs of Mexico can best be seen from the fact that she began to study Spanish and had actually planned to go to Mexico to live and work among the Yaqui Indians and to become an active force in the Revolution. In 1910, Voltairine de Cleyre moved from Philadelphia to Chicago, where she again took up teaching of immigrants; at the same time she lectured, worked on a history of the so-called Haymarket Riot, translated from French the life of Louise Michel, the priestess of pity and vengeance, as W. T. Stead had named the French Anarchist, and other works dealing with Anarchism by foreign writers. Constantly in the throes of her terrible affliction, she knew but too well that the disease would speedily bring her to the grave. But she endured her pain stoically, without letting her friends know the inroads her illness was making upon her constitution. Bravely she fought for life with infinite patience and pains, but in vain. The infection gradually penetrated deeper and, finally, there developed a mastoid which necessitated an immediate operation. She might have recovered from it had not the poison spread to the brain. The first operation impaired her memory; she could recollect no names, even of the closest friends who watched over her. It was reasonably certain that a second operation, if she could have survived it, would have left her without the capacity for speech. Soon grim Death made all scientific experiment on the much-tortured body of Voltairine de Cleyre unnecessary. She died on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1912. In Waldheim cemetery, near the grave of the Chicago Anarchists, lies at rest Voltairine de Cleyre, and every year large masses journey there to pay homage to the memory of America’s first Anarchist martyrs, and they lovingly remember Voltairine de Cleyre.

The bare physical facts in the life of this unique woman are not difficult to record. But they are not enough to clarify the traits that combined in her character, the contradictions in her soul, the emotional tragedies in her life. For, unlike other great social rebels, Voltairine’s public career was not very rich in events. True, she had some conflicts with the powers that be, she was forcibly removed from the platform on several occasions, she was arrested and tried on others, but never convicted. On the whole, her activities went on comparatively smoothly and undisturbed. Her struggles were of psychologic nature, her bitter disappointments having their roots in her own strange being. To understand the tragedy of her life, one must try to trace its inherent causes. Voltairine herself has given us the key to her nature and inner conflicts. In several of her essays and, specifically, in her autobiographical sketches. In *The Making of an Anarchist* we learn, for instance, that if she were to attempt to explain her Anarchism by the ancestral vein of rebellion, she would be, even though at bottom convictions are temperamental, “a bewildering error in

logic; for, by early influences and education I should have been a nun, and spent my life glorifying Authority in its most concentrated form.”

There is no doubt that the years in the Convent had not only undermined her physique but had also a lasting effect upon her spirit; they killed the mainsprings of joy and of gaiety in her. Yet there must have been an inherent tendency to asceticism, because even four years in the living tomb could not have laid such a crushing hand upon her entire life. Her whole nature was that of an ascetic. Her approach to life and ideals was that of the old-time saints who flagellated their bodies and tortured their souls for the glory of God. Figuratively speaking, Voltairine also flagellated herself, as if in penance for our Social Sins; her poor body was covered with ungainly clothes and she denied herself even the simplest joys, not only because of lack of means, but because to do otherwise would have been against her principles.

Every social and ethical movement had had its ascetics, of course, the difference between them and Voltairine was that they worshipped no other gods and had no need of any, excepting their particular ideal. Not so Voltairine. With all her devotion to her social ideals, she had another god — the god of Beauty. Her life was a ceaseless struggle between the two; the ascetic determinedly stifling her longing for beauty, but the poet in her as determinedly yearning for it, worshipping it in utter abandonment, only to be dragged back by the ascetic to the other deity, her social ideal, her devotion to humanity. It was not given to Voltairine to combine them both; hence the inner lacerating struggle.

Nature has been very generous towards Voltairine, endowing her with a singularly brilliant mind, with a rich and sensitive soul. But physical beauty and feminine attraction were withheld from her, their lack made more apparent by ill-health and her abhorrence of artifice. No one felt this more poignantly than she did herself. Anguish over her lack of physical charm speak in her hauntingly autobiographic sketch, *The Reward of an Apostate*:

“... Oh, that my god will none of me! That is an old sorrow! My god was Beauty, and I am all unbeautiful, and ever was. There is no grace in these harsh limbs of mine, nor was at any time. I, to whom the glory of a lit eye was as the shining of stars in a deep well, have only dull and faded eyes, and always had; the chiselled lip and chin whereover runs the radiance of life in bubbling gleams, the cup of living wine was never mine to taste or kiss. I am earth-colored and for my own ugliness sit in the shadows, that the sunlight may not see me, nor the beloved of my god. But, once, in my hidden corner, behind a curtain of shadows, I blinked at the glory of the world, and had such joy of it as only the ugly know, sitting silent and worshipping, forgetting themselves and forgotten. Here in my brain it glowed, the shimmering of the dying sun upon the shore, the long [gold] line between the sand and sea, where the sliding foam caught fire and burned to death ...

Here in my brain, my silent unrevealing brain, were the eyes I loved, the lips I dared not kiss, the sculptured head and tendrilled hair. They were here always in my wonder-house, my house of Beauty. The temple of my god. I shut the door on common life and worshipped here. And no bright, living, flying thing in whose body beauty dwells as guest can guess the ecstatic joy of a brown, silent creature, a toad-thing, squatting on the shadowed ground, self-blotted, motionless, thrilling with the presence of All-Beauty, though it has no part therein.”

This is complemented by a description of her other god, the god of physical strength, the maker and breaker of things, the re-moulder of the world. Now she followed him and would have run abreast because she loved him so, —

“not with that still ecstasy of [flooding] joy wherewith my own god filled me of old, but with impetuous, eager fires, that burned and beat through all the blood-threads of me. ‘I love you, love me back,’ I cried, and would have flung myself upon his neck. Then he turned on me with a ruthless blow; and fled away over the world, leaving me crippled, stricken, powerless, a fierce pain driving through my veins — gusts of pain! — and I crept back into my [old] cavern, stumbling, blind and deaf, only for the haunting vision of my shame and the rushing sound of fevered blood ...”

I quoted at length because this sketch is symbolic of Voltairine’s emotional tragedies and singularly self-revealing of the struggles silently fought against the fates that gave her so little of what she craved most. Yet, Voltairine had her own peculiar charm which showed itself most pleasingly when she was roused over some wrong, or when her pale face lit up with the inner fire of her ideal. But the men who came into her life rarely felt it; they were too overawed by her intellectual superiority, which held them for a time. But the famished soul of Voltairine de Cleyre craved for more than mere admiration which the men had either not the capacity or the grace to give. Each in his own way “turned on her with a ruthless blow,” and left her desolate, solitary, heart-hungry.

Voltairine’s emotional defeat is not an exceptional case; it is the tragedy of many intellectual women. Physical attraction always has been, and no doubt always will be, a decisive factor in the love-life of two persons. Sex-relationship among modern peoples has certainly lost much of its former crudeness and vulgarity. Yet it remains a fact today, as it has been for ages, that men are chiefly attracted not by a woman’s brain or talents, but by her physical charm. That does not necessarily imply that they prefer woman to be stupid. It does imply, however, most men prefer beauty to brains, perhaps because in true male fashion they flatter themselves that they have no need of the former in their own physical make-up and that they have sufficient of the latter not to seek for it in their wives. At any rate, therein has been the tragedy of many intellectual women.

There was one man in Voltairine’s life who cherished her for the beauty of her spirit and the quality of her mind, and who remained a vital force in her life until his own sad end. This man was Dyer D. Lum, the comrade of Albert Parsons and his co-editor on *The Alarm* — the Anarchist paper published in Chicago before the death of Parsons. How much their friendship meant to Voltairine we learn from her beautiful tribute to Dyer D. Lum in her poem *In Memoriam* from which I quote the last stanza:

“Oh, Life, I love you for the love of him  
Who showed me all your glory and your pain!  
‘Into Nirvana’ — so the deep tones sing —  
And there — and there — we shall — be — one — again.”

Measured by the ordinary yard-stick, Voltairine de Cleyre was anything but normal in her feelings and reactions. Fortunately, the great of the world cannot be weighed in numbers and

scales; their worth lies in the meaning and purpose they give to existence, and Voltairine has undoubtedly enriched life with meaning and given sublime idealism as its purpose. But, as a study of human complexities she offers rich material. The woman who consecrated herself to the service of the submerged, actually experiencing poignant agony at the sight of suffering, whether of children or dumb animals (she was obsessed by love for the latter and would give shelter and nourishment to every stray cat and dog, even to the extent of breaking with a friend because she objected to her cats invading every corner of the house), the woman who loved her mother devotedly, maintaining her at the cost of her own needs, — this generous comrade whose heart went out to all who were in pain or sorrow, was almost entirely lacking in the mother instinct. Perhaps it never had a chance to assert itself in an atmosphere of freedom and harmony. The one child she brought into the world had not been wanted. Voltairine was deathly ill the whole period of pregnancy, the birth of her child nearly costing the mother's life. Her situation was aggravated by the serious rift that took place at this time in her relationship with the father of this child. The stifling Puritan atmosphere in which the two lived did not serve to improve matters. All of it resulted in the little one being frequently changed from place to place and later even used by the father as a bait to compel Voltairine to return to him. Subsequently, deprived of opportunity to see her child, kept in ignorance even of its whereabouts, she gradually grew away from him. Many years passed before she saw the boy again and he was then seventeen years of age. Her efforts to improve his much-neglected education met with failure. They were strangers to each other. Quite naturally perhaps, her male child felt like most men in her life; he, too, was overawed by her intellect, repelled by her austere mode of living. He went his way. He is today probably, one of the 100% Americans, commonplace and dull.

Yet Voltairine de Cleyre loved youth and understood it as few grown people do. Characteristically, she wrote to a young friend who was deaf and with whom it was difficult to converse orally:

“Why do you say you are drifting farther and farther from those dear to you? I do not think your experience in that respect is due to your deafness; but to the swell of life in you. All young creatures feel the time come when a new surge of life overcomes them, drives them onward, they know not where. And they lose hold on the cradles of life, and parental love, and they almost suffocate with the pressure of forces in themselves. And even if they hear they feel so vague, restless, looking for some definite thing to come.

It seems to you it is your deafness; but while that is a terrible thing, you mustn't think it would solve the problem of loneliness if you could hear. I know how your soul must fight against the inevitability of your deprivation; I, too, could never be satisfied and resigned to the 'inevitable.' I fought it when there was no use and no hope. But the main cause of loneliness is, as I say, the surge of life, which in time will find its own expression.

Full well she knew “the surge of life,” and the tragedy of vain seeking for an outlet, for in her it had been suppressed so long that she was rarely able to give vent to it, except in her writings. She dreaded “company” and crowds, though she was at home on the platform; proximity she shrank from. Her reserve and isolation, her inability to break through the wall raised by years of silence in the Convent and years of illness are disclosed in a letter to her young correspondent:

“Most of the time I shrink away from people and talk — especially talk. With the exception of a few — a very few people, I hate to sit in people’s company. You see I have (for a number of reasons I cannot explain to anybody) had to go away from the home and friends where I lived for twenty years. And no matter how good other people are to me, I never feel at home anywhere. I feel like a lost or wandering creature that has no place, and cannot find anything to be at home with. And that’s why I don’t talk much to you, nor to others (excepting the two or three that I knew in the east). I am always far away. I cannot help it. I am too old to learn to like new corners. Even at home I never talked much, with but one or two persons. I’m sorry. It’s not because I want to be morose, but I can’t bear company. Haven’t you noticed that I never like to sit at table when there are strangers? And it gets worse all the time. Don’t mind it.”

Only on rare occasions could Voltairine de Cleyre freely communicate herself, give out of her rich soul to those who loved and understood her. She was a keen observer of man and his ways, quickly detecting sham and able to separate the wheat from the chaff. Her comments on such occasions were full of penetration, interspersed with a quiet, rippling humor. She used to tell an interesting anecdote about some detectives who had come to arrest her. It was in 1907, in Philadelphia, when the guardians of law descended upon her home. They were much surprised to find that Voltairine did not look like the traditional newspaper Anarchist. They seemed sorry to arrest her, but “them’s orders,” they apologetically declared. They made a search of her apartment, scattering her papers and books and, finally, discovering a copy of her revolutionary poems entitled: *The Worm Turns*. With contempt they threw it aside. “Hell, it’s only about worms,” they remarked.

They were rare moments when Voltairine could overcome her shyness and reserve, and really feel at home with a few selected friends. Ordinarily, her natural disposition, aggravated by constant physical pain, and the deafening roar in her ears, made her taciturn and extremely uncommunicative. She was sombre, the woes of the world weighing heavily upon her. She saw life mostly in greys and blacks and painted it accordingly. It is this which prevented Voltairine from becoming one of the greatest writers of her time.

But no one who can appreciate literary quality and musical prose will deny Voltairine de Cleyre’s greatness after reading the stories and sketches already mentioned and the others contained in her collected works.<sup>1</sup> Particularly, her *Chain Gang*, picturing the negro convicts slaving on the highways of the south, is for beauty of style, feeling and descriptive power, a literary gem that has few equals in English literature. Her essays are most forceful, of extreme clarity of thought and original expression. And even her poems, though somewhat old-fashioned in form, rank higher than much that now passes for poetry.

However, Voltairine did not believe in “art for art’s sake.” To her art was the means and the vehicle to voice life in its ebb and flow, in all its stern aspects for those who toil and suffer, who dream of freedom and dedicate their lives to its achievement. Yet more significant than her art was Voltairine de Cleyre’s life itself, a supreme heroism moved and urged on by her ever-present Dominant Idea.

The prophet is alien in his own land. Most alien is the American prophet. Ask any 100-percenter what he knows of the truly great men and women of his country, the superior souls that give

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Works* by Voltairine de Cleyre, published by Mother Earth Publishing Association, New York, 1914.

life inspiration and beauty, the teachers of new values. He will not be able to name them. How, then, should he know of the wonderful spirit that was born in some obscure town in the State of Michigan, and who lived in poverty all her life, but who by sheer force of will pulled herself out of a living grave, cleared her mind from the darkness of superstition, — turned her face to the sun, perceived a great ideal and determinedly carried it to every corner of her native land? The 100-percenters feel more comfortable when there is no one to disturb their drabness. But the few who themselves are souls in pain, who long for breadth and vision — they need to know about Voltairine de Cleyre. They need to know that American soil sometimes does bring forth exquisite plants. Such consciousness will be encouraging. It is for them that this sketch is written, for them that Voltairine de Cleyre, whose body lies in Waldheim, is being spiritually resurrected — as it were — as the poet-rebel, the liberty-loving artist, the greatest woman-Anarchist of America. But more graphically than any description of mine, her own words in the closing chapter of *The Making of an Anarchist* express the true personality of Voltairine de Cleyre:

“Good-natured satirists often remark that ‘the best way to cure an Anarchist is to give him a fortune.’ Substituting ‘corrupt’ for ‘cure,’ I would subscribe to this; and believing myself to be no better than the rest of mortals, I earnestly hope that as so far it has been my [lot] to work, and work hard, and for no fortune, so I may continue to the end; for let me keep the integrity of my soul, with all the limitations of my material conditions, rather than become the spine-less and ideal-less creation of material needs. My reward is that I live with the young; I keep step with my comrades; I shall die in the harness with my face to the east — the East and the Light.”

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Emma Goldman  
Voltairine De Cleyre  
1932

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RevoltLib.com, retrieved on July 5, 2020.

Published privately by The Oriole Press, Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, 1932. Edition limited to  
two-hundred copies of which fifty are printed on Nuremberg deckle-edge paper for private  
distribution with the compliments of the publisher.

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