Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre

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SELECTED WORKS

OF

VOLTAIRINE DE CLEYRE

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Biographical Sketch by HIPPOLYTE HAVEL

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Transcriber's Notes:

Consistent spelling and hyphen usage are maintained within each poem/essay.

Punctuation typos with a single solution are corrected; those having more than one solution remain unchanged.

In the essay "Literature the Mirror of Man," the reference to "Bosworth's Life of Johnson" is corrected to "Boswell's Life of Johnson."

Words printed in the text as mixed small caps are surrounded by equal signs, as in =Voltairine de Cleyre=.

Introduction

"Nature has the habit of now and then producing a type of human being far in advance of the times; an ideal for us to emulate; a being devoid of sham, uncompromising, and to whom the truth is sacred; a being whose selfishness is so large that it takes in the whole human race and treats self only as one of the great mass; a being keen to sense all forms of wrong, and powerful in denunciation of it; one who can reach into the future and draw it nearer. Such a being was =Voltairine de Cleyre=."

What could be added to this splendid tribute by Jay Fox to the memory of =Voltairine de Cleyre=? These admirable words express the sentiments of all the friends and comrades of that remarkable woman whose whole life was dedicated to a dominant idea.

Like many other women in public life, =Voltairine de Cleyre= was a voluminous letter writer. Those letters addressed to her comrades,

friends, and admirers would form her real biography; in them we trace her heroic struggles, her activity, her beliefs, her doubts, her mental changes--in short, her whole life, mirrored in a manner no biographer will ever be able to equal. To collect and publish this correspondence as a part of =Voltairine de Cleyre's= works is impossible; the task is too big for the present undertaking. But let us hope that we will find time and means to publish at least a part of this correspondence in the near future.

The average American still holds to the belief that Anarchism is a foreign poison imported into the States from decadent Europe by criminal paranoiacs. Hence the ridiculous attempt of our lawmakers to stamp out Anarchy, by passing a statute which forbids Anarchists from other lands to enter the country. Those wise Solons are ignorant of the fact that Anarchist theories and ideas were propounded in our Commonwealth ere Proudhon or Bakunin entered the arena of intellectual struggle and formulated their thesis of perfect freedom and economic independence in Anarchy. Neither are they acquainted with the writings of Lysander Spooner, Josiah Warren, Stephen Pearl Andrews, William B. Greene, or Benjamin Tucker, nor familiar with the propagandistic work of Albert R. Parsons, Dyer D. Lum, C. L. James, Moses Harman, Ross Winn, and a host of other Anarchists who sprang from the native stock and soil. To call their attention to these facts is quite as futile as to point out that the tocsin of revolt resounds in the writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Whitman, Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and other seers of America; just as futile as to prove to them that the pioneers in the movement for woman's emancipation in America were permeated with Anarchist thoughts and feelings. Hardened by a fierce struggle and strengthened by a

vicious persecution, those brave champions of sex-freedom defied the respectable mob by proclaiming their independence from prevailing cant and hypocrisy. They inaugurated the tremendous sex revolt among the American women--a purely native movement which has yet to find its historian.

=Voltairine de Cleyre= belongs to this gallant array of rebels who swore allegiance to the cause of universal liberty, thus forfeiting the respect of all "honorable citizens," and bringing upon their heads the persecution of the ruling class. In the real history of the struggle for human emancipation, her name will be found among the foremost of her time. Born shortly after the close of the Civil War, she witnessed during her life the most momentous transformation of the nation; she saw the change from an agricultural community into an industrial empire; the tremendous development of capital in this country, with the accompanying misery and degradation of labor. Her life path was sketched ere she reached the age of womanhood: she had to become a rebel! To stand outside of the struggle would have meant intellectual death. She chose the only way.

=Voltairine de Cleyre= was born on November 17, 1866, in the town of Leslie, Michigan. She died on June 6, 1912, in Chicago. She came from French-American stock, on her mother's side of Puritan descent. Her father, Auguste de Cleyre, was a native of western Flanders, but his family was of French origin. He emigrated to America in 1854. Being a freethinker and a great admirer of Voltaire, he insisted on the birthday of the child that the new member of the family should be called Voltairine. Though born in Leslie, the earliest recollections of Voltairine were of the small town of St. John's, in Clinton County, her parents having removed to that place a year after her birth. Voltairine

did not have a happy childhood; her earliest life was embittered by want of the common necessities, which her parents, hard as they tried, could not provide. A vein of sadness can be traced in her earliest poems--the songs of a child of talent and great fantasy. A deep sorrow fell into her heart at the age of four, when the teacher of the primary school refused to admit her because she was too young. But she soon succeeded in forcing her entrance into the temple of knowledge. An earnest student, she was graduated from the grammar school at the age of twelve.

Strength of mind does not seem to have been a characteristic of Auguste de Cleyre, for he recanted his libertarian ideas, returned to the fold of the church, and became obsessed with the idea that the highest vocation for a woman was the life of a nun. He determined to put the child into a convent. Thus began the great tragedy of =Voltairine's= _early life_. Her beloved mother, a member of the Presbyterian Church, opposed this idea with all her strength, but in vain: the will of the lord of the household prevailed, and the child was sent to the Convent of Our Lady of Lake Huron, at Sarnia, in the Province of Ontario, Canada. Here she experienced four years of terrible ordeal; only after much repression, insubordination, and atonement, she forced her way back into the living world. In the sketch, "The Making of an Anarchist," she tells us of the strain she underwent in that living tomb:

"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! I struggled my way out at last, and was a freethinker when I left the institution, three years later, though I had never seen a book or heard a word to help me in my loneliness. It had been like the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and there are white scars on my soul yet, 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 assertion of its own liberty, with all the responsibility falling thereon."

During her stay at the convent there was little communication between her and her parents. In a letter from Mrs. Eliza de Cleyre, the mother of =Voltairine=, we are informed that she decided to run away from the convent after she had been there a few weeks. She escaped before breakfast, and crossed the river to Port Huron; but, as she had no money, she started to walk home. After covering seventeen miles, she realized that she never could do it; so she turned around and walked back, and entering the house of an acquaintance in Port Huron asked for something to eat. They sent for her father, who afterwards took her back to the convent. What penance they inflicted she never told, but at sixteen her health was so bad that the convent authorities let her come home for a vacation, telling her, however, that she would

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