

Dyer D. Lum

Voltairine de Cleyre

1893

Voltairine de Cleyre had “a great love and unshakeable friendship” with Dyer D. Lum.¹ Here we reprint her tribute to her teacher, confidant and comrade after his suicide in 1893.

Comrades:

Across the sea I send the echo of a mourning knell. The brightest scholar, the profoundest thinker of the American Revolutionary movement is dead. On Thursday, April 6th, they found him sleeping the last sleep, in a hotel near the Bowery in New York. Utterly without pain he must have passed away, as he had always wished he might – into the painless rest.

Dyer D. Lum was born at Geneva, N.Y., fifty-three years ago. He was descended from an old Puritan family, hence an American as much as it is possible for any Anglo-Saxon to be an American. In early life he was brought up under strict Presbyterian discipline, but piety never seems to have taken any deep root in his sceptical nature. According to one of his own inimitably told stories, such religious sentiment as he had all departed one bright Sunday, when God failed to send a thunderbolt upon him for having played ball, torn his trousers, and uttered an oath on the Lord’s day. And yet in the nobler and better sense of the word Dyer D. Lum was a deeply religious man. He was full of that earnest self-sacrificing devotion to whatever ideal of the future seemed highest to him at any period of his life, and he never stopped at any command of “the inward *must*,” though it cost him friends, worldly success, or the danger of death itself.

He has frequently said and written that the labor movement of America really began with the Pittsburg riots in 1877;² previous to that time, however, he had taken part in the great struggle, now recognised as an economic one, known as the civil war. He fought on the northern side, and so bravely that he jumped from the rank of a volunteer private soldier to that of captain by sheer force of merit. At that time, there is no doubt, he believed himself to be fighting in the good cause. But since he became an economic thinker he has often expressed himself sarcastically as having

¹ Paul Avrich, *An American anarchist: the life of Voltairine de Cleyre* p53. “Teacher, confidant and comrade” comes from Hippolyte Havel’s introduction to her *Selected Works* (1914). A longer tribute to Lum, also from de Cleyre’s *Selected Works* is at www.katesharpleylibrary.net

² In Pittsburgh, twenty workers were killed in a battle with the State militia during the “virtual general strike” of 1877, “the first great collision between capital and labour” in America. See Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket tragedy*, p26-7.

“gone down there out of *patriotism* (?) to fight the battle of *cheap* labor against *dear*.” After the war he resumed his trade as bookbinder, and began his studies in the economic field. In 1876 he was associated with Wendell Phillips as candidate for lieutenant-governor for Massachusetts on the Greenback ticket.³ Out of the old nursery of Greenbackism came nearly all of our present radical thought, while few of its original exponents are any longer affiliated with the Greenback program: it was simply the beginning of the Socialistic movement. Mr. Lum was not one to remain long satisfied with the “illogic” of Greenbackism. He was too consistent in mind to accept a mixed authoritarianism and liberty. At first he went over to authoritarianism, and was for a time a State-socialist. Subsequently, however, he became an Anarchist, a contributor to Parsons’ *Alarm*, and a most cutting critic of State-socialism.

While living in Washington he was appointed on a committee to investigate the conditions of labor, and in the course of that investigation studied the cooperative system of the Mormons (a much abused people here in America). The result was a pamphlet in which he set forth the principles of their labor exchange, disabusing the reader of many false notions in regard to Mormon life. This pamphlet had a wide circulation.⁴

In 1886 he was conducting a bookbindery at Port Jervis, N.Y., when the question of who should keep alive the paper of the imprisoned Parsons arose. Although Lum was an individualist and Parsons Communist, no one else could be found able and willing to continue the work of the doomed editor. Lum did not hesitate. He sold out his business, went to Chicago, put about \$1500 into the work, no penny of which he ever received or expected to receive back, ran the gauntlet of police, detectives, and the crowd haters of Anarchy, then very numerous in Chicago, and held the banner aloft as long as he could. During this time he was a constant visitor at the prison, the loved and trusted comrade of those who were about to die, the jealous guardian of their highest honor. Like all who knew those men, he grew to love them all, and never in after years was he able to speak much of them without tears filling his eyes. And yet he counselled them to die. When Parsons asked him his advice as to signing the petition, which he and Lum both *knew* from sure sources of information would have saved his life, he said, “I cannot advise you.” But when Parsons pressed him, he said, “Die, Parsons.” And the other answered, “I am glad you said it. It is what I wished.” For this he was blamed by some, blamed as “wanting their death.” Yes, he did want their death, as he loved liberty, and honor, and pride, and the future, and their true glory – more than his own life and more than theirs. For those who knew him best knew there was not one moment when he would not have taken his place by their side and walked proudly to the scaffold had the State decreed it.⁵

After the failure of the “Alarm” in Chicago he was enabled, partly through the courtesy of John Most and others, to re-commence its publication in reduced form in New York. But owing to an accumulation of difficulties he could not continue it long. It was a great sorrow to him, for his last promise to Parsons was to do everything to keep the paper alive. From that time

³ Wendell Phillips 1811–1884 was an abolitionist and social reformer. The Greenback movement was devoted to currency reform (the promotion of paper money).

⁴ Lum was the author of *Utah and its people. Facts and statistics bearing on the “Mormon Problem.”* (1882) and *Social problems of to-day, or, The Mormon question in its economic aspects : a study of co-operation and arbitration in Mormonism, from the standpoint of a wage-worker* (1886).

⁵ “It was Lum who smuggle in the dynamite cigar with which Lingg committed suicide in his cell.” Avrich, *An American anarchist* p63; Lum had also plotted with Robert Reitzel to free the Haymarket defendants the day before their execution, see Avrich *The Haymarket tragedy* p384-5.

on his life was a bitter struggle with poverty whose miseries he endured with shut lips, only his intimate friends knowing how great they were, and even they hardly daring to offer him any help for fear of offending his proud, uncomplaining spirit. This poverty chained his hands, tied his aspirations, compelled him to a forced inaction that wore him out more than the severest active strain. Although of a strong constitution he became a victim of insomnia and burnt up the oil of life without replenishing. – Yet no one would have guessed all this to have met and talked with him, always merry, always full of jokes, always ready to sympathise with the humblest thing that suffered or was glad. At one moment talking Philosophy with the scholars, at the next stroking the sore foot of a dog, or playing hide-and-seek with the children, it was hard to determine what lay deepest beneath those smiling gray eyes that never told aught of the hard personal struggle within.

Of his many pamphlets, articles and poems it may be said all evinced profound thought; but unfortunately were too often in a heavy style that rendered them difficult to the ordinary reader. In fact few students went deeper into psychological depths than he, and his habit of reading the masters, living in the company of books, made language which to most of us is stilted the ordinary channel of his thought. His early studies in Buddhism left a profound impress upon all his future concepts of life, and to the end his ideal of personal attainment was self-obliteration – Nirvana. He had not the slightest use for the Hedonistic doctrines of most of the individualistic school, and often sent the sharp shafts of his wit into the heart of an argument hingeing upon the “pleasure the motive of action” premise.

As to his revolutionary beliefs he always avowed them when there was any reason for so doing. When Berkman shot Frick⁶ he was one of those who dared to defend the act. But he did not believe in continually talking about it: He did not believe in telling *other* people to “do” anything. He never said, “arm yourselves and prepare.” He had his own plans probably; but if he had he trusted to himself, and neither depended upon nor asked aught from others. For the rest he believed in revolution as he believed in cyclones; when the time comes for the cloud to burst it bursts, and so will burst the pent up storm in the people when it can no longer be contained. So he believed, and trusted in the future.

And I who trust in his philosophy trust that in the fire-hued day the spirit of my beloved teacher and friend will burn in the hearts of the strugglers for freedom, till it consumes away all fear, all dependence, all the dross of our “American slavery,” and leaves them erect, proud, free, dauntless as he who has left to them the rich legacy of a life of thought and work in their behalf

Voltaire de Cleve
Philadelphia

⁶ Homestead, Pennsylvania, 23 July 1892.

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