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Voltairine de Cleyre

Nameless

1889

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I thought that I heard a sound — a voice!
Was there a voice that spoke?
Or did I fancy? I must have dreamed, and
have only now awoke.
Again? What is it? I cannot see, is there
anyone in the room?
Those words? "A minister come to pray
my soul through the gates of gloom!"
That's kind of you, but — what do you
say? Do I shrink from death?
Ah, no, I long for his terrible arms and the
frost of his icy breath.
There is rest for me on his stony breast, there
is peace in his cold, cold heart.
Ah, no, I fear not! My bosom's bare for the
sting of his shadowy dart.
Do you know what death means, sir to such,
as I, the wanton, the wretch of the street,
The trodden thing, that you godly ones crush
down as a worm 'neath your feet?

It means the end of a ceaseless pain that
none pity save those who bear.
Dear Death, draw near; lay your hands on
mine, draw nearer, my pillow share.
You say that I wander, that I forget the
stains on my guilty soul,
I must turn to Christ with a trusting faith,
and he will wash out the whole.
Why didn't your Christ save my soul before
from pollution's dark living grave?
When I was honest, and pure, and good, was
the time for your Christ to save!
I wasn't always an outcast, sir, to disgrace
my sex and name.
And it isn't from choice that these last five
years I've been leading a life of shame.
Why didn't your godly ones come to me ere
my virtue was putrid, dead;
If your Christ knew how hard I struggled,
why did he make so dear honest bread?
If I could only tell you how hard I tried — if
I only had time to speak—
But what does it matter? It's over now,
and I'm growing so weak, so weak!
What is it? I didn't "ask Christ," you say.
Nay, Sir, on my bended knees
In the street I've prayed to him to send me
work that I may not starve and freeze;
On my knees I prayed, in the other days,
that his merciful hand might save
The man I loved, and whose name I bore,
from the stain of a drunkard's grave;
And I asked your Christ when I saw him die,
only six poor feet to yield

I was dumb with despair, a dull, blank
 despair, as I went out into the night,
 And I didn't know, nor I didn't care, if I did
 wrong or right.
 I sold myself for a glittering price. 'Twas too
 late! Little Charlie died;
 And I'm only waiting for Death to come, that
 we may sleep side by side.
 Life hasn't mattered to me since then, all
 that I loved was gone,
 But your God of Vengeance, perhaps, decreed
 that I, in my grief, live on.
 It is over now — I am almost gone - it is
 darker — I'm nearly blind!
 Yes, I thank you for your intention, Sir, I'm
 sure it was very kind.
 No! Your prayers would be useless! I asked
 for bread, and your Christ gave me a stone.
 I can leave this world, as I've lived in it — in
 shame, and in pain, alone.
 It isn't the dying who need God's help. It's
 the living who cry for aid!
 Don't expect to have virtuous death, my
 friend, when Virtue's so underpaid.
 While Virtue's so underpaid in life, and honor
 is sold so high,
 Don't talk about Jesus' tender love,
 don't endeavor to help vice die!
 I am weak - so weak - and my voice - it fails.
 A faintness steals over me
 — Oh John! — Dear John! — and my little one,
 I am coming. Light! I see!

Of his great wide Earth for a burial place
 —and he gave me the Potter's Field!
 I followed John's corpse to a pauper's grave
 in the aisles of eternal night,
 And the love of my life went down with the
 clods that buried him from my sight;
 I didn't think, as I stood there then, in the
 driving wind and sleet,
 Of my helpless self with my babe in arms, turned
 homeless into the street!
 I didn't think of the weary years, nor the
 pain that was yet to come,
 I could only think of those close shut lids, and
 the dear lips sealed and dumb.
 I didn't remember the life he'd led, nor his
 last blood-curdling curse;
 I only thought I'd once taken him for better
 or — for worse;
 That heart that I so often had pressed to
 mine lay pulseless, and cold, and still,
 And a weary voidness was left to me, that
 nothing might ever fill.
 Yes, he died of the tremens; you'll comfort
 me by saying his soul is lost!
 But where is the fiend who sold him rum, the
 price that his ruin cost?
 He's sitting to-day in a cushioned pew — a
 good Christian, without flaw,
 Along with the praters of Justice high, and
 the deacons who make the law.
 When he dies, you will say that the great
 white gates flew open to let him in,
 While my John is lying in mortal pain from
 his great, unforgiven sin.

Ah, John — Dear John — I am faithful yet! All
the love I had to give
Is yours in death as in life dear John, and if
— somewhere — again we live,
You will know — and — forgive me. 'Twas for
our child! You will pity, you will not blame
That to save our child I sold myself,
and drank the dregs of shame!
I tried so hard to be honest, John, but
where was the use to try?
So many were willing to sell their toil, and
oh! So few to buy.
So few, so few, have felt, have seen God's love
in the blue skies,
Though the ranks of the starving poor are
filled with mournful, beseeching eyes.
They are filled with eyes that implore, and
haunt, and follow you through the years,
Strange, suffering eyes that are always dry
and heavy with unshed tears.
What is it? Could I get no work at all?
Sometimes; but, good Sir, I pray
Would you care to preach for seventeen hours,
at thirty-five cents a day?
It wasn't often I'd make that much, for
sewing without a fire,
In dead of winter is fearful work; and
your stiffened fingers tire,
And your head swims 'round, and your
shivering limbs grow numb with the cold,
And — well, it doesn't seem half so awful then
— this selling yourself for gold.
To me it didn't seem so bad as to you,
in the generous heat,

When I was forced in my mouth to hold my
little one's freezing feet.
The nobler self, like a delicate plant, dies fast
in a pitiless hour,
And the numbing cold of Starvation's tooth
has a terrible blasting power.
Aye, and many a winter night,
while you, in your well-warmed home,
Were teaching the love of Christ and God, I
was forced in the streets to roam;
Forced in the streets to roam all night, with
the babe on my shivering breast.
And a minister's wife has refused me food, or
even a spot to rest!
How long do you think your own mother,
Sir, would have led a virtuous life
If she had been left in the world like this?
How long would your trusted wife
Have remained like the snow ere it falls to
Earth, to mix in the muddy street
With the filth and the mire and the grime and
the ooze, ground in by the trampling feet?
I tell you, Sir, it's a terrible thing to judge of
a woman's sin
When a tenement's rent is a higher price than
her honest toil can win.
No! Don't talk of Christ any more to me!
When my little one's dying head
Was laid on my bosom, I asked him then, for
the last time, to send me bread.
I prayed to him, oh! So earnestly — and how
did his answer come?
The landlord knocked for his rent. And I,
like your Christ, was dumb!