

# Nameless

Voltairine de Cleyre

1889

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  
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!  
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!

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Voltairine de Cleyre  
Nameless  
1889

<<https://www.deadanarchists.org/nameless.html>>  
*Justice* (Philadelphia), January 27, 1889

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**