

Some Nihilists I Have Met

Voltairine de Cleyre

October 1893

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An introduction

by Robert P. Helms, Philadelphia, May 2013

Voltairine de Cleyre (1866-1912) has drawn plenty of well-deserved attention in recent years by historians of anarchism, of feminism, sex radicalism, and atheism. My research for a book on the early anarchists of Philadelphia has caused me to understand ever more clearly why, during her life, she was considered an intellectual of very high stature, why she was respected by social reformers of many varieties for her body-and-soul dedication to helping and educating the poor, and why she was loved or even revered by fellow anarchists.

I spotted a magazine review in the *Brooklyn Eagle* of Sept. 26, 1893 (p. 4). The October issue of the short-lived *Worthington's Illustrated Monthly Magazine* was described in summary form, and mid-way through, it read, "'Some Nihilists I have Met' is an interesting paper by Voltairine de Cleyre, who exhibits a specimen of that sort of fanaticism even in America." The title gave me a healthy jolt, since I've never seen it in these many years of dissecting de Cleyre's remarkable life. No library has a complete set of *Worthington's* eighteen issues, but the one containing the article survives, in only one original copy, at the Connecticut Historical Society. The journal ran from January 1893 until June 1894, published by A. D. Worthington & Company of Hartford.

Nihilism is defined in *Le Petit Larousse* as "a revolutionary tendency of the Russian intelligentsia of the 1860s, characterized by the rejection of the values of the preceding generation." The logic of the term itself is that a nihilist reduces all non-empirical or prejudicial notions to nothing (*nihil*). It developed into a broad culture, originally from Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* (1862) and the utopian novel *What Is To Be Done?* by Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1863), but the idea and use of the term lasted long after these seminal works. Historian Steven Cassedy summarizes Turgenev's version as "rigidly materialistic in its denial of free will and any spiritualistic dimension to human life," strictly scientific, and "egoistic in its rejection of any kind of a priori moral obligation." In Chernyshevsky it was a lifestyle and an attitude. Nihilism meant "ostentatious awkwardness, a studied indifference to attire and grooming, and a taste for shocking living arrangements." One reason why Nihilism had so profound an impact on Russian history is that no entitlement of nobility or royalty was recognized, including their right to live after causing widespread sorrow and death in the general population. Some nihilists went so far as killing Czar Alexander II by blowing his royal legs off with a dynamite bomb, thrown by Ignattii Grinevitskii on March 1, 1881.

In her story, Voltairine takes care to fictionalize her characters so that no real nihilist known to her in Philadelphia could be identified. However, certain traits hint toward comrades from whom she may have derived the characters. In 1893 she knew members of the Knights of Freedom, a controversial anarchist group involved in the labor movement and very militant atheism. Although in the present article de Cleyre mentions no Jews, all or most examples from her life and a large segment of all the nihilists were Jewish. The personalities we know of were young, barely born in the early days of Nihilism. By the time she wrote this, Russian anarchism and Nihilism had become very closely associated, and the terms were sometimes used interchangeably.

One nihilist in Voltairine's circle was Natasha Notkin, a very close associate who became a pharmacist at the beginning of the 20th Century. Born in Russia in 1870, Notkin identified specifically as a Nihilist, having arrived in the United States when she was fifteen. Sometimes called the "soul" of the city's movement, she was revered by comrades for her sober-minded organizing work, and we have evidence of her activism from around 1892 until 1917. Natasha was noted for

her self-sacrificing dedication, being "married to the movement." She never made public speeches, but she was co-founder of two important lecture clubs (Ladies' Liberal League and Social Science Club), she served as treasurer for many fundraising drives, and she would organize large, elaborate fundraiser balls, including the annual Russian Tea Party. She also served as the local agent for the key anarchist newspapers *Free Society* and *Mother Earth*, and paid for articles to be translated from European anarchist journals. Natasha Notkin was no publicity-seeker: although she was a publicly known, widely respected leader among the anarchists of a large city for some 25 years, we have only one image of her face (a quick sketch made by a mainstream paper's illustrator), and all of the quotes we have of her own words would fill up less than a single page. A young John Cournos remembered visiting her apartment, where the other visitors were "all sprawling about the floor of the sitting room, the men with their arms about the women." He found this shocking at the time. Notkin was already dead by 1930, but we know neither where she died, nor the cause of her death, nor what was done with her remains.

The best biographical source on Voltairine is Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (1978). For Nihilism and related ideas, see Steven Cassedy, *To The Other Shore: The Russian Jewish Intellectuals Who Came to America* (1997); Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution: a History of the Populist and Socialists Movements in Nineteenth Century Russia* (1960); and Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (1967).

This is the second reappearance of "Some Nihilists I Have Met." The first, with an earlier version of my introduction, appeared in *Social Anarchism* (Baltimore MD), Issue 37, in January 2005.

Some Nihilists I Have Met

by Voltairine de Cleyre

The word nihilist is so generally associated with darkness, secrecy, dynamite, assassination and blood, that had someone whispered five minutes before the encounter, "You are about to meet a Russian nihilist," I should, no doubt, have hastily retreated to the shelter of law-abiding domiciles, far from the dirty, tortuous, downtown quarter, where, amidst a labyrinth of alleys and deceitful little streets that mockingly led against walls, and then turned back into one another, I found myself one snowy afternoon, picking my way somewhat disgustedly with no very clear idea concerning my exact whereabouts.

One thing, however, was sure, I had been appointed on a committee to secure musical talent for a concert shortly to be given by a certain society, the proceeds of which were to be used for the purchase of turkeys for people who otherwise could not properly celebrate the Christmas feast. Having learned through devious channels of a new violin-wonder whose services were to be had for a reasonable consideration, I had at length obtained his address and gone in pursuit of him. It was indeed a pursuit. For half an hour I chased skulking lamp-posts, that on being captured mockingly stood forth without the shadow of a letter on them; signs that had grown so old in wind and weather as to be illegible; a few brick corners that seemed to say, "Here we are, and we don't need a name to tell you -we're plain enough without it," as indeed they were among such heaps of dirt and ruin; and finally, people who smiled vaguely, and answered me in a foreign language. At length I stopped perfectly still, leaned against a wall and said, "What next?"

My mouth and ears seemed to be two personalities, the latter being very much surprised to hear the English language in this town of “skis” and “ovitches,” and the former very defiant and determined. It said slowly, “I shan’t give up now; I surely will find Mr. W_____y.” I lifted my eyes with a sigh and lo! strange mockery of this cynical quarter, there, precisely opposite, on a black sign with staring gilt letters was the very name which had so persistently and so successfully eluded me: “H. W_____y, violinist, concerts, lessons.”

I went up the two white steps, the sepulchral steps which can never be omitted from the meanest tenement of old Philadelphia, and rapped loudly and long. A woman with bright red cheeks and a mass of curly auburn hair bushing astonishingly about her head, admitted me.

“Mr. W_____y was in. Walk up.” Bless him for being ‘in,’ I thought, as I climbed the steep, dark stairs; “my luck must have turned at last.” The woman had left me to guide myself, only directing me to the first door on the left. As I stepped into the upper hall I heard a low cry, something neither human nor inhuman, that made me catch my breath. There were two or three wails, and then a sob was broken short; then the cries began in a lower key. I felt as if a cold wind had suddenly blown over me a frozen me to the floor. This, then, was the wonderful violin, this thing which cried and moaned just inside the room. I must have stood ten minutes listening when I felt some one behind me, and turned to hear the woman say, “Just rap, he’s only playing by himself.”

“Does he often do it –play like that?” I whispered under my breath.

She smiled; “All the time. The worst is, he gets up in the night. You’d think dead folks were crying in the room. Some people believe dead folks do play music, but I don’t,” she added, knocking on the door.

The wailing ceased as if the thing that cried had been startled and fled. Directly the door was opened and I was invited to enter. The room was neither small nor large, but oh! so bare! There was only a bed without pillows, a chair, a trunk, a table contrived from a dry-goods box, a stand piled high with books –over which lay the violin –and a music rack, back of which, on the floor, lay a mass of music. No heat, and the temperature dangerously near the freezing point. What wonder the violin wailed!

I see the whole picture now as it was photographed upon my memory by the cloudy, snow-luminous light that came through the curtainless windows, striking the staring walls and dark wood floor, and the tall figure in the center holding the magical bow. Certainly it was a homely face, one of the homeliest I have ever seen, in spite of the fine, Beethoven-like forehead that relieved it from any charge of stupidity.

Yet this very ugliness was curiously attractive. The square, prominent jaw with the wide, thin-lipped mouth was a character study; those small, light-intent eyes fascinated; and the Tartar nose, utterly ugly, somehow impressed one as having an individuality of its own that might, on occasion, express itself.

“I interrupted you,” said I, by way of beginning “–it’s too bad. I was luxuriating in the misery of those notes for nearly a quarter of an hour in the hall.”

He flushed slightly; “You should have knocked; I was merely passing time.”

“Was it an improvisation?” I inquired, curious to know what human heart had first cried so brokenly.

“Oh, no,” he answered, “it is a composition, the plea of a nihilist, a Siberian exile, to his jailer. There are words.”

“Ah,” I said, with interest, “do such compositions circulate generally, then?”

A real laugh went over the ugly mouth, and yet a laugh with more of sarcasm than pleasure in it.

"Certainly not. It is a prison offense to sing them. All the same there are means."

"But," I suggested, "are they not dangerous? Were you not afraid to -to become implicated with the nihilists?"

He drew himself up proudly. "I myself was one."

"What," I exclaimed, "you! A man with a soul for such music, can you believe in killing people? Do you think the czar should be assassinated?"

The same sarcastic smile crossed his mouth. "Why should he not be assassinated? Thousands of people die every year merely for his pleasure. Is he any better than other murderers?"

"What do you mean by saying that thousands of people die for his pleasure? He does not kill anybody."

"I mean that the poor are taxed so high to pay for his palaces, that they die in their huts. Yes, I would be very glad to hear that the czar was killed, but not because I think it would help anyone living."

"Why then?" I queried, interested in the play of the ugly features.

"Why? Because it would be a crash that would make the people think. They do not think, they are asleep. Their bodies work, but their brains have never yet awakened. Another czar would come, and he, too, would have to be killed, until the people learn that it not to trade masters, but to have no masters they must work."

"But," I persisted, "why not in some other way? Why kill to teach them that?" He sighed and a sad light came into his eyes.

"You have no idea," he said, "there is tyranny in America, but it is nothing to Russia. The nihilists are not people who love fighting and killing; but it is the only thing left them. We are not allowed to read, or write, or print, or agitate. We must keep our ideas until we choke with them, even if we wade in misery to the eyes. For trying to help, the noblest and the best have been sent to Siberia. We must kill."

"How trying to help?" I said, "Surely not for relieving distress with--"

"Charity?" he broke in bitterly. "No, not that. But for trying to show that it is the injustice of the government which puts them so they need charity. For trying to tell them that if they straighten up, the czar can no more put his yoke on their necks. For that, not for charity." He picked up the violin, struck a few notes with his fingers, and added, "The Americans don't understand us."

"Excuse me," I said humbly, "I presume that this is true. I have never met a nihilist before."

"No?" and this time the smile was full of amusement. "I must have frightened you, then."

"Oh, no," I said, lying with much courtesy. "I have been very much interested, so much that I have neglected my errand." And I proceeded to engage his services, which was soon done, though inwardly I reflected that for a man in such quarters his price was rather high.

It was darkening, but the snow still gave a luminous whiteness to the dusk as he accompanied me to the door, saying: "Well, I hope you are not afraid of me. You would like us better if you knew us better. You ought to read Bakounine -do you read Shelley? He is the greatest English poet, but almost no one understands him. He lived five hundred years too soon. Will you shake hands? I never killed anyone. Thank you. I shall be exactly on time at the concert."

And he was. The virtues of the Russian character, like its vices, are mathematically calculable; every act answers the question why. Hence punctuality is assured.

This happened several years ago; Since then I have met so many nihilists whom the persecution of the Jews has driven out of Russia within the last ten years, and found them and found them all so much like other people that the word has lost all its terrors. Just now there comes before my eyes the quiet face of the little woman with large blue eyes, who sat in my study one morning, and in the most placid voice related how, as a child, she had carried messages across the city from one of the dreaded terrorists to another, without molestation, because, as she said in her queer English, "the police would not expect a child;" and again, when the officers had searched the house, she had lain with the prohibited books under her pillow, "because even they are polite, more or less, and will not come into a girl's room if she is in bed, unless they expect her very much."

This she had done because of a much-loved brother, an ardent nihilist, and quite without the knowledge of her father, himself a public official.

Not long ago she returned to Russia, and I sometimes wonder if, escaping the famine and plague, she may yet travel the long way to the Siberian prisons.

Of these so much has lately been written, of their loneliness, their deprivations, their inaccessibility, that one would say the word despair must finally be written on the heart of him who enters there.

Yet I have met one who escaped even from there; one who had scaled the fearful walls of the Russian prison, crossed the lonely deserts of snow, through the passes of the Altai mountains, and finally reached Japan from which he sailed to America. One would naturally expect something bold, daring, shrewd, or strongly self-assertive in the person of the man who had accomplished such miracles. But none of these are evident in this short stoutish, sandy-complexioned, curly-haired fellow, with the prominent nose and jaw of the Slavic races. Very quiet, very much averse to talking even with his friends, but absolutely impenetrable to strangers, and much given to pessimistic contemplation. I should not be surprised to learn that he had committed suicide, for he is woefully disappointed in America, being wholly unfit for its sharp commercial push and scramble.

Not so with my young friend, the medical student, a person of surprisingly quick intellect and disputatious inclinations. After delivering her letter of introduction to me one summer afternoon, she commenced an attack on an inoffensive Y. M. C. A. member who chanced to be present, and speedily drove him into a corner concerning the existence of God. She next disposed of the marriage problem, Henry George's land-tax scheme, the advisability of eating meat, of women wearing short hair and a pantaloonly substitute for skirts, each in "one round." The expression is apropos; mentally speaking, she has on boxing gloves all the time, and is ready to spar on any known subject with the greatest mental athlete. She has a romantic history. The child of orthodox Jewish parents who forbade her all education, she naturally rebelled, and, to escape them, married at the age of eighteen a young nihilist, passionately devoted to her, but whose affection she but faintly reciprocated.

The marriage, however, was a compromise with authority to make her way to America, a female minor being subject to her father, if unmarried, and to her husband, if married.

Neither her husband nor herself believed in the binding efficacy of any ceremony, however; and after two years of wedlock she concluded to take up life alone. She had been swept into the storm of struggle between living with a husband she did not love, for his sake, or obeying her desire to live alone and be free.

I fancy it was a little hard to give up the woman he so dearly loved, though he did not believe in perfect liberty.

However, he did it with tolerable grace, and they greet one another as mere comrades now. He still retains his nihilistic enthusiasm, ingrained in all his life. But she has left it behind as a cast-off shell; indeed, she has a faculty of casting her coat of ideas quite regularly, withal remaining a very attractive and interesting person, in spite of inconsistency.

One thing, however, is very shocking to American feelings among all these people -an utter absence of filial affection. And yet, it is mathematically calculable; given the facts of utter rigidity, conservatism, and intolerance on the part of the parents, a tendency to curb every aspiration towards change, a resolution to put the garb of the seventeenth century on the back of the nineteenth, and, as a result, "it is impossible that we should love our parents," they say. At first they regard as hypocrisy all evidences of attachment between American parents and children. After time, however, larger influences of a freer life unconsciously mould them over, and now among all those who have come into the circle of my acquaintance I remember very few who, from ardent state-haters, furious social reformers ready to compel the world into a social paradise laid out on paper, even at the point of a bayonet, have not now become ambitious, make-the-most-of-it people, arrived at the conclusion that if the world is bound to perdition it will go in spite of them, and, if salvation is in store, it will save itself according to some gigantic evolution, whose form is yet dimly seen by the human mites whose lives are weaving into it.

At present, I remember one face only, a wild, burning face, utterly unsubduable, which stands out in never-surrender prominence.

I saw it in an artist's gallery in the West, where this strange personage was posing as a study of a bandit.

Imagine a small, lithe figure, sinuous as a serpent, a pointed face lighted with tremendous lights of fire, and sunset, and running water gleams, in the depths of eyes now somber, now glowing under heavy brows; long, loose-curling hair falling to the shoulders, a picturesque dress of white-embroidered blouse, dark pantaloons and silken sash, and a voice quick and vibrant as the motion of a cobra's tongue.

We entered into a conversation concerning a total vegetarian diet; and, to my astonishment, this singular being declared that for eight years he had eaten nothing but raw food, vegetables, and fruit, and for the last two years fruit alone.

He had been living near to Nature indeed; in the summer he slept upon the ground, in the winter, in a blanket on the floor; had done so for seventeen years. On questioning what had led him to so strange a life, he answered, "Because I want to be free. I saw that men were slaves of their own artificial needs, out of which have grown so many oppressive laws, systems of production, and so forth. I did not wish to work for any one else, nor to slave nine or ten hours a day to gratify a need which is only imaginary. The chief causes of this foolish industry are the need for food and clothing. Civilization, so called, seems to have a rage for every possible compound, healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or ugly, so that these increase the necessity for toil. I said to myself, I will learn to live on little, to overcome the need for so many changes of clothing, and I shall be free. I have done so. I can live very comfortably on eight cents a day, and I do not starve on five. Then you see I love what is beautiful. A fruit dinner is beautiful to look at. Mr. C. (the artist) would even like to paint it. But suppose he paints a carnivorous dinner, is there anything about it? No woman need slave over the stove to prepare my meal, and there need be no dishes to wash afterward. Oh, one escapes a great deal of slavery. One's blood is never overheated, nor subject

to internal changes; winter and summer I dress the same and am never too hot or too cold. I have my time to see, to study, to think. When I do work it is because I wish.”

“But suppose everyone should do so?” I said at last, “What would life amount to? What would be accomplished?”

He laughed musically, and stepping to the window, pointed to the street below, where the workmen were going home, swinging their empty dinner pails.

“There they are,” he said, “look at them. What are they living for? To build a city. Look at it, look at those bricks, these cobble-stones, those wagons, and the dirt everywhere. Down there it is dark already. Do you see anything beautiful anywhere? What is the use to build such a thing? Better to put a bomb under it all and blow it up.”

“Look at them,” he continued rapidly, “all running, running here and there, and swallowing mouthfuls of filthy air at every breath. That is what they call business –having an aim in life! The animals are wiser.”

“Why do you stay in the city?” I inquired.

“I intend to leave within two weeks,” he answered. “I wish to dispose of my library first. Another of the evils of civilization –books. It is a good chance, though, for anyone who wants them.”

Having something of a relish for book sales, and being, moreover, curious to see what manner of place my new specimen inhabited, I took the opportunity to say I would examine the books.

A short walk, which took away my breath, since I was obliged to trot half the time in order to keep up with the swift glide of my companion, brought us up next door to a police station.

We entered a small, dark room lined with glass jars filled with various liquids arranged on shelves, and, near the floor, little closets with mysterious locks. “My laboratory,” he said with a wave of his hand “–bargained for. The books are upstairs.”

He ushered me into one of the fairest rooms, draped in white; paintings and sculpture adorned the walls and niches; there were a few pieces of elegant furniture, and on one side, some five hundred books in a neat case.

The whole was pervaded with a scent of roses. “How beautiful!” I exclaimed involuntarily.

“Not at all,” he answered. “Only a makeshift. When I get my home in the woods it will be beautiful, but art is not possible in a city.”

“But what good will it do for you to go off alone?” I said; “You certainly have beautiful ideals, but if you isolate yourself, how will it help humanity?”

He snapped his fingers. “Always that,” he answered; “I reform myself; that is the beginning of reform, self. When I have accomplished it perhaps I shall return and teach others.” He glided around the room and added, “Yes, anyway I shall come back some day. The Americans are a lot of cowards, but some day they will talk justice, too. When it begins –perhaps here in New York, in Chicago, or Philadelphia –no matter where, there will be work to do and I shall be there!”

His five white teeth jutted savagely over the lower lip.

“Well, do you wish any of my books?” I had chosen a few, and, finding no further excuse for remaining, reluctantly turned to go. As we were passing through the “laboratory,” my strange acquaintance asked, “Do you want to see water burn?” and taking some metallic substance from a jar he threw it into a small dish of water. A brilliant blaze shot up and burned for several minutes. In its glare the wizard face laughed silently; “See,” he said, “how I could burn the Pacific Ocean.”

“Wouldn’t that be a big contract?” I returned.

“There are other things I would prefer to burn. Well, good bye. We shall not meet again.”

And we did not.

Mr. C. afterward told me he had left San Francisco, to no one knew where. He had, however, a different theory to explain his bandit's misanthropy.

He was in love once, C. explained, and wanted the girl to go and live with him on uncooked food. She declined, and he has foresworn civilization ever since.

"Ah, the usual woman in the case." And I went away musing on the freaks of passion, my thoughts returning often to the wizard face with its prophetic, silent laugh lit by the burning water.

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