

A New Hope

Voltairine de Cleyre

March 15th, 1893

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The New Hope: Voltairine de Cleyre's Forgotten Poem

by Robert P. Helms

The celebrated anarchist, freethinker, poet, feminist, and public intellectual Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) was twenty-six years old in 1893, living in West Philadelphia and at her best game as a writer and activist. She was then contributing occasional letters, articles, and a few poems to the *Boston Investigator*, which in its day (1831–1904) was a well-respected and lively forum for liberals, atheists, and dissident religionists.

Until recently there were no on-line databases for 19th century radical newspapers, and it was not so long ago that the internet didn't exist. Even now in 2013, the database where I found this old gem is for paying customers only. But even before the internet came into its own, the *Boston Investigator* was not to be found in university libraries. I remember looking for it and having other researchers ask me if I knew where it might be. Now, one can search the full text of the paper's first 64 years of publication. Thus it seems that in spite of a surge in interest in this author since Paul Avrich's biography *An American Anarchist: The Life Of Voltairine de Cleyre* (1978) and three new books by or about her in 2004–05, this poem "The New Hope" evidently has not been mentioned or reprinted in the century since the poet's death, or perhaps not since it first appeared.

I have uncovered a few other lost pieces by Voltairine de Cleyre that involved a bit of detective work, but the present discovery was merely knowing her work and searching a newly available source. Even so, I am very proud to present this forgotten poem in which the great anarchist declares her independence from superstition.

The New Hope

by V. de Cleyre

I stand in the darkness waiting
For the light of the truth to shine;
The faith that you preach has failed me,
And your God is no longer mine.

I have lifted my hands to heaven,
And besought him, with many a prayer,
To put down the evil doer
And destroy the unrighteous snare.

And still did the evil triumph,
And still was the right made wrong;
Till my trust began to waver,
Yet I prayed Him to keep it strong.

I walked in the ways appointed,
I treasured the preacher's words,
And cried, aye, cried fast to heaven,
For the armor his soldier girds.

Yes, I shut my eyes from seeing,
I bound strong chains on my soul,
That I might judge of its witness,
Might not read the damning scroll.

I said: All is well –God wills it—
His wisdom is greater than mine,
He sees with the perfect vision,
His love is the love divine;

Mine is a human standard,
His is so far above
That I cannot see, nor feel, nor know
The height of that infinite love;

Yet will I trust my infinite father,
Yet will I yield to Him
Whose glory dwells in the uttermost,
Whose brightness makes all else dim.

But tho' I prayed so loudly,
And tho' I cried very fast,
Tho' my eyes were shut, and my soul was bound,
The old faith could not last.

Still round my ears rolled the surge of life,
Still rose the awful din
Of a world crushed under and trampled down
By the feet of the strong who win.

The wild inarticulate anger
Of a mad thing driven at bay,
Lashed into pain by a million strokes,
And seeing no help, no way.

And under, and over, and through it,
A menacing undertone,
A fearful reverberation
Repeating forever my own

Sad prayer for the faith I had not,
Came the despairing cry,
“Oh God, see you not your children
That of hunger and cold they die?”

Now I know “It is finished;”
Never more shall I make moan
To your God of the stars who feels our prayers,
As our tears are felt by the stone.

What the future holds I know not,
But this faith it cannot hold,
For my thoughts are no longer the thoughts of a child,
Nor my hopes the hopes of old.

Help for Earth is not in heaven,
Nor the hope of man in God,
Nor the truth that shall deliver
To be bought with another’s blood.

By our own blood we must purchase,
With our own feet the way;
When we search out the strength of our own souls
No God shall say us “nay.”

Yes, I utter this profanation,
I proclaim it loud to the sky,
Man is more than the angels,
Jehovah is less than I.

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