

Bastard Born

Voltairine de Cleyre

1891

Why do you clothe me with scarlet of shame?
Why do you point with your finger of scorn?
What is the crime that you hissing name
When you sneer in my ears, "Thou bastard born?"

Am I not as the rest of you,
With a hope to reach, and a dream to live?
With a soul to suffer, a heart to know
The pangs that the thrusts of the heartless give?"

I am no monster! Look at me —
Straight in my eyes, that they do not shrink!
Is there aught in them you can see
To merit this hemlock you make me drink?

This poison that scorches my soul like fire,
That burns and burns until love is dry,
And I shrivel with hate, as hot as a pyre,
A corpse, while its smoke curls up to the sky?

Will you touch my hand? It is flesh like yours;
Perhaps a little more brown and grimed,
For it could not be white while the drawers' and hewers',
My brothers, were calloused and darkened and slimed.

Yet touch it! It is no criminal's hand!
No children are toiling to keep it fair!
It is free from the curse of the stolen land,
It is clean of the theft of the sea and air!

It has set no seals to a murderous law,
To sign a bitter, black league with death!
No covenants false do these fingers draw
In the name of "The State" to barter Faith!

It bears no stain of the yellow gold
That Earth's wretches give as the cost of heaven!
No priestly garment of silken fold
I wear as the price of their "sins forgiven!"

Still do you shrink! Still I hear the hiss
Between your teeth, and I feel the scorn
That flames in your gaze! Well, what is this,
This crime I commit, being "bastard born?"

What! You whisper my "eyes are gray,"
The "color of hers," up there on the hill,
Where the white stone gleams, and the willow spray
Falls over her grave in the starlight still!

My "hands are shaped like" those quiet hands,
Folded away from their life, their care;
And the sheen that lies on my short, fair strands
Gleams darkly down on her buried hair!

My voice is toned like that silent tone
That might, if it could, break up through the sod
With such rebuke as would shame your stone,
Stirring the grass-roots in their clod!

And my heart-beats thrill to the same strong chords;
And the blood that was hers is mine to-day;
And the thoughts she loved, I love; and the words
That meant most to her, to me most say!

She was my mother — I her child!
Could ten thousand priests have made us more?
Do you curse the bloom of the heather wild?
Do you trample the flowers and cry "impure?"

Do you shun the bird-songs' silver shower?
Does their music arouse your curling scorn
That none but God blessed them? The whitest flower,
The purest song, were but "bastard born!"

This is my sin, — I was born of her!
This is my crime, — that I reverence deep!
God, that her pale corpse may not stir,
Press closer down on her lids — the sleep!

Would you have me hate her? Me, who knew
That the gentlest soul in the world looked there,
Out of the gray eyes that pitied you
E'en while you cursed her? The long brown hair

That waived from her forehead, has brushed my cheek,
When her soft lips have drunk up my salt of grief;
And the voice, whose echo you hate, would speak
The hush of pity and love's relief!

And those still hands that are folded now
Have touched my sorrows for years away!
Would you have me question her whence and how
The love-light streamed from her heart's deep ray?

Do you question the sun that it gives its gold?
Do you scowl at the cloud when it pours its rain
Till the fields that were withered and burnt and old
Are fresh and tender and young again?

Do you search the source of the breeze that sweeps
The rush of the fever from the tortured brain?
Do you ask whence the perfume that round you creeps
When your soul is wrought to the quick with pain?

She was my Sun, my Dew, my Air,
The highest, the purest, the holiest;
Peace — was the shade of her beautiful hair,
Love — was all that I knew on her breast!

Would You have me forget? Or remembering
Say that her love had bloomed from Hell?
Then BLESSED BE HELL! And let Heaven sing
“*Te Deum laudamus,*” until it swell

And ring and roll to the utterest earth,
That the damned are free, — since out of sin
Came the whiteness that shamed all ransomed worth
Till God opened the gates, saying “Enter in!”

What! In the face of the witness I bear
To her measureless love and her purity,
Still of your hate would you make me to share,
Despising that she gave life to me?

You would have me stand at her helpless grave,
To dig through its earth with a venomous dart!
This is Honor! and Right! and Brave!
To fling a stone at her pulseless heart!

This is Virtue! To blast the lips
Speechless beneath the Silence dread!
To lash with Slander's scorpion whips
The voiceless, defenseless, helpless dead!

God! I turn to an adder now!
Back upon you I hurl your scorn!
Bind the scarlet upon your brow!
Ye it is, who are "bastard born"!

Touch me not! These hands of mine
Despise your fairness — the leper's white!
Tanned and hardened and black with grime,
They are clean beside your souls to-night!

Basely born! 'Tis ye are base!
Ye who would guerdon holy trust
With slavish law to a tyrant race,
To sow the earth with the seed of lust.

Base! By Heaven! Prate of peace,
When your garments are red with the stain of wars.
Reeling with passion's mad release
By your sickly gaslight damn the stars!

Blurred with wine ye behold the snow
Smirched with the foulness that blots within!
What of purity can ye know,
Ye ten-fold children of Hell and Sin?

Ye to judge her! Ye to cast
The stone of wrath from your house of glass!
Know ye the Law, that ye dare to blast
The bell of gold with your clanging brass?

Know ye the harvest the reapers reap
Who drop in the furrow the seed of scorn?
Out of this anguish ye harrow deep,
Ripens the sentence: "Ye, bastard born!"

Ay, sin-begotten, hear the curse;
Not mine — not hers — but the fatal Law!
"Who bids one suffer, shall suffer worse;
Who scourges, himself shall be scourged raw!

"For the thoughts ye think, and the deeds ye do,
Move on, and on, till the flood is high,
And the dread dam bursts, and the waves roar through
Hurling a cataract dirge to the sky!"

"To-night ye are deaf to the beggar's prayer;
To-morrow the thieves shall batter your wall!
Ye shall feel the weight of a starved child's care
When your warders under the mob's feet fall!

“’Tis the roar of the whirlwind ye invoke
When ye scatter the wind of your brother’s moans;
’Tis the red of your hate on your own head broke,
When the blood of the murdered spatters the stones!

“Hark ye! Out of the reeking slums,
Thick with the fetid stench of crime,
Boiling up through their sickening scums,
Bubbles that burst through the crimson wine,

“Voices burst — with terrible sound,
Crying the truth your dull souls ne’er saw!
We are *your* sentence! The wheel turns round!
The bastard spawn of your bastard law!”

This is bastard: That Man should say
How Love shall love, and how Life shall live!
Setting a tablet to groove God’s way,
Measuring how the divine shall give!

O, Evil Hearts! Ye have maddened me,
That I should interpret the voice of God!
Quiet! Quiet! O angered Sea!
Quiet! I go to her blessed sod!

Mother, Mother, I come to you!
Down in your grasses I press my face!
Under the kiss of their cold, pure dew,
I may dream that I lie in the dear old place!

Mother, sweet Mother, take me back,
Into the bosom from whence I came!
Take me away from the cruel rack,
Take me out of the parching flame!

Fold me again with your beautiful hair,
Speak to this terrible heaving Sea!
Over me pour the soothing of prayer,
The words of the Love-child of Galilee:

“PEACE — BE STILL!” Still, — could I but hear!
Softly, — I listen. — O fierce heart, cease!
Softly, — I breathe not, — low, — in my ear,
— Mother, Mother — I heard you! — PEACE!

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