

## “*Spiritus Valet*”

THE record of Sebastian Torr's life is the meagrest we have of any great poet's life since antiquity. It is full of strange silent periods during which the poet seems to have entirely disappeared, and among these perhaps the most conspicuous is the hiatus that bridges the century, that between 1896 and 1902. From out of this dark age the only evidence of the poet's continued existence issued in the shape of the seven short but matchless lyrics to 'the golden-haired lady.' The present biographer does not despair of some day identifying this lady and obtaining from her many facts, letters, and perhaps poems. Until then we can only marvel at the complete obscurity in which the world so often allows its greatest geniuses to remain.”

This paragraph was lightly marked in Mrs. Manners' copy of Frederick Burton's *Life of Sebastian Torr*. In fact many paragraphs were marked, for Mrs. Manners was one of the few people who had known the poet *as* the poet. Many, no doubt had known him as a man—many thousand one might say, remembering his travels—but that without ever remotely suspecting that the dark magnetic gracious listener was the great self-concealing poet, the eternal incognito. But he had left a clew with Mrs. Manners by which, a little time after his departure, she was able to know that her reticent acquaintance had been her favorite poet. She has always been glad to tell the little she remembered of the great man; how he rented in 1895 her mother's cottage in Brookline for a few spring months, and how when he went away, never to be heard from directly in this connection, he left her (as though from a delicate gratefulness for the enjoyment he had received from the gardens, an enjoyment for which “paying the rent” fell ludicrously short of making amends) a sheaf of poems on the tree and flower life he had found there. She received them under the name he was at that time availing himself of, and it was only when she saw them published as his in the magazine that she realized her privilege, and that the quiet-voiced abstracted tenant was Sebastian Torr.

Her account of this acquaintance with the great man she made as casual and detached as was fitting, especially during

the lifetime of her husband to whom the few slender anecdotes that made up her little contribution to the Torr cult became a weariness. At the time of the poet's death, when the interest in his life and work rose to so tremendous a height, she was called on daily for the memoir by enthusiastic friends, and she herself grew to be weary of the little set piece to which her originally spontaneous recital had degenerated.

She seemed to herself to be growing weary of many more things than this daily. It frightened her a little that she was indifferent to her friends, to the arts and to every form of social recreation. Her mind was full of the refrain that she must soon be saying farewell to her admired golden hair, and to her voice and to her lustrous young distinction. In a sense she was willing to give them up since the flood of ennui had born away her vanity with her other enthusiasms; but in another sense she wanted them a little longer; until, say, she could make one big stroke with them before she resigned them. Her desire was to enter middle age and the forties with some really great gesture. Without that she would feel she had never been really young: "without some stunning termination to it," she told herself—"youth will have seemed to have had about it always something of middle age; every period of life should mark itself off from its succeeding time, or life will seem to have been one long old age."

These wan thoughts had been much in her mind the day that Mr. Frederick Burton called, but only after he had been many moments gone did she realize that in the object of his visit lay the opportunity she waited for. He had called on her many years before, when he was at work on his biography of Torr, and taken down the little set piece which in due time came to fill a page and a half in the "life." She had given him the manuscript of the Garden Verses to preserve in the safe of the New York Sebastian Torr Society. He came to her now from the hall without formalities and, with a kind of fierceness, plunged into the object of his visit immediately. He demanded of her all the letters and verses she had received at any time from Sebastian Torr and which she had so subtly concealed.

"But, Mr. Burton, I never received a letter from him," she replied in a daze.

He laughed incredulously. "How successful you have been.

And how you have been smiling at us all these years. Of course you are 'the golden-haired lady.' By making your telling of the story so indifferent, you felt sure you put our observation to sleep."

"No, you are entirely mistaken, Mr. Burton. You must find some other golden-haired lady. My acquaintance with Torr was just as I have related it, no more, no less."

"Your reticence does you a certain credit, Mrs. Manners, and I assure you we expected it. These poems about you were written in the 'lost interval' just succeeding his meeting with you in '95. Your husband was alive at the time, and the secrecy with which he wrapped himself about in the years that followed, is due to his honorable desire to shield you from any possible imputation. You see, Mrs. Manners, denial is no longer possible; the case is perfectly clear."

Mrs. Manners had been too long starved of just this sort of excitement to realize that this speech constituted an insult to her. The only thing she recognized in it was a soothing flattery. "You will have to believe me. I have no letters; I have no secrets."

"I realize, Mrs. Manners," he replied in a lower voice, ignoring her protest, "that such letters as you possess must be of an intimate nature. We do not ask you to make public any passages in them that might place you in a difficult position. I want you to feel that I am a friend and fellow-enthusiast with whom you may discuss the matter with perfect confidence. The lives of both of us have centered about the same man. . . ." It was in this vein that he pleaded with her for little less than half an hour, against the steady increase of her disclaimer. At the end of that time she asked him a little brusquely to leave her, since he would not believe her statement. He retreated slowly, calling on the ceiling to witness that he would return again and again until he had shown Mrs. Manners that any slight sacrifice she could make of her selfish reticence would bring all the lovers of literature in the world with thank-offerings to her door.

From behind her window-curtains she saw his silk-hat stoop as he entered his limousine. "Could it be possible," she asked herself, "that he is paying a series of calls on a number of golden-haired ladies, of whom perhaps *I* am the least likely? Or does he really believe me to have been the Beatricé of modern time? Perhaps already he has spread his assurance that I am the

subject of Torr's greatest work." And then after she had mused a while she started suddenly. "What harm would it do if I encouraged the rumor a little, if without saying yes I could sigh and grow pale and change the subject?" She played with the idea a while. "And then sometime burst out into a momentary blaze of anger, asking them never to mention that name to me again, and so return the next day humbly begging their pardon! Why, that would be Romance. I might even, if I dared, write the letters myself."

This terrible thought held her rigid for a moment. A strange warning tremor passed over her mind, like a chill wind that rises before dawn above the lowlands. "Why not?" she asked herself, in a defiant mood. "He is dead; it cannot harm him—I shall start them tonight!" Suddenly an exhausting turmoil swept her mind as though the wind on the lowlands had reached the sea and was struggling with it. She felt it only as some force in her nature that was combating her intention, and to this force she cried almost aloud that *she would do it*.

## II

"Dearest Judith, I have been struggling alone in this dark boarding-house ever since Saturday morning. Tell me what I am to do. I cannot live unless I see you every day. I cry aloud (my arms feel unreal for lack of thee), and like Sappho, I am as pale as the grass under the snow. My only comfort is my resolve that I too shall 'write of you such things as have never been written of any woman,' and it is because of this promise that I am asking you to let me meet you once more. I have written a little poem about you as it is, but I will not send it to you; you must come and take it from me."

It was very late, but she wrote on in a kind of adventurous fever. She was closing up the chapter of her youth with as fine a flourish as any woman had ever achieved. But still from time to time that warning sensation would return, a mental suffering so acute that it passed into the physical as naturally as water passes into ice.

"I will expect a telegram from you any minute, my terrible flower, telling me when you are coming. You must send a telegram or I will be expecting you to come in the door every

moment, and *that* would be terrible. Oh, the agony of thinking that every time a door opens it is you, and that every footstep on the stair is yours, knowing all the while that you may never come at all. So do not leave me to expect a surprise visit from you, or you will find me dead."

There was a knock on the door. Mrs. Manners quickly hid her writing materials and opened it. Mrs. Drury, her housekeeper, stood in the hall with her hands crossed below her throat. She gazed at Mrs. Manners with speechless terror in her eyes.

"Well, what is it? What is it you want?"

Mrs. Drury was still trying to regain the control of her voice. The sight of the warm room and shaded lamp had begun to dispel her fear, and embarrassment was adding to her difficulty.

"Has something happened to you, Mary? Why are you staring at me so. Can you speak?"

"Are you alone, Mrs. Manners?" she at length brought out, peering into the room.

"Of course, I'm alone. Can you tell me, Mary, what has happened to you?" Mrs. Manners began to feel very exactly what was the matter with her housekeeper, but she did not stoop to the artifice of asking her if the house was on fire or the silver stolen. She was shaken by that vehement force within her, that she came to know so well, the force that was set against her writing the great letters. "Come in and sit down, if you wish to, Mary."

"No, thank you. I seemed suddenly taken with a great sorrow at something and a great fright, Mrs. Manners. You will forgive my interrupting you. When our moods are greater than our wills we can do nothing. I had a feeling as though there were a great sorrow and wrong on the stairs. It brought back to my mind all that I have been through. . . . I have felt that way on the seashore. . . . Goodnight."

Mrs. Manners had found nothing to say. She was herself struggling with uneasiness and amazement. She turned back to her table, murmuring and moving her lips: "I shall finish these letters in spite of you!" As she opened the drawer the sheaf of manuscript seemed to rise, as with a flurry of wind and floating into the air, fell about her chair with a soft and piteous motion. The determination in her words had led her to opening the drawer suddenly; the release of the air-current was due to that,

she explained to herself. Oh, this thing that she had to fight, this thing that she had to fight, she had learned now how to torment it. She had to write a passage like this to fairly feel it groan or grow malignant or frozen with suffering:

"My dear Judith, all the oceans will be too shallow for my drowning if you do not come away with me. You must pity me because my love is so full of hate, but is so true that I become strong in saying it to you. What bond have you with your husband that you must keep me always outside of your life. You have made me a dweller of the shadow, one who must always wait around the corner, and I call myself the night-brother of the street-lamps. I sat in Washington Square half the night looking upon your window, when for a few moments you could so easily have stolen out to me. All the oceans of the world will be too shallow for my drowning if you do not come away with me soon. Your torn Sebastian."

She penned this letter with an intentional cruelty. She had long since personified to herself this attendant warning. She told herself that it was the remnant of her conscience in the matter, protesting against her literary deception. She loved to see it wring its hands, or stagger back as though struck when she penned some more than usually audacious line. And during this letter she was keeping one triumphant eye on its suffering. She was only half ready for it, therefore, when it sprang at her, mentally or physically, she could not tell. She remained unconscious a long time, fallen upon the floor; and when she rose she found the ink-bottle spilled upon the page. In the cold dawn and with terror at her heart she wondered whether it was her own arm that had struck the ink-bottle in falling or whether it was this Thing that had at last definitely passed through into the physical world. She resolved that she was only partly beaten, that although she would write no more letters she would carry such as she had to Mr. Burton that very day.

She spent the morning in the sunlight of her breakfast-room copying the letters into an old diary, using diluted ink. Since she could not hope to imitate Torr's handwriting her only chance lay in pretending that she had carefully copied the letters as they came, into a very private diary, and then had destroyed the originals. She, therefore, interspersed her record with such items as this, borrowed from old letters to herself: "My mother

arrived in town today in a critical state. We pray that it is not a return of the old trouble." or: "To the Opera this evening. Nordica very fine indeed. John has begun to talk again of our going to Europe. I can not sleep for worrying over the wretched boy, from whom I received the following two letters today. If we go to Europe I suppose he will kill himself. I feel quite sure that he was watching my return from the Opera, although I did not see him on any of the nearer park benches. Something seems to tell me when he is watching me. What shall I do, what shall I do?"

She finished copying about noon. In the sunlight the Thing had been unable to even make her aware of its presence; of the eight different ink-bottles she used in the diary, not one had spilt. But she felt that over herself the effect of the previous night's experience lay heavily. It seemed that the lustre of her hair had begun then to fade. She had no time to lose; if the festival she had planned to close her youth with did not take place soon she would have to go to it as though to the obsequies of youth themselves. And it was from humorous fear of such an event that she ordered her car for three that afternoon, and climbed into it, clutching the manuscript, with a kind of undue haste.

She had made her appointment to meet Mr. Burton at the rooms of the Torr Society at three-thirty and suddenly she felt a little ashamed of her anticipation of the hour. She resolved to keep him waiting a while and told the chauffeur to follow the length of the Drive as fast as he wished since there were very few cars out, the day being overcast. She sat in the shadow, not gazing out, still holding the diary tightly. As the first great drops of rain began to fall the impulse came to her to read what she had written. She turned the pages at random:

"Judith Radiant-Head, I have been made happy all day by a chance word you let fall Friday morning. I wonder if you remember, before I tell you, what it is. You said that the thought of me had been clinging about you all day like the Queen of Night's aria from *The Magic Flute*. It was love that prompted you to that remark, and it is my literary sense that tells me this time that you are in love with me; I enjoy an evidence, you see, that other people cannot so confidently summon. I too shall en-

deavor to give my life up to saying such authentic things of my love for you that people will say: 'this man loved,' before they say: 'this poet wrote.' That too is why I am so strangely happy today—Sebastian."

Suddenly, by hallucination, she saw the poet sitting beside her, searching her face, and with hand outstretched for the diary. She was never to be in doubt for a moment as to whether she had seen a "spirit" or merely a projection of her too long brooding fancy; this was an evocation of her own mind. But the Thing was present too, and the battle was to take place on the obdurate field of her mind once more. She thrust the book into her coat, crying out: "I am resolved. This is to be my new life." A grateful unconsciousness again fell upon her.

### III

Mrs. Manners had been obliged to dismiss her secretary. Very likely the girl was on the point of asking for release as it was. It would only be another indication—but of what? Of a sudden change of attitude to her, of course. But why? Why, after receiving from twenty to fifty invitations and social notes in every day's mail, why had the number sunk to five or six timid ventures? The sales of her booklet were still mounting; the play which was supposed to have been based on her story, as seen in the tragic letters, was still drawing crowds; all the greater evidences of her supreme distinction were still hung high over the world of culture, but she herself was being so suddenly left to her bewilderment. Surely society had not taken offence suddenly at the passionate character of the letters addressed to her, or at the controlled response that the letters implied as her part in the relationship. These aspects had been generously condoned by the reviewers with a kind of gallant haste. Mr. Burton's preface had drawn a picture of himself as literally wresting the letters from the tearfully reluctant lady after long hours of argument. No, the attitude of New York to her now had no resemblance to that of a group merely shocked or scandalized. And as she would sit and ask herself these questions for the thousandth time a chill fear would creep over her heart, a chill she had grown so used to that it seemed to her to be

nothing more than one of the many human weaknesses of mind that man is burdened with, as though this consciousness of fate threatened even the happiest of us.

It had come to her first (as though to replace the choking sensations she had had to endure during the writing of the letters) the moment after she had read the request from the Torr Society that she speak to them at their annual banquet. It had come to her tremendously at the banquet itself. And oh, how many times since in the very midst of those great worldly receptions that had been given for her, after the publication of the diary. Above the music, the conversation, and the laughter on the stairs, she could hear the approach of a reversal, a sudden knife-thrust through the silk.

She tried to examine again the direction that the world's attitude to her had taken. Was it indifference, or was it revulsion? Indifference does not fall so suddenly on a favorite, not even in New York. Then if it was revulsion, was it because of something in her story in the past, something in her present personality, or something that had been murmured about against her? All three must have contributed to it, she told herself sadly, and perhaps this was the fate she had so long felt to be poised above her. Then there would be a compensation in its fall, if it was no worse than this. She could retire to a New England village—but how little she felt like retiring after this taste of real power!—and enter upon her middle age as a great lady of almost legendary character, albeit the legend dark and forbidding (since New York would have it so).

The door-bell rang. So there was still some one in town with the courage to call upon her? Someone to whom perhaps she could put this question of importance. The butler announced a lady who would not give her name. This deviation from convention was enough to arouse Mrs. Manners' alarm to unreached heights; she turned to the door as though to defend herself. She felt herself to be shaking with her fears. After a pause there faced her a quietly dressed middle-aged lady of severely lovely aspect. Her face was modeled by a carefully guarded serenity, as though serenity itself was the earnest of spiritual treasure. Her eyes had a slow regard that was of the essence of control. No expression could have been more likely to break

through the barrier of Mrs. Manner's making, built as it was of her fears, her unsound "clutch" on distinction, her inexperience (the result of her long egotistical happy solitude) and her timorous antagonism. The visitor did not show any intention of shaking hands with Mrs. Manners.

"I have read the book of the letters," she said calmly. "I know that they are a pure invention of your own."

Mrs. Manners was able to muster a little presence of mind. "Who are you?" she asked with considerable spirit.

"I am the real 'golden-haired lady,'" she replied as the smile left her face. "I have the letters, I have the material, and after my death the book is to appear. Until then you may live in this dishonorable dishonor. You have committed the great offense. You have dealt with another's personality irreverently. It is as great an offense against the dead as against the living."

"Then if your book is coming out after your death to refute me. . . ."

"Why do I come to you now? To charge you with deception, merely because it gives me pleasure?"

"I suppose that is it." Mrs. Manners was gradually gathering herself together.

"No," replied her visitor. "I was sent."

"*He* sent you. I see now. He came to me first. . . . You know that he came to me first?"

"And when he found that he could not persuade you to abandon your intention, he tried to reach our physical means of restraining you. . . . But they cannot make use of them. They cannot steal or strike. . . . But they have agents of their own, spiritual agents, intuition and subtle perceptions. And it is to the lowest of these that he has stooped, in order to discredit the effect of the injury you have done him. He has made use of Rumor. You are now given over to Rumor. I have heard you discussed on the street and in the papers. You are helpless against the whispers of a city."

"All this cannot frighten me. I ask nothing better than a long retirement. I have always been company enough for myself." Mrs. Manners spoke with false assurance. There are ways, she was telling herself, of climbing out of such difficulties as she was now in; she might reveal her own deception, for in-

stance, claiming it to have been a literary *tour-de-force*, such *jeux* are common enough in France. "How did you receive your messages from this man?" she asked.

"We are not separated," she answered, turning to go. Mrs. Manners did not detain her. But watching from behind her window-curtains she saw her joined by a companion, a tall reticent thoughtful young man.