

Eddy Greater

THORNTON WILDER

THE fall of 1900— I spent in London collecting material for my *Life and Works of Sebastian Torr* for the English Sebastian Torr Society. This task, I soon found, could merely end in my serving cold my predecessor's data as to this strange, obscure poet of the previous generation. I could only annotate superabundantly the thin book of verse that was his, retell the handful of anecdotes, and deduce lamely from them the shadowy career of a poet. It was in a fit of despondency following this discovery, that I endeavored to beguile a rainy afternoon by visiting the gift shops of the city, tentatively searching for a wedding present. The marriage was still afar off, so under the removed urgency I wandered from shop to shop, marvelling at length over their servile adherence to type. Mrs. Creighley's, ultimately arrived at, concentrated the elements. It was dark and narrow; very few *objets d'art* were exposed to the visitor: here and there under glass lay objects of hand-hammered silver, necklaces meandering among the folds of claret velvet; a few examples of Chinese pottery, consummately cracked and holding rock lilies whose bulbs had been scoured for their high lights; little trays of uncut jewels, carelessly displayed—tourmaline, aquamarine, stones prized for their negative watery tints. Mrs. Creighley likewise represented a type. She was handsome in a business way; she wore draperies rather than gowns, yet gave an impression of efficiency and shrewdness. A portion of her stock-in-trade had found its way to her person, a gun-metal chain on an odd enamel ring. Her appreciation of her "little things" was too readily ecstatic and her voice low but over-rich. In her Commerce was flattering Art by imitation, to the embarrassment of Art.

This excellent woman was engaged, upon my entrance, with two ladies who were spreading bits of brocade critically upon their knees, and matching jewels with them. Her quick welcoming smile, however, urged me to take my liberty of the shop, which I did, arriving at last in the further corner upon a pile of what appeared to be framed texts. I found them to be autographed letters: Whistler inviting a lady to dinner; Degas

making an appointment with a model; the menu card of a dinner given by the brothers Goncourt, signed by all the guests with much too lively maxims and nicknames. The name these documents enjoyed in common was the familiar Eddy Greater, the soubrette of the seventies, who was in the height of her fame during the years of Sebastian Torr's last illness. The reading I had done for a study of his period was full of her engaging figure. The successive light operas of Offenbach were then enjoying tremendous runs in Paris and London, culminating in "La Boîte au Lait" and "Madame Favart," bright theatrical things, full of gay tunes and famous women. The musical actresses of the seventies, who remembers them now? Mildred Palmer, with the face of a sheep and her mass of copper-colored hair, maintained by the son of a famous Scotch peer until the arrival of her dropsical millionaire from India. Little Manina Shayer, who is reported to have sung *A Soldier's Maid* eight thousand times. They all drove their carriages in Hyde Park, made flamboyant descents on Paris, and drove the organized society of modest ladies of fashion to a jealous distraction. Eddy Greater was not as magnificent in manner as Mildred Palmer, nor did she command as socially distinguished a clientele; she was not as pretty as Manina Shayer, nor as good a singer; nor was she the clever actress that was Rosalie Barlow. But she was the most intelligent and the most versatile of all the great lights-of-love. The men of letters of the time, such as were unmarried and unprincipled, flocked to her dinners and even galloped beside her in the park, if they were in society, or sent verses to her if they were not.

One often wondered what became of them as time went on. In the first place, that type of musical play went out, under the press of Gilbert and Sullivan; newer prima donnas, more ingenuous and better chaperoned, took their places. The old fellows in the club used to say that Mildred Palmer followed her millionaire to India and now looked very much like a rajah's lady; and that Manina Shayer, whose mixed blood became more and more evident with time, retired to a plantation in the West Indies with a quadroon. Well, what became of Eddy Greater, a part of whose correspondence I was discovering, framed and passe-partouted?

"Ah, you've the autographs!" murmured Mrs. Creighley,

suddenly appearing at my elbow and lighting a discreet lamp. "Of course I can't show them to everyone."

"They're of the greatest interest. Where did you get them?" I asked.

"Oh, they've belonged to a cousin of mine, a very interesting woman. She used to sing on the stage when she was a girl, and these were addressed to her. A Mrs. Clarke."

"Oh, she was . . . Mrs. Clarke was . . . the . . . ?"

"Yes. She bore the absurd name of Eddy Greater. Fancy calling yourself Eddy! She enjoyed a certain fame in her day. You wouldn't have remembered her very likely. But look at the correspondence! Whistler, Zola, Manet. . . . I'm asking three-for-a-pound, though I'm really quite frightened to show them to some people—some people, that is, mightn't understand!"

"She might have some really interesting—"

"Oh, yes. There's a great deal more than this. But she won't part with it. She has all sorts of manuscripts and little sketches. She only allows me to sell these, because—well, to tell the truth—I believe her resources are very low. I like to help her, of course!"

"Is she in London?"

"Yes, indeed, she is. She's in the shop."

I looked about me vaguely.

"She's in my office in back! She's having a cup of tea with me. I fancy she's brought some more things to sell me, but—it's a *real* struggle for her, you know. To give them up, I mean."

"Could you present me to her, Mrs. Creighley? My card, here. I've been engaged in studying the lives of many of these men—"

"Oh, she wouldn't open her mouth to you. She sits there, so—for hours. But sometimes she's lively enough, Heaven knows. I don't mind your trying though. Can you come in now?"

Mrs. Creighley then led me into her inner office, an apartment that proved to be better lighted than the shop, but no less ranged about with objects of display. Mrs. Creighley's desk—one saw her sitting at it, urging up the price of the heirlooms as they came to her—was scarcely mercenary enough to break in upon the impression the room gave of being half drawing-room and half private gallery. As I entered it I was

beaten back by the light of the setting sun that poured across the roofs and chimneypots in a stream, red and vindictive, through Mrs. Creighley's high windows onto Mrs. Creighley's deep carpets. It played on a tea urn, and on a brass tray laden with cups; it burnished the mahogany, and it plated the white ceiling with a caked and imperial gold; but it had nothing to do with the lady who sat with her back to it, over the tea urn. In the midst of this tumult sat a figure, grey, composed, abstracted. A woman of middle-age, one would say, robed in faded purples and wasted reds, hung about with relics and amulets; some queen-mother, superceded, unattended and forgotten, having about her still the twilight of royalty and old processional honors. Her face—though in the darkness—had the texture of an old glove, touched with pink. She remained for a time unaware of our entrance, but sat gazing at some mote in the air, incomputably distant, her nose lifted, as though balancing a difficult pince-nez.

The interview proved Mrs. Creighley to have been right. This Mrs. Clarke, Eddy Greater, refused to be drawn out, and while her cousin and I eked out her unresponsiveness with a highly artificial conversation of our own, her hand rose and fell, carrying the teacup to her lips. Even to direct questions as to these notable friends of hers, she made monotonous disclaimers. Her voice was low and curiously hoarse, and the few phrases she permitted herself: "I don't know," "I can't remember" and "I believe so," were only too obviously protective measures set up by one who could, but would not, expatiate. Finally I thanked Mrs. Creighley, who said she would see me through the shop, and rose to go.

"Your material is of the greatest interest, Mrs. Clarke," I said. "Can I give you my card? Should you consider—ah—sharing anything further you may have, I hope you will let us know. The Sebastian Torr Society will be pleased to buy any documents of the period that—"

She had received my card spiritlessly on her lap, but now she looked up with arrested attention. One saw her thus as quite aged, and with a touch of eccentric madness in her thin, angular face and looped, variegated costume.

"Sebastian Torr? What do you know about him?" she asked

sharply, adding as she relapsed into her abstraction, "Drunkard! —I have nothing but these few things you have seen. Goodbye."

Mrs. Creighley had preceded me into the shop. "You mustn't mind," she said from the gloom, "she is strange with everyone. I fancy she had quite a difficult time in her youth. Did I tell you she was on the stage? You wouldn't have heard of her, it was so long ago. Not that she wasn't all right, Mr. Caruthers! But I imagine in these days the stage could be very difficult for a girl of high principles."

The tone of my commiseration implied an unqualified acceptance of Eddy Greater's model life and consequently desperate struggle for advancement. I bought a little pile of autographs and pushed out into the falling dusk.

In the days that followed I planned to return to the shop, confident that it required only time to draw from the aged singer further and more valuable mementos of her brilliant epoch. Any such trying process was disposed of, however, by my receipt of a pencilled note at my hotel. "Dear Mr. Caruthers," it read, "I have more things for you to see. I am at 45 Queens-chapel Road, every evening at seven, Mrs. Clarke." After a great deal of inquiry, a hotel retainer was found who knew the general direction of Queenschapel Road. This woman was led out to my cab-driver, and after a prolonged discussion of landmarks we set out. After half-an-hour's driving we fell into the habit of stopping at public-houses for reassurance. We were penetrating into a suburb, all walls and hedges. The road seemed prepared at any moment to resign its claim to city supervision, and relapse into villagedom. There were suspicions of orchards and lanes and even pastures. At last we drew up before a large, ugly house, of what at first appeared to be a highly solitary situation, bearing two faded signs: "Altar Guild" and "Sacristan, 3:00 to 5:00 p.m." Descending to the pavement I looked about me and saw through the dark that had fallen, the light smoking rain, and a vague screen of foliage, that opposite the house of our intention stood a suburban cathedral, a vast bumpy structure, uncompleted and infested with side entrances, breaking into little gilded domes and leaning before and behind upon ghostly scaffolding. I bade my driver draw off towards a nearby gloom that I assumed to be a clump

of weeping willow trees, and started to ascend the stairs. The door before me suddenly opened and three ladies rushed out in a little flurry of screams and giggles. "We shall be so late!" one said. "Father Raglin will be very annoyed," said another. "The third time this week." Two were in nun's garb, and the third wore a discreet modification of it that resembled penury, widowhood and convent in one. They rushed off to the dripping church without seeing me and I continued my ascent.

The bell was answered immediately by an old woman who must have been sitting by the door. She nodded when she saw me, as though I were a frequent caller, and led me into the front room, clean, high and uncarpeted. There was a faint smell of incense about, and through folding-doors, came the sound of low impassioned Jesuitical murmuring. These doors creaked to admit Mrs. Clarke, who closed them behind her. Seen thus for the first time, in motion and facing the light, she appeared less impressive. I was seeing an elderly lady with a sharp, hunted face framed in hair that was still dark. Her lips were thin with acquisitiveness, and her eyes were wide and fixed, and bore the flag of a fixed idea. She wore the same costume that I had seen on the stairs, and in the new association I saw her to be a lay sister or a postulant, one too ignorant to be admitted, or too unspiritual, yet too devoted to reject. She swept and polished and embroidered, one saw; she dusted the woodwork in the choir and mended the vestments in the press; and passed a piece of chamois over the altar vessels.

She sat down immediately at the table and said in her guttural voice: "Now! I have a diary of Sebastian Torr's. For three years. How much will you give me? It's full of poems he wrote me. I used to know him. There are photographs of us two, standing together. Now!"

"Let me see it," I said.

"Yes, yes. You shall. There is most of a long poem, too. And the story of his illness, when he was getting worse. How much will you give me?"

"Mrs. Clarke, I must see it first. If it contains all this you say I may be able to give a hundred and fifty pounds."

"A hundred and fifty pounds! Do you hear, I will not *show* it to you for that."

"You must be reasonable, Mrs. Clarke. I can make no prom-

ises without seeing the manuscript," I replied, and my firmness exerted a quieting effect on the old woman, whose excitable haggling had acquired a touch of hysteria. She dabbed her eyes and suddenly drew open a drawer of the table, where lay three worn note-books. My eyes at once caught the handwriting I had been studying for so many months, Sebastian Torr's, indubitably. I saw the indentations of daily entries; I saw with these eyes the lost poems, the legendary lost poems, the Imogen lyrics and the seven Primitive Rituals; I saw a half-dozen daguerreotypes—I hung over these things for several minutes while Mrs. Clarke stood up, translating my pleasure and awe into the terms of her own cupidity, increase for increase.

"I will give you four hundred pounds," I said finally.

Mrs. Clarke gave a second cry of dismay and repudiation, and for the first time I became aware of a touch of the histrionic in this pathetic funereal quasi-distinguished old woman. Suddenly the folding-doors, behind which the murmuring had ceased, opened to admit a small, precise priest. He bowed impersonally to me, and by the slightest of signals requested Mrs. Clarke to leave us alone. She closed the drawer of the table, locked it and left the room without a glance at us.

"Mrs. Clarke has told me of your interest in these old papers of hers, Mr. Caruthers," said the priest. "For the journal she showed you to-night she is willing to accept a thousand pounds."

"I can't pay it," I replied immediately. "You know such sums are not paid for small manuscripts like these—"

"I am aware of that. You must understand that we are not charging you a thousand pounds for the literary value of the journal. I have read it. It is the daily record of profligacy and degeneration. The poems may be fine; but they are blasphemous or licentious, or both. We could not but feel that we are contributing to the destructive forces about us by selling this journal. I suppose it would enjoy a certain sensation?" He waited until I nodded. "The verses would become a part of everyone's culture—very likely?" Again I nodded. "The responsibility on us becomes fairly great. But for a thousand pounds—"

I was listening to a popular preacher whose ears were charmed by his own stilted phrasing. The cool, delicate voice would go on forever, multiplying distinctions.

“Good-night.” I said suddenly, rising. “Mrs. Clarke has my card. My offer of four hundred pounds rests with her.”

I left the room in a rage, descended the stairs and aroused my driver without noticing that the rain had begun to fall more heavily, and that I was carrying my hat and coat in my hand. A thousand pounds was impossible. It was in the days before the great sales, besides which I could never persuade the society nor any of its rich enthusiasts to pay a thousand pounds for a manuscript that would be eventually published—such poems are never lost!—leaving an only incidental interest in their original handwriting. On the drive home I furiously cast away all interest in the journal. Let them keep it; I should never penetrate into their strange retreat again. But during the days that followed my eagerness to possess it took an almost physical form; I fell ill of disappointment and frustration, and had about resolved to journey out to Queenschapel Road, when another pencilled note was left at my hotel making an appointment with me at one of Mrs. Crooke’s tea-rooms situated in the center of the city.

The organizing genius that has given the name of Mrs. Crooke to the world as a household word built a chain of untidy, identical shops throughout London, choosing for the most part the more important bus transfer stations. The trade-mark displays a Japanese girl tilting an umbrella, but the firm is more closely associated with the rubber-plants in the windows and the embarrassing turn-stile in the door. Our appointment was for three, but arriving early I saw through the stile and rubber-plants that Mrs. Clarke was already waiting for me. It was early and we were the only customers. In the distance a tall waitress was sewing on an apron-string and conversing with the cashier in her little pagoda. We sat in silence a moment while Mrs. Clarke seemed to be hurriedly preparing the line of argument, into which she finally launched herself, with more than her usual hoarseness.

“I will sell you the journals for four hundred pounds. But you must not publish them. Not for five years at least. They must not know, Father Xavier and Father Lara. They would never let me be a nun; I would be washing dishes forever. Do you see now?” I nodded greedily. “I will pretend to them that I have burned the manuscripts, or thrown them into the lake.”

Wonder as to what she would do with the money, and how she could conceal its expense from her confessors crossed my mind, and I asked her, only to find that my question had tapped the fixed idea that was burning in her eyes.

“No one will ever know. I shall build a chapel in my cathedral in Paris. For my friends, for all of us, Manina Shayer, Fanny Bonner and the rest—eight of us. I owe it them, they are telling me that all the time. I am the last and I owe it them.”

During the shaken silence that followed this feverish confession the waitress at the end of the room bit off her thread, shook out her apron-string, licked her fingers and descended on us. I gave the order, adding that we would like a fire lighted in the grate beside us. The waitress looked at the grate as though she had never seen it before, stuck one forefinger into the hollow of her cheek skeptically, and went away. Presently a boy appeared with sugar on his face, lit the kindling, made a tremendous racket with a coal scuttle, and returned to his interrupted tea. Throughout these incongruous proceedings Mrs. Clarke and I had sat shielding, as it were, our religious and literary passions from the vulgarity and horse-play about us. When tea had been placed before us, I attempted to lead her into conversation on her old acquaintances, but she cut me short, saying she never thought of them, and I saw something of the abhorrence of the convert for the days before the change. I arranged to meet her at the same place the next day, with the money, when a shadow suddenly fell across the table. Mrs. Clarke was in the act of extending to me “on account” the first *cahier* of the diaries which she brought with her. She looked up and a change came across her face, more of resignation than fear. “Father Lara!” she said, half rising. The priest with exquisite manners was beside us.

“Veronica, have I your permission to burn these books?” he asked, almost with deference.

“Yes, Father Lara,” she said, her chin trembling strangely, and her eyes returning to their myopic fixity.

“These have come between us again. First you clung to them because they represented the life you have put behind you. The second time they caused you to fall into avarice. Now they have led you into disobedience against our authority. Veronica, have I your permission to destroy them?”

She sighed her admission again. He took the journals, and with a sudden movement threw them into the burning coals.

"I could have given your damned authority a thousand pounds for those papers," I cried.

Father Lara without looking at me remarked gently: "The obedience of the least of our postulants is worth more than ten thousand pounds to us. Come, Veronica, you will be late for the class."

Without another glance at me they went out, Mrs. Clarke buttoning her cheap cotton gloves with a sort of tearful dignity. Perhaps I could still have extracted a page or two from behind the moulded iron grate, but a strange lassitude had fallen upon me, from which I was aroused by the tall girl.

"The man with the collar's been lookin' in over the rubber-trees ever since you came," she said. I paid the account, and went out thinking of the two cherished ambitions that would never be fulfilled—that strange chapel of dead actresses and my edition of Sebastian Torr.