



# Why Maeterlinck Is Among Us

To This "Unknown Shore" of Ours He Brings Word  
That the Existence of a Trans-Stygian Shore Is Proved

THE viability of a legend such as attaches the quality of aloofness to Maeterlinck is a plausible reason why, despite their enormous popularity, there is a more general curiosity about the man than ever was felt about his books. This curiosity seems to flatter him, too, for he smiled when it was brought to his attention in a living room overlooking Bryant Park. The smile broadened at the further statement that he had, happily, written of late years more within the understanding of the ordinary man than in the prolonged enigma of his earlier work.

Maeterlinck takes himself very simply, but also very seriously. Feeling that he is a teacher above all else, including poet, he is entranced, and said so, that plain men and women are becoming his pupils. For he brings to them a message, one that demanded his delivering it by urgencies and poignances during the war, but it is not a message of the war. His purpose is to define the superhuman and the human, and to prove that the soul not only lives on after death but may reestablish communion with the embodied souls in this, our world.

### II.

First, to have done with the shop, a little may be gained by trying to give to persons who may have to wait to see him an idea of what Maeterlinck the man looks like. He is tall and straight, with rather a thick body. His large head is thatched with thick silvery gray hair; his eyes are small and deeply set, of a color between gray and green. Except his mouth, which is sweet and sympathetic in expression, the Belgian has no claim to good looks or even distinction of person. He dresses plainly but neatly, and in his lapel wears the small red button of the Legion of Honor.

To attempt to describe Maeterlinck the author would be futile. Why not offer him a clean palette with six or seven little dabs of crude color on it and say: "Master, paint thyself."

These blobs of color took the form of questions, crude in truth, but out of them a skilled hand could make an impressionistic sketch or a finished portrait. Do you bring wisdom to heal our souls distrustful of all gods and enervated by ennui? Was your cup of pity filled from a Grecian fountain or from a spring that welled earlier in India? Was it mere restless curiosity, a craving for new motives, new subjects of interest, new modifications of style that urged you, or was fame your ultimate purpose? What charm in art and literature works on your spirit, what authors excite you and what tranquillize? Are you a classic or romantic?

Maeterlinck looked amazed (as well he might), but his face soon settled back into its wonted calm. His is not a mind of quick reactions and a considerable pause ensued. When he began to speak he answered in lovely, graceful words (the French words were so) without a break, without a pause, as he were pouring them out of a full cornucopia. They are translated here with a sorrowful sense of inadequacy.



Maurice Maeterlinck.

"With the best will in the world, how is it possible for a man to discover himself in the finite? If I dissolve my life in a phrase—the pursuit of truth and beauty, confident of finding them one—I simply admit you to the start of my adventure when I was unknown to myself. I write what I feel, nothing more, nothing less. If I have written words that afford balm, as you so politely intimate, I should be content. I have not that feeling.

"Are the man and the writer one? I will answer you in Rousseau's words, 'Si je ne vaudrais pas mieux, au moins je suis autre.' (If I am not better, at least I am different). For praise or censure, to be liked or laughed at (and they have laughed at me) I am myself.

"In the midst of the harsh noises of the nineteenth century there sounded a delicious music so distinct that many ears heard it. These were the melodious, fascinating voices of our earlier centuries. Surcharged with a strange loveliness these voices laid the hearers under a spell.

"By an inner sense which can scarcely be termed vision, pictures are called into being by this music, pictures woven on a background of delicately beautiful landscape of men strong and noble, of women loving and wistful. Quite different are these shadows from the hard living, hard fighting, harsh and cruel beings who, the world fancied, inhabited the

moyen age. Those monsters never existed; instead there were people so passionate and eager, so ideal in a devotion to truth and chivalry higher than those honored now, that one who had caught vague glimpses of them might not rest until he had represented in his pitiful way their births and their deaths, their tragedies of hate and love!

"Alas! if I hear the voices they are fainter, if I still see the vision it is more shadowy. I lived with it while I was allowed until the grotesque vanished and by a profound alchemy terror and love conceived a perfect beauty. No trace of the harshness which threw up into relief the ideality of the moyen age lingered; but a calm, a tranquillity like the face of a sculptured goddess added the ultimate grace.

"The literature of Asia, of Egypt, of Greece all have helped me. I drank when I could at the sources. I read now everything that is worth while, and in several languages. After that need I say that the impression of a lack of sympathy with my own time, which you say has been created, was never true? To-day I share all the hopes, the aspirations, the misfortunes of my fellow men wherever they are. But in the spiritual situation left by the subsidence of war we more than ever yearn for truth as it is embodied in beauty and strength. Visions teach nothing if they do not show us how

to approach the present and live it. No man can shrink from the strain of outward, practical life without shrivelling. But it is one thing to shout with the crowd and expand the strain and excitement and another to seek to soften the fever of life by a preaching of profound pity.

### III.

"I have come here to tell you my belief that the personality of a man lives on after what we call death. I have come here with a message that is not of the war, but grew out of the war. I have come to prove that what the wise and religious men of all ages longed for and hoped for, absolute proof of our immortality, has been scientifically established. My days and my labors have led me to this, and could a man ask a grander consummation?"

Men famous at home have so frequently exploited America with a laugh behind the hand that it is not strange if we have learned to mistrust the seriousness of a message made for America. This one of Maeterlinck's is suspiciously timely; we are "crazy" about ghosts and probably as much afraid of them as our forefathers were who talked of the chain clanking variety. But although we may listen incredulously to Maeterlinck's poetic adventures on "The Unknown Shore," we are sure to be impressed with the fact that he believes, himself. "I don't come as a seer, or a prophet; I detest the charlatan, and abhor tricks and delusions. I wish to tell simply what I have seen and to declare seriously what I know to be true." This is the Maeterlinck defiance.

Before Maeterlinck's consciousness had wholly disentangled itself from outward objects, nature was a many sided mirror, giving back to him myriad images, mainly beautiful, but some of them distorted, of landscape and figure, magnified or diminished until his imagination began to look upon its own incorporations as having an independent being. It is but a step from there to the point where we are fain to find the supernatural, as we vaguely term whatever exceeds man's ordinary experience. There is a period of mental development when men grow childlike. It had to come to Maeterlinck earlier than to most mortals, for this poet has always preserved much of the child. Perhaps it is his best claim to wisdom.

We expect in a great artist an imperturbability of reason, an equal eye that looks on all ranks and conditions of men, all fortune and misfortune without remorse or envy. We expect also fine creations that build themselves in his work and are not built by deliberate foresight. Nature, by a process as mysterious as some lesser artists fain would be themselves, puts something there for which they are not responsible.

It is this higher than human element which, when we meet it in an author, exalts us with the feeling that we have met—not a god (we leave gods to Dunsany), but with the pure artist.

And this is the lasting impression one gets of Maeterlinck.

WILLIS STELL