

**AGLAVAINÉ AND
SELYSETTE: A
DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS**

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Aglavaine and Selysette: A Drama in Five Acts by Maurice Maeterlinck

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MAURICE MAETERLINCK

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BY MAURICE MAETERLINCK

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INTRODUCTION

IN the remarkable volume of essays which M. Maeterlinck published last year, a sentence occurs which might be taken as the text of a discourse upon his whole dramatic work and method. *Les hommes*, he says, *ont je ne sais quelle peur étrange de la beauté*. The drama, of which an English rendering is given in this volume, is the latest of a series of plays in which, with continually increasing power and subtlety, he has attempted to disengage the inner beauty that lies deep at the heart of life itself. The romantic drama, with all its large possibilities of treatment, has shrunk, except now and then in the hands of its greatest masters, from the deepest expression of this spiritual beauty. Where we feel most, we are often most shy of saying all we mean; and to express such feelings in language that is at

once adequate and sincere, implies skill and courage of no ordinary degree. M. Maeterlinck is widely known as the inventor of a dramatic method which, with certain obvious imperfections, is vivid, flexible, far-reaching. It is still more important to recognise that this method is the vehicle of a new and strange sense of duty.

This newness, this strangeness of beauty, is what is meant by the word *romance*; and it is by comparison with other movements of the romantic spirit that it may best be appreciated in its real meaning. Being of the nature of a new sense, and only incidentally of a new method of expression, it does not appear at once in definite forms. It may even wander about from art to art, seeking for means of outlet. The analogy which certainly exists between M. Maeterlinck's dramatic pieces and the painting of his distinguished countryman, M. Fernand Khnopff, may be traced back to a common impulse—that of expressing, by such means as the existing arts supply or suggest, the inner meaning and hidden beauty

of things as they are freshly felt by a mind which approaches them quite courageously and quite simply.

The new romantic movement in Belgium has a close historical relation to the great romantic movement of France proper, the influence of which after sixty years still remains unexhausted. But it also—as the Belgian critics themselves point out—has been deeply influenced by England. The direct study of the Elizabethan drama has had an obvious effect on these plays in choice of method and inspiration of subject. And another English influence is not less certain or less powerful—that of the romantic movement which originated, some forty years ago, among an obscure group of Oxford undergraduates, and which has since effected so great a change, not only in specific arts like poetry and painting, but in the serious daily thought of mankind with regard to beauty.

La Princesse Maleine, the earliest and by far the crudest and most fantastic of the plays, is also the one which shows the Elizabethan