ALLADINE AND PALOMIDES, INTERIOR, AND THE DEATH OF TINTAGILES; THREE LITTLE DRAMAS FOR MARIONETTES

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MAURICE MAETERLINCK & R. BRIMLEY JHNSON

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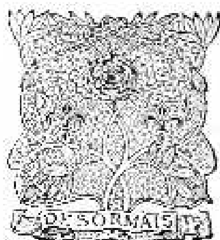
THREE LITTLE DRAMAS FOR MARIONETTES BY MAURICE MAETERLINCK



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INTRODUCTION

These three little plays were written five years ago; after Pelleas and Melisande, before the "Treasure of the Humble," before "Aglavaine and Selysette." They were the last of the series that began with "The Princess Maleine": a series of what might almost be termed Dramas of Unconsciousness and Instinct. A curious fatalism runs through them all; we feel that the men and women before us are merely unravelling the web that Destiny has spun round their lives—Destiny being a mysterious and inexorable force whose behests they must blindly obey. They are the slaves of their passions, slaves of the events that befall them; they are primitive beings, the mainspring of whose action lies forever exposed on the surface; they are creatures in whom deed follows instinctively on thought—and yet are we curiously conscious the while of the struggle in their soul, of their vague and helpless desire, as fate hurries them swiftly along to their doom. In his later work, M. Maeterlinck has entered fields of speculation that are wider, surer, nearer to life; here he seems still to be groping, searching, eagerly trying to discover the relationship that exists between man and his destiny, between man and the universe. These plays are often termed "mystic"; it were more correct, perhaps, to describe them as plays that are governed by obscure ideas, ideas that have not yet become clear; and, considering them thus, we shall

find in them the germ of many a lofty, magnificent thought of "Wisdom and Destiny"; we shall understand the process of reasoning by which Fate, that in "Alladine and Palomides" is a monstrous force, crushing all life and all hope, shall in a few years be looked on as a power that can never enter the soul, uncalled: that can vanquish the upright man only by the good it compels him to do, and that has but one sword wherewith to attack him, the sword of goodness and truth.

"Three little dramas for marionettes," the legend runs on the title-page; nor is this a mere fanciful description of their nature, or affectation on the part of the author. He does but thereby give expression to his feeling that the naïvete of treatment, the simplicity of character, render them somewhat ill-adapted for performance on the regular stage. And indeed few concessions are made to the realism demanded by modern convention. We know nothing of his people, who they are, or whence they come. This man is a king, that other a prince's son, the third a retainer. Often, indeed, they will be nameless—merely strangers, old men, sisters. They live, always, in palaces with gloomy corridors, and lofty, ruined towers; there are underground rivers, savage mountains, ominous forests: and the unquiet, restless sea is never far away. When the curtain rises, the characters are "discovered," and begin to speak; having said their say, they go out "by different ways," and the curtain abruptly falls. The environment is unchanging, but it is because the poet wills it so, because he chooses the scene that appears to him best fitted to his subject, and persists in regarding the setting as a matter entirely subordinate. His methods, therefore, are by no means in harmony

with those of the modern stage; and yet such pieces of his as have been performed—notably "Pelleas and Melisande,"—conclusively prove that these methods do not detract from the complete enjoyment of the audience. For M. Maeterlinck is a dramatist of rare quality; and plays, after all, are meant to be acted.

"Alladine and Palomides" has much in common with the play mentioned above, which was its immediate predecessor; though it perhaps fails to reach the very high level of that most exquisite tragedy. But yet it would seem in some measure to mark a fuller creativeness, a somewhat wider conception. Alladine is as naïve as Melisande, as unconscious, and yet more alert, more alive; endowed with more will and initiative, more foresight, more knowledge. Melisande shrinks from death, is scarcely aware of what death may mean; Alladine prefers love to life; and through all her childishness and want of reason we detect an ardent, urgent soul. And in this play, too, there is Astolaine—no less instinctive than the others—but whose instincts all make for nobility, sacrifice, devotion; whose love is so great that she can almost cheerfully resign the man she adores to a rival, and for this rival have only love too, and sisterly sympathy. Astolaine—to use a phrase of which M. Maeterlinck is fond—has attained the higher unconsciousness, that has drawn near unto God. She moves in the midst of these impetuous, impulsive creatures like one inspired, a centre of light; and we feel that her love, that is so hushed and silent, is yet infinitely greater and deeper than the more turbulent, overwhelming passion of Alladine. The old King who has grown weary of the monotony of his existence, and climbs on to the battlements to summon

the events that are to rob him of reason and life, embodies an idea that will be familiar to the readers of M. Maeterlinck's essays. He was not able to understand the happiness that dwelt in the very uniformity of his existence; he clamoured for adventure; but, when it came, he lacked the power to transform it into consciousness, he allowed it to assume complete mastery over him and promptly yielded himself over to calamity. In marked contrast to Ablamore is the sage in "Intérieur"; the wise, benevolent old man, who places the centre of his joys in those about him, and finds happiness in watching their simple gestures, their calm and placid lives. "Intérieur" is a triumph of technical skill; as we read, we are painfully conscious of that peaceful family in their room, behind the lighted windows, seated there in all tranquillity, suspecting nothing; we dread the terrible awakening, and in our hearts are grateful to Mary for her suggestion that the sorrowful tale be not told until the morrow; and when at length the old man enters and the father rises to greet him, we almost turn our eyes away from the poignant misery that we know must ensue. And yet all is suggested only; there is not a word of despair. But this beautiful little play does more than merely stir our emotions; there is not a word that falls from the old man's lips but is noble, touching, throbbing with love, deeply and humanly sensitive; he is wise with a wisdom that disdains nothing, but has ever kept in close kinship with man. "The Death of Tintagiles"—the play M. Maeterlinck himself prefers of all he has written—is a strangely powerful study of sisterly love. Ygraine's devotion to little Tintagiles is all-absorbing, overwhelming; Ygraine herself, in her despair, her pathetic entreaty,

her desperate struggle, is surely one of the most piteous victims of the cruelty of Fate. We have here the story of a child whom death tears away from his sister's helpless embrace; the play itself being symbolic of the struggle of all mankind against Death.

I have said that this play is symbolic; yet are those doubtless mistaken who imagine that there is scarcely a line in M. Maeterlinck's writings but has its special cryptic meaning. Symbolism there certainly is, but it is broad and general: one central idea, or set of ideas, will govern the whole; the plays however are invariably simple and direct, and by no means underlined with constant symbolic reference. The air, it may be, is charged with mystery; but only such as pertains to the shadowy twilight in which the characters move, and have being. Let us take, as an instance, the scene in "Alladine and Palomides," where the two lovers are imprisoned in the grotto; they tear the bandages off their eyes, and the light thrown up by the blue water that flows at their feet reveals to them countless sparkling jewels and radiant flowers on the walls of the cavern; yet it needs but one ray of the sun, as it pierces through the cleft in the rock, to prove that what seemed flashing gem is nothing but dull and lifeless stone; what seemed exquisite roses only moist and decaying fungus. Here we may find perhaps some connection with the thought M. Maeterlinck has since expressed in his essays, viz., that the beautiful dream which shrinks from reality, actuality, and cannot support the steady light of everyday life, is in itself a tawdry thing too, and unreal, and not what it seems. But those unable to define this wider and more general meaning will still