

Maurice Maeterlinck has just finished a monumental work on the life of the ant. Léon Daudet, royalist and literary critic, tells what it is all about.

Maeterlinck's Book on Ants

By LÉON DAUDET

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MAURICE MAETERLINCK'S new work of biological philosophy, *La Vie des fourmis*, completes the trilogy whose first two sections were *La Vie des abeilles* and *La Vie des termites*. The great Belgian writer, who is both a scholar and a poet, has devoted long years to searching for the fleeting secret of life in man, nature, the vegetable kingdom, the insect world, and messages from the beyond. His universal curiosity, based on a no less universal sympathy, makes him partake of the tradition followed by Erasmus, Montaigne, Goethe, and Michelet. His is one of the most vast and clear-sighted minds of all time and his immense classic culture and mastery of French, English, and German have never stifled his personality. He has an ever vigilant faculty of investigation which he keeps indulging by reading and original criticism. And, finally, he possesses independence,

that superb open-mindedness which is as necessary to life as breathing. He has never accepted, in any theme that he has treated, a single *cliché* or ready-made idea, which explains the authority that he enjoys among the elect members of the civilized world, an authority that he has maintained for twenty-five years.

This complete, tranquil, unassuming independence is characteristic of the Belgian nation and in my eyes is its greatest charm. Whether the individual Belgian is Flemish or Walloon, he looks for himself, reads for himself, listens for himself, jokes in his own way, and lets no one impose on him. That admirable poet, Verhaeren, contemplated the lovely banks of the Escaut, Flemish villages on autumn evenings, dim lights in houses, and smoke spiraling to the sky, but he never interposed a reminiscence of his own. Maeterlinck treats sentiments

and ideas in the same fashion. Moreover, he does not confine himself any more than Verhaeren did to studying and depicting one milieu or one category of human beings. He moves with sovereign ease from stars to ants, from the presentiments of death to its images. He puts on a vast county fair of imaginative intelligence that is at once reconstructive and synthetic, and every page he writes is brilliant and passionate.

FROM these preliminary paragraphs you have already divined that the development of Maeterlinck's personality is what has always interested me most in each new work that I have read by this singular genius, whose roots go, like the roots of all great men, deep down into his native soil. He began by depicting the quasi mystical states of human consciousness and the agonies of sorrow and love in the anxious, ecstatic young man, only to end in synoptic studies of social insects, from whose singular habits and strange peculiarities he distilled a general sense of direction. His universal curiosity, fringed about with darkness, has led him to study the human soul, and from that point he went on to investigate the extranatural or supernatural manifestations that keep raining about us. Then, leaving man behind, since man either failed to satisfy his fever of comprehension or else deceived that fever, he turned to nature, or 'the other book,' as my father called it, a book more undecipherable than the 'book of myself.' He has followed a highly original trajectory, starting out with poetry and ending in interpretative science. But he will certainly not remain there,

for it is inevitable that the sum total of effusions, studies, and ruminations that go to make up his meditative and rather pastoral life will bring forth, at some given moment, a new Faust who will embrace and sum up all of his prodigious investigations.

Schopenhauer said that life oscillated like a pendulum between boredom and suffering, but this bitter vision is all too simple. Maeterlinck's life has always oscillated between beauty and comprehension, though it is true that his aptitude for grasping the beautiful in all its forms is itself a form of comprehension, perhaps the least deceptive of all the forms of comprehension that we know.

I shall not outline here the study Maeterlinck has made of ants, which surpasses in interest his previous studies of bees and termites. The extraordinary altruism that these insects show to all comers, companions and adversaries alike, their collective organization, their numerous but rather harmless battles, their alliances and the innumerable parasites they support so well, their known and unknown means of communication, their migrations and their conceptions of slavery and procreation, the care they give their eggs, their powers of resistance and their hereditary powers, all these elements are brought together and depicted by Maeterlinck with his incomparable mastery, in that same simple, supple, sensuous language that has been his ever since he wrote *Serres chaudes*. Few native Frenchmen have used their language with such precision and natural elegance as he. His phrases are as serene as his thoughts. Never having searched for singular turns of expression, he can always be recognized within five lines and it

seems as if his radiant personality impregnates his golden, commonplace words. He bends every energy to resist using hypotheses; his whole effort is to make himself understood. What he has read, observed, and meditated continually advances him closer to the mysterious, to the infinite, to the isles of gold. Like Goethe and Mistral, who were also pastoral figures, he prefers the universal to the particular, the spiritual to the material.

Here is an example of his writing which made a particular impression on me because I once tried to draw a similar analogy in relation to cancer. He is trying to discover what is the point of departure and the means of transmission for the sole commandment, the commandment of order, that prevails in the ant-hill.

'We find here again the great problem of the beehive and the termite community. Who reigns and who governs in this city? Where is the idea or spirit hidden? Whence do these orders which are never questioned emanate? The concerted agreement is as unquestionable and admirable as in the other groups and must be more difficult, for the life of ants is in general much more complicated, more unforeseen, and more adventurous. Until some better explanation can be found, the most likely one is perhaps the explanation I suggested in *La Vie des termites*, which is that the ant-hill should be considered as a single individual whose cells, unlike the cells of our bodies, which number some sixty trillion, are not agglomerated but are dissociated, disseminated, exteriorized, yet at the same time remain subject to some central law, in spite of their seeming independence.'

There is an evident analogy between

the singular coöperation of our various organs—the liver, the lungs, the spleen, and so forth—and the coöperation to be found among social insects like bees, termites, and ants. The former is a conglomeration of chemical, physical, organic units, nourishing themselves in a certain way, accomplishing certain tasks, defending themselves by certain means, eliminating waste and reproducing themselves by other means, and secreting certain substances, which recall the conglomerates, tribes, and groups of the social insects. The cellular conglomerate of cancer, for instance, is essentially warlike and devouring, and its migrations and metastases bear strange resemblances to what happens in hives and ant-hills. Such comparisons, however, should not, scientifically speaking, be pushed too far.

THIS great book of Maeterlinck's on the habits and organization of ants, even more than his two preceding books about bees and termites, leads us to revise our classical views on the difference between intelligence and instinct. Numerous philosophers and biologists have admitted the existence of the famous gulf between the deliberations and determinations of the human intelligence and the hereditary impulses of instinct. Numerous experiments have been based on the repetition of certain movements and the division of labor among social insects. To-day, however, all this seems rather dubious and we may well ask if the famous gulf is not merely a question of point of view which assumes a fatalistic character when it is seen from higher up and further away and which, through lack of direct commu-

nication, cannot be grasped or understood except in a partial fashion.

Another very clear impression is the small number of powers and functions that govern the phenomena of animal life throughout every different species. To sum matters up, ants, like ourselves, possess a nervous system, a digestive system, an ambulatory system, and a system of reproduction, and they do not deviate in any essential way from the general plan on which all vital activity functions. Pleasure, fear, sorrow, the fighting instinct, and the instinct to dominate or to submit may be situated differently in these creatures than in us but they have them none the less, just as we do. Perhaps the most striking thing in animate nature, whose fundamental secrets may be said to be hermetically sealed, is the few means that it has at its disposition. The game of life is limitless in time but not in its possible combinations. It was this thought that gave Friedrich Nietzsche his famous vision of eternal recurrence and led him to assert that a limited number of combinations occurring in a limitless space of time must repeat themselves indefinitely.

'Where do ants go when they die?' asks Maeterlinck at the close of his book, just as he did about bees. Clearly a mind of his stamp, although up to now it has no belief, cannot be satisfied by the reply of 'Nowhere,' especially since such a reply is inconceivable. 'Finally, where do they go, the ants? What becomes of them when they are dead? Why smile at these questions when they concern insects and take them seriously when they concern man? Is the difference between them and us sufficiently great? We encounter at each step the specta-

cle of their intelligence and we must turn our backs on our evidence not to recognize it. We are no longer in the presence of minerals, vegetables, or brutes that are mere victims of instinct; we are dealing with existences that are separated from our own by a mere transparent membrane, for it would take but little to make these creatures our equals in many respects, and our ignorance makes us poor judges. Does a little more or a little less cerebral activity change from top to bottom the laws of the universe, of beauty and eternity, and does this little difference grant immortality on the one hand and deny it on the other?

'What we find it most difficult to admit is that in neither space nor time does there accumulate a kind of reserve supply of all experiences, all efforts, all struggles against evil, misery, suffering, stupidity, and matter. We can hardly bring ourselves to believe that some day everything will be lost, that everything will begin all over again as if nothing had been done, and that, though evil harms the whole world, good profits nobody.'

Expressing himself in these terms, Maeterlinck arrives at the same point as Montaigne, when he said, 'What do I know?' Everything that we see and discern, everything that we assert, possesses a sense of foresight or finality just as it possesses a sense of hindsight or causality. But our mind is so made that a succession of ends is much more difficult to imagine than a succession of causes. Even such a man as Maeterlinck, whose subtle art, keen science, and generous soul all work together, knows no more of the fundamental mysteries that he names and classifies than a little child just beginning to speak.

Nietzsche's unrequited love for the wife of Richard Wagner is here revealed as the essence of his tragic genius.

Nietzsche in LOVE

By DR. ERICH F. PODACH

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THE INTELLECTUAL LINES of Nietzsche's dispute with Wagner are clear cut. Convinced himself that antiquity could be born again in the German spirit, Nietzsche perceived a similar tendency in Wagner's music, which, he felt, conjured into being the new-old world for which he yearned. But his deception revealed itself fully when Wagner entered his Bayreuth phase and the celestial companions became earthly foes.

According to Frau Förster-Nietzsche's biography of her brother, 'the island of the blessed,' Tribschen, was an abode of unalloyed friendship where the younger man remained true to his master, whom he looked upon as a hero, and where no trace of their later controversy intruded. But the second volume of Charles Andler's six-volume work on *Nietzsche, sa vie et sa pensée*, published in 1921, gave a good analysis of the Tribschen idyl and showed that the Nietzsche-Wagner

dispute had already begun in the period between 1869 and 1872. In 1870 and 1871 the dramatic fragment, 'Empedokles,' appeared and according to this French student of Nietzsche it provides the key to Nietzsche's so-called 'illusionistic epoch,' to the period between Nietzsche's first visit to Tribschen and his last meeting with Wagner in Sorrento. Andler detects in 'Empedokles' not only a lyrical creation of incomparable grandeur but a work suffused with glowing thoughts that first took the form of words in *Zarathustra*. These thoughts arose from Nietzsche's doubts as to whether Wagner was strong and determined enough to fight shoulder to shoulder with him and they betray his conviction that the older man is no longer of service, at any rate, not as a leader. But Wagner's wife, whom Nietzsche always regarded as Wagner's equal and whom he later publicly proclaimed to be Wagner's superior, he wished to