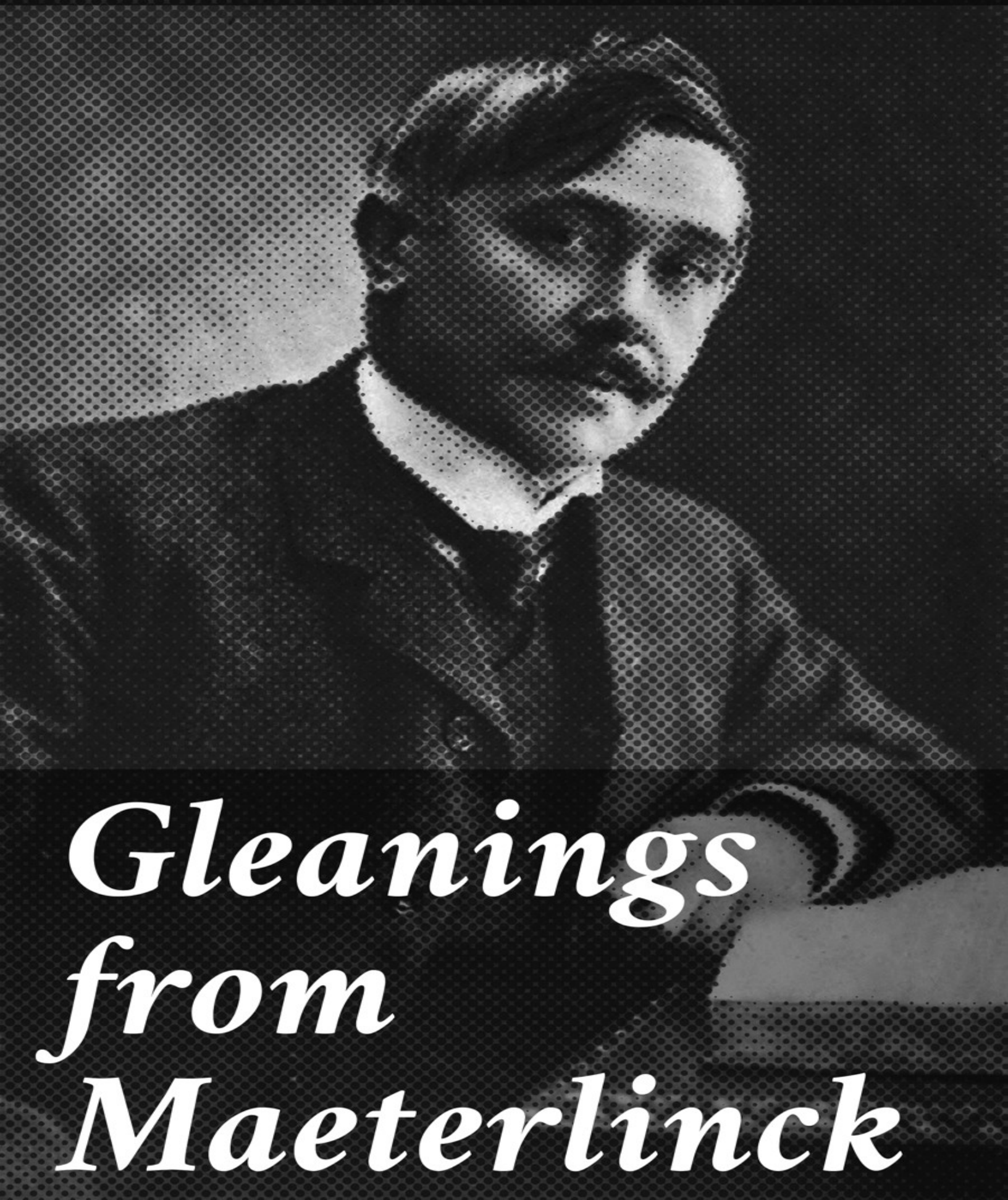
Maurice Maeterlinck



Gleanings from Maeterlinck

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I
OUR INJUSTICE TO DEATH

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It has been well said:

“Death and death alone is what we must consult about life; and not some vague future or survival, where we shall not be. It is our own end; and everything happens in the interval between death and now. Do not talk to me of those imaginary prolongations which wield over us the childish spell of number; do not talk to me—to me who am to die outright—of societies and peoples! There is no reality, there is no true duration, save that between the cradle and the grave. The rest is mere bombast, show, delusion! They call me a master because of some magic in my speech and thoughts; but I am a frightened child in the presence of death!”[1]

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That is where we stand. For us, death is the one event that counts in our life and in our universe. It is the point whereat all that escapes our vigilance unites and conspires against our happiness. The more our thoughts struggle to turn away from it, the closer do they press around it. The more we dread it, the more dreadful it becomes, for it but

thrives upon our fears. He who seeks to forget it has his memory filled with it; he who tries to shun it meets naught else. It clouds everything with its shadow. But though we think of death incessantly, we do so unconsciously, without learning to know death. We compel our attention to turn its back upon it, instead of going to it with uplifted head. All the forces which might avail to face death we exhaust in averting our will from it. We deliver it into the groping hands of instinct and we grant it not one hour of our intelligence. Is it surprising that the idea of death, which should be the most perfect and the most luminous of ideas—being the most persistent and the most inevitable—remains the flimsiest and the only one that is a laggard? How should we know the one power which we never look in the face? How could it have profited by gleams kindled only to help us escape it? To fathom its abysses, we wait until the most enfeebled, the most disordered moments of our life arrive. We do not begin to think of death until we have no longer the strength, I will not say, to think, but even to breathe. A man returning among us from another century would have difficulty in recognizing, in the depths of a present-day soul, the image of his gods, of his duty, of his love or of his universe; but the figure of death, when everything has changed around it and when even that which composes it and upon which it depends has vanished, he would find almost untouched, rough-drawn as it was by our fathers, hundreds, nay, thousands of years ago. Our intelligence, grown so bold and active, has not worked upon this figure, has not, so to speak, retouched it in any way. Though we may no longer believe in the tortures of the damned, all the

vital cells of the most sceptical among us are still steeped in the appalling mystery of the Hebrew Sheol, the pagan Hades, or the Christian Hell. Though it may no longer be lighted by very definite flames, the gulf still opens at the end of life and, if less known, is all the more formidable. And therefore, when the impending hour strikes to which we dared not raise our eyes, everything fails us at the same time. Those two or three uncertain ideas whereon, without examining them, we had meant to lean give way like rushes beneath the weight of the last minutes. In vain we seek a refuge among reflections which are illusive or are strange to us and which do not know the roads to our heart. No one awaits us on the last shore where all is unprepared, where naught remains afoot save terror.

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Bossuet, the great poet of the tomb, says:

“It is not worthy of a Christian”—and I would add, of a man—“to postpone his struggle with death until the moment when it arrives to carry him off.”

It were a salutary thing for each of us to work out his idea of death in the light of his days and the strength of his intelligence and stand by it. He would say to death:

“I know not who you are, or I would be your master; but, in days when my eyes saw clearer than to-day, I learnt what you were not: that is enough to prevent you from becoming mine.”

He would thus bear, graven on his memory, a tried image against which the last agony would not prevail and from

which the phantom-stricken eyes would draw fresh comfort. Instead of the terrible prayer of the dying, which is the prayer of the depths, he would say his own prayer, that of the peaks of his existence, where would be gathered, like angels of peace, the most lucid, the most rarefied thoughts of his life. Is not that the prayer of prayers? After all, what is a true and worthy prayer, if not the most ardent and disinterested effort to reach and grasp the unknown?

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“The doctors and the priests,” said Napoleon, “have long been making death grievous.”

And Bacon wrote:

“*Pompa mortis magis terret quam mors ipsa.*”

Let us, then, learn to look upon death as it is in itself, free from the horrors of matter and stripped of the terrors of the imagination. Let us first get rid of all that goes before and does not belong to it. Thus we impute to it the tortures of the last illness; and that is not just. Illnesses have nothing in common with that which ends them. They form part of life and not of death. We readily forget the most cruel sufferings that restore us to health; and the first sun of convalescence destroys the most unbearable memories of the chamber of pain. But let death come; and at once we overwhelm it with all the evil done before it. Not a tear but is remembered and used as a reproach, not a cry of pain but becomes a cry of accusation. Death alone bears the weight of the errors of nature or the ignorance of science that have uselessly

prolonged torments in whose name we curse death because it puts a term to them.

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In point of fact, whereas sicknesses belong to nature or to life, the agony, which seems peculiar to death, is wholly in the hands of men. Now what we most dread is the awful struggle at the end and especially the last, terrible second of rupture which we shall perhaps see approaching during long hours of helplessness and which suddenly hurls us, naked, disarmed, abandoned by all and stripped of everything, into an unknown that is the home of the only invincible terrors which the soul of man has ever felt.

It is doubly unjust to impute the torments of that second to death. We shall see presently in what manner a man of to-day, if he would remain faithful to his ideas, should picture to himself the unknown into which death flings us. Let us confine ourselves here to the last struggle. As science progresses, it prolongs the agony which is the most dreadful moment and the sharpest peak of human pain and horror, for the watchers, at least; for very often the consciousness of him whom death, in Bossuet's phrase, has "brought to bay" is already greatly dulled and perceives no more than the distant murmur of the sufferings which it seems to be enduring. All doctors consider it their first duty to prolong to the uttermost even the cruellest pangs of the most hopeless agony. Who has not, at the bedside of a dying man, twenty times wished and not once dared to throw himself at their feet and implore them to show mercy? They are filled with

so great a certainty and the duty which they obey leaves so little room for the least doubt that pity and reason, blinded by tears, curb their revolt and recoil before a law which all recognize and revere as the highest law of man’s conscience.

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One day, this prejudice will strike us as barbarous. Its roots go down to the unacknowledged fears left in the heart by religions that have long since died out in the intelligence of men. That is why the doctors act as though they were convinced that there is no known torture but is preferable to those awaiting us in the unknown. They seem persuaded that every minute gained amid the most intolerable sufferings is snatched from the incomparably more dreadful sufferings which the mysteries of the hereafter reserve for men; and of two evils, to avoid that which they know to be imaginary, they choose the only real one. Besides, in thus postponing the end of a torture, which, as old Seneca says, is the best part of that torture, they are but yielding to the unanimous error which makes its enclosing circle more iron-bound every day: the prolongation of the agony increasing the horror of death; and the horror of death demanding the prolongation of the agony.

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The doctors, on their side, say or might say that, in the present stage of science, two or three cases excepted, there is never a certainty of death. Not to support life to its last limits, even at the cost of insupportable torments, might be murder. Doubtless there is not one chance in a hundred thousand that the patient escape. No matter: if that chance exist which, in the majority of cases, will give but a few days, or, at the utmost, a few months of a life that will not be the real life, but much rather, as the Romans called it, “an extended death,” those hundred thousand useless torments will not have been in vain. A single hour snatched from death outweighs a whole existence of tortures.

Here we have, face to face, two values that cannot be compared; and, if we mean to weigh them in the same balance, we must heap the scale which we see with all that remains to us, that is to say, with every imaginable pain, for at the decisive hour this is the only weight which counts and which is heavy enough to raise by a hair’s-breadth the other scale that dips into what we do not see and is loaded with the thick darkness of another world.

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Swollen by so many adventitious horrors, the horror of death becomes such that, without reasoning, we accept the doctors’ reasons. And yet there is one point on which they are beginning to yield and to agree. They are slowly consenting, when there is no hope left, if not to deaden, at least to dull the last agonies. Formerly, none of them would have dared to do so; and, even to-day, many of them

hesitate and, like misers, measure out niggardly drops of the clemency and peace which they ought to lavish and which they grudge in their dread of weakening the last resistance, that is to say, the most useless and painful quiverings of reluctant life refusing to give place to on-coming rest.

It is not for me to decide whether their pity might show greater daring. It is enough to state once more that all this has no concern with death. It happens before it and beneath it. It is not the arrival of death but the departure of life that is appalling. It is not death but life that we must act upon. It is not death that attacks life; it is life that wrongfully resists death. Evils hasten from every side at the approach of death, but not at its call; and, though they gather round it, they did not come with it. Do you accuse sleep of the fatigue that oppresses you if you do not yield to it? All those strugglings, those waitings, those tossings, those tragic cursings are on the side of the slope to which we cling and not on the other side. They are, indeed, accidental and temporary and emanate only from our ignorance. All our knowledge merely helps us to die a more painful death than the animals that know nothing. A day will come when science will turn upon its error and no longer hesitate to shorten our woes. A day will come when it will dare and act with certainty; when life, grown wiser, will depart silently at its hour, knowing that it has reached its term, even as it withdraws silently every evening, knowing that its task is done. Once the doctor and the sick man have learnt what they have to learn, there will be no physical nor metaphysical reason why the advent of death should not be

as salutary as that of sleep. Perhaps even, as there will be nothing else to take into consideration, it will be possible to surround death with profounder ecstasies and fairer dreams. In any case and from this day, with death once acquitted of that which goes before, it will be easier to look upon it without fear and to lighten that which comes after.

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Death, as we usually picture it, has two terrors looming behind it. The first has neither face nor form and permeates the whole region of our mind; the other is more definite, more explicit, but almost as powerful. The latter strikes all our senses. Let us examine it first.

Even as we impute to death all the evils that precede it, so do we add to the dread which it inspires all that happens beyond it, thus doing it the same injustice at its going as at its coming. Is it death that digs our graves and orders us to keep that which is made to disappear? If we cannot think without horror of what befalls the beloved in the grave, is it death or we that placed him there? Because death carries the spirit to some place unknown, shall we reproach it with our bestowal of the body which it leaves with us? Death descends into our midst to change the place of a life or change its form: let us judge it by what it does and not by what we do before it comes and after it is gone. For it is already far away when we begin the frightful work which we try hard to prolong to the very utmost, as though we were persuaded that it is our only security against forgetfulness. I am well aware that, from any other than the human point of

view, this proceeding is very innocent; and that, looked upon from a sufficient height, decomposing flesh is no more repulsive than a fading flower or a crumbling stone. But, when all is said, it offends our senses, shocks our memory, daunts our courage, whereas it would be so easy for us to avoid the foul ordeal. Purified by fire, the remembrance lives enthroned as a beautiful idea; and death is naught but an immortal birth cradled in flames. This has been well understood by the wisest and happiest nations in history. What happens in our graves poisons our thoughts together with our bodies. The figure of death, in the imagination of men, depends before all upon the form of burial; and the funeral rites govern not only the fate of those who depart but also the happiness of those who stay, for they raise in the ultimate background of life the great image upon which men's eyes linger in consolation or despair.

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There is, therefore, but one terror particular to death: that of the unknown into which it hurls us. In facing it, let us lose no time in putting from our minds all that the positive religions have left there. Let us remember only that it is not for us to prove that they are not proved, but for them to establish that they are true. Now not one of them brings us a proof before which an honest intelligence can bow. Nor would it suffice if that intelligence were able to bow; for man lawfully to believe and thus to limit his endless seeking, the proof would need to be irresistible. The God offered to us by the best and strongest of them has given us our reason to

employ loyally and fully, that is to say, to try to attain, before all and in all things, that which appears to be the truth. Can He exact that we should accept, in spite of it, a belief whose doubtfulness, from the human point of view, is not denied by its wisest and most ardent defenders? He only offers us a very uncertain story, which, even if scientifically substantiated, would be merely a beautiful lesson in morality and which is buttressed by prophecies and miracles no less doubtful. Must we here call to mind that Pascal, to defend that creed which was already tottering at a time when it seemed at its zenith, vainly attempted a demonstration the mere aspect of which would be enough to destroy the last remnant of faith in a wavering mind? Better than any other, he knew the stock proofs of the theologians, for they had been the sole study of the last years of his life. If but one of these proofs could have resisted examination, his genius, one of the three or four most profound and lucid geniuses ever known to mankind, must have given it an irresistible force. But he does not linger over these arguments, whose weakness he feels too well; he pushes them scornfully aside, he glories and, in a manner, rejoices in their futility:

“Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their faith, those who profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in presenting it to the world, that it is a foolishness, *stultitiam*; and then you complain that they do not prove it! If they proved it, they would not be keeping their word; it is in being destitute of proofs that they are not destitute of sense.”

His solitary argument, the one to which he clings desperately and devotes all the power of his genius, is the very condition of man in the universe, that incomprehensible medley of greatness and wretchedness, for which there is no accounting save by the mystery of the first fall:

“For man is more incomprehensible without that mystery than the mystery itself is incomprehensible to man.”

He is therefore reduced to establishing the truth of the Scriptures by an argument drawn from the very Scriptures in question; and—what is more serious—to explain a wide and great and indisputable mystery by another, small, narrow and crude mystery that rests only upon the legend which it is his business to prove. And, let us observe in passing, it is a fatal thing to replace one mystery by another and lesser mystery. In the hierarchy of the unknown, mankind always ascends from the smaller to the greater. On the other hand, to descend from the greater to the smaller is to relapse into the condition of primitive man, who carries his barbarism to the point of replacing the infinite by a fetish or an amulet. The measure of man’s greatness is the greatness of the mysteries which he cultivates or on which he dwells.

To return to Pascal, he feels that everything is crumbling around him; and so, in the collapse of human reason, he at last offers us the monstrous wager that is the supreme avowal of the bankruptcy and despair of his faith. God, he says, meaning his God and the Christian religion with all its precepts and all its consequences, exists or does not exist.