"THE BLUE BIRD": MAETERLINCK'S SYMBOLIC FAIRY STORY: THE PRODUCTION AT THE NEW THEATER: BY KATHARINE METCALF ROOF

The programme for the London presentation of "The Blue Bird,"—an interpretation which seems to have cast a spell over all who witnessed it—contains the following prefatory note: "The Blue Bird, an inhabitant of the Pays Bleu, the fabulous country of our dreams, is an ancient symbol in the folklore of Lorraine and stands for happiness." The New Theater programme comments: "The quest of the 'Blue Bird'—a being perfect, elusive and infinitely to be desired—is the subject of many an old French fairy tale. In this play the Blue Bird stands for happiness."

The English programme, designating that wonderful scene where the children visit the graves at midnight, translates the poet precisely,—"Before the Wall"—thus in the poet's use can a single word become a symbol! But the American programme, suspicious of symbols, states prosaically—that there shall be no mistake in the minds of the audience—that the scene takes place "Outside the Churchyard."

In the newspaper announcement of the play this phrase of quack advertisement flavor appears, "The Blue Bird for Happiness." There is food for thought in these rhetorical differences in explicitness and exploitation.

Maeterlinck's symbolism, at least so far as central ideas are concerned, is invariably stated clearly in his text. With the added explicitness of the English translation it must be obvious to the veriest dullard. One must regret therefore that an organization like the New Theater, founded with the avowed intention of maintaining a theater free from the business considerations that constrain Broadway, should feel it necessary to use the kindergarten methods of popular advertisement for the benefit of the matter-of-fact or uncultivated patron.

Of the allegory of the soul's pursuit of happiness, personified by the search of the two children for the Blue Bird, it is not necessary to speak in detail. That sense of the existence of a soul in animals and in the forces and creations of nature—so dominant a note in the Belgian poet's philosophy—becomes in this play a part of the fabric of symbolic drama. The scene in the Forest (omitted in the production because of its length) reveals the hostility of nature
and the animals to man, the conquerer and despoiler. All have con-
spired to keep from him the Secret (of happiness, man’s destiny), all
hate and fear him and long for his downfall,—all save the Dog, the
friend of man, symbol of blind faith and the love that neither questions
nor demands, that asks nothing but the privilege of loving. This
conception of the character of the Dog Maeterlinck has set forth in
an expressibly touching fashion in his essay, “Our Friend the
Dog.” The mystery of this dumb creature’s allegiance to man has
taken strong hold upon the imagination and sympathies of the poet,
and in “The Blue Bird” we find the Dog and the little boy Tyttyl
the central figures of the drama. In the story the Dog is the only
one of the creatures who when told that death awaits them at the
end of the journey, does not seek to escape. Instead, he leaps in
joy about the children exclaiming, “I want to go with the little
god.” And when at the end he is obliged to give up his power to
communicate with man he stretches himself, a tragic figure, before
the door with the unlovely pathetic howl that is a dog’s only expres-
sion of grief. In the second act he states his simple creed, “There
is man and that’s all. We have to obey him. . . . That is the one
and only fact in life or death. All for man. Man is God.” The
philosophical Cat says, “Give your reasons.” And the dog replies:
“There are no reasons. I love man; that is enough.”

In the character of the Cat the author’s art sense is not less per-
fect. Let no cat lover bristle with indignation at this statement, for
the real cat lover is not (as Miss Repplier has pointed out some-
where) the one who seeks to equip the cat with the doglike virtues
it does not possess, but the one who appreciates it for its own unique
quality. This quality has always seemed to me rather exclusively
an aesthetic one. The nature of the cat is cryptic, enigmatic, mys-
terious. This is expressed in the scene “In the Palace of the Night,”
where the cat’s real nature is revealed in its alliance with the powers
of night and darkness. In the scene in the forest we see its unaltered
kinship with the wild animals. (What is more unappreciative of the
real essence of the cat than to call it a domestic animal!) In its
human relation we see it cautious, selfish, hypocritical, furtive,
spinxlike. The cat associates itself with man for its own purposes.
But it comes and goes at its own will; its mysterious rites and cele-
brations take place under cover of the darkness. It returns to the
hearth in the morning reticent, sleepy, patronizingly willing to be
housed and fed. To human beings its motives and feelings are un-
expressed, save those relating to hunger and the desire for warmth.
When the Cat takes leave of the children before returning into the
“Land of Silence,” called upon by the little girl for an expression of
THE FAIRY Berylune TELLING Mytyl AND Tytyl ABOUT THE MAGIC DIAMOND.
THE OPENING SCENE IN "THE BLUE BIRD": Mytyl and Tytyl watching happy children playing across the way.
"THE LAND OF MEMORY": WHERE THE CHILDREN FIND THEIR MUCH-BELOVED GRANDPARENTS.
FEASTING WITH GRANDPARENTS AND OLD FRIENDS IN "THE LAND OF MEMORY."
"THE DANCE OF THE HOURS" IN THE WOODCUTTER'S COTTAGE.

"THE KINGDOM OF THE FUTURE": THE "BLUE CHILDREN" WAITING TO BE BORN.
AT THE END, THE BLUE BIRD (HAPPINESS) IS FOUND IN THE CHILDREN'S OWN HOME, THE LAST PLACE THEY HAD THOUGHT OF SEARCHING FOR IT.
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affection, it observes ("in an affected and enigmatic tone," the text reads) "I love you both as much as you deserve." But the Dog, frank, adoring, who, endowed with speech, has expressed all the pent-up devotion of his little being, passionately protests against losing his power to communicate: "No, no, I refuse. I shall always talk. You will understand me, will you not, my little god? . . . and we shall tell each other everything—everything. I shall be very good. I shall learn to read, to write, to play dominoes and I shall always be very clean. Shall I do a wonderful trick for you? . . . Would you like me to kiss the Cat?"

IN THE forest scene (at first retained in the London production and afterward cut as in the New Theater version) the different characters of Cat and Dog are dramatically developed. In this scene, too, another significant fact quite obliterated in the American interpretation is elaborated,—the children’s misunderstanding of the Dog’s sincere outspoken devotion and willingness to fight for them to the death, and their mistaken reliance upon the diplomatic ill-meaning smooth-speaking Cat. In the theatrical representation the little boy’s attitude toward the Dog is always affectionate. In the true Maeterlinck allegory the child receives the Dog’s devotion carelessly and is easily turned against him for the moment by the wily Cat, who tells him that the Dog is making the trees and animals so angry that they will refuse to give up the Blue Bird. In reality, the Cat has led the children into a trap, wishing to destroy them now that they menace the wild creatures’ last stronghold of freedom.

"His presence will spoil everything," says the Cat, referring to the Dog, and the little boy apologizes, "I could not get rid of him." Then to the Dog he says, "Go away, you ugly thing." The Dog begs to follow at a distance. Tyttyr urged by the Cat beats him. The Dog, yelping, returns to his side. "I must kiss you now you have beaten me—" How often, oh, happy owner of a dog, has your own pet done this very thing!

The little boy sends him away, but the little girl, although always ready to believe the Cat, whimpers, "No, I want him to stay. I am afraid of everything when he is not here." Then the Dog, expressively grateful, leaps upon her: "Oh, the dear little girl, how beautiful she is . . . how good she is; . . . how sweet she is. . . I must kiss her." The very absurd clumsy loving leaps of the dog translated into words. The same extraordinary interpretation of canine expression is disclosed at the moment where Bread appears fatuously dressed in Turkish robes, and the Dog jumps about him exclaiming, "How nice he looks; . . . what a fool he looks . . . how nice he
looks!” Agreeable ill logic of the humor-perceiving affectionate soul!

The Dog submits to being bound at his master’s request and is so made powerless to help the children. Most of the animals have arrived on the scene. A few have sent excuses. “The Hen could not leave her eggs, the Stag had a pain in his horns, the Fox is ill, the Goose did not understand and the Turkey flew into a passion—” the Rabbit informs them. They conspire to kill the children, each in his turn, however, seeking to excuse himself from the actual execution of the deed, revealing the fear of Man.

After a time Tytlyl, slow to grasp the fact of danger from the inferior powers, becomes frightened. “What is the matter with them?” he asks the Cat. “Are they displeased?” But the Cat replies with bland and inconsequent dissimulation, “Don’t be alarmed. They are a little annoyed because the spring is late.” Then when the trees and creatures set upon the children, the Dog bursts his bonds and fights with Tytlyl for their lives.

The scene at the “Palace of the Night” begins with an eerie conversation between the Cat and Night. Here behind the closed doors to which Night holds the key is the real Blue Bird, “The only one that can live in the light of day.” But among them are “the Blue Birds of dreams that live on the rays of the moon and die as soon as they set eyes on the sun.”

Night complains of Man: “Must he know everything? Already he has captured a third of my mysteries; all my Terrors are afraid and dare not leave the house; my Ghosts have taken flight, the greater part of my Sicknesses are ill.” Tytlyl has come to seek the Blue Bird behind the closed doors; he tries all the smaller doors, finding only Night’s various terrors. The symbolic utterances of Night here contain incomparable whimsical touches, as when she adjures the child not to let the Ghosts escape. “We shall never be able to catch them again. They have felt bored in there ever since man ceased to take them seriously.” And there are characteristic bits of Maeterlinckian poetry, as when the escaped Stars, the Will o’ the Wisps, the Fireflies, Dew and the Perfumes of the night dance about the hall, and the child asks, “Who are those whom one can hardly see?” And Night replies, “Those are the perfumes of my Shadow.”

At last Tytlyl comes to the great doors and determines to open them. Bread, the Cat and Night use every argument to frighten him from the task. All at last flee from him save the Dog, who “panting and hiccupping with suppressed fright,” reassures him, “I shall stay. . . . I am not afraid—I shall stay with my little god.
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I shall stay.” What a pity that in the desire to give an obvious effect for climax this touch was cut out and stage “business” of excited action and movement was substituted.

For theatrical purposes also presumably, the climax of that act—a touch of genius—was cut out. Tyttyl opens the great doors in the “Palace of Night” to find instead of fabulous horrors the magic garden in the unearthly light of which thousands of blue birds are flying. The children fill their arms with them and carry them away, only to find outside the gates that they have died, for they were the birds who could not live in the sun. The real Blue Bird had escaped them. “They could not reach him,” the Cat exulted. “He kept too high.” Tyttyl sorrowfully leaves them in a heap upon the ground. The Dog is left in contemplation. No longer the hero, the body-guard of man, he relapses a moment into wistful material doggishness as he looks down at the dead birds and wonders, “Are they good to eat?” Instead of this speech a sort of ballet pantomime of the Night Spirits restoring the dead birds to life was interpolated.

THE scene where the children meet their dead grandparents in the “Land of Memory” is full of tender poetic beauty. “How can we see them when they are dead?” Tyttyl asks the fairy when she proposes the visit; and the fairy responds mystically, “How can they be dead when they live in your memory?” Again Maeterlinck touches upon the eternal mysteries when among the graves at midnight the child turns the magic diamond upon the grave stones only to see them totter and disappear while an enchanted dawn comes with green leaves, bees and flowers. The little girl, not daring to look, asks fearfully, “Where are the dead?” and the little boy, gazing at the lilies blooming where the grim symbols of death had stood, responds, “There are no dead!” a simple expression conveying a great spiritual proclamation. The ability to convey this could hardly have been expected of the young girl who took the part. Through the medium of Debussy’s music and Mary Garden’s art the delicate escapable essence of such things can be communicated. But in the American theater of the spoken word few actors possess so intangible an art. Again when in the end the little boy finds that the real Blue Bird is his own dove, in his home—a true and simple symbolism—the boy’s exclamation, “We went so far and he was here all the time—” is unfortunately insignificant and trivial in its attempt to preserve naturalness.

In the scene in the “Land of the Unborn Children” the “Kingdom of the Future”—which more nearly than any other conveyed its intrinsic beauty in the performance, the poet touches upon the un-
solved mysteries of the origins and destinies of souls. Each child must
carry something to earth with him in his little box—a discovery, an
invention, a crime or a great mission. Time summons them when
their hour has come. The child who is to become a great hero to
fight against injustice is called but he holds back crying, “No, no,
I don’t want to go. I would rather not be born. I would rather
stay here.” A deeper note of life’s mystery is touched upon with
the souls of the two lovers who must be parted before they are born.
“I shall be gone before she comes down,” exclaims one. “I shall
never see him again!” the other cries despairingly. But Time,
adamant, responds, “All this does not concern me. Address your
entreaties to Life. I unite and part as I am told.” In this mys-
terious blue region Tytlyl and Mytyl are greeted by their own little
brother, yet unborn. They talk together. “What have you in that
bag?” Tytlyl questions. “I bring three illnesses,” the child replies.
“Whooping cough, scarlatina, measles.” “And after that?” “After
that . . . I shall leave you.” “It will hardly be worth while com-
ing,” Tytlyl exclaims, but the unborn soul replies, “We cannot pick
and choose.”

The children whose hour has struck set sail in Time’s ship. The
others, left to await their time, cry out to them. “Try to know me
again . . . I shall find you. Don’t lose your ideas. . . . Don’t lean
too far into space.” The children’s voices are heard in the distance.
“The earth, how beautiful it is.” . . . Then a strange wonderful
song of gladness arises. “What is that?” asks Tytlyl, and Light
responds, “It is the song of the mothers coming out to meet them.”

The beautiful expressive music for this was written by a young
Irishman, Norman O’Neil, previously unknown. It is intended to be
sung by a chorus of women’s voices, and done in that way, as it was in
London, instead of being merely played by the orchestra as here, the
effect was said to be indescribably thrilling.

IT WOULD be pleasant if one could speak with more enthusiasm
of the performance itself, but the truth is that it is not on the
same high level of many of last winter’s performances at the New
Theater, and that upon the whole the effect seemed rather remote
from the spirit of the original. It is only just, however, to remem-
ber that the expense of such things is greater in this country and
that the stage managers have not the same material to draw upon in
casting a production. Several of the interpretations—notably that
of Bread—were conceived in the crude and blatant spirit of Broad-
way musical comedy. Indeed, the programme did not need to
inform us that little Irene Brown had received her training there,
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the exaggerated self-conscious conception of childish coquetry which pleases the taste alike of that region and Third Avenue was only too painfully apparent in the child’s expression. Indeed, of all the actors only Miss Wycherly (who is a Canadian), Miss Moretti, who is an actress of wide experience, Mr. Wendell, who is recruited from the ranks of the cultivated class, Mr. Yapp and Mr. Robert Cummings seemed able to deliver the lines with any sense of their beauty or meaning. Yet Miss Moretti’s Night gave no sense of its symbolic mystery, and Louise Closser Hale—so delightful in modern character parts, was prosaic and disappointing in the rôle of the fairy Berylune. To expect interpretations containing any sense of illusion from actors immature in years would seem to be unreasonable in a country where the art of the theater is at so low an ebb as it is in ours, and no doubt it was all that could be expected that Gladys Hulette—save for a comic-opera effect of dancing through her rôle—should achieve as much naturalness as she did, for after all she is only a “big little girl.” It is unfortunate that the scheme of the performance should have substituted a child of unnatural nobility and courage for the altogether human and natural child of the text, for Tytytyl’s unconscious native bravery is only made the more convincing by his moments of fear, hesitation and careless childish unkindness.

The spectacle side of “The Blue Bird” was only mediocre. We can do such things much better in these days. Fire—a Loge emancipated from the necessity for a voice—might surely have been more subtly danced and costumed, and the rejection of the fantastic semi-realistic costumes used for the Cat and the Dog in the London performance deprived the actors of much of their means to effect. Mr. Wendell’s performance handicapped by an unsuggestive makeup lacked, therefore, much of the charm of the part, in spite of his realistic barks and howls. The interpreter of the Cat had a more successful makeup and achieved moments of effect, but his mews were interpolated rather more in the spirit of Broadway extravaganza than that of Maeterlinckian fantasy. The charge of lack of poetry in the text of “The Blue Bird”—which was surely made by those who have not read the original—was no doubt based upon the impression made by the awkward overemphasis and the prosaic and uncultivated enunciation of many of the performers. Bad enunciation, local “burrs” in the actors’ speech are not agreeable to listen to in any performance, but they offend the ear more actively in the poetic drama. In other countries the theater is supposed to present a standard of correct speaking. It is to be hoped that that will some day be the case in America.