

Newbigging Thomas

Fables and Fabulists: Ancient and Modern



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CHAPTER I

DEFINITION OF FABLE

'Read my little fable,
He that runs may read.'

Tennyson: The Flower.

'As clear as a whistle.'

Byron: The Astrologer.

The term 'fable' is used in two senses, with two distinctive meanings.

First, as *fabulæ*, it is employed to denote the myths or fictions which, by the aid of imagination and superstition, have clouded, or have become blended with, the history of the remote past. Such are the stories related of Scandinavian and Grecian heroes and gods; beings, some of whom doubtless had an actual human existence, and were wise and valiant and powerful, or the reverse, in their day, but around whose names and persons have clustered all the marvellous legends that are to be found in mythological lore. The better name for these is 'romance.'

Secondly, as *fabellæ*, it is used to signify a special branch of literature, in which the imagination has full play, altogether unassisted by superstition in any shape or form. The fabulist confers the powers or gifts of reason and speech on the humbler subjects over whom he exercises sway, and so has ample scope for his imaginative faculty; but there is no attempt on his part at any serious make-believe in his inventions. On the contrary, there is a tacit understanding between him and his hearers and readers, that what he narrates is only true in the sense of its application to corresponding circumstances in human life and conduct.

It is with fable as understood in this latter sense that we propose to deal.

The Fable or Apologue has been variously defined by different writers. Mr. Walter Pater, paraphrasing Plato's definition, says that 'fables are medicinale lies or fictions, with a provisional or economized truth in them, set forth under such terms as simple souls can best receive.'¹ The sophist Aphthonius, taking the same view, defines the fable as 'a false discourse resembling truth.'² The harshness of both these definitions is scarcely relieved by their quaintness. To assert that the fable is a lie or a falsehood does not fairly represent the fact. A lie is spoken with intent to deceive. A fable, in its relation, can bear no such construction, however exaggerated in its terms or fictitious in its characters. The meanest comprehension is capable of grasping the humour of the situation it creates. Even the moral that lurks in the narration is often clear to minds the most obtuse. This is at least true of the best fables.

Dr. Johnson, in his 'Life of Gay,' remarks that 'A fable or epilogue seems to be, in its genuine state, a narrative in which beings irrational, and sometimes inanimate —*quod arbores loquantur, non*

¹ 'Plato and Platonism,' by Walter Pater. London: Macmillan and Co., 1893, p. 225.

² Aphthonius flourished at Antioch, at what time is uncertain. Forty of his Æsopian fables, with a Latin version by Kimedoncius, were printed from a MS. in the Palatine Library at the beginning of the seventeenth century. 'The Æsopian Fable,' by Sir Brooke Boothby, Bart. Edinburgh: Constable and Co., 1809. Preface, p. xxxi.

*tantum feræ*³— are, for the purpose of moral instruction, feigned to act and speak with human interests and passions.'

Dodsley says that 'tis the very essence of a fable to convey some moral or useful truth beneath the shadow of an allegory.⁴ Boothby defines the fable as 'a maxim for the use of common life, exemplified in a short action, in which the inhabitants of the visible world are made the moral agents.' G. Moir Bussey states that 'the object of the author is to convey some moral truth to the reader or auditor, without usurping the province of the professed lecturer or pedant. The lesson must therefore be conveyed in an agreeable form, and so that the moralist himself may be as little prominent as possible.'⁵ Mr. Joseph Jacobs says that 'the beast fable may be defined as a short humorous allegorical tale, in which animals act in such a way as to illustrate a simple moral truth or inculcate a wise maxim.'⁶

These various definitions or descriptions apply more especially to the Æsopian fable (and it is with this that we are dealing at present), which is *par excellence* the model of this class of composition. Steele declares that 'the virtue which we gather from a fable or an allegory is like the health we get by hunting, as we are engaged in an agreeable pursuit that draws us on with pleasure, and makes us insensible of the fatigues that accompany it.'⁷ This is applied to the longer fable or epic, such as the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey' of Homer, or the 'Faerie Queen' of Spenser, rather than to the fable as the term is generally understood, otherwise the simile is somewhat inflated.

One more definition may be attempted:

The Æsopian fable or apologue is a short story, either fictitious or true, generally fictitious, calculated to convey instruction, advice or reproof, in an interesting form, impressing its lesson on the mind more deeply than a mere didactic piece of counsel or admonition is capable of doing. We say a short story, because if the narration is spun out to a considerable length it ceases to be a true fable in the ordinary acceptance of the term, and becomes a tale, such, for example, as a fairy tale. Now, a fairy or other fanciful tale usually or invariably contains some romance and much improbability; it often deals largely in the superstitious, and it is not necessarily the vehicle for conveying a moral. The very opposite holds good of a fable. Although animals are usually the actors in the fable, there is an air of naturalness in their assumed speech and actions. The story may be either highly imaginative or baldly matter-of-fact, but it never wanders beyond the range of intuitive (as opposed to actual or natural) experience, and it always contains a moral. In a word, a fable is, or ought to be, the very quintessence of common sense and wise counsel couched in brief narrative form. It partakes somewhat of the character of a parable, though it can hardly be described as a parable, because this is more sedate in character, has human beings as its actors, and is usually based on an actual occurrence.

Though parables are not fables in the strict and limited meaning of the term, they bear a close family relationship to them. Parables may be defined as stories in allegorical dress. The Scriptures, both old and new, abound with them. The most beautiful example in the Old Testament is that of Nathan and the ewe lamb,⁸ in which David the King is made his own accuser. This was a favourite mode of conveying instruction and reproof employed by our Lord. Christ often 'spake in parables'; and with what feelings of reverential awe must we regard the parables of the Gospels, coming as they did from the lips of our Saviour!

³ 'Even trees speak, not only wild beasts.' — Phædrus, Book i., Prologue.

⁴ 'Essay on Fable.'

⁵ 'Fables Original and Selected,' by G. Moir Bussey. London: Willoughby and Co., 1842.

⁶ 'The Fables of Æsop,' as first printed by William Caxton in 1484. London: David Nutt, 1889, vol. i., p. 204.

⁷ 'The Tatler,' No. 147, vol. iii., p. 205.

⁸ 2 Samuel xii. 1-7.

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERISTICS OF FABLES

'To hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to Nature.'

Shakespeare: Hamlet.

There is an archness about the best fables that creates interest and awakens curiosity; and it is the quality of such that, whilst simple enough as stories to be understood and enjoyed by the young, they are at the same time calculated to interest, amuse, instruct and admonish those more advanced in years.

A fable should carry its moral without the telling; nevertheless the application is often worth supplying, because it puts, or should put, the lesson taught by the fable in a terse and impressive form. Above and beyond all, a fable should possess the quality of simplicity, and whilst easy to be understood, it should have force and appropriateness.

Fables treat of the follies and weaknesses, and also of the nobler qualities, of humankind, generally through the medium of the lower animals and the members of the vegetable and natural kingdom. These are made to represent the characters we find in human life. Curious, that although it is chiefly the lower animals and inanimate things that are made the vehicle of the instruction or reproof contained in the story, we do not feel that there is any incongruity in these having the power of speech. We willingly accept the circumstance of their faculty of speech and reasoning as Gospel truth for the time being. It is natural that they in the fable should speak as the heroes or actors, and we listen to their words, whether wise or foolish, with deference or contempt as the case may be.

It is a question in casuistry how far justice and injustice are done to the inferior animals and the members of the vegetable kingdom by this liberty that is taken with them in the fable. If they had the knowledge of the fact, and the power of remonstrance, it may be conceived that some of them, at least, would repudiate the characters and propensities which we in our superior conceit so glibly ascribe to them in the fable. And, indeed, there is doubtless a good deal of unfairness in our habit of stigmatizing this one with cunning, that one with cowardice, and the other with cruelty, or stupidity, or dishonesty, as suits our purpose. Possibly if some of the humbler creatures thus branded were gifted with the power of writing fables for the benefit of *their* fellow creatures and associates, they might be able to point to characteristics in the higher order of beings which it is desirable to hold in reprobation, and this, too, with as much or more reason and justice on their side than we have on ours. But, in truth, the fabulists themselves tacitly admit the force of this argument, inasmuch as the failings and defects and general qualities which they ascribe to the characters in the fable are, of course, those of the human species. A fable of Æsop, *The Man and the Lion*,⁹ is very much to the point here:

'Once upon a time a man and a lion were journeying together, and came at length to high words which was the braver and stronger of the two. As the dispute waxed warmer they happened to pass by, on the road-side, a statue of a man strangling a lion. "See there," said the man; "what more undeniable proof can you have of our superiority than that?" "That," said the lion, "is your version of the story; let us be the sculptors, and for one lion under the feet of a man, you shall have twenty men under the paw of a lion!" Men are but sorry witnesses in their own cause.'

A fable is generally a fiction, as has already been said. It is a singular paradox, however, that nothing is truer than a good fable. True to intuition, true to nature, true to fact. The great virtue of fables consists in this quality of truthfulness, and their enduring life and popularity are

⁹ Quoted from James's 'Fables of Æsop.' Murray, 1848.

corroboration of it. If not true in the sense of being reasonable, they are nothing, or foolish, and therefore intolerable. We instinctively feel their truth, and are encouraged, or amused, or conscience-smitten by the narration, for they deal with principles which lie at the very root of our human nature.

It is a remarkable feature of this species of composition that a departure from the natural order of things loses its incongruity in the fable; and although this view has been controverted, the argument against it fails to carry conviction in face of the excellent examples that can be adduced. By way of illustration, take the fable of the man and his goose that laid the golden eggs. We don't remember ever meeting with a goose of this particular breed out of the fable. There are numberless geese in the world – human and other. But the goose that lays a golden egg every morning is a *rara avis*. Nevertheless, she has a veritable existence in the fable, and we would as soon think of casting a doubt on our own identity as on that of the fabled bird. The story has always been, and will continue to be, Gospel truth to us, and we never recall it without commiserating the untimely end of the poor obliging goose, and thinking, at the same time, what a goose its owner must have been to kill it and cut it up, in expectation of finding in its inside the inexhaustible treasure his impatient greed had pictured as existing there. *Semper avarus eget*. Had *we* been the fortunate owner of such an uncommon fowl, one golden egg each day would have contented us!

Certain early authors, with the formalism which characterizes their writings, have attempted an arrangement of fables under three distinct heads or classes, designating them, respectively, Rational, Emblematical, and Mixed. The Rational fable is held to be that in which the actors are either human beings or the gods of mythology; or, if beasts, birds, trees, and inanimate objects are introduced, the former only are the speakers. The Emblematical fable has animals, members of the vegetable kingdom, and even inanimate things for its heroes, and these are accordingly gifted with the power of speech. The Mixed fable, as the name implies, is that in which an association of the two former kinds is to be found. The distinction, though perfectly accurate, serves no useful purpose and need not be observed. As a matter of fact, all fables are rational or reasonable from the fabulist's standpoint; and all are emblematical or typical of moods, conditions, and possible or actual occurrences in daily life, whoever and whatever be the actors and speakers introduced.

CHAPTER III

THE MORAL AND APPLICATION OF FABLES

'Come, sir, lend it your best ear.'

Ben Jonson: Love Freed.

Thus La Fontaine:¹⁰ 'The fable proper is composed of two parts, of which one may be termed the body and the other the soul. The body is the subject-matter of the fable and the soul is the moral.'

On the origin of the added morals to fables, Mr. Joseph Jacobs¹¹ has the following appropriate remarks: 'The fable is a species of the allegory, and it seems absurd to give your allegory, and then give in addition the truth which you wish to convey. Either your fable makes its point or it does not. If it does, you need not repeat your point: if it does not, you need not give your fable. To add your point is practically to confess the fear that your fable has not put it with sufficient force. Yet this is practically what the moral does, which has now become part and parcel of a fable. It was not always so; it does not occur in the ancient classical fables. That it is not an organic part of the fable is shown by the curious fact that so many morals miss the point of the fables. How then did this artificial product come to be regarded as an essential part of the fable? Now, we have seen in the Jātakas what an important rôle is played by the *gāthas* or moral verses which sum up the whole teaching of the Jātakas. In most cases I have been able to give the pith of the Birth-stories by merely giving the *gāthas*, which are besides the only relics which are now left to us of the original form of the Jātakas. Is it too bold to suggest that any set of fables taken from the Jātakas or their source would adopt the *gātha* feature, and that the moral would naturally arise in this way? We find the moral fully developed in Babrius and Avian, whom we have seen strong reason for connecting with Kybises' Libyan fables. We may conclude the series of conjectures by suggesting that the morals of fables are an imitation of the *gāthas* of Jātakas as they passed into the Libyan collection of Kybises.'

Montaigne remarks that 'most of the fables of Æsop have diverse senses and meanings, of which the mythologists chose some one that quadrates well to the fable; but for the most part 'tis but the first face that presents itself and is superficial only; there yet remain others more vivid, essential and profound into which they have not been able to penetrate.'¹²

If this be so, it is an argument against the common practice of limiting their significance to the one moral that is often given as an appendage to the fable. It is worthy of note that Æsop did not supply, either orally or in writing, the separate moral to any of his fables. They were left to speak for themselves and produce their unaided effect. The moral or application appended to or introducing a fable (for both practices are followed), is an innovation, as appears from what has already been advanced, probably intended to make clear what was obscure in the apologue.

The true moral is contained in the fable itself. The application may, and often does, vary with the idiosyncrasies of the commentator. Besides the moral and application there is in some collections of fables what is designated 'The Remark,' and 'The Reflection,' in which the commentator tries, as it were, to drive home the application of the story with an additional blow. Our own experience as a youth was that all these appendages to the fable were invariably skipped.

From all which it would appear that the moral and the so-called application of a fable are not one and the same thing. In point of fact, the latter may and does vary according to the peculiar

¹⁰ Preface, 'Fables,' 1668.

¹¹ 'History of the Æsopic Fable,' p. 148.

¹² Essay: 'Of Books.'

views of the commentator. An exemplification of this may be found in the applications of Sir Roger L'Estrange and Dr. Samuel Croxall, the latter taking it upon him to stigmatize in strong language the twist which he asserted the former gave to the morals of the fables in his collection. L'Estrange, who was a Catholic, concerned himself in helping the restoration of Charles II., and was a devoted adherent of his successor, James, from whom he received place and emoluments. In publishing his version of Æsop, his object, as he affirms in his preface, was to influence the minds of the rising generation, 'who being as it were mere blank paper, are ready indifferently for any opinion, good or bad, taking all upon credit.' Whereupon Croxall observes: 'What poor devils would L'Estrange make of the children who should be so unfortunate as to read his book and imbibe his pernicious principles – principles coined and suited to promote the growth and serve the ends of Popery and arbitrary power,' and more to the same purpose.

The question as to whether the moral or application, if any is supplied, should be placed at the beginning or end of a fable has sometimes been discussed. On this head Dodsley has some pertinent remarks that may be quoted. He says: 'It has been matter of dispute whether the moral is better introduced at the end or beginning of a fable. Æsop universally rejected any separate moral. Those we now find at the close of his fables were placed there by other hands. Among the ancients Phædrus, and Gay among the moderns, inserted theirs at the beginning; La Motte prefers them at the conclusion, and La Fontaine disposes them indifferently at the beginning or end, as he sees convenient. If,' he adds, 'amidst the authority of such great names I might venture to mention my own opinion, I should rather prefer them as an introduction than add them as an appendage. For I would neither pay my reader nor myself so bad a compliment as to suppose, after he had read the fable, that he was not able to discover its meaning. Besides, when the moral of a fable is not very prominent and striking, a leading thought at the beginning puts the reader in a proper track. He knows the game which he pursues; and, like a beagle on a warm scent, he follows the sport with alacrity in proportion to his intelligence. On the other hand, if he have no previous intimation of the design, he is puzzled throughout the fable, and cannot determine upon its merit without the trouble of a fresh perusal. A ray of light imparted at first may show him the tendency and propriety of every expression as he goes along; but while he travels in the dark, no wonder if he stumble or mistake his way.' If it be considered necessary or desirable to give the moral separately, or to apply the fable, Dodsley's argument here seems to us to be incontrovertible.

CHAPTER IV

FABULISTS AS CENSORS

'Mark, now, how a plain tale shall put you down.'

Shakespeare: King Henry IV.

Fabulists as censors have always been not only tolerated, but patronized and encouraged, even in the most despotic countries, and when they have exposed wickedness and folly in high places with an unsparing hand. Æsop among the ancients, and Krilof amongst the moderns, are both striking examples of this. The fables of antiquity may indeed be truly said to have been a natural product of the times in which they were invented. In the early days, when free speech was a perilous exercise, and when to declaim against vice and folly was to court personal risk, the fable was invented, or resorted to, by the moralist as a circuitous method of achieving the end he desired to reach – the lesson he wished to enforce. The entertainment afforded by the fable or apologue took off the keen edge of the reproof; and, whilst the censure conveyed was not less pointed and severe, the device of making the humbler creatures the scapegoat of human weakness or vice mollified its bitterness. The very indirectness of the fable had the effect of making the sinner his own accuser. Whom the cap fitted was at liberty to don it.

Phædrus, in the prologue to his third book, thus gives his view of the origin and purpose of fables:

'Here something shortly I would teach
Of fables' origin. To reach
The potent criminal, a slave
To beasts and birds a language gave.
Wishing to strike, and yet afraid,
Of these his instruments he made:
For all that dove or lamb might say,
Against them no indictment lay.'¹³

The fable saves the self-love of the person to whom it is applicable. It enables him to stand aside, as it were, and become a spectator of the effect produced by his own conduct. In this way he is impressed and humbled without being affronted. When one, even though guilty, is openly and directly reproved for a misdeed, the stigma often raises a rebellious spirit, which either suggests a hundred justifiable reasons for his action or begets a defiant mood, driving him to persist in his evil courses.

Listening to the fable, 'we see nothing of the satirist, who probes only to heal us, and who does not exhibit any of the personal spleen and ill-humour which meet and put us out of countenance with ourselves and each other in the invectives of those who sometimes set up for moralists without the essential qualification of good nature. The fable gives an agreeable hint of the duties and relations of life, not a harangue on our want of sense or decorum. We feel none of the superiority of the fabulist, who, indeed, generally leaves us to make the application of his instructive story in our own way; and if we do sometimes prefer to apply it to our neighbour's case instead of our own, we are still improved and amended, inasmuch as we have learned to despise some vice or folly which our

¹³ Boothby's translation.

unassisted judgment might have regarded more leniently.¹⁴ Dodsley, again, puts the matter finely when he says:¹⁵ 'The reason why fable has been so much esteemed in all ages and in all countries, is perhaps owing to the polite manner in which its maxims are conveyed. The very article of giving instruction supposes at least a superiority of wisdom in the adviser – a circumstance by no means favourable to the ready admission of advice. 'Tis the peculiar excellence of fable to waive this air of superiority; it leaves the reader to collect the moral, who, by thus discovering more than is shown him, finds his principle of self-love gratified, instead of being disgusted. The attention is either taken off from the adviser, or, if otherwise, we are at least flattered by his humility and address. Besides, instruction, as conveyed by fable, does not only lay aside its lofty mien and supercilious aspect, but appears dressed in all the smiles and graces which can strike the imagination or engage the passions. It pleases in order to convince, and it imprints its moral so much the deeper in proportion that it entertains; so that we may be said to feel our duties at the very instant we comprehend them.'

The humour of a good fable is a fine lubricant to the temper. Sarcasm, irony, even direct criticism, are in place in the fable, but humour is its saving grace. Without this it cannot be classed in the first order. Wanting in this quality, the fables of some writers who have attempted them are flat, stale and unprofitable. Humour in the fable is the gilding of the pill. It is like the effervescing quality in champagne, the subtle flavour in old port.

It may be questioned whether a fable has ever the full immediate effect intended. Men are loath to apply the moral to their own case, though they have no difficulty in applying it to the case of others – even to their best acquaintances and friends. For example, take the present company, the present company of my readers – it is usual, by the way, to except 'the present company,' but we will be rash enough, even at the risk of castigation, to break the rule – take, then, the present company in illustration of our point. Who among us would admit for a moment that we are the counterpart or human representative of the fox with its low cunning, the loquacious jackdaw, the silly goose, the ungrateful viper, the crow to be cajoled by flattery, not to mention the egregious donkey? 'Satire,' says an acute writer,¹⁶ 'is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own.' Or, to parody a line of Young, 'All men think all men peccable but themselves.' To be sure, we might be willing, modestly perhaps, to admit that we who are singers can emulate the nightingale; that we even possess some of the – call it shrewdness, of the fox; the faithful character of the honest dog; vie in dignity of manners and bearing with the stately lion. But all that is a matter of course; the noble traits we possess are so self-evident that none excepting the incorrigibly blind or prejudiced will be found to dispute them! So that the admonishing fable contains no lesson for any of us, but should be seriously taken to heart, with a view to their reformation, by certain persons whom we all know. That view of the question, however, need not be further pursued.

¹⁴ G. Moir Bussey: Introduction to 'Fables.'

¹⁵ 'Essay on Fable.'

¹⁶ Swift: Preface to 'The Battle of the Books.'

CHAPTER V

LESSONS TAUGHT BY FABLES

'The tale that I relate
This lesson seems to carry.'

Cowper: Pairing Time Anticipated.

In the earlier ages of the world's history fables were invented for the edification of men and women. This was so in the palmiest days of Greek, Roman and Arabian or Saracenic civilization. In these later days fables are generally assumed to be more for the delectation of children than adults. This change of auditory need not be regretted; it has its marked advantages. The lesson which the fable inculcates is indelibly stamped on the mind of the child, and has an influence, less or more, on his or her career during life.

Jean Jacques Rousseau is the only writer of eminence who has inveighed against this use of the fable, but his remarks are by no means convincing. He accounted them lies without the 'medicinal quality,' and reprobated their employment in the instruction of youth. 'Fables,' says Rousseau, 'may amuse men, but the truth must be told to children.' His animadversion had special reference to the fables of La Fontaine, and doubtless some of these, and the morals deduced from them, are open to objection; but to condemn fables in general on this account is surely the height of unreason.

A greater than Rousseau had, long before, given expression in cogent language to the worth of the fable as a vehicle of instruction for youth. Plato, whilst excluding the mythical stories of Hesiod and Homer from the curriculum of his 'Republic' – that perfect commonwealth, in depicting which he lavished all the resources of his wisdom and genius – advised mothers and nurses to repeat selected fables to their children, so as to mould and give direction to their young and tender minds.

Phædrus, again, in the prologue to his fables, says —

"'Tis but a play to form the youth
By fiction in the cause of truth,'

so that his view of the question also was just the very antipodes of that of the French philosopher.

Quintilian urges¹⁷ that 'boys should learn to relate orally the fables of Æsop, which follow next after the nurse's stories.' True, he recommends this with a view to initiating them in the rudiments of the art of speaking; but he would not have inculcated the use of fables for children for even this secondary purpose, if he had dreamt for a moment they would have had a bad effect on their minds.

Rousseau, with all his knowledge of human character and his power of imagination, had a matter-of-fact vein running through his mind, which led him to entertain the mistaken view that the influence of fables on the juvenile mind was objectionable. Cowper, who was no mean writer of fables himself, with his clear common sense, broad natural instincts, and mother wit – in which Rousseau was lacking – saw the unwisdom of the philosopher's conclusions, and satirized his views in the well-known lines:

'I shall not ask Jean Jacques Rousseau
If birds confabulate or no;

¹⁷ 'Institutes of Oratory,' book i., chap. ix.

'Tis clear that they were always able
To hold discourse, at least in fable;
And e'en the child, who knows no better
Than to interpret by the letter
A story of a cock and bull,
Must have a most uncommon skull.'¹⁸

It is no exaggeration to assert that the effect which fables and their lessons have had on the people is incalculable. They have been read and rehearsed and pondered in all ages, and by thousands whom no other class of literature could attract. The story and its moral (in the Æsopian fable at least) are obvious to the dullest comprehension, and they cling to the memory like the limpet to the rock, and find their application in all the concerns of daily life.

But it is not the illiterate alone that have profited by the fable; all classes have been affected by its lesson. We are all apt scholars when the fable is the schoolmaster. There is no class of the community that has not come under its sway. It has penetrated to the highest stratum of society equally with the humblest, and may be credited with an influence as wide and far-reaching as the sublimest moral treatise which the human intellect has produced.

The epic and the novel (fables of a kind), like some paintings, cover a wide canvas, and the details are not always easily grasped and remembered; but the true fable is a story in miniature which we take in at a glance, and stow away for after use in a small corner of our memory.

We have the 'successful villain' in the fable as sometimes on the stage; and it may be a question whether the tendency of this is not rather to encourage dissimulation in certain ill-constituted minds, than to inculcate virtue. One of Northcote's fables, *The Elephant and the Fox*, will exemplify what we mean.

'A grave and judicious elephant entering into argument with a pert fox, who insisted upon his superior powers of persuasion, which the elephant would not allow, it was at length agreed between them that whichever attracted the most attention from his auditors by his eloquence should be deemed the victor. At a certain appointed time a great assembly of animals attended the trial, and the elephant was allowed to speak first. He with eloquence spoke of the high importance of ever adhering with strictness to justice and to truth; also of the happiness which resulted from controlling the passions, of the dignity of patience, the inhospitable and hateful nature of selfishness, and the odiousness of cruelty and carnage.

'The pert fox, perceiving the audience not to be much amused by the discourse of the elephant, made no ceremony, but interrupted the oration by giving a farcical account of all his mischievous tricks and hairbreadth escapes, the success of his cunning, and his adroit contrivances to extricate himself from harm – all which so delighted the assembly, that the elephant was soon left, in the midst of his wise advice, without a single auditor near him; for they one and all with eagerness thronged to hear the diverting follies and knaveries of the fox, who, of course, was in the end declared the victor.'

It might almost appear that a fable of this kind is an error of judgment, and that it is calculated to do harm rather than good, inasmuch as it exhibits the triumph of duplicity and the defeat of wisdom. True, the author of the fable tries to recover the lost ground in the application, by mildly holding up the fox to reprobation, thus:

'Application: The effect these two orators had on the perceptions of their audience was exactly the reverse one to the other. That of the elephant touched the guilty, like satire, with pain and reproach; even the most innocent was humbled, as none were wholly free from vice, and all felt themselves lowered even in their own opinion, and heard the admonition as an irksome duty, but still with little inclination to undergo the difficult task of amendment. But when the fox began, all was

¹⁸ 'Pairing Time Anticipated.'

joy; the innocent felt all the gratification which proceeds from the consciousness of superiority, and the guilty to find their vices and follies treated only as a jest; for we all have felt how much more pleasure we enjoy laughing at a fool than in being scrutinized by the sage. From this cause it is that farce of the most grotesque and absurd kind is tolerated and received, and not without some degree of relish, even by the good and the wise, as we all want comfort.'

In spite of the application – nay, rather to some extent by reason of it, for the anti-climax is extraordinary in a fable – it may be doubted whether our sympathies are not with the fox rather than with the elephant. We feel that the latter, with all his wisdom and good advice, is somewhat of a bore; whilst the fox, rake and wastrel though he be, has that touch of nature that makes him kin.

Æsop's well-known fable of *The Fox and the Crow* is also an example of the success of the scoundrel, but mark the difference: here there is the obvious reproof of the vain and silly bird, deceived by flattering words, till, in attempting to sing, she drops into the mouth of the fox the savoury morsel she held in her beak! Here our verdict is: 'Served her right!' In Northcote's fable, clever though it is as a narration, this climax is altogether wanting.

It has been suggested that there is a closer natural affinity than at first sight appears between man and the lower animals, and that the recognition of this contact at many points would suggest the idea of conferring the power of speech upon the latter in the fable. In the higher reason and its resultant effects they differ fundamentally; mere animals are wanting discourse of reason, but the purely animal passions of cunning, anger, hatred, and even revenge and love of kind, and the nobler characteristics of faithfulness and gratitude prevail in the dispositions of both. These similarities would strike observers in the pastoral ages of the world with even greater force than in later times.

The ineradicable impression which certain fables have made upon the mind through uncounted generations by their self-evident appropriateness and truth, is well exemplified in *The Wolf and the Lamb*; *The Fox and the Grapes*; *The Hare and the Tortoise*; *The Dog and the Shadow*; *The Mountain in Labour*; *The Fox without a Tail*; *The Satyr and the Man*, who blew hot and cold with the same breath, and others. It is safe to assert that nothing in literature has been more quoted than the fables named. We could not afford to lose them; their absence would be a distinct loss – literature and life would be the poorer without them; and, such being the fact, we are justified in holding those writers in esteem who have contributed to the instruction and entertainment of mankind in the fables they have invented.

CHAPTER VI

ÆSOP

'Nature formed but one such man.'

Byron.

'The hungry judges soon the sentence sign.'

Pope.

Æsop is justly regarded as the foremost inventor of fables that the world has seen. He flourished in the sixth century before Christ. Several places, as in the case of Homer, are claimed as his birthplace – Sardis in Lydia, Ammorius, the island of Samos, and Mesembra, a city of Thrace; but the weight of authority is in favour of Cotiæum, a city of Phrygia in the Lesser Asia,¹⁹ hence his sobriquet of 'the Phrygian.'

Whether he was a slave from birth is uncertain, but if not, he became such, and served three masters in succession. Demarchus or Caresias of Athens was his first master; the next, Zanthus or Xanthus, a philosopher, of the island of Samos; and the third, Idmon or Jadmon, also of Samos. His faithful service and wisdom so pleased Idmon that he gave Æsop his freedom.

Growing in reputation both as a sage and a wit, he associated with the wisest men of his age. Amongst his contemporaries were the seven sages of Greece: Periander, Thales, Solon, Cleobulus, Chilo, Bias and Pittacus; but he was eventually esteemed wiser than any of them. The humour with which his sage counsels were spiced made these more acceptable (both in his own and later times) than the dull, if weighty, wisdom of his compeers.

He became attached by invitation of Cræsus, the rich King of Lydia, to the court at Sardis, the capital, and continued under the patronage of that monarch for the remainder of his life. Cræsus employed him in various embassies which he carried to a successful issue. The last he undertook was a mission to Delphi to offer sacrifices to Apollo, and to distribute four minæ²⁰ of silver to each citizen. To the character of the Delphians might with justice be applied the saying of a later time: 'The nearer the temple and the farther from God.' Familiarity with the Oracle, as is the case in smaller matters, bred contempt, for the meanness of their lives was due to the circumstance that the offerings of strangers coming to the temple of the god enabled them to live a life of idleness, to the neglect of the cultivation of their lands.

Æsop upbraided them for this conduct, and, scorning to encourage them in their evil habits, instead of distributing amongst them the money which Cræsus had sent, he returned it to Sardis. This, as was natural with persons of their mean character, so inflamed them against him that they conspired to compass his destruction. Accordingly (as the story goes), they hid away amongst his baggage, as he was leaving the city, a golden goblet taken from the temple and consecrated to Apollo. Search being made, and the vessel discovered, the charge of sacrilege was brought against him. His judges pronounced him guilty, and he was sentenced to be precipitated from the rock Hyampia. Immediately before his execution he delivered to his persecutors the fable of *The Eagle and the Beetle*,²¹ by which he warned them that even the weak may procure vengeance against the strong for injuries inflicted.

¹⁹ Suidas.

²⁰ The mina was twelve ounces, or a sum estimated as equal to £3 15s. English.

²¹ See *post*, p. 76.

The warning was unheeded by his murderers. The shameful sentence was carried out, and so Æsop died, according to Eusebius, in the fourth year of the fifty-fourth Olympiad, or 561 years before the Christian era. The fate of poor Æsop was like that of a good many other world-menders!

According to ancient chroniclers, the death of Æsop did not go unavenged. Misfortunes of many kinds overtook the Delphians; pestilence decimated them; such of their lands as they tried to cultivate were rendered barren, with famine as the result, and these miseries continued to afflict them for many years. At length, having consulted the Oracle, they received as answer that which their secret conscience affirmed to be true, that their calamities were due to the death of Æsop, whom they had so unjustly condemned. Thereupon they caused proclamation to be made in all public places throughout the country, offering reparation to any of Æsop's representatives who should appear. The only claimant that responded was a grandson of Idmon, Æsop's former master; and having made such expiation as he demanded, the Delphians were delivered from their troubles.

Not only was Æsop unfortunate in his death: his personal appearance has suffered disparagement. The most trustworthy chroniclers in ancient times describe him as a man of good appearance, and even of a pleasing cast of countenance; whereas in later years he has been portrayed both by writers and in pictures as deformed in body and repellent in features. Stobæus, it is true, who lived in the fifth century A.D., had written disparagingly of 'the air of Æsop's countenance,' representing the fabulist as a man of sour visage, and intractable, but he goes no farther than that.

It is to Maximus Planudes, a Constantinople monk of the fourteenth century, nearly two thousand years after the time of Æsop, that the burlesque of the great fabulist is due. Planudes appears to have collected all the stories regarding Æsop current during the Middle Ages, and strung them together as an authentic history. Through ignorance, or by intention, he also confounded the Oriental fabulist, Locman,²² with Æsop, and clothed the latter in all the admitted deformities of the other. He affirmed him as having been flat-faced, hunch-backed, jolt-headed, blubber-lipped, big-bellied, baker-legged, his body crooked all over, and his complexion of a swarthy hue. Even in recent years, accepting the description of the monk, Æsop has been thus depicted in the frontispiece to his fables. This writer is untrustworthy in other respects, for in his pretended life of the sage he makes him speak of persons who did not exist, and of events that did not occur for eighty to two hundred years after his death.

That the story of Æsop's hideous deformity is untrue is clear from evidence that is on record. Admitted that this evidence is chiefly of a negative kind, it is sufficiently strong to refute the statements of the monk. In the first place, Planudes, as we have seen, is an untrustworthy chronicler in other respects, and an account of Æsop, written after the lapse of two thousand years, could only be worthy of credence issuing from a truthful pen, and based on documentary or other unquestionable evidence. Of such evidence the Constantinople monk had probably none.

Again, it is related that during the years of his slavery Æsop had as mate, or wife, the beautiful Rhodope,²³ also a slave – an unlikely circumstance, assuming him to have been as repulsive in bodily appearance as has been asserted. At all events, any incongruous association of this kind would have been remarked and commented on by earlier writers.

Further, none of Æsop's contemporaries, nor any writers that immediately followed him, make mention of his alleged deformities. On the contrary, the Athenians, about two hundred years after his death, in order to perpetuate his memory and appearance, commissioned the celebrated sculptor Lysippus to produce a statue of Æsop, and this they erected in a prominent position in front of those of

²² Spelt variously Locman, Lôqman, Lokman.

²³ This woman is notorious in history as a courtesan who essayed to compound for her sins by votive offerings to the temple at Delphi. She is also said to have built the Lesser Pyramid out of her accumulated riches, but this is denied by Herodotus, who claims for the structure a more ancient and less discreditable foundation, being the work, as he asserts, of Mycerinus, King of Egypt (Herod., ii. 134).

the seven sages, 'because,' says Phædrus,²⁴ 'their severe manner did not persuade, while the jesting of Æsop pleased and instructed at the same time.' It is improbable that the figure of a man monstrously deformed as Æsop is said to have been would have proved acceptable to the severe taste of the Greek mind. An epigram of Agathia, of which the following is a translation,²⁵

²⁴ Phædrus, Epilogue, book ii.

²⁵ Boothby, Preface, p. xxxiv.

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