

AESOP'S FABLES

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Aesop's Fables by Aesop & Vernon Jones & G. K. Chesterton

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AESOP & VERNON JONES & G. K. CHESTERTON

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A NEW TRANSLATION
BY V. S. VERNON JONES
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY G. K. CHESTERTON
AND ILLUSTRATIONS
BY ARTHUR RACKHAM



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INTRODUCTION

ÆSOP embodies an epigram not uncommon in human history ; his fame is all the more deserved because he never deserved it. The firm foundations of common sense, the shrewd shots at uncommon sense, that characterise all the Fables, belong not him but to humanity. In the earliest human history whatever is authentic is universal : and whatever is universal is anonymous. In such cases there is always some central man who had first the trouble of collecting them, and afterwards the fame of creating them. He had the fame ; and, on the whole, he earned the fame. There must have been something great and human, something of the human future and the human past, in such a man : even if he only used it to rob the past or deceive the future. The story of Arthur may have been really connected with the most fighting Christianity of falling Rome or with the most heathen traditions hidden in the hills of Wales. But the word "Mappe" or "Malory" will always mean King Arthur ; even though we find older and better origins than the Mabinogian ; or write later and worse versions than the "Idylls of the King." The nursery fairy

tales may have come out of Asia with the Indo-European race, now fortunately extinct ; they may have been invented by some fine French lady or gentleman like Perrault : they may possibly even be what they profess to be. But we shall always call the best selection of such tales " Grimm's Tales " : simply because it is the best collection.

The historical *Æsop*, in so far as he was historical, would seem to have been a Phrygian slave, or at least one not to be specially and symbolically adorned with the Phrygian cap of liberty. He lived, if he did live, about the sixth century before Christ, in the time of that Cræsus whose story we love and suspect like everything else in Herodotus. There are also stories of deformity of feature and a ready ribaldry of tongue : stories which (as the celebrated Cardinal said) explain, though they do not excuse, his having been hurled over a high precipice at Delphi. It is for those who read the Fables to judge whether he was really thrown over the cliff for being ugly and offensive, or rather for being highly moral and correct. But there is no kind of doubt that the general legend of him may justly rank him with a race too easily forgotten in our modern comparisons : the race of the great philosophic slaves. *Æsop* may have been a fiction like Uncle Remus : he was also, like Uncle Remus, a fact. It is a fact that slaves in the old world could be worshipped

like *Æsop*, or loved like *Uncle Remus*. It is odd to note that both the great slaves told their best stories about beasts and birds.

But whatever be fairly due to *Æsop*, the human tradition called *Fables* is not due to him. This had gone on long before any sarcastic freedman from *Phrygia* had or had not been flung off a precipice ; this has remained long after. It is to our advantage, indeed, to realise the distinction ; because it makes *Æsop* more obviously effective than any other fabulist. *Grimm's Tales*, glorious as they are, were collected by two German students. And if we find it hard to be certain of a German student, at least we know more about him than we know about a *Phrygian* slave. The truth is, of course, that *Æsop's Fables* are not *Æsop's fables*, any more than *Grimm's Fairy Tales* were ever *Grimm's fairy tales*. But the fable and the fairy tale are things utterly distinct. There are many elements of difference ; but the plainest is plain enough. There can be no good fable with human beings in it. There can be no good fairy tale without them.

Æsop, or *Babrius* (or whatever his name was), understood that, for a fable, all the persons must be impersonal. They must be like abstractions in algebra, or like pieces in chess. The lion must always be stronger than the wolf, just as four

is always double of two. The fox in a fable must move crooked, as the knight in chess must move crooked. The sheep in a fable must march on, as the pawn in chess must march on. The fable must not allow for the crooked captures of the pawn ; it must not allow for what Balzac called " the revolt of a sheep." The fairy tale, on the other hand, absolutely revolves on the pivot of human personality. If no hero were there to fight the dragons, we should not even know that they were dragons. If no adventurer were cast on the undiscovered island—it would remain undiscovered. If the miller's third son does not find the enchanted garden where the seven princesses stand white and frozen—why, then, they will remain white and frozen and enchanted. If there is no personal prince to find the Sleeping Beauty she will simply sleep. Fables repose upon quite the opposite idea ; that everything is itself, and will in any case speak for itself. The wolf will be always wolfish ; the fox will be always foxy. Something of the same sort may have been meant by the animal worship, in which Egyptian and Indian and many other great peoples have combined. Men do not, I think, love beetles or cats or crocodiles with a wholly personal love ; they salute them as expressions of that abstract and anonymous energy in nature which to any one is awful, and to an atheist must be frightful. So in all the