

MISCELLANEOUS.

MR. LEONARD'S FABLES.¹

BY TRAUGOTT BOEHME.

The Æsopian fable had lost its vitality as a full-grown type of literature with the dawn of the modern world. It continued to be taken seriously only in schools and pulpits as a vehicle for morality in educating children and simple folk. La Fontaine, Gay, Gellert, Lessing, and others endeavored to bring the primitive charm of Æsop's fables up to date. They enriched them by the complex social experiences of the age of Louis XIV; they overcharged them with the niceties of enlightened reason; they embellished them with all the polished artistry of language, diction, and meter relished during the rationalistic age of poetry. But they hardly departed from the primary purpose of the Æsopian fable, which had been no other than to teach morality, or rather *mores*, to help the youngsters grasp and mind the rules of good behavior and social wisdom which their elders had inherited in turn from their own forefathers. The Age of Reason was naturally attracted toward a type of poetry that lent it-elf so easily to the task of dealing out a fixed system of ethics in small doses for educational purposes. These fable-tellers had their vogue while the rationalistic standard of ethics remained intact. Nowadays they are forgotten, except for a few masterpieces which survive in readers for the elementary grades.

It is a safe prediction that the fables of *Æsop and Hyssop* will never be reduced to a similar state of literary "living death" in the schoolbooks. Teachers may and will appreciate this version of Æsop as a stimulating revelation of human nature, but it will require boldness on their part to put it into the hands of children. Pervading the entire collection there is a calm but merciless disregard of the conventional moral creeds. Some of the "morals" may appear quite harmless to the unheedful; but how "carefully formulated" they are, is often revealed if they are taken in connection with the preceding tale. Then their real, and mostly "wicked" character comes out. They are either pointed assertions of the profound amorality of man, or ironical illustrations of the futility or hypocrisy of moralistic motivation. This "ethical naturalism" is diametrically opposed to the dogmatic conceit of the rationalistic fable-tellers, but it is not entirely irreconcilable with the spirit of good old practical Æsop. In Mr. Leonard's hands, however, the homely humor of Æsop assumes an intensity, a subtle force which the original never possessed. These fables not merely expose the folly of men's conduct, but also the fallacy of their reasoning about their conduct. But the humor, if tragic, is virile; and there is a note of heroic defiance and the optimism of an ethical freedom.

It is preeminently through this novel method of "formulating the morals" that Mr. Leonard has succeeded in awakening an almost extinct type of literature to a new and vigorous life.

¹ *Æsop and Hyssop, Being Fables Adapted and Original with the Morals Carefully Formulated*, by William Ellery Leonard. Open Court Publishing Co.

In the "Original Fables," more fantastically daring in vision and words than the adaptations, still another new factor is introduced. They are used as instruments of trenchant personal confessions and invectives; a human tragedy of overshadowing magnitude looms up behind the studied playfulness of many of these side-glimpses into a "universe of pain and yelling."

While I have rather lengthily dwelt on the general character and tendency of the fables, I do not underrate their purely artistic qualities. There is a quaint concreteness, a friendly intimacy about the animal world of these fables which I do not recall to have found anywhere else. Those animals and birds and insects and plants are not merely pegs on which to hang a moral; they live and feel and are our brother creatures. This nearness to nature, this home-flavor of things and beings reminds me of Chaucer, who seems to have also been one of the models for the author's management of the language.

The English deserves a more detailed appreciation than I can give here. It is no castrated poet's English. There is a resourcefulness in the choice and order of words, and a versatility in the use of vocabulary and syntax that gives its peculiar atmosphere to each fable, whether it be honest rusticity or learned punctilio. The mother-tongue seems to be teased that she may betray some hidden aspects of her temperament. The fabulist plays tricks with accents and rhymes; he experiments with many meters, from classic distichs to old ballad verse and elaborate Renaissance stanzas; he "dances in chains" and enjoys his triumph over the language doubly under self-imposed severities.

Only a reader equipped with an extensive literary training will be able to recognize the finer values of such work. Mr. Leonard has sacrificed old Æsop's democratic popularity. But to speak of a sacrifice is an injustice to what he has achieved; just as it is unfair to blame Hoffmannsthal for the lack of Sophoclean simplicity and grandeur in his stirring *Elektra*. What Mr. Leonard offers in place of that primitive naïveté is of infinitely higher interest to intellectuals of the twentieth century.

[To illustrate some of Dr. Boehme's points, we wish to quote a few of the fables, though Dr. Boehme himself did not select them.—Ed.]

From "Fables Adapted from Æsop" (pp. 13, 54, and 73):

THE DOG AND HIS IMAGE.

A Dog, who clenched between his teeth a bone,
 Was crossing, as it chanced, a bridge alone,
 Intent upon a thicket where he might
 Unseen indulge his canine appetite:
 When looking down beside the plank he spied
 His image in the water magnified.
 "Another Dog, and a more tempting bone;
 In size," he thinks, "at least two times my own."
 He makes a savage spring with opened jaws
 And loses both the edibles, because:

Moral.

One must acquaint oneself with Nature's laws.

THE TREES AND THE RUSTIC.

A Rustic Fellow to the greenwood went,
 And looked about him. "What is your intent?"
 Inquired the Beech. "A stick of wood that's sound
 To serve as handle for the ax I've found."
 The Trees politely grant a piece of ash;
 Which having fitted, he begins to thrash
 And lay about him stroke by villain stroke;
 And Beech and Ash and Hickory and Oak
 He fells, the noblest of the forest there,
 And leaves a wilderness of stump and weed.

Moral.

Of all concessions unto private greed,
 Ye Forests and ye Waterways, beware.

THE GOAT AND THE GOATHERD.

A Goatherd in a fit of scorn
 Cracked with a stone a Nanny's horn.
 Unskilled to mend with paste or plaster,
 He begged her not to tell his master.
 "You're quite as silly, sir, as violent—
 The horn will speak, though I be silent."

Moral.

Man oft repents of what he did—
 For wicked deeds cannot be hid.

From "Original Fables" (pp. 123 and 146):

THE BEAR AND THE OWL.

A famished Bear, whose foot was clenched
 Within a murderous engine, wrenched
 And bounced about in fright and pain
 Around the tree that held the chain,
 Emitting many a hideous howl.
 His state was noticed by an Owl,
 Who, perched above him fat and free,
 Philosophized from out the tree:
 "Of what avail this fuss and noise?—
 The thing you need, my Bear, is poise."

Moral.

Such counsels are most sage, we know—
 But often how malapropos!

THE ASS AND THE SICK LION.

An Ass mistook the echo of his bray
 For a celestial call to preach and pray;
 And his own shadow, big upon the wall,

He deemed the everlasting Lord of All.
 Besides he had some notions how to treat
 Sinners and fetch them to the mercy seat.
 So in a broad-cloth tailored coat, combined
 With a white collar buttoned up behind,
 He got himself a parish. In his flock
 Was a sick Lion, panting on a rock.
 (It was an arrow from a huntsman's bow
 That laid this miserable Lion low.)
 Him on his pastoral rounds the Reverend Ears
 One morning thus addressed: "These groans and tears,
 How base and craven in the King of Beasts!
 You need a moral tonic! Godless feasts
 And midnight games and evil Lionesses
 Have brought you, brother, to these sad distresses;
 Think not that I will comfort or condole—
 My cure is drastic, but 'twill save your soul."
 Whereat he turned and in the Lion's face
 Planted his hoofs with more of speed than grace,
 Knocked out the teeth, and blinded both the eyes,
 And left him, dying, to the sun and flies.

Moral.

This little fable, children, is a proof
 That no profession, purpose, or disguise
 Can change the action of an Ass's hoof.

"SAVAGE LIFE AND CUSTOM."

To the Editor of The Open Court:

In the articles on "Savage Life and Custom," by Edward Lawrence, that you have published in *The Open Court*, some views are expressed which show that the author's knowledge of the race problems is very piecemeal. If your magazine represents the monistic trend of thought, of which the late Dr. Paul Carus was such an able exponent, such articles should find no place in your magazine unless the peculiar views of the articles are corrected. It was a peculiarity of the late Dr. Carus that he was inclined toward cosmopolitanism, while as the same time he was inclined to be nationalistic. This was a point where I seemed to find inconsistency in Dr. Carus, but I am convinced that if I could have stated my views to him fully, he would not have differed from me. Although Dr. Carus was an incessant student, versed in all departments of knowledge, yet I think he never studied the race problems fully.

The monistic philosophy of life, of which the late Ernst Haeckel was the chief exponent, would be in favor of eliminating and exterminating the lower races, rather than trying to civilize them and to favor their intermixture and consequent amalgamation with the white race. After an elaborate study of the race problems, it is clear to me that to assimilate the savage races is a score or more times as cruel as to eliminate them, since to intermix with and assimilate the lower races involves centuries of evil social conditions in which life