

WINDOW

CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY

■ SPRING 1996



Fabulous Gift

Fr. Carlson's Fable
Collection Comes to C.U.



Radio Station
KOCU Spawned
Legends

Marriage Prep Test
Makes Mark
Across U.S.

Academic Coach
Gross Has Seen
Much Change



Fabulous Gift



17 Years Haunting Bookstores Leads to Donation of Fabled Books to Creighton

By Gregory I. Carlson, S.J.

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This year a delightful form of craziness in my life will yield an unusual gift for Creighton University. The craziness? An unusual form of collecting. The gift? A collection of some 2,400 books along with many other objects all relating somehow to one subject. I am delighted to write something here about both the craziness and the gift.

The madness started about 17 years ago, shortly before I came to Creighton as a faculty member. I always enjoyed used-book stores. I noticed in them that Aesop's fables showed up in many forms.

Something of my upbringing may have sharpened my eye for fables, since my dad ran the toy department in Milwaukee's major department store chain,

Schuster's. In fact, our family still has fun giving and receiving toys. And, as a literary critic, I have always enjoyed stories, particularly brief stories — and so I had worked on Vergil's similes in my doctoral dissertation and Jesus' parables in my theological training. Friends tease me that I have a short attention span! They are right! I would prefer a brief story any day to an argument, an idea or a sermon. I still hope to be a storyteller when I grow up!

For all these reasons, but mostly out of sheer delight, I began to collect the various apparitions of Aesop that I found.

Madness had set in! Only a fellow-collector can know what the craziness is like. Collecting makes a person hungry. For example, travel has become an occasion not just to see museums and monuments and quaint neighborhoods.

It is first of all a chance to find new bookstores and new fable books! Vacation is a time for friends and family, for rest and relaxation — and to find more fable books!

Research for me has become a matter of learning, speaking and writing — about fables, and I could not be happier than when I look forward to next year's sabbatical, when I will write a book about the 100 most important books of fables in English.

A little free time at the end of a day becomes a chance to review a new fable book that I have found and to include it in the catalogue of the collection. The last edition of this catalogue numbered 434 pages. I have found learned societies that are happy to discuss fables, have met fellow collectors who have found their own treasures, know dealers who are happy to watch out for fable books for me, and have friends who are happy to ask for fables in out-of-the-way places.

The result of this collecting craziness is now a gathering of amazing variety, and it is the variety that has me going stronger than ever.

I have found fable books in 24 different languages, including Aztec, Malay, Lithuanian and Urdu. Those in English include two different shorthand systems and two different phonetic alphabets. There are extensive translations—of Tibetan into German, of German into French, of French into Italian, Italian into English, and English into German. I have not yet found the English translated back into Tibetan!

There are books larger than a small child and some miniatures smaller than the palm of your hand.

Ambitious artistic and ponderous scholarly tomes contrast with a set of 82 Thai-English pamphlets

containing one bilingual fable each.

There are pop-up books, comics, coloring books, old readers that have been gnawed on, careful critical texts with variant versions, song books, rebus books, religious books, primers, abc books...

Besides books, I have found all sorts of objects: puppets, games, puzzles, six-sided story blocks, masks, T-shirts, china ware, tiles, statues, carvings, records, tapes, compact disks, playing cards, cigarette cards, greeting cards, postcards, advertisements, menus, posters, bookmarks, calendars, and postage stamps from Greece, Burundi and the Maldiv Islands.

This collection, I have long believed, belongs in a library. This spring the Jesuits are making a gift of this collection to



The Tortoise and the Hare

Creighton's Reinert Alumni Memorial library, so that it will be well cared for and available to students and scholars. The collection will form an ongoing resource for book and illustration exhibits in the library. And I will go on adding to the collection as, in the words of one library friend, the "collection development agent."

At the present rate, the collection grows by about 300 books per year. What could be more fun than finding more great fable books?

There was probably a time, perhaps when I first presented a paper on the variety of presentations of Aesop before the American Philological Association in 1982, when I thought I could get close to "finding them all."

Now I entertain no such illusions.

The spread of fable editions and artifacts seems to keep growing the more I am able to find! The same is true of the variety of approaches these books and artifacts represent. People keep finding new and ingenious ways of coming at the old stories.

As I keep collecting, researching, writing and speaking — for example, for the Nebraska Humanities Council —

the driving force remains the ever-expanding variety. I delight in the way in which each simple story in this tradition can provoke so many different versions, so many different understandings of its meaning, and so many different visual interpretations. It is as though every new writer, teller, editor or illustrator of fables starts with Aesop as inspiration and then does the story his or her own way. Collectively, this vast cast of verbal and visual artists presents a mind-boggling array of understandings of simple but profound human events.

Aesop himself was a little crazy and quite fabulous, according to the stories told about him. He is the opposite of many ancient figures: We know too much about him. A world traveller who rose from the status of slave, he went about telling jokes, proposing riddles and setting traps for the supposedly wise. Small and ugly, potbellied, squash-nosed, hunchbacked and bandylegged, he was consulted by wise men and rulers from around the world before the people of Delphi murdered him. Angered by his pointed stories, they trumped up a charge and threw him from a cliff.

The problem is that the specifics of this colorful history date back no further than the first century A.D. — about six centuries after Aesop.

What we know with more probability but no certainty is that he lived in the early sixth century B.C., that he was a Greek who was a slave, that he was later freed, and that he was known as a maker and teller of prose stories.

Aesop is, of course, not the only fabulist nor the first. The Greeks heard fables first told hundreds of years earlier by the Babylonians and Sumerians. While Aesop himself presumably would not have thought of composing a book of fables, a collection of Aesopic fables in prose was made about 300 B.C. as a catalogue for public speakers who needed concrete illustrations for making rhetorical points. The standard collection of the fables attributed to Aesop in antiquity includes 725 fables. And, of course, many others have written fables like his ever since. My collection numbers contributions from well over 100 fabulists.

What is a fable?

One hint: We easily assume that a fable is an animal story, since many of those we know best include talking animals, for example, "Belling the Cat," "The Crow Who Tried to Borrow Feathers," "The Crow and the Pitcher," "The Donkey in the Lion's Skin," "The Dog in the Manger," "The Dog and His Shadow," "The Fox and the Crow," "The Fox and the Grapes," "The Frogs Wanting a King," "The Fox and the Stork," "The Fox without a Tail," "The Grasshopper and the Ant," "The Lion and the Mouse," "The Tortoise and the Hare" and "The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse."

On investigation, however, the presence of animals is not essential. There are many good fables with only human characters, like that of the boy who cried "Wolf!" or of the

milkmaid who spilled her milk by dancing about the profits with the pail still on her head. A fable is really not tied to any particular content at all: It is rather a specific literary form. A fable is best defined as a short, past-tense narrative that invites perception of a point about how to live life.

Fables have demonstrated an amazing power to invite. Aesop's stories have invited many others. His and other early fables have invited so many varied and such genial retellings of the same stories. Even when a story is told the same way, it invites so many different understandings of its meaning — and it invites so many delightful and incisive illustrations.

As fables have invited me into a wonderful adventure, let me invite you to meet six of the fascinating books I have found and tell you something about how I found them.

1 *SEVEN YEARS AGO*, I was in Denver to witness the marriage of a Creighton alumna whom I had taught.

I had a Saturday morning free before the ceremony and set out to find the local bookstores. One was a neighborhood store that opened late that morning. I did not have much time once it opened. To my question about fables, the owner answered that he thought there was a two-volume set somewhere back in the literature section.



Belling the Cat

I think that by now I can smell a fable book buried in the middle of a shelf! What I found in this case were two copies of the same book, an 1864 French-language edition published in New York to help Americans learn French. The book starts with a description of 50 different animals and ends with a long dictionary. In between are a hundred fables using the animals described and the words listed. Almost all French books of fables that I have come across present not Aesop's original fables, but LaFontaine's delightful reworking of them.

This book by contrast knows nothing of LaFontaine. I treasure the book, though it cost only \$1.50, because it is such a rare American publication and because it makes fables the way to learn another language.

Fables, as part of our common cultural heritage, have been put to so many uses over the centuries. They not only survive; they adapt, and grow, and show up in new and different places!

2 *THE SECOND FIND* brought two of the great treasures of my collection. I am an avid reader of the several histories of fables and fable editions. The latter books always praise an edition done in Tokyo in 1894.

For it the Frenchman Pierre Barboutau had gathered a group of outstanding traditional Japanese artists to illustrate some 28 of LaFontaine's best fables in two volumes. The resulting illustrations are, I knew from the illustrations I had seen, simply exquisite.

The two volumes, limited to 350 numbered copies, are quite rare. I had never had one in my hands. I looked forward to consulting them sometime in a major library.

Four years ago I was invited to teach for a year as a guest professor at Georgetown University. During the time I visited a book fair in Silver Spring. Imagine my surprise when I found Barboutau's two volumes (#249 to be exact) on a bookseller's table there before me! I was like a kid whose security blanket is inside the wash machine: I couldn't walk away!

I do not remember what the asking price was, but I knew I would not go away from that table until we agreed on a fair price.

In fact, we met at \$318.75 a volume! Hard bargaining over a wonderful find! Generally, mine is a champagne collection built on a beer budget. The average book has cost exactly \$12. I have allowed myself a few reaches for really exquisite and rare volumes, and this is one I treasure particularly. In fact, I will highlight it at a lecture I am giving to a special meeting of the Renard Society — an international group of fable scholars — in Tokyo this summer.

3 *AT THE SAME FAIR* I found the heaviest book in my collection. It weighs in at just under 11 pounds!

It happens again to be a volume of LaFontaine, this time illustrated by Gustave Doré, famous for his illustrations of



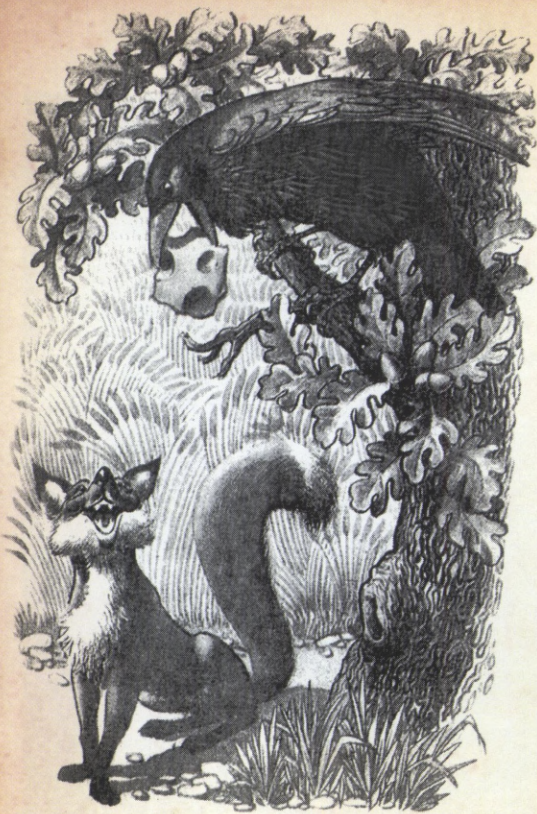
The Lion and the Mouse

things like Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This book may be a first edition; it is certainly an early edition (1868) by the original publisher, Hachette in Paris. Doré has been frequently reprinted, but I found these illustrations jumping off the page — in full size and with the dramatic vigor they deserve.

The book itself was painstakingly rebound by a book-loving dealer in Catskill, N.Y., who soon realized, I think, that I was in love with his work, just as he was. Like many dealers, he was generous with someone who would use the book, take good care of it, and bring it together permanently with other related books.

4 *I DO NOT KNOW* the titles of the next books I want to mention. That is part of the fun about them.

I had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity five years ago to travel with my brother and sister-in-law on a trip to visit our sister and fellow Jesuits of mine in Korea. Along the way, I had astounding luck in finding fable books in Hong Kong and Singapore, and I would go on to find loads of fable books in Seoul. I had expected to find good books in these Asian tigers that have devoted themselves



The Fox and The Crow

booklets in front of him and came out with two booklets featuring a wolf and a crane on one cover and a wolf and a lamb on the other!

One value of my collection came clear when I could identify the source of the illustrations pirated for this inexpensive set, namely a British publication of 1974. In fact a great deal of the fun for me lies in tracking various versions, morals and illustrations through the fable tradition.

5 MY EARLIEST HOLDING is probably from 1619, but may be as early as 1570.

I found it in an old used bookstore in Edinburgh when I was there for a meeting of the Beast Fable Society. A small book (less than 5" by 3") with its cover separated and its title page missing, it contains Greek and Latin in parallel columns with one small woodcut illustration for each fable.

I happened to be able to recognize the book because I had seen a similar version not far away in Dunblane, Scotland, two or three days earlier. By writing back to Dunblane, I found that the book was published in London. On the same trip I found a similar, though not quite so old, volume in Stirling, Scotland, while my beast fable mates were visiting the cathedral.

Here a typical thing for my collecting experience hap-

pened:

The surprise for me came in Bangkok.

I was at the Saturday market with John and Susie. Amid the sellers of chickens, vegetables, fruits, shirts and batteries I found a book dealer.

In the hubbub, I tried shouting "Aesop" at him in as many languages as I could think of. After some puzzling, he dived into a heap of

books and

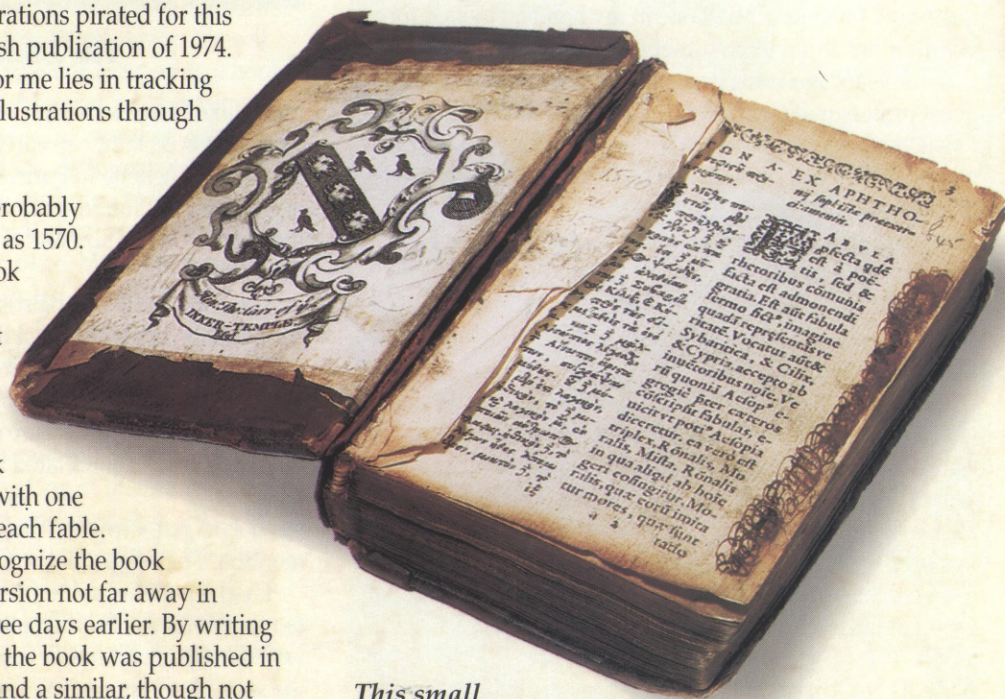
6 EIGHT YEARS AGO, I was lucky enough to be a missionary for three months in Nigeria. Near the end of my stay, I made a car trip with one of my fellow Jesuits.

We went through the old, small town of Ife. Near where we stopped for our picnic lunch, there was what they would call a bookstore but we might roughly call a stationery shop. There was one old pivot rack with some booklets and pamphlets.

On it I found a wonderful pamphlet depicting the fable of *The Miller, His Son, and Their Ass*. Aesop and his fables keep showing up in the unlikeliest places!

Unlike the many other English versions I have found of this fable, this booklet by Oxford University Press tells the story for the non-English parts of the old Commonwealth. Thus the miller has become Ibrahim and his son Ali; their skin is dark and their clothing African. Though this booklet cost me about 25 cents, I treasure it as much as I do more expensive and lavish books.

But that is the way it is with my crazy and fabulous collection. I delight in every member of it, especially for the variety I find when they have come together. I hope readers of *WINDOW* will have a chance to come by and see the collection at Creighton soon! **W**



This small ("less than 5 by 3 inches"), unpretentious book is Fr. Carlson's oldest treasure, possibly exceeding four centuries in age.

Aesop's Fables:

The Fox and the Grapes

*Fox sees grapes. Can't reach them. Fox goes away, saying,
"Those grapes are sour. I wouldn't want them."*

So goes one of Aesop's most familiar fables. "Is this fox wise?" asks Fr. Greg Carlson, S.J., Creighton classics and fables scholar. "Has he turned his disappointment into gain?"

Fables have prodded, guided, amused and instructed us ever since Aesop's time, six centuries before Christ. A later form than mythology and also more specific, fables have their roots firmly planted in folklore, Fr. Carlson believes. And, while myths transcend our everyday world, fables are distinctly of this world, he says.

Often fables deal with animals, but not always. And fables don't necessarily rely on magic, Fr. Carlson says, "except the kind of magic that enables animals to talk."

The Creighton Jesuit believes fables attract us today as "a challenge to open our eyes." When you read the tale of the fox and the stork, "you learn that hurting someone else sets you up to be hurt ... in ways you'd never expect."

Fr. Carlson places fables about mid-way on a continuum of ways we employ to explain our world. It's a line



that stretches from the joke on the one hand to the parable on the other. The joke delivers a punch line based on surprise and incongruity, and so does the fable. "Snap! It opens your eyes," Fr. Carlson suggests.

The parable, on the other hand, not only invites perception; it questions values, with the parable of the Good Samaritan among our most familiar.

Central to a good fable are often the admonitions, "Know thyself, what you want, what you need. Accept who you are," Fr. Carlson says. "If you don't, you're going to get hurt, just like the turtle who wanted to fly ... and wound up in the eagle's mouth."

The world of fable is often a cruel world, to Fr. Carlson's mind. "Fables teach us that, while human beings may be forgiving, the world often is not."

After all, what child can forget the story of the boy who cried "Wolf!" — or miss the haunting message about truthfulness this oft-told tale portrays?

— Pamela Adams Vaughn

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