CHAPTER IV

The Man Behind the Works.

The life and history of Vishnusharma is involved in much obscurity. But about the name of the author of the Panchatantra, there is no discrepancy, every recension agreeing that it was Vishnusharma. But we do not have the details of the life of the author except the meagre information in the introductory part of the work. All that can be said is that he had the most ascetic conception of a teacher's duty shown by his refusal to accept any reward for imparting knowledge, when he says "I will not sell knowledge."

Vishnusharma, the author of the Panchatantra, was a Shaiva-Brahmin; for the suffix "Sharma" comes usually at the end of the names of the Brahmins; the reason for the guess that he was a Shaiva is that he mentions a number of times the god Mahadeva and indeed, the story of Devasharma is nothing but a complete treatise on Shaivism.

Vishnusharma was a master of story telling; it is because of his narrative technique that the work is still read and enjoyed even today. He was a believer in the Karmic theory; most of his fables are only illustrations in defence of it.
The life and history of Aesop is involved in much obscurity. His place of birth is not known. He is described as a blunt, blunt-nosed, ugly and deformed in shape. Sardis, the capital of Lydia, Samos, a Greek island; Mysia, an ancient colony in Thrace; and Cotiaeum, the chief city of a province of Phrygia, contend for the distinction of being the birthplace of Aesop. Xanthus and Jadmon, both inhabitants of Samos, were his masters. He was freed by Jadmon because of his wit, tact, ability and judgement.

Aesop is said to have made Sardis his place of residence about the time of the 52nd Olympiad, 570 B.C. Here Aesop made acquaintance with the learned men of the age. He was so much esteemed by Croesus that the king sent him on ambassadorial missions to a number of places. Once Aesop was sent to the city of Delphi and was entrusted with the duty of offering costly gifts at the shrine of Apollo and of distributing to each citizen a present. But Aesop was provoked at their covetousness that he refused to divide the money and sent it back to his
master. The people became angry at this treatment, and executed him as a public criminal. This cruel death of Aesop did not pass unavenged. The people of Delphi met a number of calamities, until they made a public reparation of their crime. The phrase "The blood of Aesop" became an adage, bearing witness to the truth that deeds of wrong would not pass unavenged. A statue was erected to his memory at Athens. Phaedrus immortalises the event:

Aeso\pe ingentem statuam posuerer Attici,
Servumque collocarunt aeterna in basi:
Patere honoris acirent ut cuncti viam;
Nec generi tribui sed virtuti gloriem."

It will be seen that Vishnualarma and Aesop had a stock of popular animal stories. Vishnularma had wild and young princes to serve. Aesop did not have any such purpose. He converted a public need into an art form. He was never appointed to teach anyone. It was the outcome of his hobby to tell others stories to his friends. The credit of authorship can go to the writers in so far as they gave the raw material of the oral tradition a form.

with a distinct beginning, a middle and an end. They can get the credit for the moral content of wisdom in the animal fable. Much of the moral content of wisdom will inhere in the content of the fable itself, though the witty, sarcastic expression of this moral content should belong to the literary artiste. The animal fable right from the Panchatantra and the Fables of Aesop to the comics of Walt Disney and Hanna Barbera is closely associated with a moral lesson which usually governs its end as a generalisation for which the story is the exemplar.