



Alessandro Casano © 2018

Leonardo 4 Children

Fables of Leonardo da Vinci selected for “Leonardo 4 Children” competitions

The following fables have been selected for the competitions.

1. **Fables about Water**
2. **The Fire and the Water**
3. **The Butterfly and the Candle**
4. **The Candlestick**
5. **The Fire and the Stone**
6. **The Privet and the Blackbird**
7. **The Chestnut and the Fig tree**
8. **The Nut and the Crow**
9. **The Willow and the Magpie bird**
10. **The Razor and the Saw**

1. Fables about Water

a. The Water becomes Vapour

The water finding that its element was the lordly ocean, was seized with a desire to rise above the air, and being encouraged by the element of fire and rising as a very subtle vapour, it seemed as though it were really as thin as air. But having risen very high, it reached the air that was still more rare and cold, where the fire forsook it, and the minute particles, being brought together, united and became heavy; whence its haughtiness deserting it, it betook itself to flight and it fell from the sky, and was drunk up by the dry earth, where, being imprisoned for a long time, it did penance for its sin.

(Forster Codex III 2 r., c. 1493, Londra, South Kensington)

b. The Snow melts

A small patch of snow finding itself clinging to the top of a rock which was lying on the topmost height of a very high mountain and being left to its own imaginings, it began to reflect in this way, saying to itself: "Now, shall not I be thought vain and proud for having placed myself - such a small patch of snow - in so lofty a spot, and for allowing that so large a quantity of snow as I have seen here around me, should take a place lower than mine? Certainly my small dimensions by no means merit this elevation. How easily may I, in proof of my insignificance, experience the same fate as that which the sun brought about yesterday to my companions, who were all, in a few hours, destroyed by the sun. And this happened from their having placed themselves higher than became them. I will flee from the wrath of the sun, and humble myself and find a place befitting my small importance." Thus, flinging itself down, it began to descend, hurrying from its high home on to the other snow; but the more it sought a low place the more its bulk increased, so that when at last its course was ended on a hill, it found itself no less in size than the hill which supported it; and it was the last of the snow which was destroyed that summer by the sun. This is said for those who, humbling themselves, become exalted.

(Atlantic Codex, 67 v.b, Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

c. The Donkey and the Ice

A donkey having gone to sleep on the ice over a deep lake, his heat dissolved the ice and the donkey awoke under water to his great grief, and was forthwith drowned.

(Atlantic Codex, 67 v.b, Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

2. The Fire and the Water

In a dispute with water in a pot, the fire says that water should not stand above fire, which is the king of the elements, and it tries to drive the water from the pot by boiling it. The water, paying the fire the honor of its obedience, descends and drowns the fire.

(Forster Codex III 30 r., c. 1493, London, South Kensington)

3. The Butterfly and the Candle

The vain and wandering butterfly, not content with being able to fly at its ease through the air, overcome by the tempting flame of the candle, decided to fly into it; but its sportive impulse was the cause of a sudden fall, for its delicate wings were burnt in the flame. And the hapless butterfly having dropped, all scorched, at the foot of the candlestick, after much lamentation and repentance, dried the tears from its swimming eyes, and raising its face exclaimed: "O false light, how many must thou have miserably deceived in the past, like me; or if I must indeed see light so near, ought I not to have known the sun from the false glare of dirty tallow? "

(Atlantic Codex, 67 r.a, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

4. The Candlestick

Some flames had already lasted in the furnace of a glass-blower, when they saw a candle approaching in a beautiful and glittering candlestick. With ardent longing they strove to reach it; and one of them, quitting its natural course, writhed up to an unburnt brand on which it fed and passed at the opposite end out by a narrow chink to the candle which was near. It flung itself upon it, and with fierce jealousy and greediness it devoured it, having reduced it almost to death, and, wishing to procure the prolongation of its life, it tried to return to the furnace whence it had come. But in vain, for it was compelled to die, the wood perishing together with the candle, being at last converted, with lamentation and repentance, into foul smoke, while leaving all its sisters in brilliant and enduring life and beauty.

(Atlantic Codex, 67 r.b, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

5. The Fire and the Stone

The flint on being struck by the steel marvelled greatly and said to it in a stern voice, 'What arrogance prompts you to annoy me? Trouble me not, for you have chosen me by mistake; I have never done harm to any one.' To which the steel made the answer, 'If you will be patient you will see what a marvellous result will issue forth from you.' At these words the flint was pacified and patiently endured its martyrdom, and it saw itself give birth to the marvellous element of fire which by its potency became a factor in innumerable things. This is said for those who are dismayed at the outset of their studies, and then set out to gain the mastery over themselves and in patience to apply themselves continuously to these studies, from which one sees result things marvellous to relate.

(Atlantic Codex, 257 v.b, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

6. The Privet and the Blackbird

The privet feeling its tender boughs loaded with young fruit, pricked by the sharp claws and beak of the insolent blackbird, complained to the blackbird with pitious remonstrance entreating her that since she stole its delicious fruits she should not deprive it of the leaves with which it preserved them from the burning rays of the sun, and that she should not divest it of its tender bark by scratching it with her sharp claws. To which the blackbird replied with angry upbraiding: "O, be silent, uncultured shrub! Do you not know that Nature made you produce these fruits for my nourishment; do you not see that you are in the world [only] to serve me as food; do you not know, base creature, that next winter you will be food and prey for the Fire?" To which words the tree listened patiently, and not without tears. After a short time the blackbird was taken in a net and boughs were cut to make a cage, in which to imprison her. Branches were cut, among others from the pliant privet, to serve for the small rods of the cage; and seeing herself to be the cause of the Blackbird's loss of liberty it rejoiced and spoke as follows: "O Blackbird, I am here, and not yet burnt by fire as you said. I shall see you in prison before you see me burnt."

(Atlantic Codex, 67 r.a, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

7. The Chestnut and the Fig tree

The chestnut, seeing a man upon the fig-tree, bending its boughs down and pulling off the ripe fruits, which he put into his open mouth destroying and crushing them with his hard teeth, it tossed its long boughs and with a noisy rustle exclaimed: "O fig! how much less are you protected by nature than I. See how in me my sweet offspring are set in close array; first clothed in soft wrappers over which is the hard but softly lined husk; and not content with taking this care of me, and having given them so strong a shelter, on this she has placed sharp and close-set spines so that the hand of man cannot hurt me." Then the fig-tree and her offspring began to laugh and having laughed she said: "I know man to be of such ingenuity that with rods and stones and stakes flung up among your branches he will bereave you of your fruits; and when they are fallen, he will trample them with his feet or with stones, so that your offspring will come out of their armour, crushed and maimed; while I am touched carefully by their hands, and not like you with sticks and stones."

(Atlantic Codex, 67 r.a, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

8. The Nut and the Crow

A nut, having been carried by a crow to the top of a tall campanile and released by falling into a chink from the mortal grip of its beak, it prayed the wall by the grace bestowed on it by God in allowing it to be so high and thick, and to own such fine bells and of so noble a tone, that it would succor it, and that, as it had not been able to fall under the verdurous boughs of its venerable father and lie in the fat earth covered up by his fallen leaves it would not abandon it; because, finding itself in the beak of the cruel crow, it had there made a vow that if it escaped from her it would end its life in a little hole. At these words the wall, moved to compassion, was content to shelter it in the spot where it had fallen; and after a short time the nut began to split open and put forth roots between the rifts of the stones and push them apart, and to throw out shoots from its hollow shell; and, to be brief, these rose above the building and the twisted roots, growing thicker, began to thrust the walls apart, and tear out the ancient stones from their old places. Then the wall too late and in vain bewailed the cause of its destruction and in a short time, it wrought the ruin of a great part of it.

(Atlantic Codex, 67 r.a, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

9. The Willow and the Magpie bird

The hapless willow, finding that she could not enjoy the pleasure of seeing her slender branches grow or attain to the height she wished, or point to the sky, by reason of the vine and whatever other trees that grew near, but was always maimed and lopped and spoiled, brought all her spirits together and gave and devoted itself entirely to imagination, standing plunged in long meditation and seeking, in all the world of plants, with which of them she might ally herself and which could not need the help of her withes. Having stood for some time in this prolific imagination, with a sudden flash the gourd presented itself to her thoughts and tossing all her branches with extreme delight, it seemed to her that she had found the companion suited to her purpose, because the gourd is more apt to bind others than to need binding; having come to this conclusion she awaited eagerly some friendly bird who should be the mediator of her wishes. Presently seeing near her the magpie she said to him: "O gentle bird! by the memory of the refuge which you found this morning among my branches, when the hungry cruel, and rapacious falcon wanted to devour you, and by that repose which you have always found in me when your wings craved rest, and by the pleasure you have enjoyed among my boughs, when playing with your companions or making love - I entreat you find the gourd and obtain from her some of her seeds, and tell her that those that are born of them I will treat exactly as though they were my own flesh and blood; and in this way use all the words you can think of, which are of the same persuasive purport; though, indeed, since you are a master of language, I need not teach you. And if you will do me this service I shall be happy to have your nest in the fork of my boughs, and all your family without payment of any rent." Then the magpie, having made and confirmed certain new stipulations with the willow, - and principally that she should never admit upon her any snake or polecat, cocked his tail, and put down his head, and flung himself from the bough, throwing his weight upon his wings; and these, beating the fleeting air, now here, now there, bearing about inquisitively, while his tail served as a rudder to steer him, he came to a gourd; then with a handsome bow and a few polite words, he obtained the required seeds, and carried them to the willow, who received him with a cheerful face. And when he had scraped away with his foot a small quantity of the earth near the willow, describing a circle, with his beak he planted the grains, which in a short time began to grow, and by their growth and the branches to take up all the boughs of the willow, while their broad leaves deprived it of the beauty of the sun and sky. And not content with so much evil, the gourds next began, by their rude hold, to drag the ends of the tender shoots down towards the earth, with strange twisting and distortion. Then, being much annoyed, it shook itself in vain to throw off the gourd. After raving for some days in such plans vainly, because the firm union forbade it, seeing the wind come by it commended itself to him. The wind flew hard and opened the old and hollow stem of the willow in two down to the roots, so that it fell into two parts. In vain did it bewail itself recognising that it was born to no good end.

(Atlantic Codex, 67 v.b, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)

10. The Razor and the Saw

The razor having one day come forth from the handle which serves as its sheath and having placed himself in the sun, saw the sun reflected in his body, which filled him with great pride. And turning it over in his thoughts he began to say to himself: "And shall I return again to that shop from which I have just come? Certainly not; such splendid beauty shall not, please God, be turned to such base uses. What folly it would be that could lead me to shave the lathered beards of rustic peasants and perform such menial service! Is this body destined for such work? Certainly not. I will hide myself in some retired spot and there pass my life in tranquil repose." And having thus remained hidden for some months, one day he came out into the air, and issuing from his sheath, saw himself turned to the similitude of a rusty saw while his surface no longer reflected the resplendent sun. With useless repentance he vainly deplored the irreparable mischief saying to himself: "Oh! how far better was it to employ at the barbers my lost edge of such exquisite keenness! Where is that lustrous surface? It has been consumed by this vexatious and unsightly rust." The same thing happens to those minds which instead of exercise give themselves up to sloth. They are like the razor here spoken of, and lose the keenness of their edge, while the rust of ignorance spoils their form.

(Atlantic Codex, 175 v.a, Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana)