

The Mice and the Owl

by Jean de La Fontaine

A pine was by a woodman fell'd,
Which ancient, huge, and hollow tree
An owl had for his palace held--
A bird the Fates had kept in fee,
Interpreter to such as we.
Within the caverns of the pine,
With other tenants of that mine,
Were found full many footless mice,
But well provision'd, fat, and nice.
The bird had bit off all their feet,
And fed them there with heaps of wheat.
That this owl reason'd, who can doubt?
When to the chase he first went out,
And home alive the vermin brought,
Which in his talons he had caught,
The nimble creatures ran away.
Next time, resolved to make them stay,
He cropp'd their legs, and found, with pleasure,
That he could eat them at his leisure;
It were impossible to eat
Them all at once, did health permit.
His foresight, equal to our own,
In furnishing their food was shown.
Now, let Cartesians, if they can,
Pronounce this owl a mere machine.
Could springs originate the plan
Of maiming mice when taken lean,
To fatten for his soup-tureen?
If reason did no service there,
I do not know it anywhere.
Observe the course of argument:
These vermin are no sooner caught than gone:
They must be used as soon, 'tis evident;
But this to all cannot be done.
Hence, while their ribs I lard,
I must from their elopement guard.

But how?--A plan complete!--
I'll clip them of their feet!
Now, find me, in your human schools,
A better use of logic's tools!