

THE STONE-BREAKER

A STORY FOR CHILDREN. FROM THE FRENCH OF QUATRELLES.

[QUATRELLES' real name is Ernest Louis Victor Jules L'Épine. He lives at Paris—a grey old gentleman of sixty-five, who during the greater part of his life has held a post in the French Government, who wears in his button-hole the rosette of the Legion of Honour, and who can do almost anything delightful—whether it be to paint a picture, or to compose a piece of music, or (as in the following example) to tell a charming little story to amuse the children.]



HERE was once, in Japan, in times so far away that the learned hardly now dare speak of them, a poor little stone-breaker who worked on the highways.

He worked on the highways as long as the day lasted, in all weathers, in all seasons, in rain, in the burning sunshine, and in snow. He was always half dead with fatigue and three-quarters dead with hunger; and he was not at all contented with his lot. "Oh! how I would bless heaven," he said, "if one day I became rich enough to sleep far into the morning, to eat when I was hungry, and drink when I was athirst. I am told that there are people so blessed by fate as always to be gay and full of food. Stretched at ease upon thick mats before my door, my back covered with soft silken vestments, I would take my afternoon nap, wakened every quarter of an hour by a servant, who should remind me that I had nothing to do, and that I might sleep without remorse."

A passing angel overheard these words, and smiled.

"Be it according to your wish, poor man!" the angel said. And, suddenly, the



"BEFORE THE DOOR OF A SPLENDID DWELLING."

stone-breaker found himself before the door of a splendid dwelling of his own, stretched at his ease upon a pile of thick mats and dressed in sumptuous garments of silk. He was no longer hungry, no longer thirsty, no longer tired—all of which appeared to him as agreeable as it was surprising.

He had feasted for half an hour on these unknown enjoyments, when the Mikado passed by. The Mikado! It was a great thing to be the Mikado. The Mikado was Emperor of Japan, and the Emperor of Japan was, especially in those far-off times,

the unequalled honour of holding above his master's head a large umbrella fringed all round with tiny jingling bells.

The enriched stone-breaker followed the imperial procession with an eye of envy.

"Much advanced I am!" he said to himself. "Shall I be happy with the few paltry indulgences I am able to give myself? Why am I not the Mikado? I could then traverse the highways in a splendid carriage, in a golden palanquin powdered with precious stones, followed by my prime minister, under the shade of a great um-



"SURROUNDED BY HIS MINISTERS."

the most powerful of all the emperors of the East.

The Mikado was travelling for his pleasure, preceded by couriers, surrounded by cavaliers more embroidered and belaced than the Grand Turk of Turkey, followed by famous warriors, escorted by musicians, accompanied by the most beautiful women in the world, who reclined in howdahs of silver borne on the backs of white elephants.

The Mikado lay upon a bed of down in a palanquin of fine gold, decked with precious stones. His prime minister had

brella fringed with jingling bells, while my second minister refreshed my visage with the waving of a fan of peacocks' feathers. Ah, I wish I were the Mikado!"

"Be as you wish to be!" said the angel.

And instantly he found himself stretched on the down bed of the golden palanquin powdered with precious stones, surrounded by his ministers, his warriors, his women and his slaves, who said to him, in Japanese:

"Mikado, you are superior to the sun, you are eternal, you are invincible. All that the mind of man can conceive you can execute. Justice itself is subordinate to

your will, and providence waits on your counsels tremblingly."

The stone-breaker said to himself:

"Very good! these people know my value."



"THE LITTLE STONE-BREAKER SPARKLED IN THE HEAVENS."

The sun, which had been shining very ardently for some days, had parched the country. The road was dusty, and the glare from it fatigued the eyes of the apprentice Mikado, who, addressing his minister, the bearer of the jingling umbrella, said:

"Inform the sun that he is incommoding me. His familiarities displease me. Tell him that the great Emperor of Japan authorises him to retire. Go!"

The prime minister confided to a chamberlain the honour of carrying the jingling umbrella, and went on his mission.

He returned almost instantly, his face expressing the utmost consternation.

"Great Emperor, sovereign of gods and men, it is inconceivable! The sun pretends not to have heard me, and continues to burn up the road!"

"Let him be chastised."

"Certainly! such insolence deserves it;

but how am I to get hold of him to administer his punishment?"

"Am I not the equal of the gods?"

"Assuredly, great Mikado, at least their equal."

"You told me, just now, that nothing is impossible to me. Either you have lied, or you resist me, or you have badly executed my orders; I give you five minutes to extinguish the sun, or ten to have your head chopped off. Go!"

The prime minister departed, and did not return.

The exasperated stone-breaker was purple with anger.

"This is a pretty sort of a dog's business, upon my word, to be emperor, if he has to submit to the familiarities, caprices, and brutalities of a mere circulating star. It is plain that the sun is more powerful than I. I wish I were the sun."

"Be it as you wish!" said the angel.



"NEVER DID SO MUCH RAIN FALL."

And the little stone-breaker sparkled in the highest heavens, radiant, flaming. He took pleasure in scorching trees, withering their leaves, and parching up springs; in

covering with perspiration the august visages of emperors as well as the dusty muzzles of the wayside stone-breakers—his companions of the morning.

But a cloud came between the earth and him, and the cloud said :

“Halt, my dear fellow ; you can't come this way !”

“By the moon, that's too much ! A cloud—a poor little misty, bodiless cloud—calls me familiarly, ‘my dear fellow,’ and bars my way ! Clouds, it is plain, are more powerful than I. If I do not become a cloud, I shall burst with jealousy.”

“Don't burst for so trifling a cause,” said the angel, always on the watch. “Be a cloud, since you prefer to be so.”

Proudly the new cloud planted himself between the earth and the resplendent planet.

Never, in the records of memory, did so much rain fall. The transformed stone-breaker took pleasure in launching rain and hail upon the earth, and that in such a terrible fashion that the uprooted trees found nothing left but mud in which to hold on to the ground. Under his

whatever was above the surface of the waters.

A rock, however, made head against the force of the hurricane. In spite of all, it remained unmoved. On its granite sides the waves broke in frothy showers, the waterspouts sank at its feet, and the thunder made it laugh every time it burst against its unyielding flanks.

“I am at the end of my powers !” said the cloud ; “this rock defies me, masters me, and fills me with envy.”

“Take its place !” said the angel, “and let us see whether, at last, you are satisfied.”

The transformed cloud did not yet feel at his ease. Immovable, inaccessible, insensible to the burning caresses of the sun and to the booming of the thunder, he believed himself to be the master of the world. But at his feet a sharp hammering sound attracted his attention. He stooped and beheld a wretched being covered with rags, thin and bald, as he had been in the time of his deepest poverty, who, with a heavy hammer in his hand, was engaged in chipping off pieces of the granite for



“AT HIS FEET A SHARP HAMMERING SOUND ATTRACTED HIS ATTENTION.”

aquatic reign of several hours, streams became floods, floods became torrents, the seas were confounded with each other, and dreadful waterspouts whirled in every direction, wringing and destroying

the purpose of mending the neighbouring road.

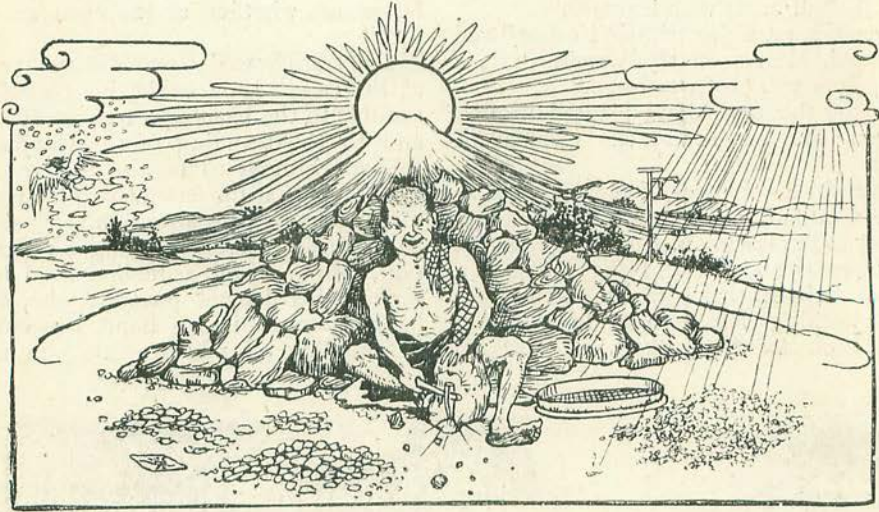
“What is the meaning of this ?” cried the haughty rock ; “a poor wretch—wretched amongst the most wretched—

mutilating me, and I cannot defend myself! I am profoundly humiliated—reduced to envy the lot even of this wretched being!”

“Take his place!” said the angel, smiling.

And the insatiate personage became again what he had been before—a poor little stone-breaker. As in the past, he worked on the

highways as long as day lasted, in all weathers, in all seasons, in rain, in the burning sunshine, and in snow. He was always half dead with hunger, three-quarters dead with fatigue. But that did not prevent his being perfectly contented with his lot.



“PERFECTLY CONTENTED WITH HIS LOT.”