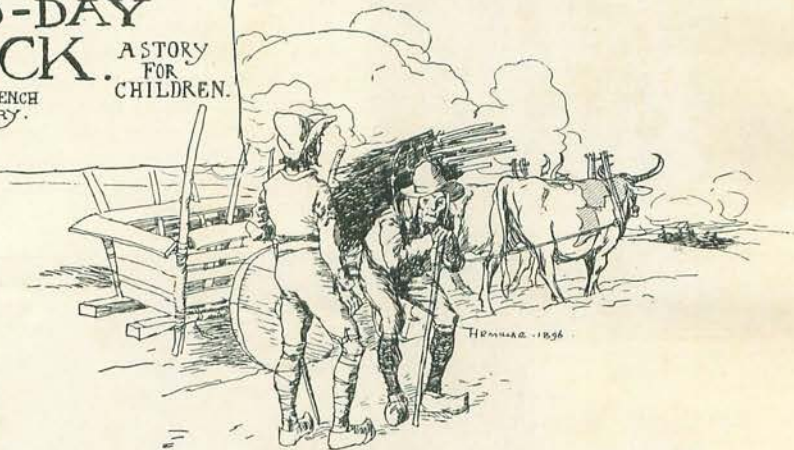


THE
**MID-DAY
 ROCK.** A STORY
 FOR
 CHILDREN.
 FROM THE FRENCH
 OF J. JARRY.



ONCE upon a time there was a poor man, who lived somewhere in the middle of the woods near a place called Gâtines de Treigny. Everybody called him Father Rameau. Not that he had any children—he had not even ever been married; nor that he was very old, for he was barely fifty; but he had always had such a hard time of it that his hair had grown grey very early, and his back had been bent and bowed long before its time.

He was generally to be seen toiling along under a big bundle of brooms, which he made with the greatest skill from young birch branches, selling them on market days to the housewives of Saint-Amand or Saint-Sauveur.

Father Rameau was not ambitious, far from it; if he had been alone in the world, without relations depending on him, he would have been quite content to live on black bread every day of the week, with an occasional glass of wine from the charitable folk of the neighbourhood. But Father Rameau had a younger sister married to a vine-dresser of Perreuse, and he was god-

father to their daughter; she was just growing up into a woman, and was so pretty and modest and intelligent, that everyone had a good word for her, and now she was engaged to be married to a young man called George, a capital worker, but without a penny in the world. The wedding was to take place as soon as she was twenty; and they had given each other engagement-rings, common leaden rings, bought from one of the pedlars who visit the hamlets of the district.

Humble as he was where he himself only was concerned, Father Rameau was proud indeed in matters connected with his niece.

"A leaden ring," he murmured, "when so many other girls, not half as good as my god-daughter, have a gold one! How I wish Madeleine could choose the one she liked best from the jeweller's shop in Saint-Sauveur. Ah, it's not much use wishing. If I put by every penny I could spare for years and years I could never afford it. Madeleine's poor, George is poor, I am poor, and always shall be. Well, we're honest, that's one comfort, and we needn't be jealous, at any rate."

As the old broomseller was thinking all this, he met George, who was driving a pair

of oxen, their nostrils steaming in the first rays of the morning sun. "Good-day, lad," said he.

"Good-day, Father Rameau."

"Off to work already?"

"Yes, father. I'm just going over the master's fields for the last time before seed sowing; we shall begin next week. We're rather behind-hand, you know."

"So you are; October's nearly over."

"Can you guess what I was thinking of as I came along?"

"*What* you were thinking of? You mean *who*," said Father Rameau, rather crossly.

"Well, yes, you're right. Madeleine is never out of my mind," answered George, thoughtfully. "I was saying to myself that if there are plenty of weeds over there" (and he pointed to the uncultivated moor with his goad), "there is good soil as well, and that anyone who had time to clear even a corner of it might buy the girl he was engaged to—"

"A gold ring!"

"How *did* you guess what I meant? You don't come from Chêneau, where all the wizards live," laughed George.

"No witchcraft in that, nephew. The other day I saw how unhappy you were that you could only give Madeleine a leaden

Even at the risk of offending his future uncle, the young labourer could not help smiling.

"That's a task for stronger arms than yours, father," he said. "No one can beat you at cutting birch branches and making them into brooms. But that doesn't need so much muscle as digging up soil like this, pulling up the great roots out of it, or smashing and carrying away huge boulders of rock. Ah, if only I had not given my word to stay with my master till I am married!"

"You may laugh at me, lad, but I won't bear malice," said the old man. "If the old are not so strong as the young, they are more persevering. I shall clear a bit of the moor, and with the money from my first harvest, we will go and buy the ring. Good-bye, lad."

"Good-bye, father; we shall see you doing wonders before long, I know."

"I shall be working for Madeleine," he said, "and your patron saint (George means cultivator of the soil) will help me."

At twelve precisely, Father Rameau came back to the moor with a heavy pick on his shoulder; he meant to set to work without delay.

Bang went the first stroke of the pick,



"HE STOOD SUDDENLY STOCK-STILL."

ring, and I was just as sorry myself that I couldn't buy her a better one . . . and ever since I've been trying to think of a way . . ."

"And have you found one, father?"

"*You've* found it for me, lad. I shall make a clearing of a bit of the moor."

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accompanied with the significant grunt diggers, woodmen, and such folk give over their work. But just as he was raising his arm for another try, he stood suddenly stock-still, with eyes staring wide in a white, terrified face.

From the midst of the boulders scattered about, which were trembling like Celtic monuments, had arisen an apparition, which the old man knew was supernatural and divine, though its form was human.

Imagine a tiny little lady, ethereal rather than thin, youthfully lovely and dainty, a kind of dream beauty, attired in a silvery tunic, embroidered with gorse blossoms. On her head a wreath of heather; in her hand a wand of the broom plant in blossom; all around the holly, ferns, and junipers, all the wild plants and shrubs, were bowing down as if in homage to a Sovereign. A ray of sunlight was playing round her head like an aureole. She was the Fairy of the Moor.

"You are a bold man," she said to the old workman, "to dare thus to encroach on my domains." There was a thrill of anger in her clear voice, and her blue eyes sparkled.

"Lady Fairy," stammered the old man, "be merciful to a wretched labourer who never meant to wrong you. Your domains are so vast, I hoped there would be no harm if I took the liberty of borrowing just a little corner from you."

"What do you want it for?"

"To cultivate it," answered old Rameau, who was beginning to feel less frightened.

"To cultivate it!" cried the fairy. "You mean to dig it up, turn it over, and upset it all round! Do you not see how lovely it is now, and are you so presumptuous as to think you can do better for it than Nature has done already?" Her voice grew softer as she went on: "What could you find anywhere that is as beautiful as this spot in spring-time, when, under a sky of the tenderest blue, the little leaves are beginning to bud on the branches, the tufts of narcissus are opening among the marshes, and everywhere in the woods around the blackbirds are beginning to whistle their first notes, the doves keep up a gentle cooing, and the jays are chattering like parrots?"

"A couple of partridges calling to each other," answered the old man, "a quail uttering its three sonorous cries, or a lark soaring into the sky with its breathless melody, make a pleasanter sound, to my way of thinking. But these are birds that like to build their nests among the corn. They are not found near your kingdom."

"In summer," went on the fairy, "when the moors are flooded with sunshine, and the heat brings out a delicious odour of resin from my favourite shrubs, I love to look on the purple of the heather, and the gold of gorse and broom."

"I prefer the pink-clover with the drowsy bees humming over it," answered the old man, "and the ripening harvest, yellow like your beautiful hair, Lady Fairy."

Fairy as she was, the queen of the moors was not displeased at the compliment. Father Rameau saw this from her face, and said to himself his cause was half won.

"In autumn," she retorted, though, "even here, there comes to me out of the depths of the thickets near, the baying of the pack when the hunt is out, and often they traverse my domains to get from one part of the forest to another. The poor, hunted stag, whose tongue is hanging out of his mouth with weariness, makes for this very heap of rocks sometimes; then I help him to elude his cruel foes and to get away safely."

"Yes," said the old man, as if he liked this idea, "the dogs get their noses pricked on the thorn-bushes and lose trace of their prey. That is indeed a kind action. I, too, like to put the pack on a wrong scent. The stags are such dear things, with their soft brown eyes. Those in this neighbourhood know me, and when I sit down to make my brooms right in the middle of a copse, as I do sometimes, they come quite close up to me. If only there were wheat growing on your moor, you would be able to protect the hares, too, for they would then take refuge in the shelter of your park."

"But when you have pulled up my holly and junipers, and broom-bushes, how shall I be able to make fires for the long winter evenings? I shall die, pierced by the cruel breath of the keen north wind, and be buried under a shroud of white snow."

"Oh, gracious fay, if you fear the cold, will there not always be the place of honour kept for you by our chimney-corner, in the little home I mean to build on the moor? You will come and get warm whenever you like by our fireside. My god-daughter, Madeleine, will keep you company, and some day, perhaps, I shall entreat you to be god-mother to her first baby."

Thus Father Rameau had his answer ready for all her objections. These last words of his touched the fairy, and the expression of her face became very soft and kind. "I know Madeleine well," she said; "I know how fair she is to see, in her snowy white caps. I know how her goodness is spoken of far and wide; and I have even heard that she is to marry that hard-working lad I saw talking with you this morning. They will be a charming pair, and their home will be a delightful place. And you, dear old man,



"FATHER RAMEAU CLEARS THE PATCH."

who have no ambition for yourself, but only care for your dear ones, you will have your reward for your cheerful faith in the future. Take up your pick and have courage over your digging. I grant you this corner of my domain. The rest I am sure you will respect, for you are not greedy; will the others who come after you spare it, too? Alas, when once the moor has been cleared all over and cultivated, I shall have to die! But we will only think of the happiness of your young folk; and, silence! not a word of all this to anyone!"

And with a finger on her lips, she vanished.

By the end of October Father Rameau had dug over, cleared, and prepared two acres of ground. All by himself? With his pickaxe and spade? Yes, quite by himself, and with his pickaxe and spade. He had worked as if by magic, for the fairy, always present and always invisible, had endowed him with some of her magic power. She helped him to split the hardest boulders, to haul up the most tenacious roots, to collect in bundles the old tree-stumps and weeds, and every kind of rubbish, and set fire to it, and so make the very first dressing the soil had ever had on it. Will you believe it? By seed-sowing time the ground was ready, and was sown with oats which began to grow in no time, came well through all the frosts, and by the following April was waving

abroad in a luxuriant mass of green. A lark built its nest in it, and every morning nodded its little tufted head at Father Rameau, who was watching over its nest, as if out of gratitude for what he had done.

The harvest was splendid, and fetched a high price.

George could no longer smile at Father Rameau's old arms, and had to confess he had found his master: Father Rameau smiled slyly when he said, "After all, nephew, we shall have a gold ring for Madeleine." But when the time came for getting it, Madeleine would not allow it. "No, father," she said, "you have toiled and moiled this year at your digging; buy a plough: anyone will lend you a plough-horse for a few days, and it won't be nearly such hard work for you."

So when autumn came again, the old man cleared another two acres, and next summer his harvest was twice as big—and so were his profits.

Madeleine still refused the precious ring. "Buy a pair of oxen," she said; "you will be independent then of everyone."

Next year the old man's field was bigger than ever; and Madeleine advised him to use the profit of his harvest for building a little house. Her modest, sensible advice was acted upon every time, and, in fact, when the wedding-day arrived, the gold ring

had still not been bought, and at the marriage ceremony, in the church at Treigny, it was over the old leaden rings of their betrothal that the curé pronounced his blessing. "We have given our hearts to each other," said the young wife; "what do we want with gold rings after that? What do you think, George?"

"I mean to spend the money on a

cottage, surrounded by a circle of bright light, the marvellous godmother, the Fairy of the Moor.

Many tried to follow Father Rameau's example and cultivate a portion of the moor; but very few succeeded, because the fairy could see into the very bottom of their hearts, and would only help the true-hearted, rare folk, alas, in this world. There is much left



Th. R. Millar
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"THE FAIRY OF THE MOOR."

christening robe, then," said Father Rameau, gaily. "Bless me, things'll have to be just so then, if ever they are! If you only knew what kind of a godmother——"

But he stopped short just in time, remembering the fairy's injunction about silence; and Madeleine, whom he had made very inquisitive, could not get another word out of him. She never found out what he meant till her first baby was born, when on the day of the christening, there stepped into the

still to be cleared. And she yet lives on, the little fairy of the silvery tunic embroidered with gorse blossoms, with her crown of heather bells, and her wand a verdant broom branch. But if ever you want to see her, as old Father Rameau did, you must arrive at the Mid-day Rock on the first stroke of twelve, and have a conscience perfectly clear; two conditions which seem easy enough, and which are really very difficult of fulfilment.