

The Flower of the Rock

Once upon a time, there was a soldier named Jean Cate. He was in the garrison at the fort of La Corbière, and, when he wasn't serving, he would climb down the length of the cliff and went fishing on the rocks at the foot of the fort.

One day when he was fishing on his perch without catching anything big, he decided to visit the Grotto of La Corbière, which he had often heard about.

"People pretend," he said, "that fairies live here; I'm curious to see their dwelling place."

He approached the grotto, but, since the sides of the trench were piles of fallen rocks, his footing was insecure, and he fell from a great height onto the rocky surface below. In his fall, he bruised his entire side, and he stayed at the bottom of the trench, not being able to stir, and all alone.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw a young woman beside him, who said, "Ah, my poor Jean Cate, your curiosity has cost you a lot."

"Ah, my good Virgin," responded the soldier, "Is it you who has come to help me?"

"I am not your good Virgin," said the young woman, "but I am a person who wants to rescue you."

"I am a dead man," said Jean Cate, "I am bruised from head to toe."

"If you promise not to tell a soul about what I am going to do, I will heal you."

"Yes, I swear on my life."

The young woman took a bottle out of her pocket, and with the ointment that it contained, she started rubbing Jean Cate everywhere he had been hurt. When she had finished, he found himself cured, and in the same condition as he was in before he fell.

"Now," she told him, "don't let curiosity take you where you have no business."

Jean Cate was convinced that the woman was one of the fairies of the hollow; he asked her, "How can I show my gratitude? You saved my life."

"I ask for nothing, my friend, nothing but silence about what you have seen."

"Can I at least see you again? Tell me your name."

"You will know it later, and you will see me again, but if you tell about what you have seen, you will die."

Jean Cate returned to the fort; he didn't say a word to his colleagues about his adventure, but he always thought of the pretty woman who had cured him; and

every day, while doing his service on the parapets of the fort, he watched the seaside if he didn't have anything else to do.

He didn't see her again, but he often saw other ladies, old like the roads and white like the snow, who did their washing on the rocks of the cliff.

A week afterward, on a day when he wasn't on duty, Jean saw the woman, and he hastened to leave the fort, bringing a pole as if he were going fishing. He arrived beside the grotto, where he saw a set table, covered in a pretty white cloth on which there were cakes, fruit, some wine, and two glasses. Jean Cate advanced toward it happily; the woman sat on a chair and invited the soldier to sit beside her on a second chair.

"Alright, Jean Cate, are you completely cured?"

"Ah, yes madam," he responded.

"I don't want you to call me 'madam.'"

"Would you like it better if I called you 'miss?'"

"Yes, since that's what they call me."

"Is that your name?"

"Yes, because I'm unmarried, but my real name is the Flower of the Rock."

"It's not a bad name for you," responded the soldier.

While they ate, he made eyes at her, and since she seemed to take pleasure in it, he said that, if she wished, he wanted to marry her; but he wanted to know whether she was a normal woman or a fairy.

"People talk a lot," he said, "about fairies that live in the hollow; aren't you one of them?"

"Fairies!" she responded, "Do people believe in fairies in your country?"

"I'll have you know that I'm a nobleman's daughter; if you want to come with me to my family's castle, you will be well-received."

Jean Cate was very happy, and he said, "If I don't get back to the fort, they'll think I'm a deserter; but I want to see it all the same: if her family's not happy with me, I will return. On faith, I will put myself at risk. But," he said, standing up straight and peering into the grotto, "how will I follow you? It's black like a dungeon in the grotto."

"Have I not put balm on your eyes that will illuminate all you see?" responded the Flower of the Rock.

When they had finished eating, an old woman covered in seaweed came to clear the table. Jean Cate and the maiden entered the grotto, and when Jean did, he could see as clear as day; the further they advanced, the larger the grotto became; he saw fields and fenced paths to houses, and before reaching the castle, he passed through more than 10 villages.

Jean Cate said to her, "Where are you taking me, Flower of the Rock?"

"To the castle, my sweet friend."

They reached a large avenue, where there were all different types of trees, and the soldier said, "It seems like a beautiful castle."

At the end of the avenue, Jean Cate saw a pond and some moats that surrounded the walls, and at the door, two guards who looked like they were over a thousand years old kept watch.

They entered the castle, and the maiden's parents received Jean Cate like their own son, but they were so ugly that he was afraid of them; they looked old and had skin like toads, but it was only to scare Jean Cate.

"Are these," he said, "your father and mother?"

"Yes," the maiden replied, laughing; "Don't you think they're good-looking?"

They entered another room and, until they left, the nobleman and his wife suddenly had skin as lovely as their daughter's, so lovely that the soldier didn't recognize them.

They were rich like the Crésus, but they still consented to the marriage, and they held a beautiful wedding for their friends and family.

Jean Cate was very happy to be married to the Flower of the Rock; but he wasn't at peace, because he thought he had been branded a deserter.

He said to himself, "It is widely known that the grotto isn't far from the fort. If they come here, I will be taken."

But he didn't say this to anyone, not even his wife.

A short while after, the Flower of the Rock's parents fell ill, and they saw that the end was near.

The old nobleman called Jean Cate and told him, "Before dying, I'm going to give you something that will be of great use to you. I used to be a warrior, and I am going to give you my sword. Anything you ask in my name and with the sword in hand will be accomplished."

Then, he told his daughter, "Here are the keys to all of my treasures, which you will inherit."

He died a few moments later, and the old woman told her daughter, "I am going to tell you all of my secrets, because I am going to follow your father; here is my ring and a little bottle. Don't ever forget to take it with you, because it heals all wounds, and I know that you are going to follow the army. Bring the ring too, and when you leave the castle, give it to the head of the old servants."

When the Flower of the Rock's parents had been interred, Jean Cate told her, "If you want, we can go back out to the fresh air; it is well known that there is a grotto here; if the soldiers find me here, I will be branded a deserter, and I will be shot."

His wife responded, "They won't come; I have more than you could ever desire here. Why do you want to run off on adventures?"

But Jean Cate wanted to break in his new sword, and his wife finally consented to leave the grotto; they left the castle under the watch of the two very old servants, and they said that if one of them died, the other had to replace him, and that if the couple didn't return, the castle would belong to the servants.

Hence, Jean Cate parted ways with his wife at the grotto's entrance, and he returned to his post at the fort of La Corbière. He believed that he had only been gone for five or six days, but he had been gone for over eighteen months, and when he returned, he was imprisoned. His wife, who was pregnant, went to stay in a house outside of the fort, and her husband kept her from making use of her ring, because more than anything, he wanted to show the power of his sword.

When his commandant saw Jean Cate's sword, he was well aware that it was a different sword than the one Jean Cate had left with.

"What," he told Jean, "You don't have your sword anymore?"

"No, it was stolen from me, but I was able to replace it well."

At the moment when he was going to go before the war council, the enemy showed up, and the commandant said that the imprisoned soldiers should go into battle before the others.

Jean Cate was happy, because he didn't have to wait any longer to use rose from rank to rank, so high that he was the highest-ranking in France, after the king. Some time had passed since they had left the Grotto of La Corbière; Jean Cate's boy was sixteen years old, and a girl who was born later was twelve. The Flower of the Rock told her husband, "I am tired and I feel unwell; I don't want to follow the army anymore.

They retired to Brest, and Jean Cate, who had never told the secret of his sword, gave it to his son, advising him not to reveal its secret to anyone.

The Flower of the Rock fell ill, and, since she sensed that the end was near, she told her daughter, "I'm going to tell you the secret that my mother told me on her deathbed: here are my ring and my little bottle; here are the three keys that open the doors to the treasures you will inherit, which are in my castle. It is hidden underground, and one enters through the Grotto of La Corbière; take good care of the keys, or your fortune will be lost. If you follow your brother to the army, you can cure all wounds with the bottle."

The Flower of the Rock died, and her daughter kept her keys on a string around her neck. She stayed with her father for three or four more years, but then he fell ill.

Jean Cate called for his son and told him, "I am going to die; your sister will follow you and the army everywhere. You have treasures that you don't know of, and your sister has the keys to open them. I am going to give you a letter signed in my blood that will allow you to find your way and retrieve them."

Jean Cate died soon after, and I don't know if his children went to La Corbière to find their treasures or if they are still in the city.

Told in 1880 by Rose Renaud from Saint-Cast, age about 60, wife of Etienne Piron, fisherman. She took this story from Marie Chéhu, widow Jagueu, also from Saint-Cast, age 87.

Paul Sébillot. *Contes de terre et de mer*. Paris: G. Charpentier, 1883.
Translated by Marjorie Stump.