

## THE LAND WHERE NOTHING CHANGED

There was once a land where three rivers flowed. These three rivers were the Usk, the Wye, and the Severn.

Where the three rivers flowed, the land all about grew rich and fertile. People built houses along the riverbanks, until there were so many houses that they formed little villages called hamlets, and then the hamlets grew to become proper villages, with town squares and schools and shops and pubs in them, and then those villages became towns and some of the towns were on their way to becoming cities – places where people could go to seek their fortunes – when, suddenly, one day, the three rivers stopped flowing.

Nobody knew why, but when the three rivers stopped flowing, everything else stopped, too.

The people of the land kept on living, kept on trying to make their ways in the world, but it was different now.

The land had become a land where nothing changed. It was almost as if some kind of spell held everything frozen in time.

Now, if you were lucky enough to be rich, you would be fine – you'd stay rich! But if you were poor, you'd stay poor. If you had land, and wealth, you kept it for yourself. If you had nothing, your pockets stayed empty. Of course, some people were very happy, because their lives were comfortable and they had enough food to fill their bellies, and warm houses, and plenty of money. But other people were sad, and sick, but nothing ever changed for them, no matter how hard they worked or tried to change their fortunes.

And time passed.

And, slowly, the people of the land forgot that things had ever been different, that there had been three rivers that had flowed through the land, bringing the hope of change with them.

In this land where nothing changed lived a boy. This boy's name was Jack. Jack knew more about fortunes than anyone else. That's because Jack was one of the best card players in the whole of the land. Jack made his money – not much, but enough – by his cards. He travelled about, usually going to pubs and village squares. But he wanted more. He wanted big things. He wanted to change the course of his life, and – in this land where nothing changed – he was frustrated. Still, Jack felt he might, one day, be lucky enough to change his fortune. He was a hopeful lad.

One night, Jack was holed up in a pub in the middle of nowhere, wind and rain pelting outside, waiting to see who'd walk through the door, who he could charm to play a few games, when over the threshold of the pub stepped the Green Man.

"Well, hello there," said Jack to the Green Man. "Do you feel lucky tonight? How about we have a game?"

If Jack had known who the Green Man was, he would not have spoken to him like that. The Green Man smiled a green smile with a touch of the wild about it and sat down opposite Jack.

"Excellent," said Jack, and he began to deal.

The Green Man placed coins on the table to begin the bet, more coins than Jack had ever seen before in his life. Jack's eyes got very big.

"I see," he said.

Jack and the Green Man played a game of cards. Jack won. Excitedly, he put the gold in his pocket.

“Again,” said the Green Man, and put even more money on the table.

“If you’re sure,” said Jack, who felt that luck was on his side.

They played again. Again, Jack won. His pockets were heavy now. This might be enough gold to change his fortune...but –

“Again,” said the Green Man, “though I have no more money. If you beat me, I shall give you anything you want.”

By now, Jack’s heart was beating very fast.

He dealt the cards. They leapt and spun. He slapped them down. He won.

“I want a castle,” said Jack, as fast as lightning.

“Then you shall have it,” said the Green Man. He laughed. “You fool, Jack. You could have asked for anything, you could have changed your luck. But now you have a castle, and it is empty and useless, and that is that.”

The Green Man got up to go.

“No,” said Jack, “wait. Please. One more game. I want to change my answer.”

Slowly, the Green Man sat. “One more,” he said.

“If I beat you, you must give me anything I want.”

“Agreed. But, if I beat you, *you* must give me anything I want.”

Jack did not think. He’d won three games. This time, he’d ask for something good, something that really would change his luck forever.

He dealt the cards. He slapped them down.

The Green Man won.

“Ah, Jack!” the Green Man said, and his voice was low and rang with the sound of the wind in the deep woods. “You could have changed your luck. But now, you never will. For you bet me anything, and I want *you*, Jack. You have a year and a day to find my Green Castle. If you do not succeed, I will cut off your head.”

And with that, the Green Man left the pub in the middle of nowhere and vanished into the storm.

So, Jack had no choice but to go searching for the Green Man and his Green Castle. This was the beginning of the most important journey of his life.

Jack journeyed through the land where nothing changed. He journeyed as the year wore on around him, as the days became weeks and the weeks became months, and wherever he went – to the hamlets and the villages and the towns – he asked the same question to the people he met:

“Do you know where I can find the Green Man in his Green Castle?”

Jack had always been an optimist. He’d always been a hopeful lad. But as the year passed, and as his time began to run out, even he began to lose hope. All he could think about now, as he walked on and on, searching the skyline for the sight of a green castle, were the words that the Green Man had spoken to him before vanishing into the storm.

“You have a year and a day to find my Green Castle. If you do not succeed, I will cut off your head.”

But I need my head, thought Jack. I’ll never change my fortune with no head.

His fortune was looking more and more dismal every day.

Then, as the year drew towards its close, there was a day when Jack – journeying deeper into the wilderness than he’d ever been before – came upon a small cottage below a mountain. It looked as if it were made from the mountain itself. Its walls were made of large boulders and upon the roof grew moss. Outside the cottage was an ancient, mossy woman, with a wild head of hair and piercing eyes.

Jack went up to the old woman and asked her the same question he'd asked everyone else: "Do you know where I can find the Green Man in his Green Castle?"

"Ooh," she said, "I've no idea, but I should like to find him too. You see I have a bone to pick with him...once upon a time, I was as young as you, younger in fact. My name is Wye, and I was once a river. I flowed through this land, on and on and on, and I was both young and ancient, timeless and powerful, and then one day, that Green Man's magic took hold, and froze me in time, trapped me right here, as I am now. I should like to take him down a peg or two myself, but I have no power as I am now. Without my two sisters, Severn and Usk, and me, flowing through this land, nothing will ever change here. But I will do what I can to help."

From the folds of her mossy dress, Wye drew a trumpet, and she climbed to the roof of her mossy house and blew it. It echoed across the land. Then, Jack heard them. Low and quiet at the first, and then louder and louder – the sound of hundreds of thousands of feet and hundreds of thousands of voices until all the people in the land had gathered there in the valley below the mountain and the mossy-roofed house, and Wye raised her voice and shouted: "QUIET!!!!"

Finally, there was quiet. "This young man is looking for the Green Man in his Green Castle. Do any of you know where he might find him?"

The voices of the crowd rose again and there was much talking and discussion but, finally, the people of the land began to disperse as it was agreed that no, nobody knew where the Green Man's castle could be found.

"Never mind," said Wye, "I shall help you in whatever way I can." She raised her voice once more, this time calling upon the waters of the land, and from them rose a horse, with water streaming from its hooves and a tail made of sea-foam. Jack climbed on its back and Wye handed him a ball of thread. "Throw this ball of thread between his ears and he will take you where you need to go."

So Jack did just that, and the water horse rode on. The land grew steeper and wilder around them. They journeyed through a full day and a full night until Jack had almost lost track of time completely, and finally the water horse skittered to a halt and there in front of them was another small mossy house, even older than the first, and standing before it an old woman, even more ancient than Wye had been. Jack dismounted and approached her, and asked the same question he always asked:

"Do you know where I can find the Green Man in his Green Castle?"

"Ooh," said the old, old woman, "I've no idea, but I should like to find him too. You see I have a bone to pick with him myself. My name is Severn, and I flowed through this land until one day, that Green Man's magic took hold, and trapped me right here. But I will do what I can to help."

Severn took from the folds of her dress a trumpet, and climbed to the roof of her mossy house, and blew it until it echoed around the land, and then Jack heard the growing sound, except that this time it was the sound of hundreds of thousands of paws and claws and tails and scales and there before them in the valley gathered all the animals of the land.

Severn raised her voice: "This young man is looking for the Green Man in his Green Castle. Do any of you know where he might find him?"

The animals raised their voices in a cacophony of yowling and trumpeting and purring and yapping and there was much talking and discussion but, finally, they began to disperse as it was agreed that no, nobody knew where the Green Man's castle could be found.

"Never mind," said Severn, "I shall help you in whatever way I can." She called forth the waters of the land again, and from them another water creature appeared.

“Throw this ball of thread between its ears and it will take you where you need to go.”

So, Jack did, and he rode on. He rode and he rode until day had become night and night had become day and he had quite lost track of time except he knew he had very little of it left before he needed to find the Green Man’s castle. And, finally, his steed skittered to a halt and there he was, this time on a high ridge above a steep cliff-face, in front of an even older, even mossier cottage, and in front of that cottage stood an even older, even mossier woman.

Jack was so very tired by now. “Please,” he said. “Do you know where I can find the Green Man in his Green Castle?”

“Ooh,” said the old, old, *old* woman, “I’ve no idea, but I should like to find him too. You see I have a bone to pick with him myself. My name is Usk, and I flowed through this land until one day, that Green Man’s magic took hold, and trapped me right here. But I will do what I can to help.”

Usk took from the folds of her dress a trumpet, and climbed to the roof of her mossy house, and blew it until it echoed around the land, and then Jack heard another sound, this time the sound of hundreds of thousands of wings beating, and there, below the cliff before them, hanging in the air all about gathered all the birds of the land, from the tiniest robins and thrushes to the red kites and the buzzards.

Usk raised her voice: “This young man is looking for the Green Man in his Green Castle. Do any of you know where he might find him?”

The birds raised their voices in a cacophony of squawking and screeching and singing and trilling and there was much talking and discussion but, finally, they each began to disperse as it was agreed that no, nobody knew where the Green Man’s castle could be found. Jack’s heart sank until Usk said, “Hold on. Somebody’s missing.”

She blew her trumpet again, even louder this time.

A small dot appeared in the sky, getting larger and larger until, finally, it wasn’t a dot any longer, but an eagle.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she panted.

“This young man is looking for the Green Man in his Green Castle. Do you know where he might find him?”

“I do,” said the eagle. “I am a servant of the Green Man, and I guard a golden egg for him. I can take you some of the way to his castle, which is on an island in the centre of a lake. I can take you to the lakeside, but I must leave you there to find your way to the castle alone. Take hold of my talons.”

Jack did just that and, before he knew what was happening, he was jerked up in the sky and was flying in the eagle’s grip, high, high, high above the earth...

As the eagle flew, carrying Jack high above the world, she spoke to Jack.

“The Green Man’s castle lies hidden at the centre of the lake. There is only one way for you to reach it. I shall leave you at the lakeside. You will see three swans fly down and land. These are the Green Man’s three daughters – he has enchanted them so that they have the shape of swans, and only once a day can they shed their feathers and become girls again. Wait for them to do so, then take their feathers and do not return them until they have promised to take you across the lake to their father’s castle.”

Sure enough, below them, a vast green lake appeared, and at its centre swirled a great cloud of mist. The eagle deposited Jack at the lakeside and took off again for the mountains. Jack found a hiding spot and waited. He knew time was running out. This was his last day: the year and a day

were up. If the sun set, his time was over, and he would have failed to find the Green Man's castle and would lose his head.

Just as the sun began to sink below the mountains to the west, three shapes appeared in the sky. Three swans, who flew down to the lakeside and landed. Just as the eagle said, they shed their wings, shaking them off in a great flurry of white feathers, and there, instead of three swans, were three young girls, who ran joyfully into the lake and began to swim. Jack did as the eagle had told him to: he crept forwards and grabbed one of the piles of feathers and returned to his hiding place.

It wasn't long before the girls climbed out of the lake once more and ran to put on their feathers. Two of them donned them and became swans once more, but the third, the youngest of the three, unable to find hers, cast about in increasing desperation. As the waters of the lake grew pink from the light of the setting sun, her two sisters took off and disappeared. As soon as they'd gone, Jack emerged from hiding.

"I have your feathers," he said to the girl, "and I shall return them if you take me to your father's castle."

The girl turned on him, her eyes bright with fury. "How dare you?" she said. "Those are mine. They are a part of me."

Jack's heart sank in his chest as he realised what he was doing.

"You're right," he said. He held out the feathers to her. "I'm sorry. Please, take them."

Her face softened. "Many times my feathers have been stolen by those who seek to find my father's castle. Not once have they been returned when I have asked for them. I shall take you to the green castle. What's more, I shall help you when you get there. You need only ask."

She put her feathers back on, and once again, she was a swan. Jack climbed on her shoulders, and together they flew across the lake until they reached the mist swirling at its centre. Down into the mist they flew, just as the sun was setting on Jack's final day, and below them lay the green castle. The Green Man's daughter left Jack outside the green gate, and flew away, and Jack made his way into the castle. He followed a sound. It was the sound of a blade being sharpened.

There, in the green courtyard of the green castle was the Green Man sharpening his green axe.

When he saw Jack, he was furious. "There's no way you found your way here on your own. One of my daughters must have helped you. Was it my eldest? My second daughter? Or my youngest, Tegwedd, who has always been rebellious? Never mind, you may have saved your neck this time, but you won't get away with it again. I still own you and I have work for you."

Jack had not expected this. His heart sank once more. He'd been thinking so much about finding the green castle that he'd forgotten his bet with the Green Man.

"Three tasks are what I have for you. If you cannot complete them, I shall cut off your head. My green axe is ready and waiting."

"And if I do complete them?" Jack asked, as fast as lightning.

"If you do, well – what do you want?"

Jack knew now that it was not just his own life that hinged on his success. He would not wish for a castle again, nor for his own fortune to be changed. He would wish carefully. There were more important things at stake.

"I want the three rivers to flow once more, and the land to return to how it was before you cast your magic on it."

The Green Man laughed. "You think you can change the world? You will find the tasks I set you to be impossible. But as there is no hope of you succeeding, then I agree to your terms."

And Jack was taken into the green castle to wait for his first task the following day...

So, the Green Man's three impossible tasks had to be completed by Jack before he could be freed, and before he could lift the Green Man's spell on the land. Those tasks are a secret for now, but you can help Jack with one of them by learning this song: