



Walter Crane,
'The Swan Maidens'
(1894).

A Folktale Telling

Ella Leith

Dad tells me a story. It starts with Jack sitting on the hearth, playing cards with his dog.

“How does the dog play cards?”

Dad smiles. “That’s just how the story goes.”

Jack’s mother sends him off to seek his fortune. She offers him a big bannock with a curse or a wee bannock with a blessing. He takes the wee bannock, and he takes the blessing, and off he goes. And the dog puts his paws up on the gate and howls.

I’m sad for the dog.

Off Jack goes to seek his fortune, and it’s hi to the road and it’s ho to the road, and there’s rest for all the birds in the trees, but there’s no rest for poor Jack.

He shares his wee bannock with a robin. And this robin can talk, and it directs him to a house where he can stay for the night. So off Jack goes, and he finds the house, and an old, old woman opens the door, so old she’s rocking backwards and forwards on her two front teeth.

Whatever that means.

Come in, Jack, I’ve been expecting you. And she feeds him a feast, and Jack goes to sleep in a feather bed, and wakes up in a coal shed.

“How did that happen?”

Dad’s eyes flash. “Magic!”

I snuggle into the crook of his arm, and wonder if she knew Jack’s name by magic, too.

So Jack leaves the coal shed, and it’s hi to the road and it’s ho to the road, and there’s rest for all the birds in the trees, but there’s no rest for poor Jack.

He comes to a pub, and inside he sees a group of men playing cards. And one of the men is winning, and he keeps winning until he has a big pile of gold in front of him. Jack looks at the man, and he looks at the gold, and he says to the barman, I’m going to play cards with that man.

And the barman says, you’re a fool. That’s the Green Man of Knowledge. You can’t beat him.

“Does the Green Man of Knowledge have green skin and green hair? Or is he just wearing green?”

Dad cocks his head. “What do you think?”

I think if his skin was green then Dad would have mentioned it as soon as Jack went into the pub. I think he would’ve said: Jack sees a group of men and one of them was green, and also they were playing cards.

"What if I was building suspense?"

Dad won't tell me if the Green Man is actually green or not.

Jack starts playing cards with the Green Man of Knowledge. And at first the Green Man wins some of Jack's money. But then Jack starts to win the Green Man's money, and before long he has the whole pile of gold. Because Jack's been practising with his dog, remember?

I miss the dog.

So the Green Man of Knowledge gets to his feet with a face like thunder. Take your winnings, Jack, but don't you dare follow me. And he walks out of the pub. Jack gathers up all the gold, and he says to the barman, I'm going to follow the Green Man of Knowledge.

"But he's already won!"

Jack goes to the blacksmith, and he says, make me a pair of iron shoes that I can wear to dust. And the blacksmith makes him his iron shoes, and off he goes to follow the Green Man of Knowledge.

"But why? Why does he follow the Green Man of Knowledge?"

Dad doesn't know. "Sometimes, something gets under your skin. Sometimes, you can't just let it go."

I'm beginning to think Jack isn't very sensible.

Anyway, it's hi to the road and it's ho to the road, and there's rest for all the birds in the trees, but there's no rest for poor Jack in his iron shoes.

Then, one day, when his iron shoes have worn to dust, Jack finds himself on the edge of a lake, and there on the other side is the Green Man of Knowledge's castle.

I want to know if the castle's green. Dad doesn't know, but he does know that there's no bridge, and there's no boat. So Jack sits down in the shelter of a tree and wonders what to do.

As he wonders, three young women come down to the water's edge. The first two are beautiful, but the youngest one is the most beautiful of all. They strip off their clothes, and wade into the water, and become swans – two dazzling white, and one inky black.

Swan-maidens! All the best stories have swan-maidens.

And Jack, he sneaks over, and he steals the clothes of the youngest swan-maiden. So when the swans become women again, the elder two put on their clothes and go off on their merry way. But the youngest one looks, and she looks, and she can't find her clothes anywhere.

Jack, she says, can you help me find my clothes?

Everyone seems to know Jack's name.

Jack says, I've got your clothes, and I'll give them to you if you'll carry me across this lake on your back.

On her back! Outrageous.

The young woman pleads with Jack. That's my father's castle, she says, and my father is the Green Man of Knowledge, and if you dare follow him, he'll kill you!

I'm increasingly confident that the Green Man of Knowledge isn't actually green, because Dad hasn't mentioned the daughters being green, and I expect those sorts of things run in the family.

But Jack ignores her pleas. She turns into a swan again, and Jack steps on her back, and she carries him across the lake, and on the other side he gives her clothes back.

I'm not sure I like Jack very much.

Jack, she says, I've tried to warn you, but now that I've carried you here, I'm bound to you forever. I will do my best to help you and to keep you safe from my father.

This seems a bit much, since it's not like Jack even needs to be there, really. But off he goes to the castle, and the Green Man of Knowledge is not very happy to see Jack, oh no, not at all.

But he pretends to be hospitable, and he takes Jack to a fine room with a four-poster bed and a lavish meal, and he tells Jack to rest and prepare for the morning. So Jack sits down on the edge of the four-poster bed, and it dissolves beneath him, and he finds himself in a dark cell on a pile of straw, with stale bread and water.

Ha.

But then he hears a rustling in the corner, and a mouse runs over. Jack, it's me, it's the Green Man of Knowledge's daughter!

She's a mouse-maiden too! Lots of good animals in this story.

Jack, she says, my father is going to set you three impossible tasks, and if you don't succeed, he'll kill you. But I'm going to help you. Tomorrow, he'll tell you to retrieve a ring from the deepest well in the castle. As soon as he goes away, close your eyes, click your fingers, and when you open your eyes, there'll be a ladder of bones in the well.

Bones?! I snuggle closer to Dad.

That ladder will be made of my bones, Jack, so you need to be very, very careful as you climb down. Because if your foot slips and you break *one* bone, you'll be breaking one of *my* bones, and it could be my neck.

So, the next day, the Green Man of Knowledge drops a ring into the deepest well in the castle, and he tells Jack to get the ring back in one hour. And Jack closes his eyes, and he clicks his fingers, and when he opens his eyes, there's a ladder of bones stretching down into the well.

Very carefully, he climbs down the ladder.

And Jack gets to the bottom of the well, and he finds the ring, and he puts it in his pocket, and he begins to climb up the ladder of bones.

But Jack's feeling a bit pleased with himself now, and he stops being careful, and *crack!* I gasp.

Then I am furious. Jack had *one job*. And now he's broken the neck of a swan-and-mouse-maiden who can turn her bones into a ladder. What an idiot.

I'm starting to think Jack isn't a very good hero.

Oh no, Jack says, I've broken her neck!

And he hurries back up to the top of the well. And the ladder of bones turns back into the girl, and she's white with pain. She says, you were lucky, Jack, you only broke my baby finger. I'll wear gloves, so my father won't know I'm helping you.

She's *still* going to help him, even after that!

So Jack gives the ring to the Green Man of Knowledge, and he's not very happy, oh no. But he takes Jack back to the fine room with the four-poster bed, and again Jack finds himself on straw in a cell with stale bread and water, and serve him right.

The next day, the Green Man of Knowledge sets the second impossible task, to clear a forest of ants in just one hour. And the girl appears, and she tells Jack to go to sleep, and when he wakes an hour later there are no ants in the forest at all.

And the Green Man of Knowledge is not very happy, oh no, and Jack's back in the room with the four-poster bed and then back in the dark cell.

The next day the Green Man of Knowledge sets the third impossible task, to build a castle bigger and grander than his own, in just one hour. And the girl appears, and Jack sleeps, and when he wakes up an hour later, before him is the biggest, grandest castle in the world.

And the Green Man of Knowledge is not very happy, oh no, but he has to let Jack go, because Jack's beaten him, because he completed the impossible tasks.

"But he didn't do anything!"

"No, but he still won."

"She did everything!"

"Yes, he only wins because she helped him. This type of story used to be called *The Girl As Helper in the Hero's Flight*, because the girl always helps the hero."

"But why is he the hero? What did he do?"

"Well, he let himself be helped. That's not always easy."

I don't know if that's enough to make him the hero.

The Green Man of Knowledge tells Jack to choose a horse from his stables to ride home. And in the stables, Jack sees two beautiful horses, dazzlingly white, and one little scruffy donkey.

And he thinks to himself, these must be the Green Man of Knowledge's daughters. So he chooses the little donkey. And as they ride away, she says, don't get complacent, Jack. My father and my sisters will come after us.

A swan-mouse-donkey-maiden! She's *definitely* the hero.

So Jack looks over his shoulder, and he sees the Green Man of Knowledge coming after them in a chariot drawn by the two white horses.

And the donkey says, reach into my left ear, Jack, and throw what you find there over your left shoulder; and I hope it will slow my father down.

So Jack reaches into her left ear, and he finds a small grain of dirt, and he throws it over his left shoulder. And behind him he sees a huge range of mountains stretching as far as the eye can reach. And he whoops and he crows, slow down, my dear, no one could cross those mountains and catch us!

But the donkey won't slow down – you don't know my father, Jack, he's the Green Man of Knowledge, he'll be after us yet.

And sure enough, before long Jack looks over his shoulder, and he sees the Green Man of Knowledge coming after them with his chariot and white horses. And the donkey says to him, reach into my left ear, Jack, and throw what you find there over your left shoulder; and I hope it will slow my father down.

So Jack reaches into her left ear, and he finds a drop of water, and he throws it over his left shoulder. And behind him he sees a huge flood stretching as far as the eye can reach, the water roaring and churning in spate. And he whoops and he crows, slow down, my dear, no one could cross that flood and catch us!

But the donkey won't slow down – you don't know my father, Jack, he's the Green Man of Knowledge, he'll be after us yet.

Sure enough, before long Jack looks over his shoulder, and he sees the Green Man of Knowledge riding hard after them with his chariot and horses. And they're getting closer and closer. And the donkey says to him, reach into my left ear, Jack, and throw what you find there over your left shoulder; and I know it will stop my father.

So Jack reaches into her left ear, and he finds a small spark of flame, and he throws it over his left shoulder. And behind him he sees a huge roaring wildfire stretching as far as the eye can reach, and he sees the Green Man of Knowledge and the two white horses burning into ash.

I hide my face in Dad's shirt.

At last the donkey slows down. And she stops, and Jack gets off her, and she turns back into the Green Man of Knowledge's daughter. I've done something terrible, Jack. I've killed my father and my sisters for you, because I love you. I must go away now to atone for what I've done. And she kisses Jack on the lips.

I'll come back to you, Jack, in a year and day. But you mustn't let anyone else kiss you until then. Because if you do, you'll forget all about me.

Jack says, I promise, my love, I won't let anyone kiss me but you.

So they go their separate ways, and it's hi to the road and it's ho to the road, and there's rest for all the birds in the trees, but there's no rest for poor Jack.

When he reaches home, his mother comes running out of the cottage towards him with her arms wide. And Jack yells, don't kiss me, Mother! And she stops in her tracks.

But Jack's dog also comes running towards him.

The dog!

I'd forgotten about the dog.

The dog leaps over the fence, and he jumps on Jack, and he licks him all over his face.

And Jack forgets everything.

"Everything?"

"Yes."

"Even the girl?"

"Everything."

I am quiet.

But Jack's a rich man now from the gold he won, and he courts a girl from his village, and they decide to get married. And the wedding day is set, and I fume silently.

But on the eve of the wedding – as it happens, a year and a day after Jack left the Green Man of Knowledge's daughter – there's a knock at the door. There's a ragged girl standing there, and she asks to see the bridegroom, because she has a trick to show him to celebrate his wedding.

She brings out of her pocket a little wind-up cat and a little wind-up hen, and she puts them on the ground in front of Jack.

And the little wind-up hen says to the little wind-up cat, do you not remember me? I am your one true love.

The little wind-up cat says, no, I don't remember you.

Do you not remember how I carried you over the lake to my father's castle?

No, I don't remember that.

Do you not remember how I completed three impossible tasks for you, and helped you escape on my back?

No, I don't remember that.

Do you not remember how I said I'd return in a year and day, but you mustn't let anyone kiss you until then?

And the wind-up cat doesn't say anything.

And the ragged girl looks Jack right in the eyes. Do you not remember me, Jack? I am your one true love.

Jack says, no, I don't remember you.

Do you not remember how you pulled a speck of dirt and a drop of water from my ear, and mountains and floods appeared behind us?

No, I don't remember that.

Do you not remember, Jack, that I killed my father and my sisters for you?

And Jack doesn't say anything.

The ragged girl says, do you not remember, Jack, how I made myself into a ladder of bones for you, and you slipped on a rung, and you broke my baby finger?

And she pulls off her glove, and she holds up her hand, and Jack sees her crooked baby finger.

Jack says, yes, my love. Yes, I do remember that.

And he walks over to her, and he kisses her, and he marries the Green Man of Knowledge's daughter instead, and they live happily ever after.

Dad sits back.

I sit up.

"That's *it*?"

Dad smiles. "Didn't you like the story?"

"That's all it took? After he forgot about all about her? You can't just magic away forgetting!"

"But that was magic, too."

But that magic made sense. This makes no sense at all.

I splutter out my objections.

"But what about the woman Jack was going to marry? What happens to her?"

"And why was there a wind-up cat and a wind-up hen?"

"And why was he called the Green Man of Knowledge?"

"What was the knowledge?"

Dad's eyes are twinkling.

"That's how it was told to me."

"Well, it's silly.

"The whole story is silly.

"It doesn't make any sense.

"Tell it again."

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Ella Leith