

JACK AND THE GREEN LADY

from Alan Garner's **Book of British Fairy Tales**

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Once long ago and a long time it was. If I were there then, I should not be there now. If I were there then and now, I should have a new story or an old story, or I should have no story at all.

However it was, Jack left home; and in the home, his old mother on a broken box.

He tramped along a dreary muddy road for miles and miles, and at last he took a seat and reconsidered himself, and he shook his head.

"Why did I, a foolish boy, leave my home?" said Jack. "Me, who was determined to see life, because I'd never seen life before! What is my old mother doing now without me?"

He shook his head again, but he plucked up courage, brushed his coat and his cap, and started on tramp once more. "Now, Jack," he said, as he sighed his way along the road, "there's only yourself you've got to talk to." He began to feel tired again, so he rested his weary foot. The night was dark, and bright stars above him, but he could not speak to the stars.

All at once, a clear light stood in front of him, so he glared at it at one side, and with his brain and his heart wondered and plundered what was going to be at the end. "Well, Jack old boy," he said, "cheer up; and now you must take some sleep."

At long last the morning came, and the birds began their bright singing, which lightened Jack a great deal. And the sun was shining so beautiful he could see the rocks and meadows clearly, and a large grey castle on a hill in front of him.

"Jack, my lad," he said, "you do not know what's before you; that castle may be your fortune."

He went on, and soon he sighed again; tired and dreary, hungry and thirsty, he glared at one side on a grey old farmhouse. He ventured to open the gate and knocked at the farm door, and asked the woman there for a drink. The old farmer woman asked him quite snubbily as she handed him the tea, "What is a young man like you doing about the country: have you no work?"

"No, there isn't no work for poor Jack," he said to the old farmer woman.

"Why?" she asked.

“Well,” said Jack, “it’s like a good few of you farmers; you’re a bit superstitious of a man’s stealing what you’ve got. But being as you made such a brag and a boast about it, we’ll begin with you, missis. Is there any work for poor Jack from you?”

“Well, my man,” she said, “only hard work.”

Jack laughed as she stood with her coarse apron at the door. “Give me a chance, missis, to see what I can do.”

“Well!” she said, quite sneery, “What can you do?”

“Excuse me,” said Jack, quite on the laughing side, pulling his cap off so politely, and brushing back his black hair, “I’ll give you an offer of work this instant minute. I’ll chop that big tree for you, missis, into logs for your oven, for a bite to eat.”

“Well,” said the woman, “here’s my chopper.”

Jack smiled to himself and muttered, “She’s a hard piece of brick is that farmer woman.”

He worked away, did Jack, and, feeling very dreary, hungry and thirsty, brought the wood to the door.

“Jack,” she said (quite the thing now), “you’ve done more work than any one of my men has done. Seat yourself down at the table, and eat and drink of the best.”

“Now,” Jack thought to himself, “it’s only the start of a dream fro you, my boy, it’s only the first lesson. But somehow these hard-hearted manly women come soft-hearted at the end.”

After he’d done his food, he sat himself down by the fireside and plundered very deeply about his poor old mother. And he started to make amends very smartly, and asked the woman could he have a wash.

“Of course,” she said, quite cheerful; “it’ll afresh you, Jack.”

And out he went with the bucket and soap, and the farmer woman hurried after him, and delivered him the towel.

“Thank you kindly,” said Jack. “You’ve been like a mother to me, but not exactly like my poor old mammy: she used to cling to me and pray for me more than anybody in the world.”

Well, the woman fetched him a suit next, belonging to one of her sons, and begged him to stay the night. But all he said was, “How far is the next village from here, missis?”

“You don’t mean to say you will walk twenty miles tonight, Jack,” she said. “I want you to stay with me, and I’ll give you good money, and good food. Do you know owt about ploughing?”

“No,” he said, quite stern to the woman. “The best ploughing I ever did is ploughing the hard road. So I’ll stay no longer than tonight, and mind you call me up at six o’clock in the morning.”

The next morning came. He heard the gentle creak on the stairs, and up he jumped on the cheerful side. “Well, Jack,” he said to himself, “you do look a smart, brisk lad now. And you’ll soon make away for your dear hard road.”

He enjoyed his breakfast with the woman, and told her straight he must leave that same morning.

“Poor foolish Jack!” she said, with a jeery laugh. “I suppose you’re thinking of that grey castle. There’s nowt there for you, my boy, nowt whatsoever! The very idea of you going there! Poor foolish lad!”

“Well,” said Jack, “I’m determined to see life; and life I will see.”

So off he went, carrying a little food with him. He shut the gate behind him merrily, and started laughing. “Oh,” he said, “I’m on the hard road again!”

He started a bit of fast walking, for he gave no thought for those twenty miles, and he walked and walked till he saw the castle grinning at him. He sat himself down and he smiled to himself.

“I’ll soon make that castle speak,” he said. “It’s been on my brain long enough.”

He could see the lodge of the castle, but no light in the lodge. However, when he got to the door he saw a light inside, so he smartened himself and gave a knock on the hard knocker. An old grey lady came out to him. She opened the door and gave him a little smile.

“What can you want here, boy?” she said.

“What a different voice she has from that hard brick,” Jack said to himself. And he laughed. “I want to know, mother,” he said out loud, “who lives up at that grey castle.”

“You come in, boy, and I’ll try to explain to you,” she said. “You’re very late. Are you looking for work? I’ve been here these thirty years, and I’ve seen no man like you walking about the land. But there’s no harm in you going up. There’s only an old gentleman there, and he’s deaf.”

“Ah,” said Jack. “Never enter, never will. And I’m going up, mother.”

“Good night, boy,” she said. “Take care of yourself: you’ve got two miles yet to go up to the castle.”

Jack went along through two big iron gates, and made his way to the castle. He went over old humpy, old bumpy, old stones, but he didn’t care for the humpy bumpy stones. He came to the door of the castle: dirty, big lumps of lead on that door, but a beautiful knocker. He knocked at the door.

The door opened, but he saw no one there. He could not understand it. The door closed again. He knocked again. The door opened again. But still he saw no one there.

Jack stepped in then, cheekily. And what stood before him? A little hairy old man.

“What can I do for you?” said the hairy man.

“I want work, sir,” said Jack.

“Ha! ha! ha!” said the hairy man. “Work you want, is it? Come this way. I’ll show you work! Did anyone send you up here?”

“No,” said Jack, quite cheerful.

“You’re brave,” said the hairy man. “There hasn’t been anyone up here for thirty years. Well,” he said, “I’ll see about getting some work for you. When did you eat today?”

“Oh, I don’t feel hungry,” said Jack.

“Well, I do,” said the hairy man. “Come this way. You have not seen the master yet.”

Jack began to shiver. Jack began to stare. And who should sit down at the great dinner table but a big giant! Jack stared and stared.

“Well my brave man,” said the giant, “come to look for work, have you? Ha! Ha! I’ll give you work, if work it is you want!”

Jack began to miss the little hairy man.

“Sit down there,” said the giant.

Jack saw an enormous plate before him.

“You’ve to eat all that!” said the giant. “Remember you haven’t seen your master yet.”

“How many masters must I see?” Jack said to himself. But he ate the plateful of food.

“You’ll want a place to sleep in, won’t you?” said the giant.

“Yes,” said Jack.

“Come here and I’ll show you.”

And there stood Jack’s dear little hairy man. Jack stepped after him into a room and saw a huge bed. “Too big for me,” said Jack to himself.

Then who dropped in but a bigger giant than the first, and one that would have been the mainstay of two giants!

“You’re not sleeping with me?” said Jack.

“No, my man,” said the giant. “That is your bed to yourself.”

“I’ll be glad of a rest,” said Jack. And he pulled his shoes off, and he put his head down on the pillow, and he snored and snored till morning. You would hardly know that it was morning there; it was always so dark.

A ten-pound knock came at the door and shook Jack’s bed from under him.

“Come down to your breakfast, my man, come down!” said the giant.

Poor Jack went down for his breakfast; certainly he did. And he saw the two giants and the little shrimp, the hairy man.

“Jack,” said the first giant, “I want you to do some very hard work today. You’re to go into the green room today. There stands a table before you, my boy, and you’ll have to sleep there for three nights, my boy, and unpick every single bit of rag that’s in that great big rug.”

“I’ll try my best, sir,” said Jack, shivering again. The giant went away and slammed the door on him.

There were only two candles for his work. (He must have had good eyes, too.) So he picked up the rug and started working. At last he began to tremble: he partly knew there was somebody about. And the enormous big giant with his glistening eyes came in.

“Well, Jack,” he said, “have you found anything? Have you seen anything?”

“What do you want me to see or find?” said Jack. “Is there anything in this dark room to find or to see?”

“Seek not for information,” said the big giant, “but get on with your work!” The door went slam, with a fast lock.

Jack began to work again, and he looked towards a big long chest that stood in the darkest corner. He heard a whisper in the chest: “Unpick the rug from the middle, Jack, and your three days’ task will soon be finished. But do not say that you heard anything.”

The big giant came in, shining the room up with his glittering eyes. “You’re doing your work wonderful, Jack,” he said, “but I’m not quite satisfied. You must have seen someone to help you do that rug.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” said Jack.

The giant went out the same way with a slam of the door.

It struck Jack about the old chest that stood in the corner. He stepped up to it and was tempted to undo the lock. The word was spoken: “You can’t undo that lock. Look on the shelf, Jack, and look pretty sharp, and you’ll find the key of the chest.” Jack looked sharp, and found the key.

He unlocked the chest, and the lid opened, and he staggered back. He saw inside the sparkle of a beautiful green dress, and a pale face: a lovely lady. Then she up and spoke to Jack before she lay down again. "Jack," she said, "I have been locked in this chest for the last thirty years." Jack was staggered. "Are you a ghost?" he said.

"No," she said. "I'm human like you are; there's still a bit of life in me. I'm in my wedding dress. You are my brave man, Jack. Those two giants are enchanted, and that little hairy man is my father. And now, Jack, I've told you my secret. So don't hesitate, Jack; close the chest, fasten the lock, and say nothing."

By this time the whole rug was unpicked.

At last bum! bum! bum! the giant came. "Come in!" said Jack.

"My word!" said the giant. "You have worked that cloth beautiful, Jack. You must have found something, or seen someone. There's only one more thing, Jack, you've got to do for me: to go to that pond outside the castle and find two diamond rings."

"Well," said Jack, "that's impossible, sir, to find two diamond rings."

The giant glared at him quite furiously.

Poor Jack went out to the dirty black pond, and he plundered to himself could he find these two diamond rings. He saw a white swan, and he thought to have a chat with this swan, but it reared up at him, and Jack got more frightened of the swan than he was of the two giants.

"Jack," said the swan, "follow me, and I'll show you where are those diamond rings."

Jack followed the swan up to the pond.

"Don't get disheartened, Jack," she said. "I've got those diamond rings for you." And the swan lifted up her bill, and there were the rings she had picked up from the bottom of the pond. "And now, Jack," she said, "go back to that giant, and tell him you've seen no one, and give those two rings into his hands."

Back went Jack, quite cheerful, stepped into the green room, went up to the chest the first thing, and opened the lid, and spoke gently to the lovely green lady. He showed her the rings.

"Jack," she said, "my good lad, give them to that brute, and do not return here again to me. You will find me somewhere else."

Jack went bravely from her, and stepped up to the big giant. "Here you are, brute," he said.

"What!" said the giant. "Those same two diamond rings that caused a lot of bloodshed? Well, Jack, you've fulfilled your work; you've beaten me, Jack. And you've won the grey castle. You'll be poor Jack no longer. Go into the green room, and you shall have your reward."

Jack went into the other room quite happy and proud, and a nice gentleman met him at the door. He was looking for the little hairy man, but he couldn't see him: only this very nice gentleman to keep poor Jack company.

Then he saw the castle all of a light-shine, which he had never seen before. The gentleman danced him into another great room, and he could see the table laid out with chickens and ducks and all sorts of good things, and he was plundering where were the guests. And two young men appeared, shining like the rising sun. He was looking for the two giants, and lo and behold! – these two gentlemen.

Jack was quite excited and quite exhausted. Then who came in after, but a lovely lady in a pale green dress and a green veil. She came up to Jack and said, "Jack, my boy, you have broken our enchantment!" With that, she threw back her green veil, and stood before him, the most handsome young lady in all the land.

Then they all gathered together – the father, the two brothers, and Jack and the lady – without one enemy in the world. And Jack married the lovely lady. And so they lived happy for ever more after.