

THE GREEN CHILDREN

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THE GREEN CHILDREN

England, hot August. It is the twelfth century, time of eclipses and miracles; weak Stephen de Blois is King. On the estate of one of his knights, Sir Richard de Caine, at St. Mary of the Wolfpits in the eastern county of Suffolk, a strange thing is about to happen. . .

Clac straightened his back, braced his aching shoulders, and grunted. Sweat trickled down his face and dripped from the end of his nose. He licked his lips; they tasted of salt.

Clac glanced down the long, straight swaths of corn; then, rubbing the back of his neck between his shoulder blades, he considered the position of the sun. But his stomach was his best clock. He filled his lungs, cupped a huge hand to his mouth, and bellowed 'FOOD'.

The other cottars heard him. One by one they stopped work and mopped their brows; one by one they left their own strips of land and began to walk slowly towards him.

Their scythes gleamed in the midday sun; a very small wind moved over the swaths and whispered warnings to the ears of uncut corn.

'Come on,' called Clac. He sat on the turf balk dividing his strip from the next, waiting impatiently. 'This sun . . . I've had enough of it.'

'So have I,' groaned Grim. He slumped against the balk.

'And so have I,' sighed Swein, collapsing in a heap like a sack of potatoes.

'Come on,' cried Clac, 'you and you and all the rest of you.' He picked up a



flitch with one hand and with the other a gourd of cider. 'I'm for the shade. Shade first, then food. Who'll carry the apples?'

'I will,' said Grim.

So the cottars, nine of them in all, set off across the common land, on which their cattle grazed. They walked towards the Wolfpits—where, in winter, wild creatures roamed—and towards the high, waving elms.

Clac led the way. He always did; he liked leading. And the lord of the manor, Sir Richard de Caine, who had recognised this quality in him, had put him over the other cottars and villeins.

As the tired, hungry men approached the elms, Clac stopped in his tracks. 'Look!'

'What?' said Grim.

'Where?' said Swein.

'Look!' Clac exclaimed again. 'Look! There!' He pointed towards the trees. 'Follow me.' And throwing down the flitch and the gourd, he started to run. He ran and ran until at last he came to the old Wolfpits just beyond the elms.

Panting heavily, the others followed him.

'Look!' insisted Clac, pointing again. 'Look!'

And there, huddling in the hollow of the largest pit, the cottars saw what Clac had seen: two green children. Their skin was green, their hair was green, they wore green clothes. And one was a boy, the other was a girl.

For a moment, nobody moved, nobody spoke. The cottars looked down at the green children and the green children looked up at the cottars.

'Blessed Edmund preserve us!' exclaimed Clac. And he made the sign of the cross.

'And Saint William of Norwich,' muttered Grim. And he crossed himself too.

'Who can they be?' said Swein helplessly.

'Ask them,' said Clac.

Swein laughed nervously.

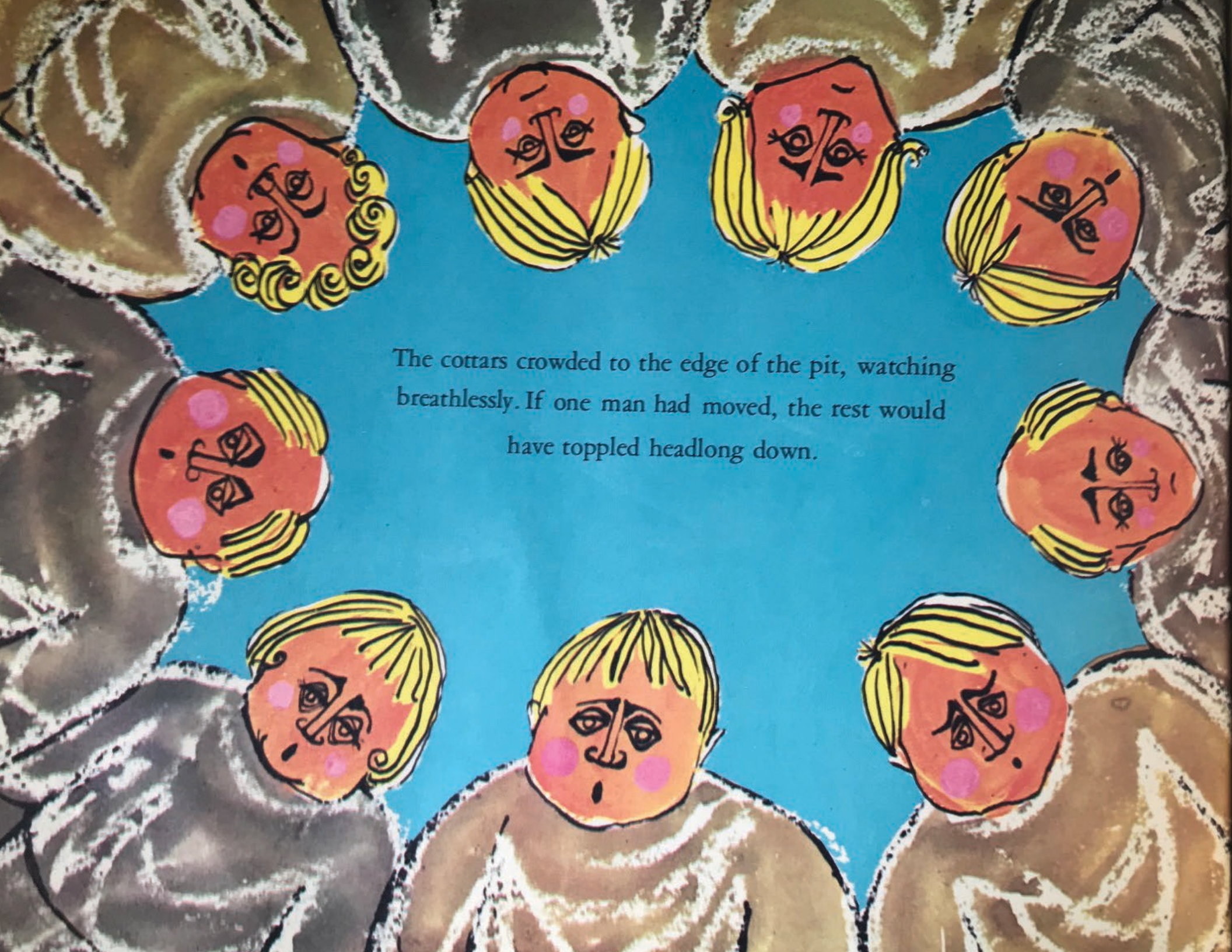
'All right then,' said Clac. 'I will. I'll ask them.' But he was nervous too; the break in his voice betrayed him.

The cottars bunched together anxiously.

'They might be little folk,' Swein warned him.

'Let's leave them alone,' said Thurketil.

'Look at them,' Clac replied. 'Do they look as if they mean harm?'



The cottars crowded to the edge of the pit, watching breathlessly. If one man had moved, the rest would have toppled headlong down.

The boy and the girl were clutching one another, looking up at the nine men fearfully. And then, quite unexpectedly, the green girl buried her face in her hands and began to sob.

‘You see?’ said Clac.

‘All the same, it might be a trick,’ mumbled Grim suspiciously.

Clac took no notice at all. He stepped forward, slid down the grassy bank, and walked towards the children.

The closer he drew, the more astonished he became—so much so that he completely forgot his nervousness. In all his thirty years, he had never seen or even heard of anything like it before: green children . . . a boy and a girl with green cheeks, green fingers, and, poking out of their green sandals, green toes.

‘Hallo!’ said Clac in his gruff, friendly voice. ‘Who are you?’ And he smiled encouragingly.

The children huddled still closer together. They gazed at Clac bewildered, and said nothing.

Clac looked at the children closely. He saw that they resembled each other not only because they were green, but also in the mould of their features. 'You must be brother and sister,' he said.

He was right.

Clac also guessed that the girl was about nine and that the boy was about seven.

'Who are you?' he repeated. 'Where do you come from?'

The children continued to gaze at him silently.

Well, thought Clac. It's clear enough: either they're dumb, or they don't understand me.

At this moment the boy turned to the girl and spoke several strange words.

'That settles it,' said Clac. 'You don't understand me . . . And I can't pretend I understand you.'

The green girl looked at Clac; suddenly, she flashed a smile at him, opened her mouth and pointed at it.

'Blessed Edmund preserve me!' exclaimed Clac. 'She's got a green tongue.' He nodded, and grinned. 'I see,' he said. 'You're hungry.' He turned round, waved reassuringly to the other cottars, then bawled, 'What are you doing up there, you idlers? Get the flitch and bring it down. And bring the cider too.'



In no time, the cottars were pouring down into the pit, bringing the food with them. They swarmed round the children, their superstition at last overcome by curiosity.

'Here! Give me the flich,' said Clac.

Swein passed it to him.

Clac sniffed at it, then showed it to the two children.



They looked at it blankly, turned to each other and shook their heads. Then the girl sniffed it, and wrinkled up her nose in distaste.

'Look at that!' marvelled Clac. 'They've never seen a flich before.' Now it was his turn to shake his head. 'What about the apples, then?' he said. 'Give me two red apples.'

'Here,' said Grim, and passed them over.

The two children looked at them, turned to each other again, and shook their heads a second time.

Clac was dumbfounded. He didn't know what to do . . . but he didn't like to admit it. 'How about that?' he asked. 'How about that? They've never seen apples before.'

Despite their behaviour, it was clear that the two children were famished. Again and again they pointed to their mouths. And once more the green girl began to weep.

'I . . . hm . . . I think we should take them to Sir Richard,' said Clac.

The other cottars nodded in agreement.

'Sir Richard's a traveller,' Clac continued. 'He's travelled far and wide, almost as far as the edges of the earth. Perhaps he's heard of green children.'

So the cottars escorted the green children to the manor of Sir Richard de Caine. And as they walked, they sang, for they were not altogether sorry to miss an afternoon's work under the blazing sun.

The children were dazzled by the bright light. They kept their heads down, and shielded their eyes with their arms.

The fortified manor was surrounded by a moat. Clac strode to the brink, and shouted to the guards on the other side.

The guards conferred, then let the drawbridge down. The little group, with the



children in their midst, walked across and on into the great hall.

'Wait here!' said a guard, his eyes bulging out of his head as he looked at the two children. 'Until Sir Richard comes.'

Inside the hall, out of the sunlight, the children looked about them with great curiosity. They ran to and fro, exclaiming in wonder at the huge stone fireplace, the narrow windowslits, the yellow rushes on the floor. They chattered excitedly, and for a moment even forgot their hunger.

'Green children,' boomed a voice at the entrance to the hall. 'What's all this?' The cottars swung round.

And there, hands on hips, stood Sir Richard de Caine, an enormous, pot-bellied man.

The cottars liked him well. He was a just lord, and a generous one, though his moods were as variable as the weather: one day he was laughing and smiling, the next thundering commands to his frightened servants.

But now he was completely silent. He was staring at the green children open-mouthed.

'Please my lord,' said Clac, stepping forward. And he explained to Sir Richard

how he had discovered the green children at the Wolfpits. 'And they don't speak English,' he said, 'and they won't eat our food.'

From his great height, Sir Richard looked down at the shrinking children. He frowned and he stroked his beard.



Sir Richard liked problems; he enjoyed solving them. But green children, green as grass, who couldn't speak English, who wouldn't eat apples . . . that was another thing altogether.

'So they don't speak English,' echoed Sir Richard after a long pause. 'Ah well! I don't blame them. Perhaps they speak Norman.' He stooped, smiled warmly at the green girl, and began, 'D'où venez-vous?'

The green girl gazed at him blankly. Then she looked at her brother; he shrugged his shoulders, repeated the strange words that Clac had heard in the Wolfpits. Whereupon the girl looked up at Sir Richard, pointed at his pot-belly and opened her mouth.

Sir Richard bellowed with laughter. 'I understand you,' he cried. 'Food's a common language. All right. Sit them down.' Then, walking to the entrance of the hall, he shouted at the top of his voice, 'FOOD, FOOD.'

Clac led the two children over to the trestle table and sat them at the wooden bench.

In no time, a servant bustled in, bearing part of a chicken on a platter; a second followed, carrying a bunch of succulent, black grapes; and a third brought a pitcher of red wine.

'Give them each a wing,' said Sir Richard. 'That'll tempt them. You see if it doesn't.'

But the children pushed the chicken away, indicating that they would not eat it.

'What about the grapes then?' suggested Sir Richard.

The black, succulent grapes were set before them. The girl fingered one and said something to her brother. Then they refused them too.

Sir Richard strode up and down the hall, disconcerted. 'Bring them some cheese, then,' he instructed.

A servant hurried out of the hall, reappeared with a bowl of cream cheese, and placed it on the table.

The two children took one look at it and pushed that away too.

'Well!' exclaimed Sir Richard. 'I don't know. What *will* they eat?'

At this moment, it so happened that an old servant was crossing the far end of the hall. In his arms, he carried a pile of freshly cut beans, still attached to their stalks.

Seeing the beans, the green children cried out with delight. They leapt up from the bench and ran towards the old man who was so startled at the sight of them that he threw down the beans on the spot and ran out of the hall as fast as his old legs could carry him.





The children fell upon the pile and immediately began to tear open the stalks, thinking the beans were in the hollows of them. Finding none, they were utterly dismayed and began to weep dismally once more.

‘Look!’ said Clac. ‘Like this.’ He quickly opened a pod and showed them the naked beans.

And so at last the green children began to eat.

The cottars stood watching them.

‘I see,’ said Sir Richard eventually. ‘I see. Green children, green food.’

After they had eaten their fill, the green children smiled gratefully at Sir Richard de Caine and the cottars.

‘Well! Now what?’ said Sir Richard. ‘What are we going to do with them now?’

This was a question no-one could answer. And as the two children showed no inclination to leave the hall, Sir Richard instructed that they should be allowed to remain at the manor for as long as they desired. He asked his priest, Father John, to teach them English.

And for many, many months the green children ate nothing but beans.



The great fair at Stourbridge came and went. Sir Richard de Caine journeyed there, laden with packs of wool, and returned with Baltic furs, French cloth and lace, and salts and spices from the East.

And all this time the green children stayed at the manor.

Father John took his duties seriously; each day the children had English lessons with him. They both worked hard and made good progress.

And the old priest, a lean, angular man who often declared he loved no-one but God, began to love the green boy and the green girl as if they were his own children.

‘They must be baptised,’ he told Sir Richard one day. ‘They may be green but they still have souls.’

And so the children were baptised. The ceremony was attended by Sir Richard de Caine and by all his household, and by his cottars and villeins.



August grew old; September was born.
High winds wrestled with the sun. Leaves fell, carpeting the earth in copper and bronze and gold. The elms by the Wolfpits looked like skeletons.

Clac and his fellow cottars brought the harvest home and began to prepare for winter. They killed pigs and cattle and fowls, and gave them to their wives who cut them up, and salted them, and stored them away for harder days.

During the cold days of November, the green boy became listless. He refused his beans; he made little progress in his work; he lost interest in playing draughts and spinning tops; and nothing his sister said could cheer him.

Nobody could say what was wrong with him; he ran no fever, sported no spots. And his sister could speak so little English that she was unable to explain . . .
Father John was anxious. He made the green boy eat mugwort and mayweed, crab-apple, thyme and fennel; he sent to Bury for water from the Well of Our Lady; he offered prayers.

It was all to no avail.

One dark day, when the ground was like iron underfoot and the shifting skies were grey, the green boy threw up his hands and died.



Throughout the long hard winter his sister could not be consoled. Often she wept; it was so cold the tears froze on her cheeks.

But at last, as spring threw off winter, she too threw off her grief.
The crocuses flowered.

One evening Sir Richard de Caine and his family, his servants and guards, and all the cottars and villeins who worked on his demesne, gathered in the great hall.



First the company ate. The food was drawn from earth and air and sea. There was crane and swan, peacock and snipe; there was sucking-pig and, out season, venison; there were lampreys, sea-trout and sturgeon. And to wash down this sumptuous fare, there was spiced wine.

After the meal it was customary for the minstrel to sing. The company turned from the tables to face the minstrel and the fire.

'Not tonight,' called Sir Richard. 'We'll not have songs tonight. I've asked you all for a special reason.' He paused and looked round the hall. 'Our guest,' he continued, and smiling turned to the green girl, 'can speak English at last. She has told me who she is, and where she comes from. And now I have asked her to tell her story to you.'

There was a rustle of excitement.

The green girl stood up and walked over to the minstrel's place beside the flickering fire. Her shadow danced on the wall behind her. All at once she smiled, the same alluring smile she had first flashed at Clac in the Wolfpits. Then she began in a strong, clear voice, 'I come from a green country. The people are green, the animals are green, the earth and sky are green. There is nothing that is not green.

'The sun never shines in my country. The light there is a constant green glow, as if the sun were always just below the horizon.'

A puff of woodsmoke filled the room. The listeners coughed, rubbed their smarting eyes, then settled again. They had never heard such a thing in their lives.

'From the hills of our country,' said the girl, 'you can see another, much brighter land—though I have never been there—divided from ours by a broad river.'

'But tell us where your land is,' interrupted Sir Richard, 'and how you got here.'





‘Well! One day my brother and I . . . my poor brother who died of homesickness . . . we were tending sheep on the hills, and they began to stray. We followed them and came to the mouth of a cave, a great cave we’d never seen before. The sheep entered the cave and we walked in after them. And there, ahead of us, we heard the sound of bells: a most beautiful sound; loud bells and soft bells, treble bells and bass bells, ringing, ringing.’

‘And . . .’ Sir Richard said.

‘It seemed,’ said the girl, ‘that the sound came from the far end of the cave. The bells were so beautiful they pulled us towards them. We *had* to find them.’ She paused, remembering the sounds. ‘So we walked through the cave, on and on. At first it was flat; then we began to climb. And the bells rang and rang, tugging us towards them.’

‘The cave was gloomy but not dark; then, suddenly, we saw a bright light some way ahead of us. “That’s where the bells are coming from,” my brother said. So we hurried towards it. It grew and grew, dazzling us. And all at once we climbed up

and out, out of the cave,' said the girl. 'The ringing stopped, the sunlight blinded us.' She clapped her hands to her eyes. 'We were knocked senseless by the sun. We lay in a swoon for a long time . . .'

Everyone in the hall was leaning forward. The fire roared.

'When we recovered our senses, we saw we were in some deep pit. And although we looked for the entrance to the cave, it had completely gone; we couldn't find it again. "What shall we do?" my brother asked me. "I don't know," I said. I felt rather afraid. "But as we can't go back, we'd better go forward." So, very cautiously,



we climbed out of the Wolfpits . . .'

'That's it,' exclaimed Clac excitedly. 'I remember. That's when I saw you.' The green girl smiled.

'"Blessed Edmund, preserve me," I said,' continued Clac. '"Two green children."'

'If you were surprised to see green children,' the girl replied, 'think how astonished we were to see pink men!'

Everyone laughed.

'Not only astonished,' continued the green girl, 'but frightened too. My brother and I backed down into the pit again. But we couldn't find the entrance to the cave; and so you caught us.'

The assembled company sighed, and nodded their heads.

'That's my story,' said the green girl. 'The rest you know. Thank you all for your great kindness to me. I've been very happy here; but if ever I can find the entrance to the cave, I must return home.'

With that, she sat down.

But that was only the beginning. Many were the questions asked of her that night, and long into the night; many were the answers given.



But the years passed and the green girl did not return home. She remained at the manor, for she was quite unable to find the entrance to the cave.

In time she learnt to eat meat, and the fruits of the earth, and even to enjoy them. And slowly her skin lost its green tinge, her hair became fair.





She always said that she was very happy in this world. But often Clac and the cottars saw her wandering down by the Wolfpits, alone. At such times, they never went near her. For they knew that she must be lonely for her own people, and looking for the entrance to the cave.

One spring the green girl married. She left the manor of Sir Richard de Caine and went to live with her husband at Lenna near Kings Lynn. But even then she used to return to the Wolfpits from time to time. Her feet were anchored to this earth, but her heart and mind sailed on to another, far-off land.



How, then, did it end? What became of the girl who climbed up from the green land?

All this happened years and years ago. Eight hundred years ago. Some things live longer than centuries, others do not. We know much about the green girl, but there is much we do not know.

And nobody knows — unless you do — whether the green girl lived on earth to the end of her days; or whether, one day, near the Wolfpits, she simply disappeared.



The story of the Green Children is immensely old. It was first written down seven hundred years ago by Ralph of Coggeshall; and then by the chronicler, William of Newbridge. But for hundreds of years before that, it was passed by word of mouth from grandfather to father to son — and no-one would care to say how, or where, it all began.

William of Newbridge set the story in the reign of King Stephen, and that is where we have set it too. But the idea of little people coming up out of the earth is far older than that. It is age-old; but each age claims it as its own.

GLOSSARY

balk: a ridge.

cottar: a peasant, a cottager who owned an acre or two of his own but had to do a certain amount of work on his lord's land.

demesne: estate, land.

flitch: a 'side' of bacon, salted and cured.

gourd: a drinking bottle made out of the hollowed shell of the Gourd fruit.

mugwort, mayweed, crab-apple, thyme, fennel: different herbs, used as medicines.

swath: a line of reaped corn.

villein: a peasant of lower class than the cottar, obliged to do a large amount of work on his lord's land.