

# THE GREEN MAN

By Chris Johnstone



'I'm sorry, they're not for sale.'

'That's a pity. Y'know, miss, it's so very lifelike.' The American woman put the carved goblin back on the counter among a small throng of smiling, leering, snarling elves and sprites. She pointed, 'Ooh, Bob, look,' and led her husband towards a basket full of stuffed cats and quaint broomsticks.

The doorbell jingled and a draught chased into the shop. Greymalkin, my indolent cat, looked up from his place on a sunny windowsill, twitched an ear and went back to sleep.

'Morning, Sandra.'

Dave picked a path between shelves and barrels towards the counter. He was dressed for cycling, wearing those tight pants that always make me look twice.

I gave him a lazy smile. 'Hello-o-o, taking a group

out to the forest?'

'Yeah, I'll be back this evening.' He leaned across the table and gave me his usual affectionate kiss. 'Just wanted to let you know, Mrs Thomas was asking for you. Poor old dear seems upset about something or other.'

'I'll look in on her tonight,' I said.

'Don't be too late. I'm cooking.'

'Wouldn't miss it.'

We kissed again, long enough to make the American couple pretend not to notice.



Mrs Thomas lived by herself in a plaster and thatched house a little way out of Burley. Stepping out of my car, the forest about Mrs Thomas's place

seemed always thicker, darker, perpetually touched with dusk.

At the door Mrs Thomas peeked out with worried eyes.

‘Come in, come in, I’m so glad you came.’

As she served our usual tea the cup and saucer clattered in her shaking hands.

‘I hope you can help, and please don’t think I’m a silly goose, but I think I have a ghost. I’ve been hearing odd sounds each night, and when I opened the curtains yesterday, this thing with bright eyes and a horrid smile was peering in. Scared me so - I hid under the bed all night.’

I ran a finger over the china teacup.

‘I’ll have a look around, but I can’t promise anything.’



I heard the door lock behind me as I stepped outside. The air was cool and smelled of recent rain. I walked a way into the darkness, just far enough not to be seen. There I crouched down and marked a circle in the soil. I undressed and with eyes closed, barefoot and naked I stood listening, meditating.

When I opened my eyes the earth was aflame. Light seeped out of every living thing. I waited, but not for long. Through the mist of light he came.

‘Good evening,’ I said. He moved closer, his skin the colour of polished birch, eyes like dusk and hair that was a tangle of leaves.

‘Go back to your wilds,’ I said, directly but polite. ‘This is no longer a world for you. You have no worshippers here, no sacred groves. You are forgotten.’

He stepped into the circle without even noticing it.

‘Who are you to wander in my realm?’ His voice was the mingled sound of wind and rushing water and his fingers stroked my cheek. ‘Beautiful creature.’ And his touch feathered my neck and breasts. No other touch I ever knew, or shall ever hope for, held in it such promises.

‘Come away with me. Let me rule you. Be mine and you will become a stranger to sorrow, and death and misery.’

Every inch of my body shivered with pleasure. I

trembled, and my mind reeled under the caress of his words. But then I remembered. I remembered my shop and my good-for-nothing cat. I remembered lovely, comfortable Dave. His secret smile, when he thought I’d said something silly, and how he loved me all the same.

I took a deep breath, and the air mingled with the smell of him, rich and perfumed.

‘No.’

Some people think that magic is in the candles and chants and incense. But those things are tools. If you know yourself and the world and the deeper meaning of things, then magic comes and flows and goes more naturally. The forest spirit realised too late. He tried to move away, but my circle wasn’t for keeping him out - it was for keeping him in.

When the magic faded I stooped down and picked up something small and delicate from the ground.



I was a little late for dinner but Dave didn’t mind.

The next morning I opened my shop. Unwrapping a paper bag I took out a carved figure – naked with a shock of hair like leaves, skin like polished birch, and eyes like dusk. I put it with the others on the counter, and said good morning to my first customers.

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