

THE LITTLE GREEN MAN

(By S.R.Crockett, from *Sweethearts at Home*, 1912)

[Written the Summer we went abroad for the first time.]

It was about then that Hugh John suddenly grew up. He had been threatening it for a long time, but had always put it off. This time, however, it was for keeps. We noticed it first when we made Father tell us stories. Hugh John had grown tired of the 'Little Green Man'! Now this was a thing so terrible to us that we hardly dared to face it. For, you see, we had been, as it were, brought up on the Little Green Man, and this was like being false to the very salt we had eaten. And the crime was specially bad on Hugh John's part. For, you see, he ate such a lot of salt that the Doctor told him it was bad for his health. However, because there is no chance of Hugh John reading this book, I will try to tell the tale just as Father tells it even yet to Margaret the Maid—and the rest of us who have not grown too old to like such stories.

THE TALE OF THE LITTLE GREEN MAN.

'Of course it is true,' Father always began, 'because you know yourselves that you have seen the very place and the Bogle Thorn and all. No doubt everything has shrunk a good deal since the time the story tells about. But that is only because you have grown out of all knowledge, and so everything seems smaller to you.'

'I know,' cried the Maid, 'last year when we came back from the seaside, the Edam Water looked quite small and shallow, even at the first Torres Vedras!'

But Sir Toady nipped her good to make her 'shut up'—yes, he had grown so rude in the use of words that that was what he said. But then, most boys are like that. It is school that does it, and, do you know, when they come back they even pervert us girls. That this is true was immediately proved by Maid Margaret giving a fierce kick under the table to Sir Toady, and whispering back, 'Shut up yourself!'

But Father went on, never heeding in the least. A father who can be conveniently deaf at times is the best kind. Be sure and take no other! The only genuine has a twinkle in his eye, and a dimple instead of smiling. You will know by that.

'Well, the Little Green Man,' Father went on, 'lived in the Bogle Thorn on the road between Laurieston and the Duchrae. I used to go that way to school long ago, and at first I was frightened of the Little Green Man. I used to climb the dyke and go right up by the loch on the moor where the curlers played in winter, so as not to be compelled to pass that way. But after a while I got not to mind him a bit. For, you see, he was a good little man, all clad in green velvet tights, and with a broad green bonnet on his head like a peaky toadstool. Once or twice when I caught sight of him up among the branches, he popped into his little house just as quickly as a rabbit into its hole when you say 'Scat!' And, you see, when once I was sure that he was frightened of me, I used not to mind him a bit. Then by and by I used to sit down and swop currants and sugar which I had 'found' at home for some of the nuts and lovely spicy fruits that the Little Green Man had stored away. He had the loveliest little parlour and bedrooms all in the inside of the tree, everything finished neat as cabinet-making, and the floor carpeted—you never saw the like—and there were little windows, too, with glass in them, and shutters that shut with the bark outside, so that you never could tell there was a window there at all.'

‘And how could you see all that, Father?’ asked the Maid, who, as usual, was immensely interested, not having heard it above a thousand times before. So it stayed quite new to her.

‘Oh,’ said Father, ‘the Little Green Man touched a spring, and let me look through the windows. Of course I was too big to get bodily into the inside of the rooms, or run up and down the stairs. But when the Little Green Man got married, he made a beautiful pleasure-ground at the top of his house, with a clipped-hedge parapet all round to keep the Little Green Children from falling over.’

‘Whom did he marry, Father?’ said the Maid though, of course, she knew.

‘Why, he married the Little Green Woman,’ said Father in a tone of surprise mixed with reproof.

He had been asked the same question at least a hundred times before, but he always answered in the same tone of grieved astonishment, which showed how clever he was. For he could not have been astonished—not really, of course. Then he went on with the story of the Little Green Man. The Little Green Man (said he) had a lot of children. There were Topsy, Leafy, Branchy, Twiggy, Flowery, Fruity, and Rooty. That made seven in all, and as they grew up, the Little Green Man made the playground on the top of the Bogle Thorn ever so much bigger. And he built the retaining walls higher, so as to keep them from falling over. Not that that was a very serious matter. For, you see, they could all of them hang on like monkeys. The only two who really ran some risk of danger were Topsy and Rooty. For Topsy, of course, had to stay on top, where he was safest, and knew his way about; and as for Rooty, there was something in his blood that made him want all the time to worm his way down into the hidden places under the earth where nobody but he ever went, and where the corkscrew staircases got perfectly breakneck with steepness. Then, when he found out this, the Little Green Man took Rooty, and gave him regular sound lectures about his ‘habits’—you know the kind of lecture—you have all got some on your own account. He said that away off on the face of the wild moor, a good bit back from the Bogle Thorn, was the cave of the Ugly Grey Dwarf—so called because that was what he was. He was ugly as a gnarled bit of oak-trunk that they dug up out of the moss. He was grey because he hid among the stones and rocks of the moorland, and, worst of all, he lived on what he could catch to eat—for choice, Little Green Children who had fallen out of tree-tops, or missed their hold of branches, or been naughty and wandered out when a root came to the surface. He had a horrid den where he used to take his prey, and would either roast them before a slow fire, basting them all the time, or else put them into a cauldron of cold water, hung on three sticks, and boil them alive! (Here the Maid always grew very pale, and edged as thickly as she could among the crowd of us, while the boys fingered their (unloaded) revolvers.)

So you can well imagine that it was not always the greatest fun to wander over the face of that moorland, while this cruel monster, dry as a chip, still as one of the boulders among the heather, and invisible as Will-o'-the-Wisp by day, lay watching the Bogle Thorn and the Little Green Man's Well, to which some one had to go at least once a day for water. Several times already the Little Green Man had had to fight for his life. But he was a good shot with the little fairy bow-and-arrows—the ones tipped with chips of flint—you know? (‘We know!’ came from all the children in a breath.) Besides, Father Green Man was so tough when you had him that the Ugly Grey Dwarf thought twice, and even three times, before tackling him. For although he had no heart to pierce, but only a cold, cold stone out of the bottom of a well instead, the heads of the tiny chip arrows came off where they hit him and annoyed him fearfully, wandering about his system and tickling up unexpected organs. So that at long and last he got to know that he had better give the Little Green Man a wide berth.

But when he got married, and children began to patter up and down the dainty little turning staircase of the Bogle Thorn, the Grey Dwarf rubbed his knotted clawy hands together, and grumbled over and over to himself—‘Fresh Meat! Fresh Meat!! Fresh Meat!!!’ And if he did not laugh, it is certainly reported that he chuckled to himself, like thunder among the hills very far away.

But of all who went about the passages and ups-and-downs of the Bogle Thorn, there was none so reckless as Little Rooty. He was just as rambling, rampageous a boy as any I know! (Here Father looked at us, and Hugh John nodded at Sir Toady,

who nodded back, to show that both considered the other as ‘catching it.’) More than once the Little Green Man had even taken a little green switch, and—well, it just happened the same, so there is no use entering into that. But, in spite of all, Rooty would go off foraging where he had no business to, and that came quite near to being the end of Little Rooty, who would not ‘take a telling,’ and forgot all about the little green switch as soon as he had stopped smarting—where he frequently smarted.

But one dreamy afternoon, when even the bumble-bees fell asleep and only gurgled in the deep fox-glove bells, when his father was lying on the green couch in the parlour, and his mother was telling the others tales about ‘humans’ in a shady green place on the tree-top, Little Rooty slipped away off down-stairs, twenty-five flights to the cellar door where they took in the winter’s fuel—that is, fir-cones chopped small, which make the best fires in the world, especially in Green Tree-top Land where fuel is a scarcity, and one has to be careful not to overheat the chimney, because of the insurance people. Well, Little Rooty found the door all right, and after having touched the spring, he went out on the face of the moor. The loch was shining beneath him, but sleepily too. And it looked so warm and bright that Little Rooty forgot all about what he had been told—the Ugly Grey Dwarf, the big black pot swinging on three poles in front of the Grisly Den, with the water just coming to the boil within it. And Rooty ran as hard as ever he could, without ever taking a minute to shut the cellar door. He jumped and shouted, and almost tumbled into Woodhall Loch just as he was, which would have spoiled his clean new suit of gossamer green velvet that his mother had finished that morning, and given him because it was just six months to Christmas, when he got his thicker winter one.

However, he did manage to get them off, and was just getting ready to plunge into the nice cool water, when the stranded log, on which he had been sitting taking off his stockings, sat up in its turn and stretched out a kind of wizened claw that caught Little Rooty by the middle and held him in the air, kicking and screaming. Then two horny warty lids winked up, and two eyes like cold gravy looked at him—oh, so coldly and hatefully! It was the Ugly Grey Dwarf, and he had been lying waiting for Little Rooty all the afternoon. Then Rooty thought of everything his father had told him, and wished it had never felt so hot and stuffy and bumble-bee-y inside the house, and he resolved that if he got off this time, nothing would ever induce him to disobey his parents again. He even wished he was back in the wood-cellar, with his father getting the little green switch down off the shelf. Positively he thought he could have enjoyed it. Of course Rooty was the first little boy who ever felt like that, but he did not have a very long time in which to repent, and, indeed, it mattered very little to the Grey Dwarf whether he did or not. That hideous brute just pinched him all over to see how fat he was, gurgling approbation all the time of Little Rooty’s ‘ribs’ and ‘chines’ and ‘cuts off the joint’—all of which Rooty had always liked very much, but had never before thought of in so intimate a connection with himself.

Meanwhile, in the little house of the Bogle Thorn, its walls wainscoted with green silk from a fairy Liberty’s, its ceilings done in Grass of Parnassus with sprigs and tassels of larch, the afternoon world slept on. But the Little Green Woman paused in her long drowsy tale-telling to the children in the shady corner of the Roof Garden. She thought she heard a cry, so faint and far away that it might have been the squeak of a field-mouse scuttling away from a weasel among the grass roots.

Then a sudden thought struck her like a knife.

‘Where is Rooty? Who saw Rooty last? Toppo, you run and look over the pricklements and see if you see Rooty. I thought I heard him cry.’

Toppo ran to the green wall of thorn, and was just in time to see the Grey Dwarf toss poor Little Rooty over his shoulder (or at least the knotted crotch of a tree which served him as a shoulder), and away with him to his Grisly Den on the face of the moorland. Toppo just managed to scream, and then his mother ran and caught him, or it might very well have been all over with Little Toppo. By the time the Little Green Man was wakened off the green sofa, and had understood what they were saying (for the entire family talked at once, as is mostly the case with united families), he ran hastily up to the Roof Garden, and saw the Grey Dwarf, very little and flat on the face of the heath, just like a splotch of mildew. And on his shoulder there was a spot of green, hardly visible, which the father

knew at once for his Little Rooty. But he did not scold—at least not then. He went for his fairy bow, made tiny like a catapult—not hurrying, you know, but going so fast that it felt as if the wind was rising all over the house of the Bogle Thorn. The Little Green Man dipped each arrow-point—that is, the flint part of it—into a kind of green stuff like porridge, made from hemlock and the berries of deadly nightshade,

with other pleasant and effective things only known to the Little Green People. He took great care not to let any drip about, and looked closely to see if there were any scratches on his hands. For it was quite unusual stuff, and precious. So he did not want to waste any of it. He needed it all for that mildewy spot crawling over the moorland towards the Grisly Cave with the green dot on its shoulder which was his own Rooty.

Perhaps, being exceptionally good children, you are not sorry for naughty Rooty. ('Oh, yes, we are! We are!') But, anyway, his father was sorry for him, though all the time he was promising him the best 'hiding' he had ever had in his life when he got him safe back again. ('Bet he never got a whack!' said Sir Toady, who is an authority on the subject.) So, locking the children in and putting the key in his pocket, the Little Green Man and his wife went away over the moorland to look for the Ugly Grey Dwarf. The man did not want the woman to come. But she begged of him, weeping, saying that she would go 'human' if she were left (and among the Green People that is a terrible word, and a yet more terrible thing). So in the end the Little Green Man let her come.

Then she wanted to go direct to the cave, but her husband, who had had a lot of experience, showed her how impossible and foolish that was. For the Grey Dwarf would just lie down behind a big boulder and wait for them. Then he would stun them with a log or strangle them with his long twisty fingers as they went by.

So instead they went all the way round by John Knox's Pulpit and the Folds Firs, that they might turn the flank of the enemy, and so come at his cave by a way he would never expect. It was a narrow cleft between two rocks up which they had to come—the Little Green Man and his woman. They crawled and crawled, noiseless as earth-worms on a ploughed field. All the while the eyes of the Little Green Man shot out small sparkles of fire, though the lids of them were closed so that they showed like slits in a drying plaster wall.

After a long climb they looked over a ridge of many boulders and much heather—the Little Green Man and his woman close behind him. And at the sight they saw there the wife would have screamed out and run forward. For she was a real woman, you see, though little and green. Only her husband was prepared for her, knowing, after so many years, exactly what she would do. So he first put the palm of his hand across her mouth to keep in the scream, and next gave her the pouch of arrow-heads to hold. Then with a pair of tweezers made of bent wood he lifted the little poisoned flakelets of flint and dropped each into a split in the arrow-head. Then his wife deftly bound each of them about with green cord—for that was her part of the business. She forgot about screaming when she had anything to do.

Then the Little Green Man peered cautiously from behind a rock, first giving his wife a good push with his foot as a warning—but, of course, you know, kindly.

He found himself looking down into a dell surrounded by many high granite rocks, which made access difficult to the Grisly Cave. The Dwarf was busy about the great black iron pot in which he was getting ready to boil Little Rooty. The Green Man saw his boy stripped of his suit of velvet, and trussed up neck and knee ready for cooking, while every time the Ugly Grey Dwarf approached he gave him a kick in passing to make him more tender, grinning and whetting a carving-knife all the time on a monster 'steel' that hung by his side.

So you may believe that in a moment the Green Man had his bow strung taut, and his heart beat as the dull glitter of the arrow-point, from which the green stuff was still dripping, came into line with the hairy throat of the wicked Dwarf.

'CLIP!'

That was the smacking sound of the bow-string going back to the straight.

'IZZ—IK!'

That was the sound of the little elf arrow, dropping green juice from its willow-leaf-shaped head, every drop of which was death.

The 'IK!' was when the elf shaft struck the Grey Dwarf and the point broke off in his throat. He said nothing for a moment, but the knife that was in his hand to cut up Little Rooty with clattered on the stones, while he himself fell with a 'squelch' like a big heap of wet clothes thrown down on the laundry floor on washing-day morning.

Then they cut Little Rooty's bonds, and took him home on his father's back, his mother carrying the bow and the precious bag of arrow-heads. But instead of the sound beating his father had promised him, they gave Rooty (and all the other children) corn-cake and bramble jam, nut paste, raspberry short-bread, and heather honey made into toffee. They danced on the tree-tops all the night long, and illuminated all the windows of the Bogle Thorn with glow-worms—who, in consideration of the circumstances, gave their services gratis. As for the Grey Dwarf, they never bothered any more about

him, and I dare say if you care to go up by the Grisly Cave at the end of Deep Dooms Wood on the right, as you turn to the Falls of Drumbledowndreary, you may find his bones unto this day.

The end of the story of the Little Green Man, as Father told it for Fifteen Years, anyway.