

# The Green Man by Alex Nye

Mara lives in a house opposite Holme Hill, the oldest part of Dunblane. Their house is shady, with a tree out front that Mara likes to climb. She swings from its branches, monkey-free. Ape-like, she dangles.

Opposite their house is an ancient woodland. It used to be vast, covering the whole extent of Dunblane, but over the years it has been eaten away by developers, until now only thirteen acres remain. Large enough to be an Amazonian rainforest to Mara and her friends. She has played there all her life, in the dark tunnels of greenery, swaying in the branches. She's built a tree-house and a rope-swing and a den. And she kicks out and swings over the rainforest, back and forth, like a wild thing.

Sometimes she is aware of the spirit of Holme Hill, the guardians of the place, who protect the trees and all of Nature which grows on it.

She never sees them, but she knows that they are there.

One morning, at first light, Mara was woken in her bed by a terrible din, so loud that it gathered all her neighbours to their windows. The crunch and whine of chain-saws, a deafening sound.

She leapt from her bed, dressed in seconds, and ran in the direction of the noise.

Others were running too, all in the same direction, towards the sound of destruction.

At the top of Holme Hill a terrible sight met her eyes. In the pale grey light of dawn, she could see men in hard hats and bright yellow vests stamping about the undergrowth, turning the woodland into a scene of devastation.

Many trees had already fallen, ash and rowan and silver birch.

Mara ran at them, screaming. "No!"

One of the workmen pulled her away.

"Careful now, miss!" he said. "You can't go running about here. There's dangerous equipment and all."

"You can't do this," she wailed.

A big burly businessman appeared in their midst. "I think you'll find I can," he said. "I own all of this land. I purchased it a long time ago from the Bancroft family."

And on he continued with his work of destruction.

But Mara was not the only one to protest. All of her neighbours from Bogside and Ramoyle in the little town of Dunblane had followed her up the hill. One man had begun filming the incident, but the businessman in charge of proceedings knocked the mobile phone from his hand. It landed on the forest floor and the screen broke in two.

It was at that moment that Mara caught a movement in the corner of her eye. A strange spiky green figure, ethereal and remote, moving quietly, stealthily between the trees. She wondered if anyone else had noticed him.

She looked again, and a pair of piercing green eyes met hers. It was as if his whole face and body were covered in leaves. He rustled when he moved. She went to speak, but he raised a finger to his lips and vanished behind the wide trunk of a huge beech which towered into the sky.

Mara ducked behind the tree, but there was no one there. Nothing but the shadows of early dawn breaking through the trees.

Turning back to the commotion on the hill, she saw that a 'Tree Inspector' had arrived on the scene and was insisting that the work should stop.

"There is a preservation order on these trees," she cried.

The businessman checked her ID and reluctantly called his men to stop work. "I'll be back!" he yelled.

The small crowd of Mara's neighbours inspected the damage, yellow sap bleeding from the neck of wounded trees.

The ground was littered with sawn-off limbs, sawdust and bark, like a battle-scene, Mara thought, where the fallen and the wounded are trees instead of people.

Everyone went home, but Mara stayed on the hill. She went to her usual spot, her den, hidden in the thick green branches of a beech tree which had stood on this hill for more than two hundred years.

She crouched low among the leaves.

It was then that the Green Man appeared by her side.

She was frightened at first.

"I knew you were there," she said. "I saw you."

"I have always been here," he replied.

"When will they stop?"

He shook his spiky green head and as he did so, she heard the strange rustling sound she had heard before, like crisp leaves crunching together. She wanted to touch his face, just to see what it would feel like. Would it be a papery texture, dry and coarse?

His eyes peered out, bright-green like gemstones.

"Sadly, men like that never stop," he said. "This is my home, and every year, they steal a little bit more of it. Soon there will be nothing left."

"How can we stop it?"

"I will give you the strength," he told her.

Mara went home, and with the help of her father, she began her campaign. She made posters, she raised money through charity events, she spoke at public meetings.

"Well, it's a novel idea, to allow a child to speak, but... well... I don't see why not?" said the Mayor. "They're as much affected as anyone else. Perhaps more so."

Eventually, through Mara's efforts, the bigwigs looked into the paperwork and what they found was a loophole.

Two hundred years ago, a wealthy landowner called Lady Bancroft had gifted the acres of woodland to the children of Bogside "*in perpetuity*."

"What does '*in perpetuity*' mean?" Mara asked the town councillors.

"It means *forever*. At first we thought it had not been put in writing anywhere, but it just so happens," they unfurled an ancient manuscript and he tapped the thick parchment with his forefinger "we have it in writing here."

The rich businessman growled and took his men and machines away.

Up on Holme Hill, the children of Bogside all poured out of their houses again, to celebrate the survival of their playground.

They ran through the woodland like wild things, whooping and crying.

Mara sat on her rope-swing, gently swaying back and forth.

In the branches up above her, she saw a spiky green face peering down.

He winked once.

Then disappeared...