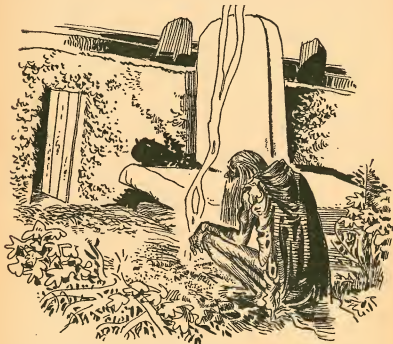


*How cold the beautiful smile! How warm the glowing ruby! How treacherous the garden of . . .*

# the LAST DRUID

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CLOBHAIR the Thief and Doreen the Weasel came silently down Gallows Hill into the Glade of the Dark Trees. Behind them the sun was low, and as they descended along the worn

road they waded knee-deep in shadows.

The twilight deepened, and Doreen grew more and more afraid. Finally he stopped. "Clobhair, let's turn back—"

Clobhair took him by the shoulder with one big hand and shook him as though he were a child. "No one's there but a weak old man and a beautiful woman. Think of it, Doreen. A beautiful woman, stark naked except for a ruby pendant about her throat. A ruby as big as your fist. A woman with snow-white skin, more beautiful than the Mist Women who dance by the lake. The ruby and the woman, they belong to an old, old man. Now, I ask you, should such things be?"

Doreen shivered. "Ah, if the story is true! Well, lead on, Clobhair."

Below them, in the hollow between two hills, were a number of dark circles—green-black like lumps of shadow.

They reached the first barrier. It was a hedge, nearly eight feet high, and a narrow door had been cut through this wall of living green. They entered, advanced a few yards, and came to the second green wall. Clobhair searched and found another opening.

Within the hedges there was a constant scurrying and squeaking, as though a host of meadow-mice had hidden there. They walked fearfully. The old tales said that the Druid lived within the seventh hedge. He was the last Druid of all; therefore, he was the oldest and wis-

est and most terrible. Sweat formed like beads of ice beneath their leather jerkins.

Doreen drew close to Clobhair and whispered, "Clobhair, you take the woman and I'll take the ruby. Rubies last longer."

"Quiet, you fool," Clobhair growled in a low, deep voice. "I could have handled this by myself, but you saved my life that time when the judges would have hanged me. But you are weaker than a small bird. You are a coward, Doreen. Could you kill an old man? No, I will have to snap his neck. Old as he is, you could not kill him. So I will take the woman with the white skin. Then we will sell the ruby and divide the gold-pieces—"

"Ah," Doreen whined, "it may be an old wife's tale."

**T**HEY found another opening—and another and another. In the spaces between the hedges there were high, upended stones that looked older than old. A wind was whispering and sighing among the green-black leaves, and little half-seen things squeaked and scurried away from their feet. Clobhair and Doreen were almost in darkness now.

Then they found the last opening that led to the inner circle of the maze. It was lighter here, for a tiny fire was glowing. A few dying coals made the shad-

ows tremble and leap higher.

Then the Druid barred their way at that last leafy entrance. He was a thin old man with a long, white beard, and he wore nothing but a tattered robe.

"Why do you come here?" the old man asked. "Why do you trouble my seven gates?"

Doreen fawned. "Master, we have come to seek truth—"

Then Clobhair laughed. "Yes, we seek a woman with snow-white skin and a ruby as large as a man's fist. Two truths, old man. A beautiful woman and the price of a kingdom. What other truths are there?"

The old man frowned. The flickering coals behind him turned his white hair and beard to a pinkish glow. "There are many truths," he said. "Some of them are terrible truths. But you, at least, are honest—"

Clobhair the Thief and Doreen the Weasel laughed.

Then Doreen got down on his knees and chanted: "You are the oldest of the old. You have wisdom left over from the Garden. And I have come to you to seek that which only the Night Bird knows—"

The old man looked down at Doreen with deep contempt on his lined face. Suddenly he raised a bony hand to strike. But while the last Druid's back was turned, Clobhair took a quick step and seized him in his two

big hands and snapped his neck.

Clobhair lowered the old man to the ground. Then he bent over him, listening for a heart-beat. As Clobhair knelt there, Doreen took a rock from under his coat and struck him upon the nape of the neck. Clobhair fell across the old Druid's lifeless body.

Doreen the Weasel went on into the innermost part of the seventh circle, leaving the two still bodies behind him. There, where the little bed of coals was flickering, he gasped a strange gasp of awe.

Near the bonfire was a beech tree with small, twisted limbs. There was a tumult of whispering within its leaves. It was not tall, that beech tree, and it seemed to Doreen that its branches had been pruned and shaped many times. From the ground to a height of six feet, its whitened bole was shaped into the form of a beautiful woman. She was stark naked, and the twisted branches appeared to be growing from her hair. She was staring at Doreen, and about her throat was a green-gold chain that ended in the great ruby pendant that smoldered between the statue's breasts.

Doreen blinked his eyes. The ruby blazed with all the fires of hell—and it promised him heaven and earth.

Forgotten was the shape of the woman who was carved from the white bole of the tree. Forgotten was the old man. Forgotten was Clobhair. Forgotten were the seven circular hedges and the upended stones. Forgotten were the things that scuttled about among the leaves.

Doreen reached forward and seized that blazing ruby. Scarlet fire laced through him. For a moment the body of Doreen the Weasel was like a figure made from bloodstone. The woman who was carved from the white bole of the beech tree looked at him and smiled. Then Doreen's body was no more than a pinkish cloud, and the drooping branches of the tree plucked down and caught it. For a second the tree held the reddish mist in its branches; then that which had been Doreen the Weasel faded and disappeared among the rattling leaves.

Doreen was gone, except for something that crouched in the shadows.

**W**HEN Clobhair awoke he was lying over the cold body of the old man. It was late and

the little fire was flickering out. He rubbed his aching head and struggled to his feet. Then cursing Doreen he stumbled to the tree.

From the white bole of the beech the cunningly-carved woman smiled at him. He cursed again. So the woman was no flesh and blood woman at all! Nothing but a thing of wood. But the ruby was real. And it was even larger than a man's fist now.

As he moved toward it a tiny white thing dodged away from his feet. He did not notice.

Clobhair too reached for the flaming stone. And ruby snakes of flame crawled through him. He too became a blood-red mist that faded, dissolved, disappeared—

The wooden figure was still smiling. The ruby had grown.

Doreen was gone. And Clobhair too. Or nearly so—

In the grass beneath the tree were two tiny white things, bleached six-inch figures of men. With staring eyes and idiot faces they squeaked and scurried away into the green-black shadows of the hedges.

**THE END**

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