

The Hearth

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(In these days when the principle of kingship has become debatable through the notoriety of such wretched examples as the spineless Romanoff, the assassin Karageorgeovitch, and the brainless Coburg, this story is of peculiar interest and importance. We do not want a hereditary monarchy with the dangers of in-breeding; or an elected monarchy, with the certainty that the worst man will win; or a temporary monarchy such as a republic affords, with its discontinuity of policy. We want the strongest and best man to rule; we want a man whom we can trust, as opposed to one whom the trusts can. Why not, therefore, return to the original, the efficient principle of selection? Keep the good part of the hereditary plan by allowing the royalty to pass through the daughter of the king, and secure the new blood and the merit by vesting its power in her consort, the man who can win her by strength and by intelligence. Provide, further, against the decay of the royal faculties by an annual test of physical, mental, and moral fitness.

— Contributing Editor International)

I.

Reverently the King approached the flame that flickered in the centre of the hut. It was a small round hut, built of wood, reeds, and straw; but it was called the King's House, although the King actually dwelt in a more pretentious building a few yards away. It was in a very particular sense his house, however; for in it was his power enshrined, and the life of his people. For the

King was King of the Sylvii, that dwelt in the mighty forests of oak that clothed the Alban Hills, far yet from the Maremma and the Tiber and the rise of Rome. The oak was the sacred tree of the tribe, their badge, their totem, and their god.

The sky was but the roof of the oak, and the thunder but its voice monitor or oracular.

More, to these people the King was actually the oak, and the god of the oak; and the life of the King was the life of the people. It was the office of the King to sustain the works of nature; and in particular he must provide men with fire. Thus the hearth of blazing oak-boughs was itself bound intimately with the life of the King, and had the fire become inadvertently extinguished, disaster must assuredly ensue. Hence the King's own daughters were vowed wholly to the maintenance of the sacred flame; and no thought of man might pollute that diamond devotion.

Yet since all nature renews itself every year to restore its vigor, so must it be for the king and for the fire. Every midsummer the King must prove himself to be of unimpaired force, and every spring the fire must be ceremonially extinguished and rekindled by the King himself, assisted by his eldest daughter.

It was this latter rite at which he was now president. Having approached the flame, he placed his hands upon it, and with firm dignity crushed it out of existence. In vain his daughter blew upon the ash; no spark was left.

Assured upon this point, she went to the sacred storehouse which contained the ancestral urns, and the magic weapons of the forefathers of King Sylvius. From this place she took a flat board of soft wood, in which were a number of charred holes. This she laid upon the floor of the hut, and squatted behind it, holding it firmly with both hands and feet. The King knelt down in front of the board, and, producing a new-cut oaken stick, sharpened at one end, placed the point against the board and began to twirl it rapidly. Soon evidences of

heat became manifest; the girl placed tinder around the point of contact; smoke arose; she caught it in her hands, and blew the spark into a flame.

Immediately she rose from the ground, and placed the burning tinder in a nest of young dry twigs of oak over which she had placed larger and larger branches; in a few minutes the flame shot in a rose-gold pyramid into the air. Meanwhile the King had opened the door of the hut, crying jubilantly:

"The child is born!" These words were taken up a great shout by the whole people of the Sylvii, who were waiting in awe and adoration without. One by one the women came forward, each with her bough of oak; each entered the hut, kindled her bough from the great fire, and went out to bear it reverently back to her own extinguished hearth.

At last all was finished. The King was once more alone with his daughter. "Julia!" The girl stood with her hands folded meekly on her breast, awaiting with bowed head the paternal admonition. "O first of the wardens of the sacred flame! O daughter of the son of the fire of the oak! O thou that keeping vigil upon the holy hearth art visited by the words of Truth! Declare to me the omens!"

Julia raised her head, "O king!" she cried, "O great Oak! O Master of the Sky and of the Thunder! O son of the fire of the Oak! O mighty to slay and to save, hear the word of the fire of the Oak!" So far was ritual; she spoke with regular intonation; now she became troubled, and it was with hesitating tongue that she declared the omens. "The flame was fierce," she went on, "the tinder burned my hands. The dry twigs would not kindle; then they lit suddenly and with violence, flying in the air like startled birds.

"Then came an air from the East, and blew all into a blaze. No sooner was this blaze bright than the air blew no more, but the flame leaped to heaven like a pyramid."

The king threw his robe over his face, and went out of the hut. She looked on him with staring eyes. "It is then terrible for him — though I do not know the meaning of the omens.

"But oh! I did not dare to tell him that which I do know. I could not speak the words — how the flame leapt out at me like a serpent and caught me between the breasts. He loves me too much; how will it be when I am ashamed before all men and must die? Oh terror of the darkness, as I lie in that cavern of the worm beneath the earth — awaiting death. Oh me!"

It is a characteristic folly of clairvoyants to keep back part of their visions from the magicians who alone can interpret them successfully.

Julia was entirely at fault in this matter of the omen; she was not an initiate, and she relied on old wives' tales. Such faults carry their own doom, and the means of it; for, being sure that something could go wrong, she had no more confidence that anything would go right; and one cannot hole a six-inch putt without confidence.

"If the sun and moon should doubt,
They'd immediately go out."

But perhaps the King had some good ground for his anguish. Omens are curious things. If you sit down thirteen at a table, and die within the year, you are just as dead as if you had always dined alone!

II.

Julia was the eldest daughter of the King, and the throne went with her hand, according to the custom of the people.

A plague of smallpox had ravaged the oak-groves ten years earlier when she had seen eight summers, and left her sole survivor of the royal family, except Claudia, a child of three years old. All her other sisters were

therefore much younger than she; her brothers had gone afield to seek their fortune in strange places. The plague had not left her wholly scatheless; she bore a few small pocks on her forehead and cheek. But these tended rather to increase the fascination of her beauty. She was lithe and long, but robust and well developed for her years. Her head was small and well-poised upon a pillar throat, the face oval, the eyes large and very lustrous, the nose long and straight, the mouth beautifully curved, with a long upper lip which shone with faint down. But her greatest beauty lay perhaps in her hair, which was extraordinarily fair, the very lightest shade imaginable of brown, with a certain ashen tinge which made it almost transparent to the sunlight. The length of it, and its abundance, were the wonder of the people, who saw therein a good omen of the vigor of the royal house.

In the time of the plague, and the harsh years of building up the community again from it, that followed, she and her father had drawn very close together. He had come to rely on her almost exclusively, for there was no one else so near that he could trust. On her side, too, the whole warmth of her nature went out to him. She was of fierce temper, but slow smouldering; of purpose inscrutable and indomitable. Often her stubbornness had strengthened the hands of the king, her father, when he hesitated; she had pushed him through doubt and through disaster to success.

Her occupation as Vestal had left her utterly innocent; she knew what god she worshipped, and she knew that she was the bride of the fire, and would one day bear children to it; but she had formulated no connection in her mind between these facts and those of human nature. She was the daughter of God; the people were as far beneath her as the stones under her feet. That she should sink to their level by any acceptance of their limitations was to her mind unthinkable; hence the passionate horror aroused in her soul by her misinterpretation of the omen of the flame.

The impression which had been made soon faded; three weeks later the festivities of spring drove everything else from her mind. The quaint figure of the Green Man, with his wreaths of oak and his fantastic mask, his weird and intense dances, and the ceremony of drenching him with water, made a mark on her mind which it had never done before. So deep was it that for three nights successively she dreamed of the dances, and on each night she heard voices from the sacred storehouse where the fire-drills represented the ancestors of the royal house; it seemed that they were talking together. She caught the tone of excitement, but could make nothing of the words; for of course they were speaking in the secret language of the gods, which only her father, of all the Sylvii, knew.

Then for a week or two things seemed to slip into the old routine. But now came something new and quite beyond nature into her; she became for the first time conscious of herself. Instead of seeing the King's House about her, she saw herself moving in the house. It was not merely the fire on which she threw the boughs; she saw herself throwing boughs on to the fire. External things became subordinate. With that, she discovered that she was restless; time, which had hitherto meant nothing to her, instead of flowing unperceived, became insistent. Unable to forget herself, she began to analyze herself. She noticed that she was always pacing to and fro, and wondered why. Her body became an obsession.

Soon she acquired the habit of lying down before the fire, and gazing into it. Here, with her head resting upon her hands, she would remain for hours, motionless save for one leg, which she would swing on toe and knee from side to side, now fast, now slow. The whole of her being would concentrate in the muscles of that leg; she would be conscious of nothing else, and she would analyze the sensation in it, which would become extraordinarily acute and voluptuous. She delighted in

feeling the different rhythms of its movement. She would halt them deliberately, torturing herself with exquisite anticipation of the moment when she would begin again. It is hard to record such subtleties of thought. Somewhat thus, perhaps, they danced. "Fast and slow — tense and slack. How hard can I push down? How hard can I pull up? Side to side — to and fro. Circular movements. All concentration in the foot; toe by toe extension and contraction. Which toes can I move separately? Could I balance my leg by its own weight without supporting it by stiffening a muscle? — most exquisite, subtle and voluptuous problem! Tap — tap — tap; that is my heel upon the floor of that hut; I understand. Now Tap tap — tap — tap — tap — tap — another rhythm, another world of music and beauty. Now slow, now fast; every rhythm has infinite capacities of modulation. I am alive in a live world of infinite ecstasies — abyss after abyss opening at each timid step. Eternity cannot exhaust the variations of delight that can play on this one muscle! What a world to live in! Ah! Ah! Ah!" After a while this would become too overpowering; the possibilities of pleasure would appall her by their multiplicity; and she would rub her thumb and forefinger slowly together with every kind of motion, watching intently, and so drinking in the wonder and splendor of life through sight as well as touch.

One very curious thing she noticed. Now and again the moving muscles seemed to take up an independent personality, to wish to assert themselves as individual wills, and to impose themselves upon the rest of the body by causing it to join in their movement. She would nearly always resist this, though sometimes the thumb and forefinger would set the muscles of the arm and shoulder twitching, and sometimes the leg would communicate its swing to the whole body. But for some reason, or rather in accordance with some instinct, she resented the domination of the other will. But the pressure constantly increased upon her; and one day

she gave way completely. She never knew what happened; her memory told her nothing; but when she came to herself, she found that she had slept for hours; her clothes were bathed in sweat, and the dust of the floor was wetted here and there by drops of it. From the footprints, too, she divined that she must have been dancing; evidently until exhaustion, and sleep, supervened.

Of this she told her father. "Julia!" said he, "there is nothing to fear. The ancestors themselves have taught you the Sacred Dance of the Vestals." From that time she resisted no more; she allowed delirium to take its course. Such crises gave her the most exquisite relief; the perfect physical fatigue was an enchantment. Gradually, too, she mastered the possession, and knew what she was doing. But as she gained this, she lost the effect; she failed to reach the summits of enthusiasm, and the fatigue, instead of being pleasure, was partial, a dull ache, in which she was too tired to dance, not tired enough to sleep. But one thing grew upon her, the fascination of the fire. The play of its heat upon her face tortured and delighted her. Sometimes she would loosen her robe and thrust her breast over the glowing oak, rejoicing as it scorched her. Sometimes she would play with the flame with her hands, passing them through and through it. She imagined them as fish leaping in the water. But nowhere was satisfaction to be found. She became moody and wretched, toying fatally instead of willfully with the fire, obtaining no pleasure, yet unable to stop. One day she took a brand from the flame, and began to dance the marriage dance with it; was she not the Bride of the Fire? Round and round the hut she leapt and whirled, thrashing herself savagely with the burning bough, until in ecstasy of pain and excitement she flung back the brand into the flame, and fell prone upon the ashes about the fire in a swoon of utter collapse.

When she awoke to life she found that she was badly burned. But the ancestors had communed with her in her trance; from that moment she was a changed creature. She reverted to her old quiet ways; she lost the self-consciousness that had disturbed her; and she occupied herself with patient toil. It was a curious task that she had set herself; she took long strands of her hair, and wove them, wove them, day and night, into a fine network, a glimmering veil scarcely visible for glamour, a pallor of ash like the harvest-moon, but strong with deft inlacement so that she might have bound inextricably a young bull in its elastic tether.

The autumn fell upon the hills; no untoward incident had marred the life of the tribe; at the midsummer ceremony of the Flight of the King her father had conquered easily, running lightly from his palace to the hill-top where stood the twin oaks solitary and proud that marked the turning-point of the race, passed between them, and taken refuge on the hearth of Vesta, the flaming bough waving triumphantly in his hand before the first of the suitors for the kingdom had reached even the top of the little ridge that was the last landmark in the race. His start, which amounted to nigh a fourth of the course, was ample, save in serious debility or accident.

He who was first of all the disappointed crowd was a stranger from a very far country. He was like a young leopard, ruddy bronze, with gleaming eye and flashing teeth, long-armed, with black hair curled upon his brows. When he saw that the king was safe, instead of following and joining in the banquet which was always ready in the palace to refresh the contestants of the race, and to celebrate the renewed life and vigor of the King, he waved his sword, gave a great shout, and, swerving from the course, ran wildly through the village, and was lost to sight.

Julia asked her father who he was, and why he acted thus, not in accordance with the custom. "His

name is Abrasax, and his surname Ithys, which means The Straight One, and he is of an island called Chi in the great sea which he says reaches to the bounds of the world. He is full of strange tales. I do not know why he has gone."

Perhaps Julia herself knew; for on the day before her eyes had fallen upon him as he passed, and seen in his gaze that it was she, more than the kingdom, that he desired. Perhaps he had gone because he would not come to her unless triumphant. And she flashed with scorn and anger that he should treat her as a woman. And that night she knew. For when all was still, an arrow with blunt point was shot into the King's House, and in its notch was fastened a thin piece of bark on which was written one word — "YET."

So summer passed and fell into autumn; Julia had finished her veil, twelve yards in length, a foot in breadth, and bound it round about her brows for a crown, a tapering cone of beauty towering from her forehead.

The days drew in; Julia fell into utter listlessness and lassitude. She could hardly force herself to tend the sacred fire. She sat hour by hour brooding over it; it had lost its power to kindle her; she let a brand fall on her wrist, and it only woke the flesh to pain, dull and stupid, a dark hall of melancholy and of the shadow of death. She became brutalized; only, like a dog, she sought her father constantly, taking refuge with him from her ill-ease; to feel his arms about her seemed protection from — she knew not what.

Yet in all the monotony of her misery there was a single point at which all concentrated; the memory of a leap and a shout, a bronze leopard body, fierce eyes, black curls, a long sword glittering to heaven, and an arrow shot into the holy house of Vesta. And so acute became that pang that in her heart was born a deadly hatred. He had insulted her by his proud glance; he meant all that was dangerous, all that was evil, in her

life; she personified the malice of all damned ghosts and sorcerers, the menace of her people, in him.

This hate so grew upon her that it turned to sickness; blue lines came under her eyes; her skin was loose upon her; her limbs were heavy; she could not eat; she spent her days squatting before the fire, now and then lifting a great bough with weary arms to let it drop dully on the embers. She never cared to make it blaze up brightly; so long as a live spark lay in the ash, she was fulfilling all she need. Even in the bitter nights of winter, when the wind howled through the rude walls of the hut, and snow came through the opening in the roof to hiss upon the fire, she preferred to sit and shiver in her robe, rather than to heap the boughs. At last all this formulated itself in a single conscious will. Abrasax would return at midsummer, she was sure; well, let him come. She knew how he must pass from the palace to the hut appointed for his bestowal at night after the banquet; she would waylay him and kill him. So now she took a dagger and passed her days sharpening it on a stone, testing it on the boughs of oak; her whole soul black with bitter lust of murder.

And then came the day of the Rekindling of the Fire. She had regained her peace of mind, her confidence, her calm. With a firm voice she declared the omens; all were favorable. Only, as the days drew on to midsummer, gladness grew upon her even as the flowers upon their stems; only twelve days more — eleven days more — ten days more — before she would plunge that steel into the heart of the man whose image mocked and taunted and defiled her.

III.

Now all things drew on apace to the conclusion. Three days before the Ceremony of the Flight of the King, the strangers began to arrive. Julia marked Abrasax among them and, withdrawing, looked to her

dagger. It was sharp, deadly sharp. Her arm was strong; it sank an inch into the oaken doorpost as she lunged. She was more than human, in the glee that filled her. Her sister, Claudia, now fourteen years of age, spoke of his strength and beauty. Julia stopped her with one venomous word.

It was the night before the race. She could hear the revelry in the palace; it would be very dark; the moon was new, a cadent crescent hung over the sunset. The shouts of the men at feast became less boisterous; now was her hour. She fed the flame till it roared high; then wrapped herself close, and stole forth into the darkness. From the shelter of the house where she lurked she could watch the palace; she saw the lights die down, one after one; she saw man after man come through the brilliant doorway. At last came Abrasax. She crouched, tense and eager, ready to spring. Only a moment now!

But the moment drew out unfathomably; no sound of drunken song, no stumbling footstep. He had simply vanished in the darkness. She set herself to wait. The minutes passed, nerve-racking, hideous. She was within a few yards of the door of the house where he lodged; he could hardly have gone round another way and reached safety. Then clarity came to her; she realized that in the open air and in the darkness his drunkenness must have overcome him; he would be prone, perhaps not far from the door of the palace. She would go find him. But first she must return; she had been perilously long away from the King's House; the fire must be replenished. She would throw logs upon it, then go to her glad work!

Stealthy as a tigress, she shrunk back to the hearth. She opened the door. Only just in time; mere sparks, no flame, in the House of the King! She went forward.

Instantly she was overthrown and nearly strangled by a lean arm that shot from the blackness. Before she could scream, her mouth was caught in the vice of

gorilla jaws. The blood gushed from her lips. She could not move her dagger hand; her arms were pinioned. A rough knee-stroke left her bare of her last fence; she lay at the mercy of her murderer.

Then blackness devoured her as with fire; she sank far below being; but the throb of her blood, bursting in her ears, was like the universal cry of all her ancestors. She fell into a hell of roaring flame, of blazing shouts; she died once, twice and thrice. She knew no more.

Suddenly she awoke; she found herself in utter darkness; her one thought was of the fire; the fire was out. Savagely she dragged her bruised and broken body to the hearth; no spark remained. "The fire is out," she moaned, "and I am lost." "We shall rekindle it," boomed the voice of Abrasax; "go, bring the drill!" The blasphemy of the idea appalled her. Only the king himself might twirl the sacred oak. A clenched fist struck her ear. She went to the storehouse, took the board, and a striker at random, returned, and squatted down as her custom was. Abrasax took the drill; under his vigorous palms a minute sufficed to heat the tinder; her breath blew it into flame. She saw his cruel face alight with laughter; blood from her mouth was splashed upon it. She threw the tinder on the hearth, caught up dry twigs, and built the fire. Instantly it leapt and crackled; the flame soared in a pyramid of blue and rose and gold, showering out sparks of glory, a rain of meteors.

When she turned to face her assailant, he was gone.

For an hour she lay motionless, as one dead, before the fire. She rose with shaken limbs; stiffened herself to fate, with serpent swiftness she put her hands to her hair, then, darkling, sped from the hut.

She was no longer the same woman as when she had left it earlier in the night; then, her virgin will, conscious and glad, impelled her; now, it was impulse seated in some cavern of her soul that she had never plumbed, obedience, unquestioning and blind, to the fact of an inscrutable and inexorable fate.

IV.

The King, a blazing brand of oak in his right hand, ran lightly to the crest of the ridge beyond the village. There he threw it down, as symbol of his temporary abdication, the signal for the strangers to race after him. He ran lightly and easily as ever; only a month before he had run down a lone wolf by sheer speed and endurance. Disappearing over the crest, he was soon visible again upon the slopes of that high hill where the twin oaks formed the turning point. Abrasax had gained slightly on him; the others not at all. The King turned near the top of the slope; he perceived the situation. But he was going to take no risks; now was the moment to break the heart of his pursuer. He would show him his speed on the steep hill; he could increase the distance, sprinting the few yards that lay between him and the summit; thence he would leap down the long slope like a deer pursued by a wolf; in that critical half-mile he would finish the race, almost less by speed than by psychology.

He took a deep breath, and increased his pace; he positively leapt up the last slopes; he reached the level; his limbs loosened; he opened his great chest and ran like the wind.

Abrasax, laboring, followed him warily, holding in his strength.

The King, reaching the trees, was at the top of his pace; then, in the sight of all his tribe, he stumbled and fell. The shock was tremendous; but to that wiry frame not irretrievable. He could not understand it; it was the first time in all his life that it had chanced; but he had no time to reason; he must run. Down the long slope he plunged, and was lost to sight of the Sylvii behind the crest of the low ridge whence he had started.

Julia stood at the door of the King's House. She was clad in the vestments of a priestess, and in her hand she bore the blazing oak bough, symbol of the

sovereignty of the Sylvii. With straining eyes she watched the crest of the ridge, and all her people stood about her, solemnly ranged to keep the course. When the King fell, a gasp went up to heaven, but his quick recovery seemed to auger his safety.

But the minutes hung; the King did not appear. Then on the crest there towered the figure of Abrasax; a moment more, leaping, a leopard, he was at the threshold of the King's House. In his right hand he held aloft his crimson sword, in his left, the bearded head of the old king. His fingers stiffened in its hair; its blood dripped on the vestal robes of Julia, who, sinking to her knees, held out the flaming branch and cried, "My Lord! My Lord! Hail, O great Oak! O Master of the Sky and of the Thunder! O son of the fire of the Oak!"

And all the people cried aloud, as he flung down his sword and held the bough to heaven: "Hail, O great Oak! Hail, King of the Sylvii!"

Then he raised Julia and kissed her before all the people, so that their acclamations rang again; echoes from the woods and from the hills caught up the cry; the whole of Nature seemed regenerate as the new King stood erect and cried his triumph to the world.

He laid the brand upon the hearth. It was Claudia, and not Julia, who followed him; for Julia might no more enter into the temple. In her was the royal power, and she was vowed to the new king. The younger girl seemed overcome with sorrow and anger; but her sister moved as a sleep-walker moves, automaton, entranced.

Abrasax took her by the waist, and led her to the palace. The banquet was to be their wedding, and his confirmation in the royal power. Julia lay like a dead woman against his breast; she would not eat, but drank huge cups of the black terrible wine of the country.

The ceremonies were ended; the guests departed; the head men of the Sylvii gathered up their robes, and made their way to their homes.

Abrasax and Julia were left alone. He led her trembling to the royal chamber, still vivid with the daily chattels of her father.

"You who hate me," said he bitterly, "shall serve me as a slave." He clenched his fist; his blows rained upon her body. "Thus — and thus — and thus — will I teach you to serve me — and to love me!"

She lay back in his arms, her hair dishevelled hanging in great cascades upon the floor, her face bloody with his blows, and her eyes mad with wine. But her bruised mouth dropped words like some thick poisonous perfume from the athanor of an alchemist. "I stretched my veil between the oaks so that my father might fall — oh my lover!"

He understood.

His passion foamed over the bounds of his consciousness! Hers mastered his.

The sun was up near noon when his eyes fell upon her face; she lay like a corpse upon the straw.

He mused awhile; then decision came into his eyes. He rose and robed himself; the golden circlet twined with oak leaves bound his brows. He called together the head men of the Sylvii; he led them to the bridal chamber.

"Fathers!" he cried, "I found this woman not a virgin; let her be buried alive as is the custom; I will take Claudia to wife."