

THE HEARTH

By MARK WELLS.

(In these days when the principle of kingship has become debateable through the notoriety of such wretched examples as the spineless Romanoff, the assassin Karageovitch, 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

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 re-kindled by the King himself, assisted by his eldest daughter.

It was this latter rite at which he was now present. 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 rosc-

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.—Contr. Ed. Int.)

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. O 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 table, and die within the year, you are just as dead as if you had always dined alone!