

## 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 an 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 Silvii 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 augur 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