

The Lady, or the Tiger?

by Frank R Stockton

In the very olden time there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas were still large, and unrestrained, just like the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man with a wild imagination, and the power to turn what he imagined into fact. He greatly enjoyed talking to himself about his ideas, and, when he and himself agreed upon anything, the thing was done. When everything in his kingdom moved smoothly in its appointed course, he was a very pleasant man, but whenever there was a little hitch, and something went wrong, he was even more genial still, for nothing pleased him so much as to make the wrong things right.

Among the modern notions this semi-barbaric king had was that of the public arena, in which his people could watch both men and beasts in acts of valor.

But even here the king's barbaric imagination could be found. The arena of the king was not built to give the people an opportunity of watching gladiators fight to the death, nor men battling lions. The people saw more than the sight of blood. No, the king's arena was a place where his people could watch the laws of their country at work. It was a place where crime was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the Law of Chance.

When a man was accused of a crime of sufficient importance to interest the king, public notice was given that on an appointed day the fate of the accused person would be decided in the king's arena. When all the people had assembled in the arena, and the king, surrounded by his court, sat high up on his throne on one side of the arena, he gave a signal; a door beneath him opened, and the accused man stepped out into the stadium. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the enclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side. It was the duty of the person on trial to walk directly to these doors and open

one of them. He could open either door he pleased; he was subject to no guidance or influence but that of the Law of Chance. If he opened one of the doors, there came out of it a hungry tiger, the fiercest and most cruel that could be found, which immediately sprang upon him and the man quickly—or not so quickly--died. The moment that this happened, sad bells were rung, women cried, and the vast audience, walked slowly homeward.

But, if the accused person opened the other door, there came forth from it a lady, the finest and most beautiful that his majesty could select among his fair people, and to this lady he was immediately married, as a reward for his innocence. It did not matter that he might already possess a wife and family, or that he might love someone else; the king did not allow such little things to interfere with his great scheme of justice. The two were married immediately, right there in the arena while happy bells rang, women cried, and the people walked home singing.

This was the king's semi-barbaric method of administering justice. Its perfect fairness is obvious. The criminal could not know out of which door would come the lady; he could choose either door, without having the slightest idea whether, in the next instant, he was to be devoured or married. The people thought the king's law was a good one. When the people gathered together on one of the great trial days, they never knew whether they were to witness a bloody slaughter or a joyous wedding. This element of uncertainty made the occasion more interesting. Thus, the masses were entertained and pleased, and no one could say the king's plan was unfair, for did not the accused person have the whole matter in his own hands?

This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as beautiful as any flower in his imagination, and with a mind as wild and free as his own. As is usual in such cases, she was the apple of his eye, and was loved by him

above all humanity. However, among the workers in the king's castle was a young man of low birth. This young man was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom, and the princess loved him with a heart like a volcano. This love affair moved on happily for many months, until one day the king happened to discover its existence. He did not hesitate in regard to his duty in this situation. The young man was immediately cast into prison, and a day was appointed for his trial in the king's arena. This, of course, was an especially important occasion, and his majesty, as well as all the people, was greatly interested in the workings and development of this trial. Never before had such a case occurred; never before had a person dared to love the daughter of the king.

The tiger-cages of the kingdom were searched for the most savage and hungry beasts, from which the fiercest monster might be selected for the arena; and the kingdom was carefully searched for the most beautiful and fairest woman in order that the young man might have a fitting bride in case fate did not determine for him a different destiny. Everyone knew that the young man had loved the princess, and neither he, she, nor any one else, thought of denying the fact; but the king would not think of allowing any fact of this kind to interfere with the workings of the arena, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how things turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and the king would take pleasure in watching the course of events.

The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered, and crowded into the great galleries of the arena, and crowds, unable to gain admittance, massed themselves against its outside walls. The king and his daughter were in their places, opposite the twin doors which looked so much alike, but were really quite different.

All was ready. The signal was given. A door beneath the royal party opened, and the lover of the princess walked into the arena. Tall, beautiful, fair, his appearance was like that of a prince. The audience had not known so fine a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

As the youth advanced into the arena, he turned to bow to the king, but his eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Her wild heart would not allow her to be absent on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested. From the moment that the decision had been made that her lover should decide his fate in the king's arena, she had thought of nothing else, night or day, but this great event. Even more, she had done what no other person had done,-- she had learned the secret of the doors. She knew behind which of the two stood the tiger, and in which waited the lady. Gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

And not only did she know behind which door stood the lady, but she knew who the lady was. It was one of the fairest and loveliest of women in the kingdom; and the princess hated her. Often she had seen, or imagined that she had seen, this fair creature throwing glances of admiration upon her lover, and sometimes she thought these glances were noticed, and even returned. Now and then she had seen them talking together; it may have been about nothing important, but how could she know that? The girl was lovely, but she had dared to raise her eyes to the lover of the princess; and, with all the intensity of her semi-barbaric nature, she hated the woman who waited behind that silent door.

When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers as she sat there, he saw right away that she knew behind which door crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He understood her heart, and he knew that she would never

rest until she had made plain to herself this thing, hidden to all other lookers-on, even to the king; and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded.

Then it was that his quick and anxious glance asked the question: "Which?" It was as plain to her as if he shouted it from where he stood. There was not an instant to be lost. The question was asked in a flash; it must be answered just as quickly.

Her right arm lay on the arm of her throner. She raised her hand, and made a slight, quick movement toward the right. No one but her lover saw her. Every eye but his was fixed on the man in the arena.

He turned, and with a firm and rapid step he walked across the empty space. Every heart stopped beating, every breath was held, every eye was fixed immovably upon that man. Without the slightest hesitation, he went to the door on the right, and opened it.

Now, the point of the story is this: Did the tiger come out of that door, or did the lady?

The more we reflect upon this question, the harder it is to answer. It involves a study of the human heart and the heart is a difficult animal to know. Think of it, fair reader, not as if the decision of the question depended upon yourself, but upon that hot-blooded, semi-barbaric princess, her soul at a white heat beneath the combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?

How often, in her waking hours and in her dreams, had she screamed in wild horror, and covered her face with her hands as she thought of her lover opening the door on the other side of which waited the cruel fangs of the tiger!

But also, how often had she seen him at the other door! How in her jealous heart had she gnashed her teeth, and pulled her hair, when she saw his relief and delight as he opened the door of the lady! How her soul had burned in agony when she had seen him rush to meet that woman; when she had seen him lead her to the center of the arena; when she had heard the glad shouts from the crowd, and the wild ringing of the happy bells; when she had seen the priest, with his joyous followers, advance to the couple, and make them man and wife before her very eyes; and when she had seen them walk away together upon their path of flowers, followed by the tremendous shouts of the people, in which her own cries of sorrow and loss were drowned!

Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the beautiful lands of semi-barbaric future?

And yet, that awful tiger, those shrieks, that blood!

Her decision had been indicated in an instant, but it had been made after days and nights of anguished deliberation. She had known she would be asked, she had decided what she would answer, and, without the slightest hesitation, she had moved her hand to the right.

The question of her decision is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to set myself up as the one person able to answer it. And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door, -- the lady, or the tiger?