

# The Lady or the Tiger

Frank Stockton

*Behind one door, a hungry tiger waited. Behind the other door was a beautiful woman.*

Many years ago there lived a strange and savage king. He had a wild imagination and a very strong will. He loved to have everything his way. Each day he and himself talked together. Whatever they agreed upon was quickly done. For he was the king and all powerful.

Some people said the king's ideas were strange. But they said this softly, very softly—when no one was around.

The king liked the idea of the public arena. In other countries, it was a place where men and beasts showed their courage by fighting each other. But this king used the arena in a different way: to reward the innocent and to punish the guilty. Here is how it worked:

A man was accused of a crime. If the

crime was important enough to interest the king, he posted a notice. All the citizens of the land were invited to attend the trial in the king's arena.



When the day arrived, a large crowd would gather. First the people took their seats. Then the king would appear, followed by his court. He sat high on his throne on one side of the arena.

When the king gave a signal, the accused man would step out into the arena. Opposite the king were two doors. They were side by side and exactly alike.

The prisoner would walk straight to these doors and open one of them. He could open either door he pleased. No one helped him decide.

Behind one door was a hungry tiger. If he opened that door, the tiger leaped out. It tore the man to pieces. That was the punishment for his guilt. Then iron bells clanged, and cries of sorrow were heard. The people bowed their heads and went slowly home. They were sad that anyone should have met such a terrible fate.

But if the prisoner opened the other door, a lady stepped out. She was as perfect a match for him as could be found. The king would clap his hands. At this, a priest would appear and marry them at once. Then bells rang out, and music played. The crowd shouted and cheered and threw flowers in the path of the innocent man as he led his bride to his home.

It did not matter if the man already had a wife and family. It did not matter if he wanted to marry some other. For as the king liked to explain, "That is of no importance. Nothing can in-

terfere with my plan for rewarding the innocent and punishing the guilty."

The king believed this method was just. Its fairness was clear. The accused man could open either door he pleased. The choice was his own. The lady or the tiger would simply carry out the fate he had chosen.

The plan was popular with the people, too. They could never guess what they were going to see. Would it be a cruel killing or a wild wedding? No one knew.

It happened that this savage king had a beautiful daughter. She was as high-spirited and as imaginative as her father. The king loved her above all others. But the princess did not always obey her father's wishes, especially in matters of the heart. She fell in love with a man. But her father did not approve of him.

The man was a slave of the king. He was both handsome and brave. And though he was just a slave, the princess loved him dearly.

Their love affair went on happily for many months. But when the king found out about it, the young man was thrown into jail. A date was set for his trial in the king's arena.

Of course, this was an important case. The king and his people were greatly interested in it. Never before had a slave dared to love the daughter of a king.

Men were sent to find the fiercest tiger in the country. Judges searched for the loveliest maiden in the land. If the youth were not torn to pieces, it

was right that he have a fitting bride.

Of course everyone knew the slave was guilty. He admitted he loved the princess! But the king did not let this fact stand in his way. He enjoyed the justice of his arena too much. Besides, the slave would be murdered or married. In either case, he'd be out of the way.

At last, the great day came. Never before had there been such a crowd! The people shoved and pushed. Some could not even get into the arena. They stood waiting for the news at the outside walls.

Finally the king and his court took their places. The signal was given. A

door opened and the slave entered the arena. What a sight he made—handsome and tall. No wonder the princess loved him. What a terrible thing for him to be there! The youth walked across the field. Then he stopped. He turned and bowed to the king. He was not thinking of the king, however. His eyes were fixed on the princess who sat beside her father.

For weeks, the princess had thought of nothing else but this day. Finally she had done what no one else before her had ever done. She had



learned the secret of the doors. Gold, and her power as the king's daughter, had bought her the secret.

But she knew more than which door hid the lady. She also knew the lady's face. She was one of the most beautiful women in the king's court.

And the princess hated her.

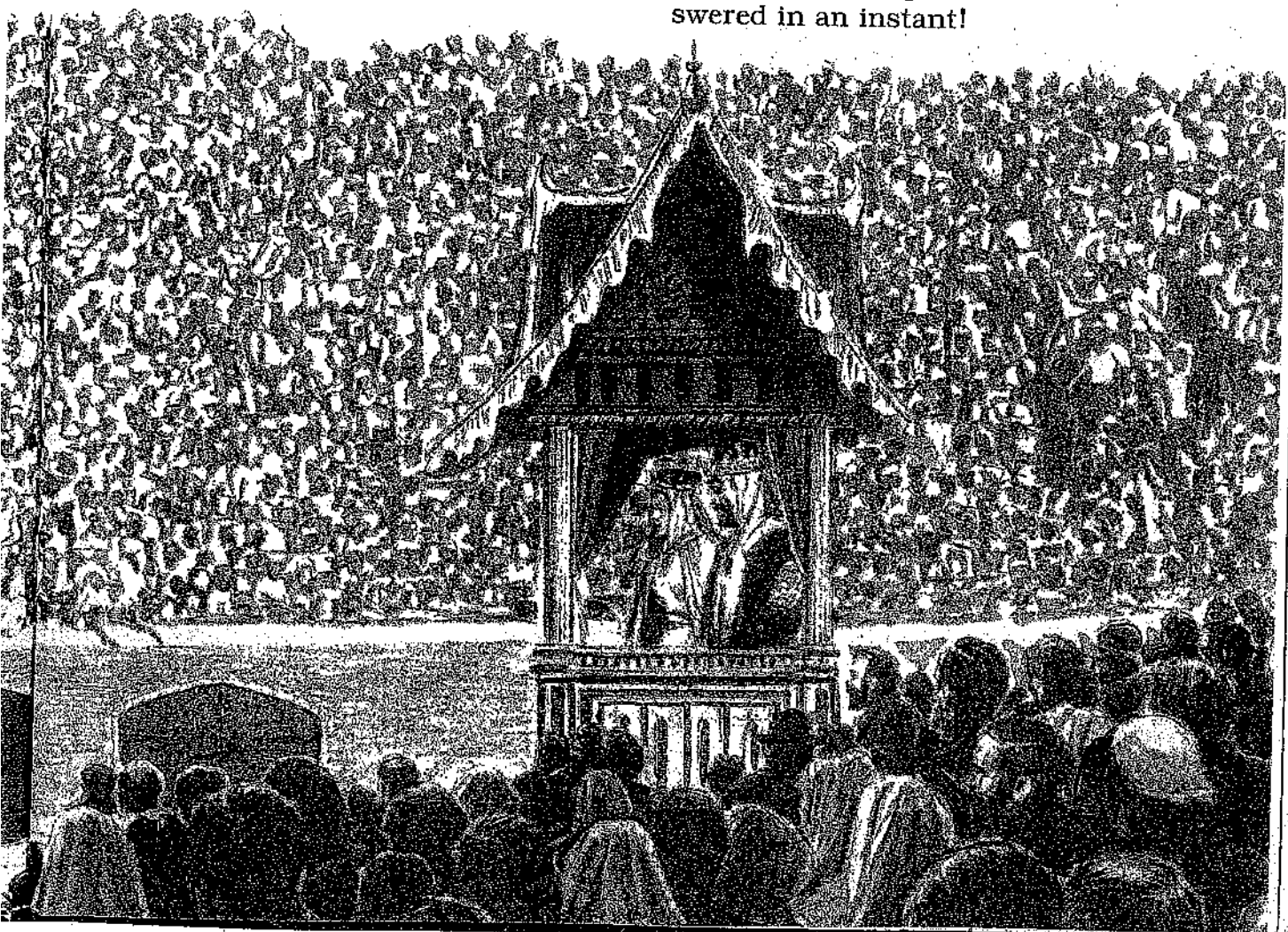
The princess had often seen the lady looking at her lover. She thought that he had even glanced back. Once she had seen them talking together. It might have been nothing—but who could tell?

The lady was lovely. But she had dared to look at the princess's lover! And now she stood waiting for him behind that silent door!

The prisoner's eyes were still fixed on the princess. He searched her pale face closely. Then he saw that she knew! She *knew* behind which door crouched the tiger, behind which stood the lady.

He stared at her. And his eyes burned with the question: WHICH?

The princess knew he was asking. It was as plain to her as if he had shouted it aloud. There was not a second to lose. The question must be answered in an instant!





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The princess raised her hand and made a motion to the right. No one but her lover saw her. Every eye was on the man in the arena.

He turned. With a quick step he walked across the arena. Every heart stopped beating. Every breath was held. Then with a firm hand, he gripped the door on the right. He pulled it open.

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

The more we think about this question, the harder it is to answer. It means we must study the human heart. Think about it.

She was a wild and savage princess. Her soul was burning with jealousy and hatred. She had lost her lover. Should another woman have him?

How often she had imagined seeing the tiger leap out with its terrible fangs! She had seen its claws ripping wildly! Then she would cover her face with her hands and tremble.

But then she also imagined him at the other door! She saw his look of delight as he smiled at the lady! She saw him rush to the woman she hated! She heard the glad shouts and the bells ringing wildly! She saw the priest marry the couple while she helplessly sat there! Then she bit her lips, and she tore her hair. Would it not be better for him to die at once! And yet—that awful tiger, those

screams, that blood!

She had given her answer in an instant. But she had thought about it for many days. She had known she would be asked. She had decided what she would answer. Without a moment's delay, she had moved her hand to the right.

The question I leave to you all is this: Which came out of the opened door—the lady or the tiger?

## About the Author

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Frank Stockton (1834-1902) \_\_\_\_\_

"The Lady or the Tiger" is Frank Stockton's best-known short story. It is also one of the most famous short stories ever written. Its unusual ending has delighted readers for many years.

Stockton was born in Philadelphia and spent his early years working as an en-

graver and as an author of children's books.

He did not begin writing for adults until he was nearly forty. "The Lady or the Tiger" created a sensation when it appeared. The story made Stockton famous. It was later made into a musical comedy.