

“The Lady or the Tiger?”

By Frank Stockton

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BIOGRAPHY: FRANK R. STOCKTON (1834–1902)

Frank Richard Stockton was an American writer and humorist best known for refusing to give his readers what they most expected: a clear, resolved ending. Born in Philadelphia, Stockton began his career as a professional wood engraver, a job that required careful attention to detail and precision. That same precision appears in his writing, which is known for its logical structure, controlled setup, and carefully constructed dilemmas. Stockton became an important figure in the literary culture of the late 19th century, a period often associated with Victorian values such as order, fairness, and moral clarity. He served as an editor for *St. Nicholas Magazine* and wrote a wide range of popular works, including fairy tales and humorous novels. However, he is best remembered for his 1882 short story, "*The Lady, or the Tiger?*," which challenged readers' expectations in a new and surprising way.

The Legacy of the "Riddle Story"

When "*The Lady, or the Tiger?*" was first published, it quickly became a cultural phenomenon. Readers debated the ending in social gatherings, classrooms, and publications, all asking the same question: which door did the princess choose? Stockton deliberately refused to answer. He believed the story was not meant to provide a solution, but to reveal something about the reader.

"If you decide which it was—the lady or the tiger—you find out what kind of person you are."

Because of this, Stockton is often seen as a pioneer of the "riddle story," a form of fiction that invites the reader to participate in creating meaning rather than simply receiving it.

Connection to *The Lady, or the Tiger?*

Although the story takes place in a fictional kingdom, its values reflect those associated with Victorian society. The arena is presented as a system of justice that appears fair, orderly, and rational—qualities that Victorian culture often claimed to uphold. However, Stockton uses this system to expose its weaknesses. The outcome is not truly based on justice, but on power, control, and human emotion. The king determines what is behind each door, and the princess's feelings influence what is supposed to be an impartial process. This suggests that systems that appear fair on the surface may still be deeply flawed. By leaving the ending unresolved, Stockton forces the reader to confront this uncertainty and question whether true fairness is ever possible.

Reading Focus

As you read, consider how the story functions as a "riddle." What does your interpretation of the ending suggest about the princess—and about human nature more broadly? Also think about the system of justice in the story. Does it truly produce fair outcomes, or does it only create the illusion of fairness?

KEY TERMS: THE "BARBARIC" SPECTRUM

Barbaric: Refers to raw, unchecked human emotion. While we usually use this word to mean "uncivilized," Stockton uses it to describe characters who act on their primal instincts, like intense jealousy, sudden rage, or overwhelming passion, without the "filter" of social etiquette.

Semi-Barbaric: Refers to the specific state of the King and the Princess. They have the "polish" of civilization (they use laws, fancy language, and have high social status), but they still have a "barbaric" core. The King is semi-barbaric because he uses a complex arena (civilized) to deliver a random, bloody execution (barbaric). The Princess is semi-barbaric because she lives in a palace (civilized) but her soul is "at a white heat" of despair and jealousy (barbaric).

Barbarism: Used to describe an inherited trait or influence. It is Stockton's way of telling the reader that the characters are capable of extreme actions because it is part of their fundamental nature.

Reading Strategy: Whenever you see one of these words, ask yourself: *Is the character acting like a "refined" member of society, or is their "barbaric" side taking over?*

The Lady or the Tiger?

In the very olden time there lived a semi-barbaric king, whose ideas, though somewhat polished and sharpened by the progressiveness of distant Latin neighbors, were still large, florid, and untrammelled¹, as became the half of him which was barbaric. He was a man of exuberant² fancy, and, withal³, of an authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied fancies into facts. He was greatly given to self-communing, and, when he and himself agreed upon anything, the thing was done. When every member of his domestic and political systems moved smoothly in its appointed course, his nature was bland and genial⁴; but, whenever there was a little hitch, and some of his orbs got out of their orbits, he was blander and more genial still, for nothing pleased him so much as to make the crooked straight and crush down uneven places.

10

Among the borrowed notions by which his barbarism had become semified⁵ was that of the public arena, in which, by exhibitions of manly and beastly valor, the minds of his subjects were refined and cultured.

¹ **Untrammelled:** Not deprived of freedom of action or expression; unrestrained.

² **Exuberant:** Filled with or characterized by a lively energy and excitement (Stockton uses this to describe the King's "fancy" or imagination).

³ **Withal:** In addition; nevertheless (an archaic transition word).

⁴ **Genial:** Cheerful and friendly (Stockton uses this ironically to describe the King when things are going his way).

⁵ **Semified:** Made to seem civilized through borrowed ideas or customs, though not genuinely refined or just

But even here the exuberant and barbaric fancy asserted itself. The arena of the king was built, not to give the people an opportunity of hearing the rhapsodies⁶ of dying gladiators, nor to enable them to view the inevitable conclusion of a conflict between religious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheater, with its encircling galleries, its mysterious vaults, and its
 20 unseen passages, was an agent of poetic justice, in which crime was punished, or virtue rewarded, by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible⁷ chance.

When a subject 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, a structure which well deserved its name, for, although its form and plan were borrowed from afar, its purpose emanated⁸ solely from the brain of this man, who, every
 barleycorn⁹ a king, knew no tradition to which he owed more allegiance than pleased his fancy, and who ingrafted on every adopted form of human thought and action the rich growth of his barbaric idealism.

When all the people had assembled in the galleries, and the king, surrounded by his court, sat high up on his throne of royal state on one side of the arena, he gave a signal, a door beneath
 30 him opened, and the accused subject stepped out into the amphitheater. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the enclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side. It was the duty and the privilege 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 aforementioned impartial and incorruptible chance. If he opened the one, there came out of it a hungry tiger, the fiercest and most cruel that could be procured, which immediately sprang upon him and tore him to pieces as a punishment for his guilt. The moment that the case of the criminal was thus decided, doleful¹⁰ iron bells were clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience,
 40 with bowed heads and downcast hearts, wended¹¹ slowly their homeward way, mourning greatly that one so young and fair, or so old and respected, should have merited so dire a fate.

But, if the accused person opened the other door, there came forth from it a lady, the most suitable to his years and station that his majesty could select among his fair subjects, and to this lady he was immediately married, as a reward of his innocence. It mattered not that he might already possess a wife and family, or that his affections might be engaged upon an object of his own selection; the king allowed no such subordinate arrangements to interfere with his great scheme of retribution¹² and reward. The exercises, as in the other instance, took place

⁶ **Rhapsodies:** An effusively enthusiastic or ecstatic expression of feeling (referring to the "dying gladiator's" songs).

⁷ **Incorruptible:** Not susceptible to corruption; honest (referring to the "chance" of the two doors).

⁸ **Emanated:** To spread out from a source (referring to the King's ideas coming from his own brain).

⁹ **Barleycorn:** A small unit of measurement (Stockton uses the phrase "every barleycorn a king" to mean he was a king through and through).

¹⁰ **Doleful:** Expressing sorrow; mournful.

¹¹ **Wended:** To go in a specified direction, typically slowly or by an indirect route.

¹² **Retribution:** Punishment inflicted on someone as vengeance for a wrong or criminal act.

immediately, and in the arena. Another door opened beneath the king, and a priest, followed by a band of choristers, and dancing maidens blowing joyous airs on golden horns and treading an epithalamic¹³ measure, advanced to where the pair stood, side by side, and the wedding was promptly and cheerily solemnized¹⁴. Then the gay brass bells rang forth their merry peals, the people shouted glad hurrahs, and the innocent man, preceded by children strewing flowers on his path, led his bride to his home.

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 opened either he pleased, without having the slightest idea whether, in the next instant, he was to be devoured or married. On some occasions the tiger came out of one door, and on some out of the other. The decisions of this tribunal¹⁵ were not only fair, they were positively determinate¹⁶: the accused person was instantly punished if he found himself guilty, and, if innocent, he was rewarded on the spot, whether he liked it or not. There was no escape from the judgments of the king's arena.

The institution was a very popular 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 hilarious wedding. This element of uncertainty lent an interest to the occasion which it could not otherwise have attained. Thus, the masses were entertained and pleased, and the thinking part of the community could bring no charge of unfairness against this plan, for did not the accused person have the whole matter in his own hands?

This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his most florid¹⁷ fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious¹⁸ as his own. As is usual in such cases, she was the apple of his eye, and was loved by him above all humanity. Among his courtiers was a young man of that fineness of blood and lowness of station common to the conventional heroes of romance who love royal maidens. This royal maiden was well satisfied with her lover, for he was handsome and brave to a degree unsurpassed in all this kingdom, and she loved him with an ardor¹⁹ that had enough of barbarism in it to make it exceedingly warm and strong. This love affair moved on happily for many months, until one day the king happened to discover its existence. He did not hesitate nor waver in regard to his duty in the premises. The youth 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

¹³ **Epithalamic:** Relating to a song or poem celebrating a marriage (this is a **very** high-level word that almost no student will know).

¹⁴ **Solemnized:** To perform the official marriage ceremony.

¹⁵ **Tribunal:** A court of justice.

¹⁶ **Determinate:** Firmly established and forthcoming; settled.

¹⁷ **Florid:** Elaborate, flowery, or excessively ornate (used here to describe the King's wild imagination).

¹⁸ **Imperious:** Assuming power or authority without justification; arrogant and domineering.

¹⁹ **Ardor:** Enthusiasm or passion.

80 before had a subject dared to love the daughter of the king. In after years such things became commonplace enough, but then they were in no slight degree novel and startling.

The tiger-cages of the kingdom were searched for the most savage and relentless beasts, from which the fiercest monster might be selected for the arena; and the ranks of maiden youth and beauty throughout the land were carefully surveyed by competent judges in order that the young man might have a fitting bride in case fate did not determine for him a different destiny. Of course, everybody knew that the deed with which the accused was charged had been done. He 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 tribunal, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair
90 watching the course of events, which would determine whether or not the young man had done wrong in allowing himself to love the princess.

The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered, and thronged the great galleries of the arena, and crowds, unable to gain admittance, massed themselves against its outside walls. The king and his court were in their places, opposite the twin doors, those fateful portals, so terrible in their similarity.

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 greeted with a low hum of admiration and anxiety. Half the audience had not known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

100 As the youth advanced into the arena he turned, as the custom was, to bow to the king, but he did not think at all of that royal personage. His eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Had it not been for the moiety²⁰ of barbarism in her nature it is probable that lady would not have been there, but her intense and fervid²¹ soul would not allow her to be absent on an occasion in which she was so terribly interested. From the moment that the decree had gone forth that her lover should decide his fate in the king's arena, she had thought of nothing, night or day, but this great event and the various subjects connected with it. Possessed of more power, influence, and force of character than any one who had ever before been interested in such a case, she had done what no other person had done - she had
110 possessed herself of the secret of the doors. She knew in which of the two rooms, that lay behind those doors, stood the cage of the tiger, with its open front, and in which waited the lady. Through these thick doors, heavily curtained with skins on the inside, it was impossible that any noise or suggestion should come from within to the person who should approach to raise the latch of one of them. But gold, and the power of a woman's will, had brought the secret to the princess.

²⁰ **Moiety:** A distinct part or portion; half (used to describe the "half" of the Princess that was barbaric).

²¹ **Fervid:** Intensely enthusiastic or passionate, especially to an excessive degree.

And not only did she know in which room stood the lady ready to emerge, all blushing and radiant, should her door be opened, but she knew who the lady was. It was one of the fairest and loveliest of the damsels of the court who had been selected as the reward of the accused youth, should he be proved innocent of the crime of aspiring to one so far above him; and the princess hated her. Often had she seen, or imagined that she had seen, this fair creature
 120 throwing glances of admiration upon the person of her lover, and sometimes she thought these glances were perceived, and even returned. Now and then she had seen them talking together; it was but for a moment or two, but much can be said in a brief space; it may have been on most unimportant topics, but how could she know that? The girl was lovely, but she had dared to raise her eyes to the loved one of the princess; and, with all the intensity of the savage blood transmitted to her through long lines of wholly barbaric ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled behind that silent door.

When her lover turned and looked at her, and his eye met hers as she sat there, paler and whiter than any one in the vast ocean of anxious faces about her, he saw, by that power of quick perception which is given to those whose souls are one, that she knew behind which door
 130 crouched the tiger, and behind which stood the lady. He had expected her to know it. He understood her nature, and his soul was assured that she would never rest until she had made plain to herself this thing, hidden to all other lookers-on, even to the king. The only hope for the youth in which there was any element of certainty was based upon the success of the princess in discovering this mystery; and the moment he looked upon her, he saw she had succeeded, as in his soul he knew she would succeed.

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 in another.

Her right arm lay on the cushioned parapet²² before her. 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.
 140

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 which leads us through devious mazes of passion, out of which it is difficult to find our way. 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
 150 combined fires of despair and jealousy. She had lost him, but who should have him?

²² **Parapet:** A low protective wall along the edge of a roof, bridge, or balcony (where the Princess was sitting).

How often, in her waking hours and in her dreams, had she started 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!

160 But how much oftener had she seen him at the other door! How in her grievous reveries²³ had she gnashed her teeth, and torn her hair, when she saw his start of rapturous 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, with her flushing cheek and sparkling eye of triumph; when she had seen him lead her forth, his whole frame kindled with the joy of recovered life; when she had heard the glad shouts from the multitude, 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 hilarious multitude, in which her one despairing shriek was lost and drowned!

Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the blessed regions of semi-barbaric futurity?

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.

170 The question of her decision is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to presume 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?

GUIDED READING & THINKING: "THE LADY, OR THE TIGER?"

I. The Setup (The King and His Arena)

- **Notice the Narrative Voice:** In the first few paragraphs, Stockton describes the King as "semi-barbaric." As you read, look for examples of his "civilized" side versus his "barbaric" side. Which side seems to win out in the way he runs his justice system?
- **The Logic of the Arena:** Pause after reading the description of the two doors. Stockton calls this system "perfectly fair" because the accused chooses their own fate. **Think:** Is a choice still "fair" if the person choosing has zero information? How does this reflect the King's character?

²³ **Reveries:** A state of being pleasantly lost in one's thoughts; a daydream.

II. The Conflict (*The Princess and Her Lover*)

- **The Power Dynamic:** The Princess is described as having a soul "as fervent and imperious" as her father's. As soon as her lover is arrested, she begins her "gold-searching" mission to find out the secret of the doors. **Think:** Does she do this to *save* him, or to *control* the outcome? What in the text suggests her motivation?
- **The Rivalry:** Pay close attention to the description of the "Lady" behind one of the doors. The text mentions the Princess had seen her "throwing glances" at the lover. **Inference:** How does this specific detail change the stakes for the Princess? Is she deciding between a tiger and a lady, or a tiger and a *rival*?

III. The Turning Point (*The Signal*)

- **The Moment of Choice:** When the young man looks up at the Princess, he sees her make a "slight, quick movement" to the right. Stockton notes he did this "without a hesitation." **Think:** Does his immediate trust in her signal show that he knows her heart, or that he is blinded by his own love?
- **The Internal Maze:** Read the section where Stockton describes the Princess's sleepless nights. **Notice:** He lists her reasons for choosing the Tiger and her reasons for choosing the Lady. Which side of her internal argument is described with more "barbaric" intensity?

IV. The "Riddle" Ending

- **The Author's Intervention:** At the very end, Stockton stops the story and speaks directly to you, the reader. **Thinking Prompt:** Why does he shift the responsibility of the ending to the audience? If he had picked an ending for us, would the story still be famous 140 years later?
- **The Mirror Test:** Based on the "semi-barbaric" traits Stockton established for the Princess earlier in the story, which door do you think *her character* would realistically choose? (Forget what you *want* to happen—what does the text say she is *capable* of doing?)