

# THE LADY, OR THE TIGER?

by

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5 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 untrammelled, as became the half of him which was  
barbaric. He was a man of exuberant fancy, and, withal, of an  
authority so irresistible that, at his will, he turned his varied  
10 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 genial; but, whenever there was a little hitch,  
15 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.

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

25 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 rhapsodies 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,

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its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of  
30 poetic justice, in which crime was punished, or virtue rewarded,  
by the decrees of an impartial and incorruptible chance.

When a subject was accused of a crime of sufficient importance  
to interest the king, public notice was given that on an  
35 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 emanated solely from the brain of this man, who, every  
barleycorn a king, knew no tradition to which he owed more  
40 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  
45 state on one side of the arena, he gave a signal, a door  
beneath him opened, and the accused subject stepped out into  
the amphitheater. Directly opposite him, on the other side of the  
inclosed space, were two doors, exactly alike and side by side.  
It was the duty and the privilege of the person on trial to walk  
50 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  
55 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, doleful iron bells were  
clanged, great wails went up from the hired mourners posted on  
the outer rim of the arena, and the vast audience, with bowed  
60 heads and downcast hearts, wended 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  
65 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

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70 arrangements to interfere with his great scheme of retribution  
and reward. The exercises, as in the other instance, took place  
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  
75 treading an epithalamic measure, advanced to where the pair  
stood, side by side, and the wedding was promptly and cheerily  
solemnized. 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.

80 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  
85 occasions the tiger came out of one door, and on some out of  
the other. The decisions of this tribunal were not only fair, they  
were positively determinate: 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  
90 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  
95 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?

100 This semi-barbaric king had a daughter as blooming as his  
most florid fancies, and with a soul as fervent and imperious 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  
105 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

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110 an ardor 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,  
115 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 subject dared to love the daughter  
120 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  
125 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  
130 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  
135 how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and  
the king would take an aesthetic pleasure in watching the  
course of events, which would determine whether or not the  
young man had done wrong in allowing himself to love the  
princess.

140 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.

145 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

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150 known so grand a youth had lived among them. No wonder the princess loved him! What a terrible thing for him to be there!

155 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 moiety of barbarism in her nature it is probable that lady would not have been there, but her intense and fervid 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 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.

175 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 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

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190 ancestors, she hated the woman who blushed and trembled  
behind that silent door.

195 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 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  
200 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.

205 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.

210 Her right arm lay on the cushioned parapet 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.

215 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?

220 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

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225 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  
started in wild horror, and covered her face with her hands as  
230 she thought of her lover opening the door on the other side of  
which waited the cruel fangs of the tiger!

But how much oftener had she seen him at the other door! How  
in her grievous reveries 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  
235 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  
240 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  
245 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  
250 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,  
255 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?