BACKGROUND: During the Middle Ages, an accused person’s guilt or innocence was often determined by a trial by ordeal. If the person was not hurt during a physical test, it was believed the accused was saved from harm by God and was therefore innocent. Those who were injured or killed were viewed as guilty. In this story, justice is determined in a similar way.

THE LADY, OR THE TIGER?
BY FRANK STOCKTON

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 unrestricted, 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 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, 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.

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

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, its mysterious vaults, and its unseen passages, was an agent of 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 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 came solely from the brain of the king....

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 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, 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 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.

Summarize the trial process for those found guilty:

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 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 dancers, advanced to where the pair stood, side by side, and the wedding was promptly and cheerily solemnized. Then the 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 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.

Based on what you know about the king, why do you think he created this system of justice? Can you identify the verbal irony in the above passage?

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 florid fancies, and with a soul as passionate 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 dearly. 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. 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 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 determined him innocent. 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 court, in which he took such great delight and satisfaction. No matter how the affair turned out, the youth would be disposed of, and the king would take 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.

The appointed day arrived. From far and near the people gathered. 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!

As the youth advanced into the arena he turned, as the custom was, to bow to the king. His eyes were fixed upon the princess, who sat to the right of her father. Her intense 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 power, influence, and force of character, she had done what no other person had done - she had learned the secret of the doors. She knew in which of the two rooms stood the cage of the tiger and in which waited the lady.

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 proven innocent of the crime of loving a lady so far above him; and the princess hated her. Often had she seen this fair creature throwing glances of admiration upon 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 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, he saw 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 for the youth 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 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.

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 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 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 sorrowful thoughts had
she gnashed her teeth, and torn her hair, when she saw his rapturous delight as he opened the
door of the lady! How her soul had burned in agony when she had imagined him rushing to
meet that woman, with her flushing cheek and sparkling eye of triumph; when she had
envisioned him leading her forth, his whole frame kindled with the joy of recovered life; when
she had heard the glad shouts and the wild ringing of the happy bells; when she had seen the
priest 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!

Does the above paragraph make it seem likely that the princess has sent the young man to the tiger? Explain your opinion.

Would it not be better for him to die at once, and go to wait for her in the blessed 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 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?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** When Frank R. Stockton (1834-1902) wrote “The Lady, or the Tiger?” he never imagined that his inspired idea for a story would bring him lasting fame. In 1882, Stockton concocted a lively story, which he called “In the King’s Arena,” to entertain some friends at a party. *Century Magazine* published it as “The Lady, or the Tiger?” and Stockton became famous overnight. Hundreds of readers pestered him, demanding that he decide the story’s outcome one can for all. Stockton did finally respond to his readers, but his answer was not the one they had hoped for. “If you decide which it was—the lady, or the tiger—you find out what kind of a person you are yourself.” Stockton was admired by his contemporaries. Near the end of his life, one critic praised him for his “inventiveness,” a quality that the modern reader can certainly appreciate.