THE LADY, OR THE TIGER?

by

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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 untrammeled, 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 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.

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 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 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 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 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 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.

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

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 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.

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 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 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 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 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 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, 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 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 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.

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!

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.

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 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

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 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

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 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.

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?

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