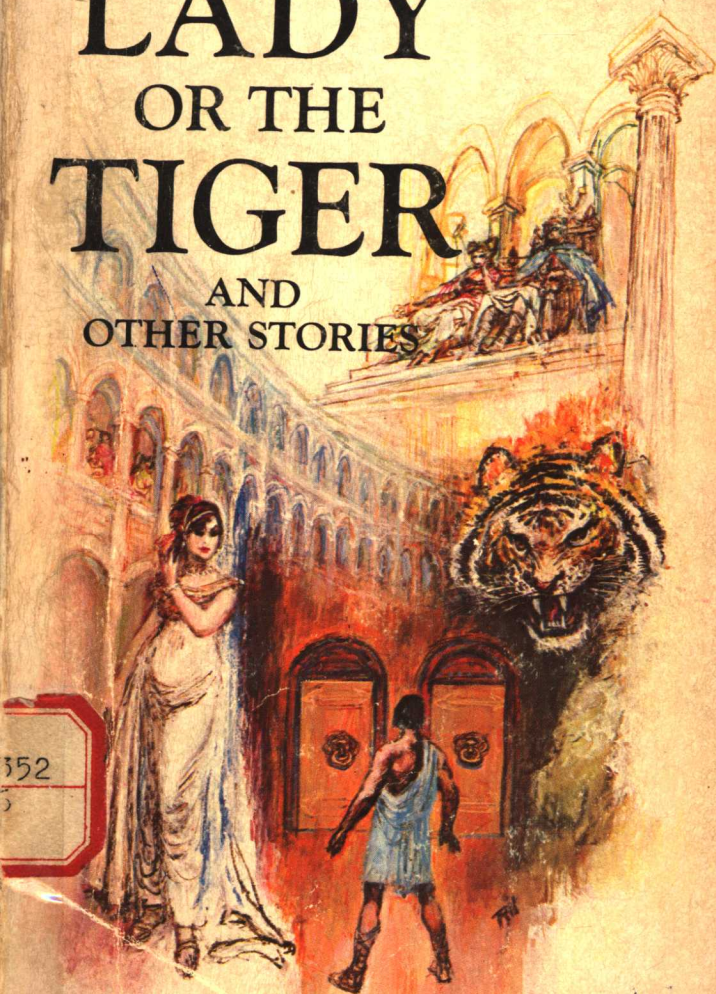


THE LADY OR THE TIGER

AND
OTHER STORIES

**FRANK
STOCKTON**



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Introduction by Francis R. Gemme

THE
LADY
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FRANK STOCKTON



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Introduction

The short story is one of the most popular kinds of literature. It is a form in which American writers have excelled. From its romantic beginnings early in the last century, with the tales of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to the realistic stories of Stephen Crane, Henry James, O. Henry and Jack London at the turn of the century, nearly every major American prose writer has written significant short fiction. The twentieth century, with its wealth of literary talent, such as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, to mention only a few, has continued the same developmental process; it is a widely accepted literary convention that a writer learns his craft by writing short stories, and Frank R. Stockton is no exception to this generalization.

Francis Richard Stockton was born in Philadelphia on April 5, 1834. He was the third of nine children and early in his public school education showed a talent for writing. During the Civil War he worked as a wood engraver in Philadelphia and New York. His first publication, "A Northern Voice for the Dissolution of the United States of North America," reflecting a minority view of the day, appeared in 1860, the same year in which he married Marion Tuttle of Virginia. After the war, Stockton pursued a career of writing and editing. *Ting-a-Ling* (1870), his first book, was a collection of children's stories which had originally appeared in the *Riverside Magazine for Young People*. He served on the editorial staffs of *Hearth and Home*, *Century Magazine*, and *St. Nicholas* during the next decade. During this time he wrote many children's stories, some of which were included in *Tales Out of School* (1875). In 1879, he published *Rudder Grange*, the book which assured his literary position.

The last twenty years of his life were devoted exclusively to writing and he abandoned his earlier direct editorial affiliations. He produced stories and novels acclaimed for their originality, humor, and craftsmanship. *Rudder Grange* is a story about a houseboat and one of its occupants, Pamona, a humorous maid-servant. The popularity of this work called for two sequels, *The Rudder Grangers Abroad* (1891), and *Pamona's Travels* (1894). His most popular book, however, was *The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Alesbine* (1886), the humorous adventures of two widows shipwrecked on a Pacific island. *The Dusantes*,

a sequel, appeared in 1892. This period also included the publication of ten volumes of collected stories the most famous of which was *The Lady or The Tiger? and Other Stories* (1884).

Frank R. Stockton died on April 20, 1902, at Washington, D.C. Nearly twenty years later, James L. Ford in *Forty Odd Years in the Literary Shop* (1921) recalled his impression of Stockton: ". . . a slender, delicate man, slightly lame and with wonderful dark eyes. He had a distinct charm of manner and was fortunate in imparting that quality to his work." The writings of Frank R. Stockton are clearly in the mainstream of the genteel tradition which dominated the 1880's and 1890's in the American literary scene. His literary assets include his proclivity for humor, his "lively fantasy," and his skill at creating a ridiculous situation and resolving it in an ingenious and sometimes implausible way. There is no little irony in the fact that Frank Stockton and the bulk of his writing has been long forgotten; yet one story, "The Lady or The Tiger?" remains universally read and universally known.

The stories in the present collection are representative of the author's works. "The Griffin and the Minor Canon," is a fanciful tale of that mythical and fabulous animal, half eagle, half lion, who is befriended by a humble cleric in an antique land; like most fairy tales, the significance of the tale is in its insights into human nature rather than its depiction of the unbelievable. "Our Story," and "His Wife's Deceased Sister," are first person stories dealing with the ironic vicissitudes in the life of a writer; "Our Story" also features a sur-

prise ending. "Mr. Tolman" is the delightful story of a tired businessman and philanthropist whose charitable adventures in a new city result in the regeneration of his own life. "Love Before Breakfast," is the most sentimental story in the group; "sighs" are the order of the day as an insecure and erstwhile suitor courts his beloved in the not-so-secret hours before breakfast. Irony, gentility, and humor are the principal ingredients of "Our Archery Club," the story of a fanatical and fumbling amateur archer who finally makes "the most glorious shot that man could make." Finally, there is the story that the author intended to be the sequel to "The Lady or the Tiger?" While it was supposed to resolve the enigmatical ending of the former tale, "The Discourager of Hesitancy," merely enlarges the puzzle.

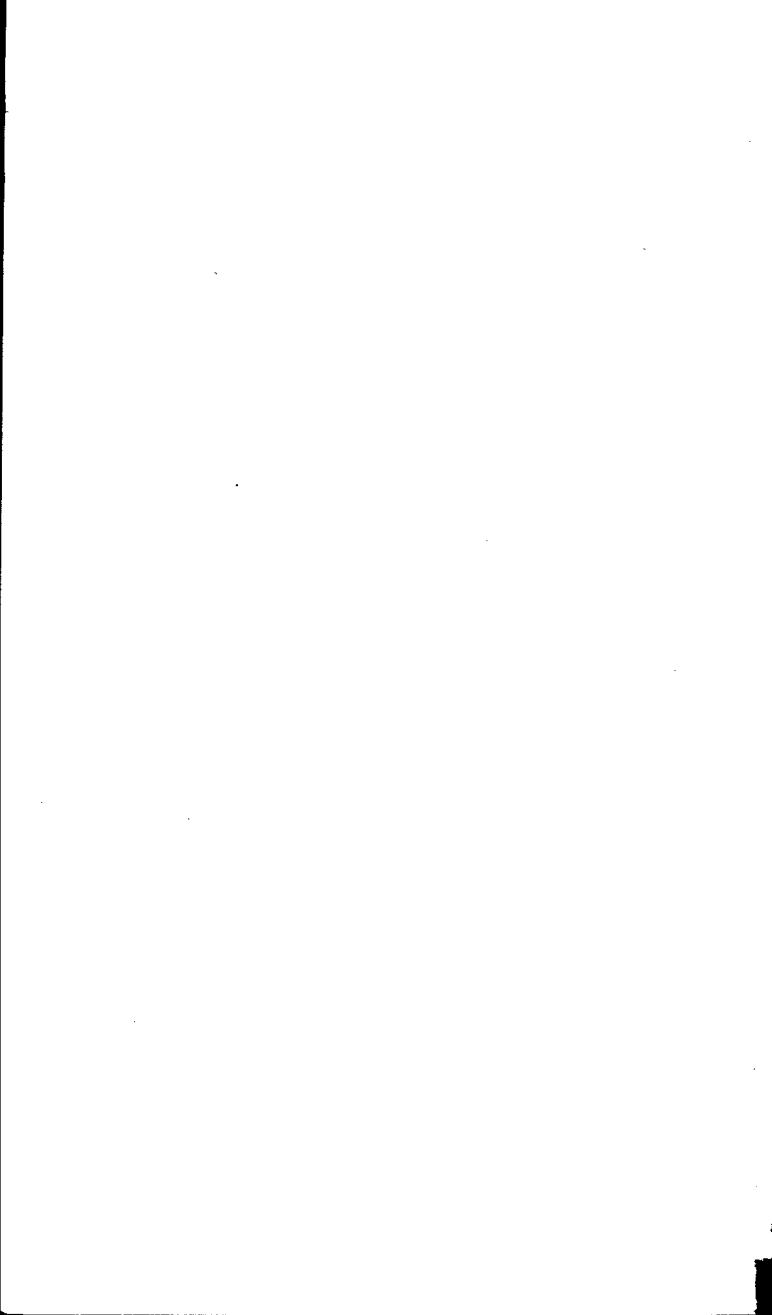
"The Lady or the Tiger?" appeared in the *Century Magazine* (November, 1882); its popularity as well as the frustration it evoked were immediate. Debates arose concerning the resolution of the action and the author was besieged by thousands of letters seeking the answer to the last line of the story: "And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door—the lady, or the tiger?" This unsolvable conclusion created one of the most famous "cliff-hangers" of all time and each reader will argue for his side in the debate which has continued for nearly ninety years.

For readers who wish additional information about the author, *Frank R. Stockton: A Critical Biography*, by Martin I. J. Griffin, remains the definitive biography and also includes a detailed bibliography of the

author's works. The standard edition is the twenty-three volume *Novels and Stories of Frank R. Stockton* (New York, 1889-1904). Two articles of particular relevance to the author's most famous story are his own "How I wrote 'The Lady or The Tiger?'" and "What Came of the Writing of It" (*Ladies' Home Journal*, November, 1893), and Walter L. Pforzheimer's "The Lady, the Tiger, and the Author" (*Colophon*, Vol. 1, #2).

FRANCIS R. GEMME

Northampton, Massachusetts
February, 1968



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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 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 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 re-

ligious opinions and hungry jaws, but for purposes far better adapted to widen and develop the mental energies of the people. This vast amphitheatre, 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 amphitheatre. 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.

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 a 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 æsthetic 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, while 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 ad-

miration 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 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.

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 in-