



The Lady, or the Tiger?

By Bryon Cahill • Based on the original story by Frank Richard Stockton • Illustrations by Sarah Beetson

“Once upon the olden time, there was a lady and a tiger.”

“Wait a minute. I know this story. And it doesn’t start out like that.” Heads turned. A few members of the audience gasped. I was not a professional storyteller, and it probably wasn’t my business to interrupt the man on the platform. But I had just listened to this professional storyteller completely ruin the story of Robin Hood, and I wasn’t about to sit through another badly told tale.

“Ah. I see a young man in the audience has a different way of telling the story,” the storyteller called down at me from his platform. The people near me in the town square moved away, giving me a little more room to speak.

“No, not a *different* way to tell it,” I dared. “The *right* way.”

“Oooh!” a small boy taunted.

“Oh, you have the right way, do you?” the storyteller shouted loudly, so everyone would hear. “Then why don’t you come up here and tell it?”

Now, any other day, I might have just turned and ran. But something about this particular day gave me courage. The sun was shining, the marketplace was hopping—I could feel the energy of something big all around me. So I went up there. And to my surprise, the crowd applauded. Once I was on the stage, the storyteller shook my hand and offered the floor to me. I looked out and realized that an audience, when you are in front of it, is quite a different-looking creature than when you are a part of it.

“By all means, friend,” the storyteller stated, “entertain us with your version. My throat is parched from ‘Robin Hood and His Merry Don-

keys.’” Half the crowd rolled their eyes with me.

“Well . . .” I began.

“Speak up!” a man from far back shouted. The crowd had gotten bigger. It was not my imagination.

“Well!” I continued, more loudly this time. “The story *I* know started out with a king.”



“In the very olden time, there lived a semi-barbaric king. His idea of a good time was to take a man and plague his mind with torture. He had all sorts of **ingenious** ways to make an innocent man believe his own guilt (and vice versa). His best device for doing so, by far, was the arena.

“It took 5,000 of the king’s men and it took no less than 15 years to build the arena. When it was

completed, the king was beside himself with joy. It was the grandest arena in the history of arenas! Shaped in the classical style, the king’s arena was not built to showcase gladiators fighting one another to the death. Nor was it designed to hold theatrical performances or sporting events. The arena was built for thrilling trials.

“But the king’s arena was no ordinary courtroom. Not by anyone’s standards. There was no judge, and there was no jury of peers—there was just an accused man and two very large doors.

“When the accused man entered the arena, the entire kingdom applauded him from the stands above. No one missed Arena Day unless they

* vocab

INGENIOUS: inventive or clever

were deathly ill or dead. It was just that exciting.

“Your Highness,’ all the accused men would shout up to the king’s royal box. ‘I am innocent of these crimes of which I have been accused!’

“Let your fate be decided by what lies beyond the door you choose,’ the king would respond. And the trial would then begin.

“The crowd would hush. Even babies would be silent. The accused man would walk slowly toward the opposite side of the large arena. He would stand before the two **ominous** doors, willing his fate to be good, sweating greatly, and praying to whichever god he chose.

“He would approach, make his choice, turn the oversize golden knob, and open the door that would seal his fate. It was there the king thought his true brilliance lay. The king believed (actually believed!) that if an accused man truly had faith in his own innocence, he would be saved and even rewarded. If, however, an accused man *knew* he was guilty, he would be severely punished ... with death. For behind one of the doors was a beautiful maiden, ready to marry the accused man if he chose her door. The ceremony would be held right there in the arena immediately upon the door’s opening. It was always a festive event. But behind the other door was a ferocious tiger that would spring upon the accused man immediately and maul him to death. It was always a gruesome event.”



“But what if a married man chose the door with the lady behind it?” some yo-yo from the crowd shouted up to me, interrupting my flow of prose.

“An excellent question!” stated the storyteller, who up until that point had been silent and even considerably enrapt in my story.

“It mattered not if he was married,” I continued. “The king did not care for such **trifles**. He only cared for high drama. The promise of either a gorgeous wedding or a terrible slaughter was enough to please him (and his subjects, for that matter). If the accused man was already married, the semi-barbaric king would kill his entire family,

‘If the accused man was already married, the semi-barbaric king would kill his entire family, all for the sake of chaotic order.’

all for the sake of chaotic order.”

“Seems rather stupid!” shouted another voice from the crowd. I looked to the storyteller; he was grinning with delight. It took all my willpower just to resist the urge to wipe that awful grin from his face with the brute force of

my fiery fists. But no ... a deep breath cures all. I gathered my composure and got on with my story. And as I continued to tell my version of the tale, I was amazed at my ability to improvise. With every word I spoke, the details of the story I knew were shifting, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was becoming my own.



“The semi-barbaric king was, *ahem*, semi-barbaric! In fact, he was such a cruel man that he often would walk through the town square, pick a man at random, and accuse him of some crime or other. Arena Day went from being held just once a week to several days a week, and then every day! At the height of the arena’s popularity, there were enough falsely accused prisoners to hold Sunday matinees. The situation

was getting out of hand.

“Families were being disposed of left and right, good men were becoming nothing more than tiger food, and some murderers and thieves were living comfortably with their new wives. Was it stupid? No. The king’s madness was beyond stupidity. His kingdom was turning into a wasteland, a shell of its former self. After a time, the unthinkable happened—people stopped coming to the arena.

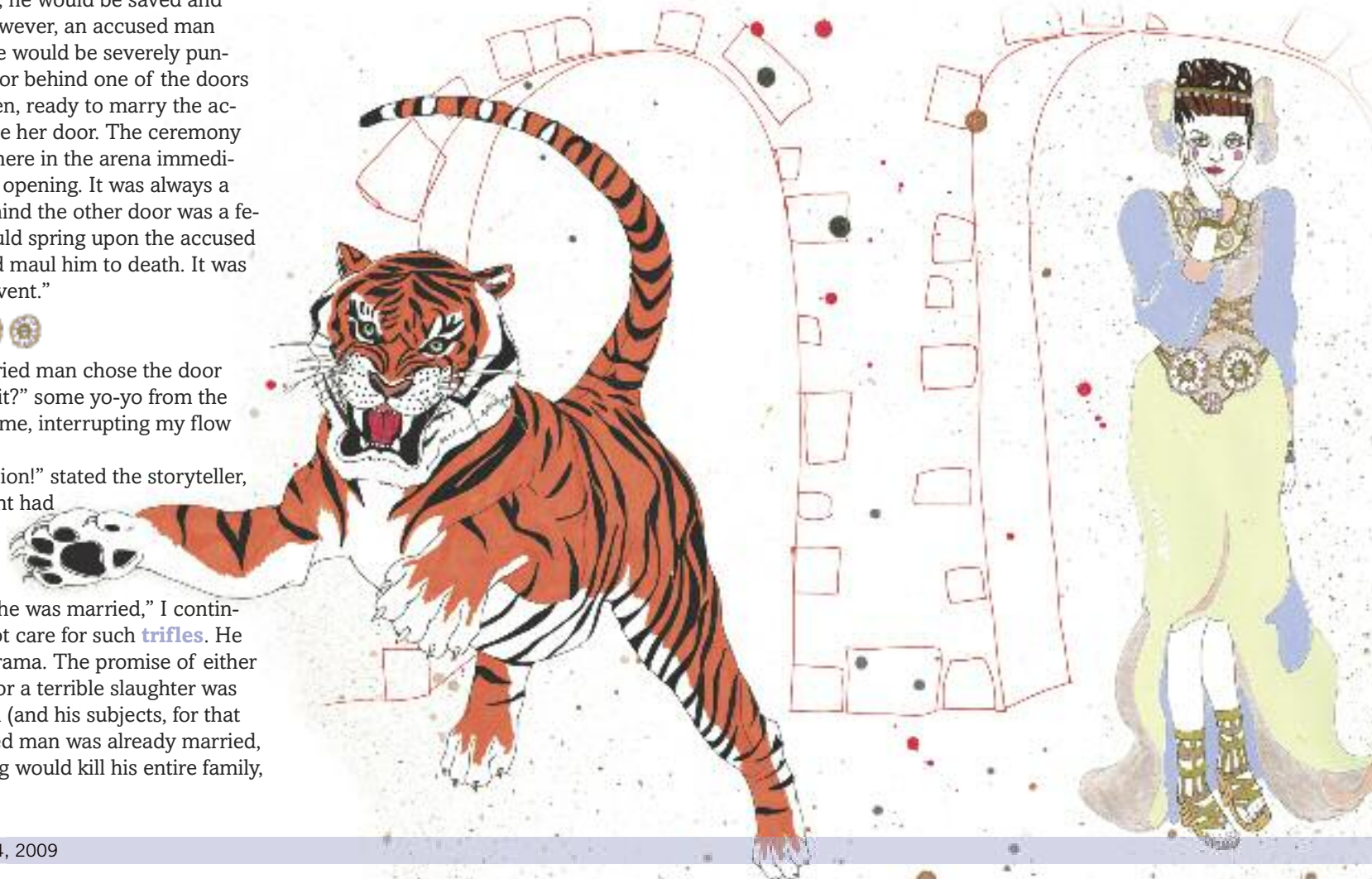
“It happened gradually. So gradually, in fact, that the king barely noticed the empty seats until the arena was barely half filled. As more and more executions and weddings occurred, fewer and fewer of his people showed up. That was partly because there were considerably fewer and fewer people alive in his kingdom. It was also a result of the remaining folks’ declining interest coupled with their growing hatred for the king. It soon became clear to the awful ruler that something had to be done.

“Now, during all of that graphic bloodshed and false merriment, the king’s daughter was beside herself with grief for other reasons. For you see, the princess was in love with a gentleman who was not of noble birth. He was a man. Just a simple man who loved her and was loved ferociously *by* her. He was a seller of wares in the marketplace. She snuck away to see him every chance she got (which wasn’t that often as the princess was constantly guarded).

“During their doomed courtship, the princess often spoke of her concerns to her love. ‘Oh, William,’ she said, for his name was William. ‘My father is going too far! He’s pulling good men off the streets for no reason and subjecting them to the perils of the arena! No one is safe! If you were to die ... or worse ... be married, I would die! You are my everything, my sweet William! Lie to me and tell me it will be all right.’

“It will be all right.’ William was a man of few words. I do believe that is what the princess loved most about him.

“But, alas and of course, it was not fine. It was



*** vocab**

OMINOUS: menacing or alarming

TRIFLES: things of very little value or importance

only a matter of time before one of the princess's guards heard a rumor about her love affair. He and six other guards followed her out of the castle one day at a safe distance as she walked into the street. They watched as the princess met her love and kissed him. And she looked on helplessly as they rushed at him, beat him, and dragged him away."



I paused. I was suddenly aware of the crowd's intense interest. Several angry voices rang out, the **din** piercing my ears.

"That's not the end, is it?"

"It can't be!"

"What happened to William?"

"What happened to the princess?"

"I miss the merry donkeys!"

The storyteller laughed when he heard that voice and bowed deep before the crowd. I couldn't take it. My story was much better than his **abomination**! I had to win them back.

"Oh ... well ... I was just pausing here to see whether you were listening."

"We're listening!" Hundreds of voices filled the air. It was a little bit of all right. I smiled and brought them to my conclusion.



"The semi-barbaric king got word of what had happened almost immediately. He sent his four best horsemen to the four corners of his kingdom to try to **procure** the fiercest, most horrible tiger of all. When they brought the beast to the room behind its door, it barely fit in the oversize hallway. It was an epic animal—like some demon tiger out of a fairy tale.

"As much as the king hated the man for secretly wooing the princess, he still considered himself a fair ruler (despite all the terrible, destructive things he had done to his kingdom). So, in honor of fairness, the king searched high and

* **vocab**

DIN: a loud, confused noise or clamor

ABOMINATION: something that inspires great hatred or disgust

PROCURE: to obtain

wide for the perfect maiden. His daughter would never have the man. That was certain. But if he chose the door of innocence, the king wanted William to be married to a goddess in human form. And that is exactly what he found.

"Finally, the big day arrived. Every seat in the arena was filled as the word spread throughout the kingdom and into several others. There were even people standing in the aisles! It was the biggest event the king had ever seen.

'As the king watched from his royal box, his daughter, the princess, was weeping. She had bribed one of the guards into telling her which door the lady waited behind and which door would open upon the tiger. She thought the knowledge would help her through the terrible ordeal. It did not. The knowing only made her weep.

*'William was brave.
He was ready to
accept his fate,
whatever it might be.'*

"Oh, cry not, my fair, traitorous daughter. If your William is a lucky man, he will live happily ever after."

"That's what I'm afraid of, the princess thought to herself. She thought but did not speak. For as far as she was concerned, she would never utter another word to her terrible father for as long as she lived.

"What will I do if William chooses the door with the lady behind it? How can I live knowing that he is married to another? I will not be able to bear it! But oh, what if he chooses the door that holds the tiger? He will be killed, and I will not be able to bear that either. Which is the worse of these two evil evils? Oh, woe is me! Woe woe woe woe woe woe is me! The princess was quite a dramatic character, even in her own head.

"Suddenly, a roar rang up from the crowd.



William had entered the arena. The princess looked down at him and tried to be strong. He smiled at her. He had a beautiful smile.

"William was brave. He was ready to accept his fate, whatever it might be. He walked, ever so slowly, to stand between the two giant doors. The crowd of thousands cheered him on. And just when he arrived at the moment that would end his life in one way or another, he looked back at the fair princess one last time. And she signaled to him! No one else saw. She darted her eyes to the left-hand door. It was so quick that William thought he had imagined it. But she did! She clearly asked him to choose the door on the left!

WRITE ABOUT IT

What was behind William's door? Was it the lady or was it the tiger? And what was the deal with the princess? Did she send her man to be married or murdered? Finish the story for us!

Submit your ending to word@weeklyreader.com. We'll post our favorites on our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com on September 14.

What did it mean?

"Well, remember, the princess knew which door held the tiger and which held the lady. In that one instant, she had made up her mind. She had sealed her lover's fate. And as William turned the oversize golden knob of the door on the left, the princess shut her eyes and sighed."



I stopped there. My *own* crowd stood before me in a different kind of silence. They were all thinking. They were hoping. They seemed humbled by the lack of an ending.

As I made my way down the stairs, I heard a slow, angry murmur rising up. The sound originated from the seasoned voice of the storyteller and then was picked up, emphasized, and exaggerated by my enthralled, curious audience.

As I made my way past them, they booed and threw orange peels and cabbage at my head. "Was it the lady?" some yelled. Others pleaded, "The tiger! It was the tiger! Wasn't it?"

Close-lipped and serious, I wiggled silently through the masses. That was the end of my story, and they just had to live with it. And *this* is the end of *this* story, and I guess *you'll* just have to live with *that*.

Is there a moral? Perhaps. If you want one, it's in you. Heh ... I guess it just goes to show that even an ending without a proper ending can be The End. ■

To read Frank Richard Stockton's original story "The Lady, or the Tiger?" visit our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com on September 4.

SUPER VIDEO ENDINGS!

READ has produced three short film endings for this story. If you want to see our video ending of the lady, go to our blog on September 8. If you want to see our video ending of the tiger, go to our blog on September 9. Or if you want to see something completely goofy, go to our blog on September 10.