

# THE LADY AND THE TIGER

Once, in a kingdom long ago where ancient customs prevailed, a gardener's son dared to love the King's only daughter, the Princess Royal. That was bad enough. But as luck would have it, the princess loved the boy in return. And that was worse. Of course, the two never had a chance to actually speak to each other, but they exchanged many glances, and occasionally blew each other a unseen kiss when they hoped nobody was looking. They both knew that loving each other was not right. But they loved each other all the same.

Oh, how they longed to speak to each other, to whisper loving things to each other, or even -- but this hardly bore thinking of -- kiss each other. Still, for many months they were happy with their secret love, gazing from afar at each other. But at about the same time, the princess and the boy realized that this was not enough. When he helped out in the garden, the boy spent more and more time under the windows of the princess's royal chambers. And the princess spent more and more of her time looking out her windows, hoping for a moment when the two could finally speak.

One lovely spring day, the longed-for moment finally arrived. The princess was in her sitting room, staring out the window, and her maids had retired at her command. The gardener's son was weeding near the palace walls, and the other gardeners were out of sight around the corner. And the boy drew near the princess's window just as she looked down. The princess leaned out the window, the boy stood up, and the two were just inches away, and finally the boy said the first thing he had ever said directly to the princess. "I love you," he said simply. "I love you," the princess replied. But that was their undoing. For as she spoke, the door to her bedroom opened and who should enter but the King himself! Hearing her words, he strode to the window and caught the unfortunate gardener's son still standing outside the window, smiling upwards.

Justice in this kingdom was swift and, in the eyes of this most just of kings, was always fair. There was but one method of dealing with all serious offenses, and it was used on all, rich or poor, minister or gardener's son. The king had had a large arena built right on the palace grounds. Prisoners were led into the center of the arena, where they were faced with two large doors. The prisoner was then to choose one of the doors, and open it. Behind one door was always a lovely lady, and behind the other was always a fearsome tiger. The doors were well padded, so there was no way to hear the roars or rumblings of the ferocious beast behind one door. And nobody but the king himself ever knew behind which door was concealed the lady and behind which the tiger.

If the prisoner opened the door with the lady, he was married on the spot and immediately rose to a powerful position in the kingdom. If he opened the door with the tiger, he would be eaten by the fierce beast. Thus, felt the king, the fates alone would determine the guilt or innocence of the prisoner.

Daring to love the king's daughter was, of course, a serious crime. And being loved in return only compounded the offense. The gardener's son was arrested on the spot, and led to prison to await his turn in the arena. But as he was led away, he saw the princess form a few words with her lips: "trust me," she breathed. So he retained a glimmer of hope.

As he waited, however, his hopes faded. At the same time, the king grew more and more pleased with himself and his system of justice. Both had the same thoughts: whatever the outcome, the boy would be forever separated from the princess. For if he chose the lady, he would of course be married on the spot, and thus forfeit forever his chances of marrying anybody else. And if he chose the tiger, he would not live another ten minutes.

While the boy was languishing in the prison and the king was feeling pleased with himself, the princess was very busy. By the eve of the day the prisoner was to be led out to the arena, she had managed by stealth and trickery to discover what normally only the king knew: which door would contain the tiger and which the lady. All that next night, she tossed and turned. What should she tell her love? She didn't know how to decide. If he chose the lady, how could she bear to watch him there, married on the spot, happy beyond words at his escape from death? And then, to see him forever around the palace, with new power and respect but forever further out of reach than she could bear? Would it not be better to end things quickly, and then meet him once again in that other world to which all are finally taken?

But oh! How could she possibly condemn him to the horrible death of the tiger's teeth and claws? The screams? The blood?

The princess did not sleep all night. But by morning, she knew what she would do. She rose and dressed, and presently was sitting at her father's side in the arena, waiting for the prisoner to be led out. Then the boy came striding boldly out, and as was the custom he walked directly over towards the king, and bowed. As he stood up, he stole one brief glance at the princess. One glance was enough. She sat calmly and with dignity, but, almost unnoticed, she made a quick motion with her right hand.

Without waiting or thinking, the gardener's son walked instantly to the right-hand door and opened it.

And now, dear reader, I ask you the same question that the princess asked herself for all those long agonizing hours of the final night. What was her decision? Which came out? The lady or the tiger?