THE LADY, OR THE TIGER?

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Since its publication in Century Magazine in July, 1882, Stockton's classic puzzle story has fascinated generations of Americans. A semi-barbaric princess is faced with the horrifying dilemma of either allowing her lover to wed a beautiful lady, or condemning him to be devoured by a ferocious tiger. Standing before two closed doors in an arena, the young man must decide which door to open. Behind one is the lady, behind the other lurks the tiger. Stockton poses an intriguing psychological problem. Is a semi-barbaric princess willing to permit her lover to marry the lady, or will she sentence him to death? The princess, we are told, knows which door conceals the tiger. She signals to her lover and points to the door on the right. Which came out, the lady, or the tiger?

In his book A Critical Biography (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1939), Stockton's biographer Martin J. J. Griffin records (on pp. 64-68) that Stockton refused to reveal the solution to the problem when questioned directly and hedged by responding: "If you decide which it was -- the lady, or the tiger -- you find out what kind of a person you are yourself." Griffin approves of Stockton's evasiveness and believes the solution is actually expressed in the story. Analyzing the emotions of the princess, Griffin concludes that Stockton unconsciously favored the tiger, a hypothesis which is debatable.

I should like to propose that Stockton may have consciously concealed his own specific solution to the lady-tiger enigma in the concluding lines of the story: "The question of her decision is 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?"

These final words may conceivably contain Stockton's answer to the dilemma. Taking the words THE LADY OR THE TIGER, one can rearrange them with the added letter H to yield TO THE RIGHT: LADY (H)ERE. Note that the anagram provides clarification of another interesting point. Why did Stockton choose a tiger rather than a lion, or some other wild beast? In TIGER are found four of the five letters necessary for the formation of the word RIGHT in the anagram.

Although it cannot be conclusively demonstrated that Stockton hoaxed his readers with an anagrammatic solution, this hypothesis would seem to merit equal consideration with the view expressed by Griffin in favor of the tiger.