

Discourager of Hesitancy by Frank Stockton

(A continuation of "The Lady, or the Tiger?")

It was nearly a year after the occurrence of that event in the arena of the semi-barbaric king known as the incident of the lady or the tiger, that there came to the palace of this monarch a deputation of five strangers from a far country. These men, of venerable and dignified aspect and demeanor, were received by a high officer of the court, and to him they made known their errand.

"Most noble officer," said the speaker of the deputation, "it so happened that one of our countrymen was present here, in your capital city, on that momentous occasion when a young man who had dared to aspire to the hand of your king's daughter had been placed in the arena, in the midst of the assembled multitude, and ordered to open one of two doors, not knowing whether a ferocious tiger would spring out upon him, or a beauteous lady would advance, ready to become his bride. Our fellow citizen who was then present was a man of supersensitive feelings, and at the moment when the youth was about to open the door he was so fearful lest he should behold a horrible spectacle that his nerves failed him, and he fled precipitately from the arena, and, mounting his camel, rode homeward as fast as he could go."

"We were all very much interested in the story which our countrymen told us, and we were extremely sorry that he did not wait to see the end of the affair. We hoped, however, that in a few weeks some traveler from your city would come among us and bring us further news, but up to that day when we left our country no such traveler had arrived. As last it was determined that the only thing to be done was to send a deputation to this country, and to ask the question: 'Which came out of the open door, the lady or the tiger?'"

When the high officer had heard the mission of this most respectable deputation, he led the five strangers into an inner room, where they were seated upon soft cushions, and where he ordered coffee, pipes, sherbet, and other semi-barbaric refreshments to be served to them. Then, taking his seat before them, he thus addressed the visitors.

"Most noble strangers, before answering the question you have come so far to ask, I will relate to you an incident which occurred not very long after that to which you have referred. It is well known in all regions hereabout that our great king is very fond of the presence of beautiful women about his court. All the ladies in waiting upon the queen and royal family are most lovely maidens, brought here from every part of the kingdom. The fame of this concourse of beauty, unequalled in any other royal court, has spread far and wide, and had it not been for the equally wide spread fame of the systems of impetuous justice adopted by our king, many foreigners would doubtless have visited our court."

"But not very long ago there arrived here from a distant land a prince of distinguished appearance and undoubted rank. To such a one, of course, a royal audience was granted, and our king met him very graciously, and begged him to make known the object of his visit. Thereupon the prince informed his Royal Highness that, having heard of the superior beauty of the ladies of his court, he had come to ask permission to make one of them his wife."

"When our king heard this bold announcement, his face reddened, he turned uneasily on his throne, and we were all in dread lest some quick words of furious condemnation should leap from out his quivering lips. But by a mighty effort he controlled himself, and after a moment's silence he turned to the prince and said: "Your request is granted. Tomorrow at noon you shall wed one of the fairest damsels of our court.' Then turning to his officers he said: "Give orders that everything be prepared for a wedding in the palace at high noon tomorrow. Convey this royal prince to suitable apartments. Send to him tailors, bootmakers, hatters, jewelers, armorers, men of every craft whose services he may need. Whatever he asks, provide. And let all be ready for the ceremony tomorrow."

“But, your Majesty,” exclaimed the prince, “before we make these preparations, I would like – “

“Say no more!” roared the king. “My royal orders have been given, and nothing more is needed to be said. You asked a boon. I granted it, and I will hear no more on the subject. Farewell, my prince, until tomorrow noon.”

At this the king arose and left the audience chamber, while the prince was hurried away to the apartments selected for him. Here came to him tailors, hatters, jewelers, and every one who was needed to fit him out in grand attire for the wedding. But the mind of the prince was much troubled and perplexed.

“I do not understand,” he said to his attendants, “this precipitancy of action. When am I to see the ladies, that I may choose among them? I wish opportunity, not only to gaze upon their forms and faces, but to become acquainted with their relative intellectual development.”

“We can tell you nothing,” was the answer. “What our king thinks right, that will he do. More than this we know not.”

“His Majesty’s notions seem to be very peculiar,” said the prince, “and, so far as I can see, they do not at all agree with mine.”

“At that moment an attendant whom the prince had not noticed came and stood beside him. This was a broad shouldered man of cheery aspect, who carried, its hilt in his right hand, and its broad back resting on his broad arm, an enormous scimitar, the upturned edge of which was keen and bright as any razor. Holding this formidable weapon as tenderly as though it had been a sleeping infant, this man drew closer to the prince and bowed.”

“Who are you?” exclaimed his Highness, starting back at the sight of the frightful weapon.”

“I,” said the other, with a courteous smile, “am the Discourager of Hesitancy. When the king makes known his wishes to any one, a subject or visitor, whose disposition in some little points may be supposed not wholly to coincide with that of his Majesty, I am appointed to attend him closely, that, should he think of pausing in the path of obedience to the royal will, he may look at me, and proceed.”

“The prince looked at him, and proceeded to be measured for a coat.”

“The tailors and shoemakers and hatters worked all night, and the next morning, when everything was ready, and the hour of noon was drawing nigh, the prince again anxiously inquired of his attendants when he might expect to be introduced to the ladies.”

“The king will attend to that,” they said. “We know nothing of the matter.”

“Your Highness,” said the Discourager of Hesitancy, approaching with a courtly bow, “will observe the excellent quality of this edge.” And drawing a hair from his head, he dropped it upon the upturned edge of his scimitar, upon which it was cut in two at the moment of touching.”

“The prince glanced, and turned upon his heel.”

“Now came officers to conduct him to the grand hall of the palace, in which the ceremony was to be performed. Here the prince found the king seated upon his throne, with his nobles, his courtiers, and his officers standing about him in magnificent array. The prince was led to a position in front of the king, to whom he made obeisance, and then said: “Your majesty, before I proceed further –“

At this moment an attendant, who had approached with a long scarf of delicate silk, wound it about the lower part of the prince's face so quickly and adroitly that he was obliged to cease speaking. Then, with wonderful dexterity, the rest of the scarf was wound around the prince's head, so that he was completely blindfolded. Thereupon the attendant quickly made openings in the scarf over the mouth and ears, so that the prince might breathe and hear, and fastening the ends of the scarf securely, he retired.

The first impulse of the prince was to snatch the silken folds from his head and face, but, as he raised his hands to do so, he heard beside him the voice of the Discourager of Hesitancy, who gently whispered: "I am here your Highness." And, with a shudder, the arms of the prince fell down by his side.

Now before him he heard the voice of a priest, who had begun the marriage service in use in that semi-barbaric country. At his side he could hear a delicate rustle, which seemed to proceed from fabrics of soft silk. Gently putting forth his hand, he felt folds of such silk close behind him. Then came the voice of the priest requesting him to take the hand of the lady by his side; and reaching forth his right hand, the prince received within it another hand, so small, so soft, so delicately fashioned, and so delightful to the touch, that a thrill went through his being. Then, as was the custom of the country, the priest first asked the lady would she have this man to be her husband; to whom the answer gently came, in the sweetest voice he had ever heard: "I will."

Then ran raptures rampant through the prince's blood. The touch, the tone, enchanted him. All the ladies of that court were beautiful, the Discourager was behind him, and through his parted scarf he boldly answered: "Yes, I will." Whereupon the priest pronounced them man and wife.

Now the prince heard a little bustle about him, the long scarf was rapidly unrolled from his head, and he turned, with a start, to gaze upon his bride. To his utter amazement, there was no one there. He stood alone. Unable on the instant to ask a question or say a word, he gazed blankly about him.

Then the king arose from his throne, and came down, and took him by the hand.

"Where is my wife," gasped the prince.

"She is here," said the king, leading him to a curtained doorway at the side of the hall.

The curtains were drawn aside, and the prince, entering, found himself in a long apartment, near the opposite wall of which stood a line of forty ladies, all dressed in rich attire, and each one apparently more beautiful than the rest.

Waving his hand toward the line, the king said to the prince: "There is your bride! Approach, and lead her forth! But, remember this: if you attempt to take away one of the unmarried damsels of our court, your execution will be instantaneous. Now, delay no longer. Step up and take your bride."

The prince, as in a dream, walked slowly along the line of ladies, and then walked slowly back again. Nothing could he see about any one of them to indicate that she was more of a bride than the others. Their dresses were all similar, they all blushed, and they all looked up and then looked down. They all had charming little hands. Not one spoke a word. Not one lifted a finger to make a sign. It was evident that the orders given them had been very strict.

"Why this delay?" roared the king. "If I had been married this day to one so fair as the lady who wedded you, I should not wait one second to claim her."

The bewildered prince walked again up and down the line. And this time there was a slight change in the countenances of two of the ladies. One of the fairest gently smiled as he passed her. Another, just as beautiful, slightly frowned.

“Now,” said the prince to himself, “I am sure that it is one of those two ladies whom I have married. But which? One smiled. And would not any woman smile when she saw in such a case, her husband coming toward her? Then again, on the other hand, would not any woman frown when she saw her husband come toward her and fail to claim her? Would she not knit her lovely brows? Would she not inwardly say ‘It is I! Don’t you know it? Don’t you feel it? Come!’ But if this woman had not been married, would she not frown when she saw the man looking at her? Would she not say inwardly, ‘Don’t stop at me! It is the next but one, it is two ladies above! Go on!’ Then again, the one who married me did not see my face. Would she not now smile if she thought me **comely? But if I wedded the one who frowned, she could restrain her disapprobation if she did not like me? Smiles invite the approach of true love. A frown is a reproach to a tardy advance. A smile -”

“Now, hear me!” loudly cried the king. “In ten seconds, if you do not take the lady we have given you, she who has just been made your bride shall be made your widow.”

And, as the last word was uttered, the Discourager of Hesitancy stepped close behind the prince and whispered: “I am here!”

Now the prince could not hesitate an instant; he stepped forward and took one of the two ladies by the hand.

Loud rang the bells, loud cheered the people, and the king came forward to congratulate the prince. He had taken his lawful bride!

“Now, then,” said the officer to the deputation of five strangers from a far country, “when you can decide among yourselves which lady the prince chose, the one who smiled or the one who frowned, then I will tell you which came out of the open door, the lady or the tiger!”

At the latest accounts the five strangers had not yet decided.

Frank Stockton (1834-1902)

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*scimitar: (n) a saber having a curved blade with the edge on the convex side and used chiefly by Arabs and Turks

**comely: (adj) handsome; pleasing in appearance