

The Prisoner of Zenda

By ANTHONY HOPE

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(Continued from last week)

"tonight, you heard tonight?"

"I did," said he.

"Your cursed acuteness told you what I should do. Well, leave me here a week and there's another problem for you. Do you find the answer?"

"Yes, I find it," he answered, frowning heavily. "But if you did that you'd have to fight me first—and kill me."

"Well, and if I had—or a score of men? I tell you, I could raise all Streisau on you in an hour and choke you with your lies—yes, your mad lies—in your mouth."

"It's gospel truth," he said. "Thanks to my advice, you could."

"I could marry the princess and send Michael and his brother together to—"

"I'm not denying it, lad," said he.

"Then, in God's name," I cried, stretching out my hands to him, "let us go to Zenda and crush this Michael and bring the king back to his own again."

The old fellow stood and looked at me for full a minute.

"And the princess?" he said.

I bowed my head to meet my hands and crushed the rose between my fingers and my lips.

I felt his hand on my shoulder, and his voice sounded husky as he whispered low in my ear:

"Before God, you're the finest Elphberg of them all. But I have eaten of the king's bread, and I am the king's servant. Come, we will go to Zenda."

And I looked up and caught him by the hand. And the eyes of both of us were wet.

CHAPTER XI.

THE terrible temptation which was assailing me will now be understood. I would so force Michael's hand that he must kill the king. I was in a position to bid him defiance and fight my way to the crown—not for its own sake, but because the king of Ruritania was to wed the Princess Flavia. What of Sapt and Fritz? Ah, but a man cannot be held to write down in cold blood the wild and black thoughts that storm his brain when an uncontrolled passion has battered a breach for them. Yet, unless he sets up as a saint, he need not hate himself for them. He is better employed, as it humbly seems to me, in giving thanks that power to resist was vouchsafed to him than in fretting over wicked impulses which come unsought and extort an unwilling hospitality from the weakness of our nature.

It was a fine bright morning when I walked, unattended, to the princess's house, carrying a nosegay in my hand. Polley made excuses for love, and every attention that I paid her, while it riveted my own chains, bound closer to me the people of the great city, who worshiped her. I found Fritz's inamorata, the Countess Helga, gathering blooms in the garden for her mistress' wear and prevailed on her to take mine in their place. The girl was rosy with happiness, and Fritz, in his turn, had not wasted his evening and no dark shadow hung over his wooing save the hatred which the Duke of Streisau was known to bear him.

"And that," she said, with a mischievous smile, "your majesty has made of no moment. Yes, I will take the flowers. Shall I tell you, sire, what is the first thing the princess does with them?"

We were talking on a broad terrace that ran along the back of the house, and a window above our heads stood open.

"Madame!" cried the countess merrily, and Flavia herself looked out. I bowed my head and bowed. She wore a white gown, and her hair was loosely gathered in a knot. She kissed her hand to me, crying:

"Bring the king up, Helga; I'll give him some coffee."

The countess, with a gay glance, led the way and took me into Flavia's morning room. And, left alone, we greeted one another as lovers are wont. Then the princess laid two letters before me. One was from Black Michael—a most courteous request that she would honor him by spending a day at his castle of Zenda, as had been her custom once a year in the summer, when the place and its gardens were in the height of their great beauty. I threw the letter down in disgust, and Flavia laughed at me. Then, growing grave again, she pointed to the other sheet.

"I don't know who that comes from," she said. "Read it."

I knew in a moment. There was no signature at all this time, but the handwriting was the same as that which had told me of the snare in the summer house. It was Antoinette de Maban's.

I have no cause to love you (it ran), but God forbid that you should fall into the power of the duke. Accept no invitations of his. Go nowhere without a large guard—a regiment is not too much to make you safe. Show this if you can to him who reigns in Streisau.

"Why doesn't it say 'the king?'" asked Flavia, leaning over my shoulder so that the ripple of her hair played on my neck. "Is it a hoax?"

"As you value life and more than life, my queen," I said, "obey it to the very letter. A regiment shall camp round your house to-day. See that you do not go out unless well guarded."

"An order, sire?" she asked, a little

rebellious.

"Yes, an order, madame—if you love me."

"Ah!" she cried. And I could not but kiss her.

"You know who sent it?" she asked.

"I guess," said I. "It is from a good friend—and, I fear, an unhappy woman. You must be ill Flavia, and unable to go to Zenda. Make your excuses as cold and formal as you like."

"So you feel strong enough to anger Michael?" she said, with a proud smile.

"I'm strong enough for anything while you are safe," said I.

Soon I tore myself away from her, and then, without consulting Sapt, I took my way to the house of Marshal Strakenetz. I had seen something of the old general, and I liked and trusted him. Sapt was less enthusiastic, but I had learned by now that Sapt was best pleased when he could do everything, and jealousy played some part in his views. As things were now, I had more work than Sapt and Fritz could manage, for they must come with me to Zenda, and I wanted a man to guard what I loved most in all the world and suffer me to set about my task of releasing the king with a quiet mind.

The marshal received me with most loyal kindness. To some extent I took him into my confidence. I charged him with the care of the princess, looking him full and significantly in the face as I bade him let no one from her cousin the duke approach her unless he himself were there and a dozen of his men with him.

"You may be right, sire," said he, shaking his gray head sadly. "I have known better men than the duke do worse things than that for love."

I could quite appreciate the remark, but I said:

"There's something beside love, marshal. Love's for the heart. Is there nothing my brother might like for his head?"

"I pray that you wrong him, sire."

"Marshal, I'm leaving Streisau for a few days. Every evening I will send a courier to you. If for three days none comes you will publish an order which I will give you depriving Duke Michael of the governorship of Streisau and appointing you in his place. You will declare a state of siege. Then you will send word to Michael that you demand an audience of the king. You follow me?"

"Aye, sire."

"In twenty-four hours. If he does not produce the king—I bid my hand on his knee—then the king is dead, and you will proclaim the next heir. You know who that is?"

"The Princess Flavia."

"And swear to me on your faith and honor and by the fear of the living God that you will stand by her to your death and kill that reptile and seat her where I sit now."

"On my faith and honor and by the fear of God I swear it! And may Almighty God preserve your majesty, for I think that you go on an errand of danger."

"I hope that no life more precious than mine may be demanded," said I, rising. Then I held out my hand to him.

"Marshal," I said, "in days to come it may be—I know not—that you will bear strange things of the man who speaks to you now. Let him be what he may and who he may, what say you of the manner in which he has borne himself as king in Streisau?"

The old man, holding my hand, spoke to me, man to man.

"I have known many of the Elphbergs," said he, "and I have seen you. And, happen what may, you have borne yourself as a wise king and a brave man—aye, and you have proved as courteous a gentleman and as gallant a lover as any that have been of the house."

"Be that my epitaph," said I, "when the time comes that another sits on the throne of Ruritania."

"God send a far day, and may I not see it!" said he.

I was much moved, and the marshal's worn face twitched. I sat down and wrote my order.

"I can hardly yet write," said I. "My finger is stiff still."

It was, in fact, the first time that I had ventured to write more than a signature, and in spite of the pains I had taken to learn the king's hand I was not yet perfect in it.

"Indeed, sire," he said, "it differs a little from your ordinary handwriting. It is unfortunate, for it may lead to a suspicion of forgery."

"Marshal," said I, with a laugh, "what use are the gams of Streisau if they can't assuage a little suspicion?"

He smiled grimly and took the paper.

"Colonel Sapt and Fritz von Tarenheim go with me," I continued.

"You go to seek the duke?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yes, the duke, and some one else of whom I have need and who is at Zenda," I replied.

"I wish I could go with you!" he cried, tugging at his white mustache. "I'd like to strike a blow for you and your crown."

"I leave you what is more than my life and more than my crown," said I, "because you are the man I trust more than all others in Ruritania."

"I will deliver her to you safe and sound," said he, "and, failing that, I will make her queen."

We parted, and I returned to the palace and told Sapt and Fritz what I had done. Sapt had a few faults to find and a few grumbles to utter. This was merely what I expected, for Sapt liked to be consulted beforehand, not informed afterward. On the whole he approved of my plans, and his spirits rose high as the hour of action drew nearer and nearer. Fritz, too, was ready, though he, poor fellow, risked more than Sapt did, for he was a lover, and his happiness hung in the scale. Yet how I envied him! For the triumphant issue which would crown him

with happiness and unite him to his mistress, the success for which we were bound to hope and strive and struggle, meant to me sorrow more certain and greater than if I were doomed to fail. He understood something of this, for when we were alone (save for old Sapt, who was smoking at the other end of the room) he passed his arm through mine, saying:

"It's hard for you. Don't think I don't trust you. I know you have nothing but true thoughts in your heart."

But I turned away from him, thankful that he could not see what my heart held, but only be witness to the deeds that my hands were to do.

Yet even he did not understand, for he had not dared to lift his eyes to the Princess Flavia, as I had lifted mine.

Our plans were now all made, even as we proceeded to carry them out, and as they will hereafter appear. The next morning we were to start on the hunting excursion. I had made all arrangements for being absent, and now there was only one thing left to do—the hardest, the most heartbreaking. As evening fell I drove through the busy streets to Flavia's residence. I was recognized as I went and heartily cheered. I played my part, and made shift to look the happy lover. In spite of my depression I was almost amused at the coolness and delicate hauteur with which my sweet lover received me. She had heard that the king was leaving Streisau on a hunting expedition.

"I regret that we cannot amuse your majesty here in Streisau," she said, tapping her foot lightly on the floor. "I would have offered you more entertainment, but I was foolish enough to think—"

"Well, what?" I asked, leaning over her.

"That for just a day or two after—after last night—you might be happy without much gayety," and she turned pettishly from me as she added, "I hope the boars will be more engrossing."

"I'm going after a very big boar," said I, and, because I could not help it, I began to play with her hair, but she moved her head away.

"Are you offended with me?" I asked in feigned surprise, for I could not resist tormenting her a little. I had never seen her angry, and every fresh aspect of her was a delight to me.

"What right have I to be offended? True, you said last night that every hour away from me was wasted. But a very big boar—that's a different thing!"

"Perhaps the boar will hunt me," I suggested. "Perhaps, Flavia, he'll catch me."

She made no answer.

"You are not touched even by that danger?"

Still she said nothing, and I, stealing round, found her eyes full of tears.

"You weep for my danger?"

Then she spoke very low:

"This is like what you used to be, but not like the king—the king I—I have come to love!"

With a sudden great groan I caught her to my heart.

"My darling," I cried, forgetting everything but her, "did you dream that I left you to go hunting?"

"What then, Rudolf? Ah, you're not going!"

"Well, it is hunting. I go to seek Michael in his lair."

She had turned very pale.

"So, you see, sweet, I was not so poor a lover as you thought me. I shall not be gone long."

"You will write to me, Rudolf?"

"I was weak, but I could not say a word to stir suspicion in her."

"I'll send you all my heart every day," said I.

"And you'll run no danger?"

"None that I need not."

"And when will you be back? Ah, how long it will be!"

"When shall I be back?" I repeated.

"Yes, yes! Don't be long, dear; don't be long. I shan't sleep while you're away."

"I don't know when I shall be back," said I.

"Soon, Rudolf, soon?"

"God knows, my darling. But if never—"

"Hush, hush!" and she pressed her lips to mine.

"If never," I whispered, "you must take my place. You'll be the only one of the house then. You must reign and not weep for me."

For a moment she drew herself up like a very queen.

"Yes, I will," she said. "I will reign. I will do my part. Though all my life will be empty and my heart dead, yet I'll do it."

She paused and, sinking against me again, wailed softly:

"Come soon! Come soon!"

"Carried away, I cried loudly:

"As God lives, I—yes, I myself—will see you once more before I die!"

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed with wondering eyes, but I had no answer for her, and she gazed at me with her wondering eyes.

I dared not ask her to forget. She would have found it an insult. I could not tell her then who and what I was. She was weeping, and I had but to dry her tears.

"Shall a man not come back to the loveliest lady in all the wide world?" said I. "A thousand Michaels should not keep me from you!"

"She clung to me a little comforted.

"You won't let Michael hurt you?"

"No, sweetheart."

"Or keep you from me?"

"No, sweetheart."

"Nor any one else?"

And again I answered:

"No, sweetheart."

Yet there was one—not Michael—who if he lived must keep me from her and for whose life I was going forth to stake my own. And his figure—the lithe, buoyant figure I had met in the woods of Zenda; the dull, inert mass I had left in the cellar of

the castle—seemed to rise, double itself before me and to come between us, thrusting itself in every where she lay, pale, exhausted, fainting, in my arms and yet looking up at me with those eyes that bore such love as I have never seen, and haunt me now and will till the ground closes over me—and (who knows?) perhaps beyond.

CHAPTER XII.

ABOUT five miles from Zenda, on the opposite side from that on which the castle was situated, there lies a large tract of wood. It is rising ground, and in the center of the demesne, on the top of the hill, stands a fine modern chateau, the property of a distant kinsman of Fritz's, the Count Stanislas von Tarenheim. Count Stanislas himself was a student and a recluse. He seldom visited the house and had on Fritz's request very readily and courteously offered me its hospitality for myself and my party. This, then, was our destination, chosen ostensibly for the sake of the boar hunting (for the wood was carefully preserved, and boars, once common all over Ruritania, were still to be found there in considerable numbers), really because it brought us within striking distance of the Duke of Streisau's more magnificent dwelling on the other side of the town. A large party of servants, with horses and luggage, started early in the morning. We followed at midday, traveling by train for thirty miles and then mounting our horses to ride the remaining distance to the chateau.

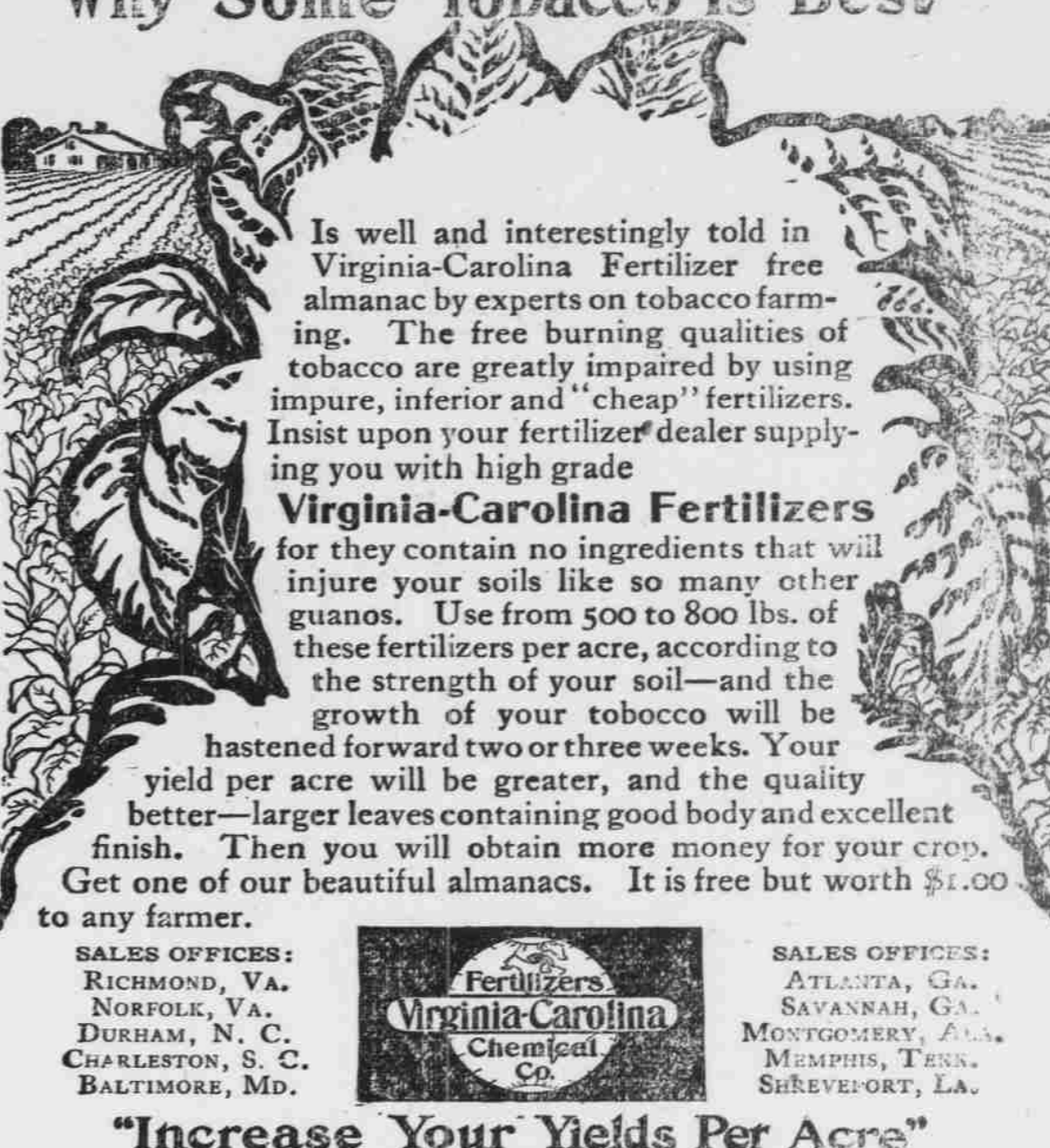
We were a gallant party. Besides Sapt and Fritz, I was accompanied by ten gentlemen. Every one of them had been carefully chosen and no less carefully sounded by my two friends, and all were devotedly attached to the person of the king. They were told a part of the truth. The attempt on my life in the summer house was revealed to them as a spur to their loyalty and an indictment against Michael. They were also informed that a friend of the king's was suspected to be forcibly confined within the castle of Zenda. His rescue was one of the objects of the expedition; but, it was added, the king's main desire was to carry into effect certain steps against his treacherous brother, as to the precise nature of which they could not at present be further enlightened. Enough that the king commanded their services and would rely on their devotion when occasion arose to call for it. Young, well bred, brave and loyal, they asked no more. They were ready to prove their dutiful obedience and prayed for a fight as the best and most exhilarating mode of showing it.

Thus the scene was shifted from Streisau to the chateau of Tarenheim and castle of Zenda which frowned at us across the valley. I tried to shift my thoughts also, to forget my love, and to bend all my energies to the task before me. It was to get the king out of the castle alive. Force was useless. In some trick lay the chance, and I had already an inkling of what we must do. But I was terribly hampered by the publicity which attended my movements. Michael must know by now of my expedition, and I knew Michael too well to suppose that his eyes would be blinded by the feint of the boar hunt. He would understand very well what the real quarry was. That, however, must be risked—that and all it might mean, for Sapt, no less than myself, recognized that the present state of things had become unendurable.

And there was one thing that I feared to calculate on—not, as I now know, without warrant. It was this—that Black Michael would not believe that I meant well by the king. He could not appreciate—I will not say an honest man, for the thoughts of my own heart have been revealed—but a man acting honestly. He saw my opportunity as I had seen it, as Sept had seen it; he knew the princess—nay (and I declare that a sneaking sort of pity for him invaded me), in his way he loved her. He would think that Sapt and Fritz could be bribed, so the bribe were large enough. Thinking thus, would he kill the king, my rival and my danger? Aye, verily, that he would, with as little compunction as he would kill a rat. But he would kill Rudolf Rassendyll first, if he could, and nothing but the certainty of being utterly damned by the release of the king alive and his restoration to the throne would drive him to throw away the trump card which he held in reserve to balk the supposed game of the impudent impostor Rassendyll. Musting on all this as I rode along, I took courage.

Michael knew of my coming sure enough. I had not been in the house an hour when an imposing embassy arrived from him. He did not quite reach the impudence of sending my would be assassins, but he sent the three of his famous Six—the three Ruritanian gentlemen, Lauengram, Krafsin and Rupert Hentzau. A fine, strapping trio they were, splendidly horsed and admirably equipped. Young Rupert, who looked a dare devil and could not have been more than twenty-two or twenty-three, took the lead and made us the neatest speech, wherein my devoted subject and loving brother, Michael of Streisau, prayed me to pardon him for not paying his addresses in person and, further, for not putting his castle at my disposal, the reason for both of these apparent derelictions being that he and several of his servants lay sick of scarlet fever and were in a very sad and also in a very infectious state. So declared young Rupert with an insolent smile on his curling upper lip and a toss of his thick hair—he was a handsome villain, and the gossip ran that many a lady had troubled her heart for him already.

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"If my brother has scarlet fever," said I, "he is nearer my complexion than he is wont to be, my lord. I trust he does not suffer."

"He is able to attend to his affairs, sire."

"I hope all beneath your roof are not sick. What of my good friends De Genet, Bersonin and Detchard? I heard the last had suffered a hurt."

Lauengram and Krafsin looked glum and uneasy, but young Rupert's smile grew broader.

"He hopes soon to find a medicine for it, sire," he answered.

And I burst out laughing, for I knew what medicine Detchard longed for. It is called revenge.

"You will dine with us, gentlemen?" I asked.

Young Rupert was profuse in apologies. They had urgent duties at the castle.

"Then," said I, with a wave of my hand, "to our next meeting, gentlemen. May it make us better acquainted."

"We will pray your majesty for an early opportunity," quoth Rupert airily. And he strode past Sapt with such jeering scorn on his face that I saw the old fellow clench his fist and scowl black as night.

For my part, if a man must needs be a knave I would have him a debonaire knave, and I liked Rupert Hentzau better than his long faced, close eyed companions. It makes your sin no worse, as I conceive, to do it a la mode and stylishly.

Now, it was a curious thing that on this first night, instead of eating the excellent dinner my cooks had prepared for me, I must needs leave my gentlemen to eat it alone, under Sapt's presiding care, and ride myself with Fritz to the town of Zenda and a certain little inn that I knew of. There was little danger in the excursion. The evenings were long and light, and the road this side of Zenda well frequented. So off we rode, with a groom behind us. I muffled myself up in a big cloak.

"Fritz," said I as we entered the town, "there's an uncommonly pretty girl at this inn."

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Because I've been there," said I.

"Since?" he began.

"No. Before," said I.

"But they'll recognize you?"

"Well, of course they will. Now don't argue, my good fellow, but listen to me. We're two gentlemen of the king's household, and one of us has a toothache. The other will order a private room and dinner and, further, a bottle of the best wine for the sufferer. And if he be as clever a fellow as I take him for, the pretty girl and no other will wait on us."

"What if she won't?" objected Fritz.

"My dear Fritz," said I, "if she won't for you, she will for me."

We were at the inn. Nothing of me but my eyes was visible as I walked in. The landlady received us. Two minutes later my little friend (ever, I fear, on the lookout for such guests as might prove amusing) made her appearance. Dinner and the wine were ordered. I sat down in the private room. A minute later Fritz came in.

"She's coming," he said.

"If she were not, I should have to doubt the Countess Helga's taste."

She came in. I gave her time to set the wine down. I didn't want it dropped. Fritz poured out a glass and gave it to me.

"Is the gentleman in great pain?" the girl asked sympathetically.

"The gentleman is no worse than when he saw you last," said I, throwing away my cloak.

She started with a little shriek. Then she cried:

"It was the king, then! I told mother so the minute I saw his picture. Oh, sir, forgive me!"

"Faith, you gave me nothing that hurt much," said I.

"But the things we said!"

"I forgive them for the thing you did."

"I must go and tell mother."

"Stop," said I, assuming a graver air. "We are not here for sport tonight. Go and bring dinner, and not a word of the king being here."

She came back in a few minutes, looking grave, yet very curious.

"Well, how is Johann?" I asked, beginning my dinner.

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