

The Prisoner of Zenda

By... ANTHONY HOPE

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CHAPTER XVI.

AS I had ridden publicly in Zenda and had talked with Rupert Hentzau, of course all pretense of illness was at an end. I marked the effect on the garrison of Zenda. They ceased to be seen abroad, and any of my men who went near the castle reported that the utmost vigilance prevailed there. Touching as I was by Mme. de Mauban's appeal, I seemed as powerless to befriend her as I had proved to help the king. Michael bade me defiance, and, although he, too, had been seen outside the walls, with more disregard for appearances than he had hitherto shown, he did not take the trouble to send any excuse for his failure to wait on the king.

Time ran on in inactivity when every moment was pressing, for not only was I faced with the new danger which the stir about my own disappearance brought on me, but great murmurs had arisen in Strelsau at my continued absence from the city. They had been greater but for the knowledge that Flavia was with me, and for this reason I suffered her to stay, though I hated to have her where danger was and though every day of our present sweet intercourse strained my endurance almost to breaking. As a final blow nothing would content my advisers, Strakenz and the chancellor, who came out from Strelsau to make an urgent representation to me, save that I should appoint a day for the public solemnization of my betrothal, a ceremony which in Ruritania is well nigh as binding and great a thing as the marriage itself. And this, with Flavia sitting by me, I was forced to do, setting a date a fortnight ahead and appointing the cathedral in Strelsau as the place. And this formal act, being published far and wide, caused great joy throughout the kingdom and was the talk of all tongues, so that I reckoned there were but two men who chafed at it—I mean Black Michael and myself—and but one who did not know of it—that one the man whose name I bore, the king of Ruritania.

In truth, I heard something of the way the news was received in the castle, for after an interval of three days the man Johann, greedily for more money, though fearful for his life, again found means to visit us. He had been waiting on the duke when the tidings came, Black Michael's face had grown blacker still, and he had sworn savagely. Nor was he better pleased when Rupert took oath that I meant to do as I said and, turning to Mme. de Mauban, wished her joy on a rival gone. Michael's hand stole toward his sword, said Johann, but not a bit did Rupert care, for he rallied the duke on having made a better king than had reigned for years past in Ruritania. "And," said he, with a meaning bow to his exasperated master, "the devil sends the prince a finer man than heaven had marked out for her. By my soul, he does!" Then Michael harshly bade him hold his tongue and leave them, but Rupert must needs first kiss madame's hand, which he did as though he loved her, while Michael glared at him.

This was the lighter side of the fellow's news, but more serious came behind, and it was plain that if time pressed at Tarlenheim it pressed none the less fiercely at Zenda. For the king was very sick. Johann had seen him, and he was wasted and hardly able to move. "There could be no thought of taking another for him now." So alarmed were they that they had sent for a physician from Strelsau, and the physician, having been introduced into the king's cell, had come forth pale and trembling and urgently prayed the duke to let him go back and meddle no more in the affair. But the duke would not, and held him there a prisoner, telling him his life was safe if the king lived while the duke desired and died when the duke desired—not otherwise. And, persuaded by the physician, they had allowed Mme. de Mauban to visit the king and give him such attendance as his state needed and as only a woman can give. Yet his life hung in the balance, and I was yet strong and whole and free. Wherefore great gloom reigned at Zenda, and, save when they quarreled, to which they were very prone, they hardly spoke. But the deeper the depression of the rest, young Rupert went about Satan's work with a smile in his eye and a song on his lip, and laughed "fit to burst" (said Johann) because the duke always set Detchard to guard the king when Mme. de Mauban was in the cell—which precaution was, indeed, not unwise in his careful brother. Thus Johann told his tale and seized his crowns. Yet he besought us to allow him to stay with us in Tarlenheim, and not venture his head again in the lion's den, but we had need of him there, and, although I refused to constrain him, I prevailed on him by increased rewards to go back and to carry tidings to Mme. de Mauban that I was working for her and that, if she could, she should speak one word of comfort to the king, for, while suspense is bad for the sick, yet despair is worse still, and it might be that the king lay dying of mere hopelessness, for I could learn of no definite disease that afflicted him.

they would be at the door when Johann opened it. They were to rush in and secure the servants if their mere presence and the use of the king's name were not enough. At the same moment—and on this hinged the plan—a woman's cry was to ring out loud and shrill from Antoinette de Mauban's chamber. Again and again she was to cry: "Help, help! Michael, help!" and then to utter the name of young Rupert Hentzau. Then, as we hoped, Michael, in fury, would rush out of his apartments opposite and fall alive into the hands of Sapt. Still the cries would go on. My men would let down the drawbridge, and it would be strange if Rupert, hearing his name thus taken in vain, did not descend from where he slept and seek to cross. De Gautet might or might not come with him. That must be left to chance.

And when Rupert set his foot on the drawbridge? There was my part, for I was minded for another swim in the moat; and, lest I should grow weary, I had resolved to take with me a small wooden ladder on which I could rest my arms in the water—and my feet when I left it. I would rear it against the wall just by the bridge, and when the bridge was across I would stealthily creep on to it—and then if Rupert or De Gautet crossed in safety it would be my misfortune, not my fault. They dead, two men only would remain, and for them we must trust to the confusion we had created and to a sudden rush. We should have the keys of the door that led to the all important rooms. Perhaps they would rush out. If they stood by their orders, then the king's life hung on the swiftness with which we could force the outer door, and I thanked God that not Rupert Hentzau watched, but Detchard. For though Detchard was a cool man, relentless and no coward, he had neither the dash nor the recklessness of Rupert. Moreover, he, if any one of them, really loved Black Michael, and it might be that he would leave Bersonia to guard the king and rush across the bridge to take part in the affray on the other side.

So I planned—desperately. And that our enemy might be the better lulled to security I gave orders that our residence should be brilliantly lighted from top to bottom, as though we were engaged in revelry, and should so be kept all night, with music playing and people moving to and fro. Strakenz would be there, and he was to conceal our departure, if he could, from Flavia. And if we came not again by the morning he was to march, on only and in force, to the castle and demand the person of the king. If Black Michael were not there, as I did not think he would be, the marshal would take Flavia with him, as swiftly as he could, to Strelsau and there proclaim Black Michael's treachery and the probable death of the king and rally all that there was honest and true round the banner of the princess. And, to say truth, this was what I thought most likely to happen.

For I had great doubts whether either the king or Black Michael or I had more than a day to live. Well, if Black Michael died, and if I, the play actor, slew Rupert Hentzau with my own hand and then died myself, it might be that fate would deal as lightly with Ruritania as could be hoped, notwithstanding that it demanded the life of the king—and in her dealing thus with me I was in no temper to make objection.

It was late when we rose from conference, and I betook me to the princess' apartments. She was pensive that evening, yet when I left her she flung her arms about me and grew for an instant bashfully radiant as she slipped a ring on my finger. I was wearing the king's ring, but I had also on my little finger a plain band of gold engraved with the motto of our family, "Nil Quae Pecl." This I took off



"Wear that ring even though you wear another when you are queen."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE night came fine and clear. I had prayed for dirty weather, such as had favored my previous voyage in the moat, but fortune was this time against me. Still, I reckoned that by keeping close under the wall and in the shadow I could escape detection from the windows of the chateau that looked out on the scene of my efforts. If they searched the moat, indeed, my scheme must fail, but I did not think they would. They had made Jacob's ladder

secure against attack. Johann had himself helped to fix it closely to the masonry on the underside so that it could not now be moved from below any more than from above. An assault with explosives or a long battering with pikes alone could displace it, and the noise involved in either of these operations put them out of the question. What, then, could a man do in the moat? I trusted that Black Michael, putting this query to himself, would answer confidently, "None," while even if Johann meant treachery he did not know my scheme and would doubtless expect to see me at the head of my friends before the front entrance to the chateau. There, I said to Sapt, was the real danger. "And there," I added, "you shall be. Doesn't that content you?"

But it did not. Dearly would he have liked to come with me had I not utterly refused to take him. One man might escape notice. To double the party more than doubled the risk, and when he ventured to hint once again that my life was too valuable I, knowing the secret thought he clung to, sternly bade him be silent, assuring him that unless the king lived through the night I would not live through it either.

At 12 o'clock Sapt's command left the chateau of Tarlenheim and struck off to the right, riding by unfrequented roads and avoiding the town of Zenda. If all went well, they would be in front of Zenda by about a quarter to 2. Leaving their horses half a mile off, they were to steal up to the entrance and hold themselves in readiness for the opening of the door. If the door were not opened by 2 they were to send Fritz von Tarlenheim round to the other side of the castle. I would meet him there if I were alive, and we would consult whether to storm the castle or not. If I were not there, they were to return with all speed to Tarlenheim, rouse the marshal and march in force on Zenda, for if not there I should be dead, and I knew that the king would not be alive five minutes after I had ceased to breathe.

I must now leave Sapt and his friends and relate how I myself proceeded on this eventful night. I went out on the good horse which had carried me on the night of the coronation back from the shooting lodge to Strelsau. I carried a revolver in the saddle and my sword. I was covered with a large cloak, and under this I wore a warm, tight fitting woolen jersey, a pair of knickerbockers, thick stockings and light canvas shoes. I had rubbed myself thoroughly with oil, and I carried a large flask of whisky. The night was warm, but I might probably be immersed a long while, and it was necessary to take every precaution against cold, for cold not only saps a man's courage if he has to die, but impairs his energy if others have to die and finally gives him rheumatism if it be God's will that he lives. Also I tied round my body a length of thin but stout cord, and I did not forget my ladder. I, starting after Sapt, took a shorter route, skirting the town to the left, and found myself in the outskirts of the forest at about half past 12.

I tied my horse up in a thick clump of trees, leaving the revolver in its pocket in the saddle—it would be no use to me—and, ladder in hand, made my way to the edge of the moat. Here I unwound my rope from about my waist, bound it securely round the trunk of a tree on the bank and let myself down. The castle clock struck a quarter to 1 as I felt the water under me and began to swim round the keep, pushing the ladder before me and hugging the castle wall. Thus voyaging, I came to my old friend, Jacob's ladder, and felt the ledge of masonry under me. I crouched down in the shadow of the great pipe—I tried to stir it, but it was quite immovable—and waited. I remember that my predominant feeling was neither anxiety for the king nor longing for Flavia, but an intense desire to smoke, and this craving, of course, I could not gratify.

The drawbridge was still in its place. I saw its airy, light framework above me, some ten yards to my right, as I crouched with my back against the wall of the king's cell. I made out a window two yards my side of it and nearly on the same level. That, if Johann spoke true, must belong to the duke's apartments, and on the other side, in about the same relative position, must be Mme. de Mauban's window. Women are careless, forgetful creatures. I prayed that she might not forget that she was to be the victim of a brutal attempt at 2 o'clock precisely. I was rather amused at the part I had assigned to my young friend Rupert Hentzau, but I owed him a stroke, for, even as I sat, my shoulder ached where he had, with an audacity that seemed half to hide his treachery, struck at me in sight of all my friends on the terrace at Tarlenheim.

Suddenly the duke's window grew bright. The shutters were not closed, and the interior became partially visible to me as I cautiously raised myself till I stood on tiptoe. Thus placed, my range of sight embraced a yard or more inside the window, while the radius of light did not reach me. The window was flung open, and some one looked out. I marked Antoinette de Mauban's graceful figure, and, though her face was in shadow, the fine outline of her head was revealed against the light behind. I longed to cry softly, "Remember!" but I dared not, and happily, for a moment later a man came up and stood by her. He tried to put his arm round her waist, but with a swift motion she sprang away and leaned against the shutter, her profile toward me. I made out who the newcomer was. It was young Rupert. A low laugh from him made me sure, as he leaned forward, stretching out his hand toward her.

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