

The Prisoner of Zenda

By... ANTHONY HOPE

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CHAPTER XX.

IN order to a full understanding of what had occurred in the castle of Zenda it is necessary to supplement my account of what I myself saw and did on that night by relating briefly what I afterward learned from Fritz and from Mme. de Mauban. The story told by the latter explained clearly how it happened that the cry which I had arranged as a stratagem and a sham had come in dreadful reality before its time and had thus, as it seemed at the moment, ruined our hopes, while in the end it had favored them. The unhappy woman, fired, I believe, by a genuine attachment to the Duke of Strelsau, no less than by the dazzling prospects which a dominion over him opened before her eyes, had followed him at his request from Paris to Ruritania. He was a man of strong passions, but of stronger will, and his cool head ruled both. He was content to take all and give nothing. When she arrived she was not long in finding that she had a rival in the Princess Flavia. Rendered desperate, she stood at nothing which might give or keep for her her power over the duke. As I say, he took and gave not. Simultaneously Antoinette found herself entangled in his audacious schemes. Unwilling to abandon him, bound to him by the chains of shame and hope, she yet would not be a decoy nor at his bidding lure me to death; hence the letters of warning she had written. Whether the lines she sent to Flavia were inspired by good or bad feeling, by jealousy or by pity, I do not know, but here also she served us well. When the duke went to Zenda she accompanied him, and here for the first time she learned the full measure of his cruelty and was touched with compassion for the unfortunate king. From this time she was with us, yet from what she told me I know that she still (as women will) loved Michael and trusted to gain his life, if not his pardon, from the king as the reward for her assistance. His triumph she did not desire, for she loathed his crime and loathed yet more fiercely what would be the prize of it—his marriage with his cousin, Princess Flavia.

At Zenda a new force came into play, the daring of young Rupert. He was caught by her beauty, perhaps. Perhaps it was enough for him that she belonged to another man and that she hated him. For many days that had been quarrels and ill will between him and the duke, and the scene which I had witnessed in the duke's room was but one of many. Rupert's proposals to me, of which she had of course been ignorant, in no way surprised her when I related them. She had herself warned Michael against Rupert even when she was calling on me to deliver her from both of them. On this night, then, Rupert when she had gone to her room, having furnished himself with a key to it, made his entrance. Her cries had brought the duke, and there in the dark room while she screamed the men had fought, and Rupert, having wounded his master with a mortal blow, had on the servants rushing in escaped through the window, as I have described. The duke's blood, spurting out, had stained his opponent's shirt; but Rupert, not knowing that he had dealt Michael his death, was eager to finish the encounter. How he meant to deal with the other three of the band I know not. I dare say he did not think, for the killing of Michael was not premeditated. Antoinette, left alone with the duke, had tried to stanch his wound, and thus was she busied till he died, and then, hearing Rupert's taunts, she had come forth to avenge him. Me she had not seen, nor did she till I darted out of my ambush and leaped after Rupert into the moat.

The same moment found my friends on the scene. They had reached the chateau in due time and waited ready by the door. But Johann, swept with the rest to the rescue of the duke, did not open it—nay, he took a part against Rupert, putting himself forward more bravely than any in his anxiety to avert suspicion, and he had received a wound, in the embrasure of the window. Till nearly half past 2 Sapt waited; then, following my orders, he had sent Fritz to search the banks of the moat. I was not there. Hastening back, Fritz told Sapt, and Sapt was following orders still and riding at full speed back to Tarlenheim, while Fritz would not hear of abandoning me, let me have ordered what I would. On this they disputed some few minutes; then Sapt, persuaded by Fritz, detached a party under Bernenstein to gallop back to Tarlenheim and bring up the marshal, while the rest fell to on the great door of the chateau. For near fifteen minutes it resisted them; then, just as Antoinette de Mauban fired at Rupert Hentzau on the bridge, they broke in, eight of them in all, and the first door they came to was the door of Michael's room, and Michael lay dead across the threshold, with a sword thrust through his breast. Sapt cried out at his death, as I had heard, and they rushed on the servants, but these in fear dropped their weapons, and Antoinette flung herself weeping at Sapt's feet. And all she cried was

that I had been at the end of the bridge and had leaped off. "What of the prisoner?" asked Sapt, but she shook her head. Then Sapt and Fritz, with the gentlemen behind them, crossed the bridge, slowly, warily and without noise, and Fritz stumbled over the body of De Gautet in the way of the door. They felt him and found him dead.

Then they consulted, listening eagerly for any sound from the cells below, but there came none, and they were greatly afraid that the king's guards had killed him and, having pushed his body through the great pipe, had escaped the same way themselves. Yet because I had been seen here they had still some hope (thus, indeed, Fritz in his friendship told me), and, going back to Michael's body, pushing aside Antoinette, who prayed by it, they found a key to the door which I had locked and opened the door. The staircase was dark, and they would not use a torch at first lest they should be the more exposed to fire, but soon Fritz cried: "The door down there is open! See, there is light!" So they went on boldly and found none to oppose them. And when they came to the outer room and saw the Belgian, Bersonin, lying dead they thanked God, Sapt saying, "Aye, he has been here." Then, rushing into the king's cell, they found Detchard lying dead across the dead physician and the king on his back, with his chair by him. And Fritz cried, "He's dead!" and Sapt drove all out of the room except Fritz and knelt down by the king, and, having learned more of wounds and the signs of death than I, he soon knew that the king was not dead nor if properly attended would die. And they covered his face and carried him to Duke Michael's room and laid him there, and Antoinette rose from praying by the body of the duke and went to bathe the king's head and dress his wounds till a doctor came. And Sapt, seeing I had been there and having heard Antoinette's story, sent Fritz to search the moat and then the forest. He dared send no one else. And Fritz found my horse and feared the worst. Then, as I have told, he found me, guided by the shout with which I had called on Rupert to stop and face me. And I think a man has never been more glad to find his own brother alive than was Fritz to come on me, so that in love and anxiety for me he thought nothing of a thing so great as would have been the death of Rupert Hentzau. Yet had Fritz killed him I should have grudged it.

The enterprise of the king's rescue being thus prosperously concluded, it lay on Colonel Sapt to secure secrecy as to the king ever having been in need of rescue. Antoinette de Mauban and Johann, the keeper (who, indeed, was too much hurt to be wagging his tongue just now), were sworn to reveal nothing, and Fritz went forth to find not the king, but the unnamed friend of the king, who had lain in Zenda and dashed for a moment before the dazed eyes of Duke Michael's servants on the drawbridge. The metamorphosis had happened, and the king, wounded almost to death by the attacks of the jailers who guarded his friend, had at last overcome them and rested now, wounded, but alive, in Black Michael's own room in the castle. There he had been carried, his face covered with a cloak, from the cell, and thence orders issued that if his friend were found he should be brought directly and privately to the king and that meanwhile messengers should ride at full speed to Tarlenheim to tell Marshal Strakenz to assure the princess of the king's safety and to come himself with all speed to greet the king. The princess was enjoined to remain at Tarlenheim and there await her cousin's coming or his further injunctions. Thus the king would come to his own again, having wrought brave deeds and escaped almost by a miracle the treacherous assault of his unnatural brother.

This ingenious arrangement of my long headed old friend prospered in every way save where it encountered a force that often defeats the most cunning schemes. I mean nothing else than the pleasure of a woman, for, let her cousin and sovereign send what command he chose (or Colonel Sapt chose for him), and let Marshal Strakenz insist as he would, the Princess Flavia was in no way minded to rest at Tarlenheim while her lover lay wounded at Zenda, and when the marshal, with a small suit, rode forth from Tarlenheim on the way to Zenda the princess' carriage followed immediately behind, and in this order they passed through the town, where the report was already rife that the king, going the night before to remonstrate with his brother in all friendliness for that he held one of the king's friends in confinement in the castle, had been most traitorously set upon, that there had been a desperate conflict, that the duke was slain, with several of his gentlemen, and that the king, wounded as he was, had seized and held the castle of Zenda. All of which talk made, as may be supposed, a mighty excitement, and the wires were set in motion, and the tidings came to Strelsau only just after orders had been sent thither to parade the troops and over-

awe the dissatisfied quarters of the town with a display of force.

Thus the Princess Flavia came to Zenda. And as she drove up the hill, with the marshal riding by the wheel and still imploring her to return in obedience to the king's orders, Fritz von Tarlenheim, with the prisoner of Zenda, came to the edge of the forest. I had revived from my swoon and walked, resting on Fritz's arm, and, looking out from the cover of the trees, I saw the princess. Suddenly understanding from a glance at my companion's face that we must not meet her, I sank on my knees behind a clump of bushes. But there was one whom we had forgotten, but who followed us and was not disposed to let slip the chance of earning a smile and maybe a crown or two, and while we lay hidden the little farm girl came by us and ran to the princess, courtesying and crying:

"Madame, the king is here—in the bushes. May I guide you to him, madame?"

"Nonsense, child!" said old Strakenz. "The king lies wounded in the castle."

"Yes, sir, he's wounded, I know, but he's there, with Count Fritz, and not at the castle," she persisted.

"Is he in two places, or are there two kings?" asked Flavia, bewildered.

"And how should he be here?" "He pursued a gentleman, madame, and they fought till Count Fritz came, and the other gentlemen took my father's horse from me and rode away. But the king is here with Count Fritz. Why, madame, is there another man in Ruritania like the king?"

"No, my child," said Flavia softly (I was told it afterward), and she smiled and gave the girl money. "I will go and see this gentleman," and she rose to alight from the carriage.

But at this moment Sapt came riding from the castle and, seeing the princess, made the best of a bad job and cried to her that the king was well tended and in no danger.

"In the castle?" she asked.

"Where else, madame?" said he, bowing.

"But this girl says he is yonder—

with Count Fritz."

Sapt turned his eyes on the child with an incredulous smile.

"Every fine gentleman is a king to such," said he.

"Why, he's as like the king as one pea to another, madame!" cried the girl, a little shaken, but still obstinate.



"It is not the king. Don't kiss him!"

Sapt started round. The old marshal's face asked unspoken questions. Flavia's glance was no less eloquent. Suspicion spreads quick.

"I'll ride myself and see this man," said Sapt hastily.

"Nay, I'll come myself," said the princess.

"Then come alone," he whispered.

And she, obedient to the strange hinting in his face, prayed the marshal and the rest to wait, and she and Sapt came on foot toward where we lay, Sapt waving to the farm girl to keep at a distance. And when I saw them coming I sat in a sad heap on the ground and buried my face in my hands. I could not look at her. Fritz knelt by me, laying his hand on my shoulder.

"Speak low, whatever you say," I heard Sapt whisper as they came up, and the next thing I heard was a low cry—half of joy, half of fear—from the princess:

"It is he! Are you hurt?"

And she fell on the ground by me and gently pulled my hands away, but I kept my eyes to the ground.

"It is the king!" she said. "Pray, Colonel Sapt, tell me where lay the wit of the joke you played on me?"

We answered none of us. We three were silent before her. Regardless of them, she threw her arms round my neck and kissed me. Then Sapt spoke in a low, hoarse whisper:

"It is not the king. Don't kiss him. He's not the king."

She drew back for a moment; then, with an arm still round my neck, she asked in superb indignation:

"Do I not know my love? Rudolf, my love!"

"It is not the king," said old Sapt again, and a sudden sob broke from tender-hearted Fritz.

It was the sob that told her no comedy was afoot.

"He is the king!" she cried. "It is the king's face—the king's ring—my ring! It is my love!"

"Your love, madame," said old Sapt, "but not the king. The king is there in the castle. This gentleman—"

"Look at me, Rudolf, look at me!" she cried, taking my face between her hands. "Why do you let them torment me? Tell me what it means!"

Then I spoke, gazing into her eyes.

"God forgive me, madame," I said. "I am not the king!"

I felt her hands clutch my cheeks. She gazed at me as never man's face was scanned yet. And I, silent again,

saw wonder born, and doubt grow, and terror spring to life as she looked. And very gradually the grasp of her hands slackened; she turned to Sapt, to Fritz and back to me, then suddenly she reeled forward and fell in my arms, and with a great cry of pain I gathered her to me and kissed her lips. Sapt laid his hand on my arm. I looked up in his face. And I laid her softly on the ground and stood up, looking on her, cursing heaven that young Rupert's sword had spared me for this sharper pang.

CHAPTER XXI.

IT was night, and I was in the cell wherein the king had lain in the castle of Zenda.

The great pipe that Rupert of Hentzau had nicknamed "Jacob's ladder" was gone, and the lights in the room across the moat twinkled in the darkness. All was still; the din and clash of strife were gone. I had spent the day hidden in the forest from the time when Fritz had led me off, leaving Sapt with the princess. Under cover of dusk, muffled up, I had been brought to the castle and lodged where I now lay. Though three men had died there—two of them by my hand—I was not troubled by ghosts. I had thrown myself on a pallet by the window and was looking out on the black water. Johann, the keeper, still pale from his wound, but not much hurt besides, had brought me supper. He told me that the king was doing well, that he had seen the princess; that she and he, Sapt and Fritz had been long together. Marshal Strakenz was gone to Strelsau; Black Michael lay in his coffin, and Antoinette de Mauban watched by him. Had I not heard from the chapel priests singing mass for him?

Outside there were strange rumors afloat. Some said that the prisoner of Zenda was dead; some, that he had vanished yet alive; some, that he was a friend who had served the king well in some adventure in England; others, that he had discovered the duke's plots and had therefore been kidnapped by him. One or two shrewd fellows shook their heads and said only that they would say nothing, but they had suspicions that more was to be known than was known if Colonel Sapt would tell all he knew.

Thus Johann chattered till I sent him away and lay there alone thinking not of the future; but, as a man is wont to do when stirring things have happened to him, rehearsing the events of the past weeks and wondering how strangely they had fallen out. And above me in the stillness of the night I heard the standards flapping against their poles, for Black Michael's banner hung there half mast high, and above it the royal flag of Ruritania, floating for one night more over my head. Habit grows so quick that only by an effort did I recollect that it floated no longer for me.

Presently Fritz von Tarlenheim came into the room. I was standing then by the window; the glass was opened, and I was idly fingering the cement which clung to the masonry where "Jacob's ladder" had been. He told me briefly that the king wanted me, and together we crossed the drawbridge and entered the room that had been Black Michael's.

The king was lying there in bed. Our doctor from Tarlenheim was in attendance on him and whispered to me that my visit must be brief. The king held out his hand and shook mine. Fritz and the doctor withdrew to the window.

I took the king's ring from my finger and placed it on his.

"I have tried not to dishonor it, sire," said I.

"I can't talk much to you," he said in a weak voice. "I have had a great fight with Sapt and the marshal, for I have told the marshal everything. I wanted to take you to Strelsau and keep you with me and tell every one of what you had done, and you would have been my best and nearest friend, Cousin Rudolf. But they tell me I must not, and that the secret must be kept, if kept it can be."

"They are right, sire. Let me go. My work here is done."

"Yes, it is done as no man but you could have done it. When they see me again I shall have my beard on. I shall—yes, faith, I shall be wasted with sickness. They will not wonder that the king looks changed in face. Cousin, I shall try to let them find him changed in nothing else. You have shown me how to play the king."

"Sire," said I, "I can take no praise from you. It is by the narrowest grace of God that I was not a worse traitor than your brother."

He turned inquiring eyes on me, but a sick man shrinks from puzzles, and he had no strength to question me. His glance fell on Flavia's ring, which I wore. I thought he would question me about it, but after fingering it idly he let his head fall on his pillow.

"I don't know when I shall see you again," he said faintly, almost listlessly.

"If I can ever serve you again, sire," I answered.

His eyelids closed. Fritz came with the doctor. I kissed the king's hand and let Fritz lead me away. I have never seen the king since.

Outside Fritz turned, not to the right, back toward the drawbridge, but to the left, and, without speaking, led me upstairs, through a handsome corridor in the chateau.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Looking away from me, Fritz answered:

"She has sent for you. When it is over come back to the bridge. I'll wait for you there."

"What does she want?" said I, breathing quickly.

He shook his head.

"Does she know everything?"

"Yes, everything."

He opened a door and, gently pushing me in, closed it behind me. I

found myself in a drawing room, small and richly furnished. At first I thought that I was alone, for the light that came from a pair of shaded candles on the mantelpiece was very dim. But presently I discerned a woman's figure standing by the window. I knew it was the princess, and I walked up to her, fell on one knee and carried the hand that hung by her side to my lips. She neither moved nor spoke. I rose to my feet and, piercing the gloom with my eager eyes, saw her pale face and the gleam of her hair, and before I knew I spoke softly:

"Flavia!"

She trembled a little and looked round. Then she darted to me, taking hold of me.

"Don't stand, don't stand. No, you mustn't! You're hurt! Sit down—here, here!"

She made me sit on a sofa and put her hand on my forehead.

"How hot your head is!" she said, sinking on her knees by me. Then she laid her head against me, and I heard her murmur, "My darling, how hot your head is!"

Somewhere love gives even to a dull man the knowledge of his lover's heart. I had come to humble myself and pray pardon for my presumption, but what I said now was:

"I love you with all my heart and soul."

For what troubled and shamed her? Not her love for me, but the fear that I had counterfeited the lover as I had acted the king and taken her kisses with a smothered smile.

"With all my life and heart," said I as she clung to me. "Always, from the first moment I saw you in the cathedral. There has been but one woman in the world to me, and there will be no other. But God forgive me the wrong I've done you!"

"They made you do it!" she said quickly, and she added, raising her head and looking in my eyes: "It might have made no difference if I'd known it. It was always you, never the king." And she raised herself and kissed me.

"I meant to tell you," said I. "I was going to on the night of the ball in Strelsau when Sapt interrupted me. After that I couldn't—I couldn't risk losing you before—before—I must! My darling, for you I nearly left the king to die."

"I know, I know! What are we to do now, Rudolf?"

I put my arm round her and held her up while I said:

"I am going away tonight."

"Ah, no, no!" she cried. "Not tonight!"

"I must go tonight before more people have seen me. And how would you have me stay, sweetheart, except—"

"If I could come with you," she whispered very low.

"My God," said I roughly, "don't talk about that!" And I thrust her a little back from me.

"Why not? I love you. You are as good a gentleman as the king."

Then I was false to all that I should have held by, for I caught her in my arms and prayed her in words that I will not write to come with me, daring all Ruritania to take her from me. And for awhile she listened, with wondering, dazzled eyes, but as her eyes looked on me I grew ashamed and my voice died away in broken murmurs and stammerings, and at last I was silent.

She drew herself away from me and stood against the wall, while I sat on the edge of the sofa, trembling in every limb, knowing what I had done, loathing it, obstinate not to undo it. So we rested a long time.

"I am mad!" I said sullenly.

"I love your madness, dear," she answered.

Her face was away from me, but I caught the sparkle of a tear on her cheek. I clutched the sofa with my hand and held myself there.

"Is love the only thing?" she asked in low, sweet tones that seemed to bring a calm even to my wrung heart.

"If love were the only thing, I could follow you—in rags, if need be—to the world's end, for you hold my heart in the hollow of your hand. But is love the only thing?"

I made her no answer. It gives me shame now to think that I would not help her.

She came near me and laid her hand on my shoulder. I put my hand up and held hers.

"I know people write and talk as if it were. Perhaps for some fate lets it be. Ah, if I were one of them! But if love had been the only thing you would have let the king die in his cell."

I kissed her hand.

"Honor binds a woman, too, Rudolf. My honor lies in being true to my country and my house. I don't know why God has let me love you, but I know that I must stay."

Still I said nothing, and she, pausing awhile, then went on:

"Your ring will always be on my finger, your heart in my heart, the touch of your lips on mine, but you must go, and I must stay. Perhaps I must do what it kills me to think of doing."

I knew what she meant, and a shiver ran through me, but I could not utterly fall beside her. I rose and took her hand.

"Do what you will or what you must," I said. "I think God shows his purposes to such as you. My part is lighter, for your ring shall be on my finger and your heart in mine, and no touch save of your lips will ever be on mine. So may God comfort you, my darling!"

There struck on our ears the sound of singing. The priests in the chapel were singing masses for the souls of those who lay dead. They seemed to chant a requiem over our buried joy, to pray forgiveness for our love that would not die. The soft, sweet, pitiful

music rose and fell as we stood opposite one another, her hands in mine. "My queen and my beauty!" said I. "My lover and true knight!" she said. "Perhaps we shall never see one another again. Kiss me, my dear, and go."

I kissed her as she bade me, but at the last she clung to me, whispering nothing but my name and that over and over again—and again—and again—and then I left her.

Rapidly I walked down to the bridge. Sapt and Fritz were waiting for me. Under their directions I changed my dress, and, muffling my face, as I had done more than once before, I mounted with them at the door of the castle, and we three rode through the night



"It was always you, never the king."

and on to the breaking of day and found ourselves at a little roadside station just over the border of Ruritania. The train was not quite due, and I walked with them in a meadow by a little brook while we waited for it. They promised to send me all news. They overwhelmed me with kindness. Even old Sapt was touched to gentleness, while Fritz was half unmanned. I listened in a kind of dream to all they said. "Rudolf! Rudolf! Rudolf!" still rang in my ears, a burden of sorrow and of love. At last they saw that I could not heed them, and we walked up and down in silence till Fritz touched me on the arm, and I saw, a mile or more away, the blue smoke of the train. Then I held out a hand to each of them.

"We are all but half men this morning," said I, smiling. "But we have been men, eh, Sapt and Fritz, old friends? We have run a good course between us."

"We have defeated traitors and set the king firm on his throne," said Sapt.

Then Fritz von Tarlenheim suddenly, before I could discern his purpose or stay him, uncovered his head and bent as he used to do and kissed my hand, and as I snatched it away he said, trying to laugh:

"Heaven doesn't always make the right men kings!"

Old Sapt twisted his mouth as he wrung my hand.

"The devil has his share in most things," said he.

The people at the station looked curiously at the tall man with the muffled face, but we took no notice of their glances. I stood with my two friends and waited till the train came up to us. Then we shook hands again, saying nothing, and both this time—and, indeed, from old Sapt it seemed strange—bared their heads and so stood still till the train bore me away from their sight. So that it was thought some great man traveled privately for his pleasure from the little station that morning, whereas, in truth, it was only I, Rudolf Rassendyll, an English gentleman, a cadet of a good house, but a man of no wealth nor position nor of much rank. They would have been disappointed to know that. Yet had they known all they would have

looked more curiously still, for, be I what I might now, I had been for three months a king, which, if not a thing to be proud of, is at least an experience to have undergone. Doubtless I should have thought more of it had there not echoed through the air, from the towers of Zenda that we were leaving far away, into my ears and into my heart the cry of a woman's love: "Rudolf! Rudolf! Rudolf!"

Hark! I hear it now!

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