

Classic Readers

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA



By: ANTHONY HOPE

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA

Retold by Alfred Lee

Published by **Priess Murphy**

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Introduction

In the second half of the nineteenth century, adventure stories set in strange countries were very popular with British readers. Anthony Hope was one of a group of writers that also included Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling, who became well known for stories of this kind. *The Prisoner of Zenda* is one of the very best adventure books from this period; it first appeared in 1894, and it has remained popular ever since then.

Anthony Hope is the pen name of Anthony Hope Hawkins, born in London in 1863, the son of a church minister. After leaving Oxford University in 1885 with a first-class degree, he practised law in London.

Although a successful lawyer, he always wanted to write. After producing a number of short stories and paying for his first book to be printed, he was able to give up his work as a lawyer and turn to writing full time. He married in 1903, and had two sons and a daughter. During World War 1 he worked at the Ministry of Information, and in 1918 he was given a title in recognition of his war work. He died in 1933.

Hope's first book was *A Man of Mark* (1890). His first success, though, came when he wrote stories that made fun of fashionable London life for *The Westminster Gazette*. These appeared in book form a year later, under the title *The Dolly Dialogue* (1894), and were much enjoyed by readers at the time, although they are of less interest today. It was *The Prisoner of Zenda* that earned Hope great popularity and persuaded

him to start writing full time. In 1898 he followed *The Prisoner of Zenda* with a second book about one of the main characters, Rupert of Hentzau, which was almost as successful.

Hope wrote plays and popular stories, including *The Chronicles of Count Artonio* (1895), *Phroso* (1897), *Simon Dale* (1898) and *Sophy of Kravonia* (1906). In 1900 he produced a more serious work of fiction,

Quisante, about the life of a clever but unpleasant politician. Many of the stories are so imaginative that they are hardly believable. For example, *Sophy of Krarvonia* tells of an English servant who finally becomes Queen of the Balkan state of Kravonia and attacks those who are responsible for the death of her royal husband. The main events are certainly improbable, but the detail in the description of the imaginary setting provided ideas for other writers. Hope actually wrote over thirty works of fiction, but none of the other books achieved quite the same success as *The Prisoner of Zenda*. He also wrote the story of his own life in a book called *Memories and Notes* (1927).

The setting for *The Prisoner of Zenda* is Ruritania, a country somewhere in central Europe invented by Hope. Hope's Ruritania is a country of castles, ancient towns, woods and mountains, a land of lords and servants, where honour and loyalty are important above all else. The book presented a romantic picture of central Europe for British and American readers of the time, and the word Ruritania soon entered the English language to mean any mysterious, romantic country where adventures might happen.

The book was written in four weeks during 1893, and appeared in 1894. It was an immediate success, earning high praise from other writers. It was turned into a play and was equally popular on the stage. The story was perfectly suited to the new film industry, and has been made into a film at least four times, featuring some great stars of the screen. One reason for the popularity of the two books about Ruritania was that they were shorter and more exciting than many works of fiction of the time. The story contains all the features of a good adventure: chance, surprise, danger, skill and love. The main character, Rudolf Rassendyll, is a courageous, active man who tells of his adventures with a humour that is immediately attractive to the reader. The most interesting of the other characters is the daring Rupert Hentzau, who

wins Rudolf's respect with his cool nerve, even though his mind and acts are evil.

The book opens with adventure-loving young Rudolf Rassendyll at home in England, looking for excitement. He has very few responsibilities in the world and time to fill. He has travelled widely and speaks a number of European languages extremely well. He reads in the papers that a new king, Rudolf the Fifth, is going to be crowned in Ruritania. It will be a grand occasion of great ceremony, and he decides to go there.

When he arrives in the country, he goes to stay in the town of Zenda. Walking in the forest, he meets the newking and discovers that he looks just like him; their most unusual common feature is their red hair. The King finds the similarity between them very amusing at first, but it becomes important as young Rudolf becomes involved in the King's problems. He finds himself the enemy of the evil duke, Black Michael, and Michael's loyal but cruel men, the famous Six. Rudolf also has to decide how to behave with the beautiful Princess Flavia, who believes him to be King, when he finds-in spite of himself- that he is falling in love with her. Rudolf needs all the quick thinking and courage he was born with to escape from the dangerous game he finds himself playing in this faraway country.

The Rassendylls

It's breakfast time. Rudolf is sitting with his brother's wife. 'When in the world are you going to do anything Rudolf?' She asked.

'Why should I do anything Rose,' I answered, 'My position is a comfortable one. I have enough money - or nearly enough - for my needs (no one ever has quite enough you know); I enjoy a good social position. I am a brother to Lord Buresdon and, through him, to that lovely lady, his wife. Surely it is enough!'

'You are twenty-nine,' she remarked, 'and you've done nothing but-'
'Travel? It is true. Our family doesn't need to do things.'

This remark of mine rather annoyed Rose, for everyone knows that, pretty as she is herself, her family is hardly of the same rank as the Rassendylls. Besides her attractions, she possessed a large fortune, and my brother Robert, Lord Buresdon, was wise enough not to mind whether her family were ancient or not.

Well, if my life had been a useless one in Rose's eyes, I had enjoyed a good deal of pleasure and picked up a good deal of knowledge. I had been to a German school and a German university, and spoke German as perfectly as I spoke English. I was also quite good at French. I was, I believe, a fairly good swordsman, and a good shot. I could ride any kind of a horse, and I was as calm and sensible as any man, in spite of the flaming red hair on my head.

'The difference between you and Robert,' said Rose, 'is that he recognizes the duties of his position and you only see the opportunities of yours.'

'To a man of spirit, my dear Rose,' I answered, 'opportunities are duties.'

‘Nonsense!’ said she, throwing her head back, and after a moment she went on: ‘Now here is Sir Jacob Borrodaile offering you exactly what you need.’

‘A thousand thanks!’ I put in.

‘He’s to be an ambassador in six months, and Robert says that he’ll take you with him to work for him. Do take the position, Rudolf- to please me.’

Now, when Rose puts the matter in that way, resting those pretty little eyes on me with such an anxious look, twisting her little hands, all because of a lazy person like myself, for whom she has no natural responsibility, the voice of conscience wakes in me. Besides, I thought it possible I could pass the time in the position suggested with some amusement. Therefore I said: ‘My dear Rose, if in six months’ time nothing has happened to prevent me, and Sir Jacob invites me, well, then, I’ll go with him.’

‘Oh, how good of you Rudolf! I am glad!’

And so my promise was given; but six months is a long time, and I wanted to find something interesting to do in that period. It suddenly came to my mind that I would visit Ruritania, as I saw in the papers that Rudolf the Fifth was to be crowned at Strelsau in the course of the next three weeks, with great ceremony.

For various reasons I had never been to that highly interesting and important kingdom, which, though a small one, had played no small part in European history, and might do the same again under the power of a young and strong ruler, such as the new king was said to be. I made up my mind to go, and began my preparations.

It has never been my practice to tell my relations where I am going on my many journeys, and as I did not want to be opposed in this case, I simply said I was going for a walking tour in the Alps. Rose was not very pleased, but when I suggested I might write a book about the

political and social problems of the area, she cried out with pleasure.

‘That would be lovely,’ she said, ‘wouldn’t it, Robert?’

‘It is one of the best ways of introducing yourself to political life these days,’ said Robert, who had written several books himself.

‘Now promise you’ll do it,’ said Rose earnestly.

‘No, I won’t promise, but if I find enough material, I will.’

‘That’s fair enough,’ said Robert.

‘Oh, material doesn’t matter,’ said Rose.

But she could not get more than a half-promise out of me. To tell the truth, I did not think for a moment that the story of my tour that summer would mark any paper or spoil any pen. And that shows how little we know what the future holds. For here I am, carrying out my half-promise, and writing, as I never thought to write, a book - though it will hardly serve as an introduction to political life, and it has nothing to do with the Alps. Nor would it please Rose, I fear, if I ever gave it to her to read, but that is something which I have no intention of doing.

★

On my way through Paris a friend came to see me at the station. We stood talking by the train, then he suddenly left me to speak to a lady. Following him with my eyes, I saw him raise his hat to a graceful and fashionably dressed woman, about thirty, tall and dark. In a moment or two he returned to me.

‘You’ve got a lovely travelling companion,’ my friend told me. ‘That’s Antoinette de Mauban, and they say that the Duke of Strelsau - King Rudolf’s brother you know - has paid her his attentions.

She is a widow, rich and hoping to improve her situation. Who knows what she is aiming for?’

But the pretty widow did not appear to want to know me; I saw no more of her, although we were on the same train.

As soon as I reached the Ruritanian border (where the official

looked at me as if he had seen a ghost), I bought the papers, and I found in them news which would have an effect on my movements. For some unexplained reason the date of the coronation had been suddenly brought forward, and was to take place in two days' time. The whole country was excited about it, and I learnt that Strelsau was crowned. Rooms were all booked and hotels overflowing; there would be very little chance of my getting a room without paying a very high price.

I decided to stop at Zenda, a small town fifty miles from the capital and about ten from the border. My train reached there in the evening; I would spend the next day, Tuesday, walking over the hills, and taking a look at the famous castle, and go by train to Strelsau on the Wednesday morning, returning at night to sleep at Zenda.

I therefore got out at Zenda, and as the train passed where I stood, I saw Madame de Mauban in her place; clearly she was going through to Strelsau, having, with more thought than I, booked a room there.

I was very kindly received at the small hotel, which was kept by a rather large old lady and her two daughters. They were good, quiet people. The old lady was fond of the Duke, who was now master of the Zenda lands and of the castle, which rose grandly on a steep hill at the end of the valley, a mile or so from the hotel. The old lady was in fact sorry that the Duke was not on the throne, instead of his brother.

'We know Duke Michael,' said she. 'He has always lived among us, every Ruritanian knows Duke Michael. But the King is almost a stranger; he has been abroad, and not one person in ten knows him even by sight.'

'And now,' said one of the young women, 'they say he has shaved off his beard, so that no one at all knows him.'

'Shaved his beard!' cried her mother. 'Who says so?'

'Johann, the Duke's forest guard. He has seen the King.'

'Ah, yes. The King, sir, is now at the Duke's hunting lodge in the

forest here; from here he goes to Strelsau to be crowned on Wednesday morning.'

I was interested to hear this, and made up my mind next day to walk in the direction of the lodge, on the chance of seeing the King.

'I wish he would stay at his hunting lodge,' went on the old woman, 'and let our Duke be crowned on Wednesday.'

'As for me, 'said the younger and prettier of the two daughters, 'I hate Black Michael! A red Elphberg for me, mother! The King's hair, they say, is as red as - as - '

She laughed as she looked across at me.

'Many a man has hated his red hair before now,' said the old lady.

'But never a woman!' cried the girl.

I thought it was time to prevent a quarrel. 'Why is the King here?' I asked. 'It is the Duke's land, you say.'

'The Duke invited him, sir, to rest here until Wednesday. The Duke himself is at Strelsau, preparing to receive the King.'

'Then they're friends?'

The younger girl threw back her head, 'Yes,' she said, 'they love one another as men do who want the same place and the same wife!'

The old woman looked angry, so I said quickly: 'The same place? You mean the throne, I suppose. But the same wife? How's that, young lady?'

'All the world knows that Black Michael - well, then, mother, the Duke - would give his soul to marry his cousin, the Princess Flavia, who is to be the Queen.'

'Well,' I said, 'I begin to be sorry for your Duke. But a younger son has to take what the older one leaves, and be as thankful to God as he can.' I laughed, thinking of Madame de Mauban and her journey to Strelsau.

A heavy step sounded at the door and a man came in.

'We have company, Johann,' said my hostess, and the man pulled off his cap.

The moment he looked at me, to my surprise, he took a step back as though, like the border official, he had seen something surprising.

'What's the matter, Johann?' asked the older girl. 'This is a gentleman on his travels, come to see the coronation.'

The man had calmed himself, but he was looking at me in a strange, almost fierce, manner.

'Good evening to you,' said I.

'Good evening, sir,' he replied in a low voice, and the younger girl began to laugh.

'See, Johann,' she said, 'it is the colour you love. He was surprised at your hair, sir. It's not the colour we see most of, here in Zenda.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Johann.

I then said good night to them all and rose to my feet. The young girl ran to light the way to my room. Johann still looked at me strangely as I passed. While the girl was leading me up the stairs, she said: 'Master Johann could never be pleased with one of your colouring, sir.'

'Perhaps he prefers yours,' I suggested.

'I meant, sir, in a man.'

'What, I asked, 'does hair colour matter in a man?'

'I don't know, sir, but I like yours - it's the Elphberg red.'

'Colour in a man,' said I, 'is a matter of no more importance than that!' - and I gave her something of no value.

'I hope the kitchen door is shut,' she said.

'Let's hope so,' I answered, and left her.

In fact, though, as I now know, hair colour is sometimes great importance to a man.