Introduction

My secret was still kept, though I had some bad moments and made some mistakes. I escaped discovery though, and I think the reason was the daring of the plan.

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 – which included Robert Louis Stevenson (best known for his novel *Treasure Island*) and Rudyard Kipling (*Kim*) – who became well known for stories of this kind, as Alexandre Dumas (*The Count of Monte Cristo*) was in France. *The Prisoner of Zenda* is one of the very best adventure novels from this period. It became an international success when it appeared in 1894, and has remained popular since then. It has been translated into many languages.

The book opens with the adventure-loving, twenty-nine-year-old Rudolf Rassendyll at home in late eighteenth century England, thinking about how he will spend the next few months. He has plenty of money, loves to travel and speaks a number of European languages extremely well. He comes from an old and very respectable family, can use a sword and can ride any kind of horse. But he admits that he is lazy.

Rudolf's brother's wife wants him to be more responsible like his brother, Lord Burlesdon. She asks him to consider taking a job with Sir Jacob Borrodaile, who is going to become an ambassador in six months' time. But six months is a long time to wait for an adventure, so Rudolf decides to go to the ancient country of Ruritania. He has read in the papers that a new king is going to be crowned in the capital city of Strelsau. It will be a grand occasion of great ceremony, and he has never been to this important European country before.

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Rudolf stops in Paris on his way to Ruritania and through a friend meets Madame Antoinette de Mauban. This rich widow is also on her way to Ruritania, where she has booked a room in Strelsau. Although she seems unimportant at the beginning of the story, she becomes involved in a secret plot and her help becomes very important to Rudolf.

When Rudolf arrives in Ruritania, he has to stay in another town, Zenda, because there are no hotel rooms left in Strelsau. There, while walking in the forest, he meets the man who will be the next king, Rudolf the Fifth of the royal Elphberg family. The two Rudolfs are very surprised to find that they look the same; the only difference is that Rassendyll has a red beard. Both men have red hair, which is very uncommon in this country but is a feature of the Elphberg family. Could these two men be brothers?

The future king finds the similarity between them amusing and invites Rassendyll to have dinner with him in the castle at Zenda. But after a night of eating and drinking, their lives become very complicated.

Rudolf Rassendyll soon finds himself playing a dangerous game, and in need of all the quick thinking and courage that he was born with. Will Rudolf the Fifth be crowned king and keep his throne, or will he be defeated by his enemies? And as he helps the king, will Rudolf Rassendyll manage to keep his self-respect, his honour – and his life?

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Ruritania, the setting for *The Prisoner of Zenda*, is a country invented by Hope, somewhere in central Europe, which is similar to small states – often headed by dukes – that did still exist at the time. It is a place of castles, ancient towns, woods and mountains; a land of lords and servants, where honour and loyalty are important above all else. Both British and American readers of the time found this romantic picture of a faraway European

country exciting and mysterious. The word 'Ruritania' soon entered the English language to mean any mysterious, romantic country where adventures might happen. People still use this name today.

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 the first film was made in 1913. While the 1922 silent film of *The Prisoner of Zenda* is a cinema favourite, the best known was made in 1937, with the actor Ronald Colman playing both Rassendyll and King Rudolf; Douglas Fairbanks Jr played Rupert Hentzau. In 1979 Peter Sellers played the two Rudolfs. Film directors have also used the plot of *The Prisoner of Zenda* to create other, similar stories. *Dave* (1993), for example, is set in the United States; the President is very ill, and Kevin Kline's character is persuaded to take his place so that nobody will know.

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One reason for the popularity of Hope's two novels about Ruritania – the other book was *Rupert of Hentzau* (1898) – 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. There are sword fights, secret plots, whispered conversations and difficult escapes, as well as blood and murder. In the same way that the idea of Ruritania entered popular culture as a result of this novel, these features of Hope's plot, and the character types in the book, have since been included in adventure stories in literature, theatre and film.

The contrast between brothers – Rudolf and Lord Burlesdon, the Duke and the King, Johann and Max Holf – creates a tension that was commonly used by Shakespeare. The contrast between good and evil, deceit and honour, love and hate, jealousy and

selflessness combine to make the unbelievable believable. At the end, we are left wondering what happened to these characters after this story, which is no doubt why Hope wrote *Rupert of Hentzau*. This second story takes place three years after *The Prisoner of Zenda* ends. Now in an unhappy marriage, Flavia writes to Rudolf Rassendyll and asks for his help. Rudolf returns to Ruritania and is again successful – but at great cost. Hope also wrote a collection of short stories set in eigtheenth century Ruritania (more than a hundred years before Rudolf Rassendyll's adventures in the fictional country). *The Heart of Princess Osra* (1896) is about the love life of the younger sister of a previous king, Rudolf III, and it provides some historical background to the events in *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Some of the characters in *The Prisoner of Zenda* appear unimportant when they are introduced, like the daughter of a hotel owner in Zenda, but reappear later and change the course of events. The story does leave us with a few unanswered questions, but this lack of perfection will lessen the enjoyment only of the most critical of Hope's readers.

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Anthony Hope was the writing name of Anthony Hope Hawkins, who was born in London on 9 February 1863, the youngest son of a church minister and headmaster. After leaving Oxford University with a first-degree, he started practising law in London in 1877. Although he was a successful lawyer, he always wanted to write. After producing a number of short stories and paying for his first book to be printed (at great financial loss), he was able to give up his work as a lawyer in 1894 and turn to writing full time. During this period he lived with his father, a widower, and his first successful novel was *Mr Witt's Widow* (1892). In all, he wrote thirty-seven novels, two plays, four non-fiction books and some serious works on society. He felt that his best novel was *The King's Mirror* (1899).

Hope's plays were never as popular as his novels but he enjoyed working on the theatrical productions of them. Later he stopped writing fiction in order to write works of social criticism. Towards the end of his life he wrote a book about himself called *Memories and Notes* (1927).

Hope married Elizabeth Sommerville Sheldon from New York City in 1903, and had two sons and a daughter. During World War I, he worked at the Ministry of Information, and he was given a title in recognition of his war work. He died at his home in Surrey, in the south of England, in 1933.

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Characters (in order of appearance)

Rudolf Rassendyll:	an upper-class English adventurer
Rose Rassendyll:	the wife of Rudolf's brother
Robert Rassendyll:	Lord Burlesdon, Rudolf's brother
Sir Jacob Borrodaile:	soon to be an ambassador
Rudolf the Fifth:	soon to be the new King of Ruritania
Antoinette de Mauban:	a rich French widow
Duke Michael:	'Black Michael', the brother of Rudolf the Fifth
hotel owner:	an old woman with two daughters
young girl:	one of the hotel owner's daughters
Johann:	Duke Michael's forest guard
Princess Flavia:	soon to be married to the new King
Colonel Sapt:	an old soldier in the service of the new King
Fritz von Tarlenheim:	a gentleman, assistant to Sapt
Josef:	the new King's loyal servant
fat woman:	Johann's mother
Marshal Strakencz:	the head of the Ruritanian army
Max Holf:	Johann's brother
Bersonin:	a Belgian, one of the Duke's famous Six
de Gautet:	a Frenchman, one of the Duke's famous Six
Detchard:	an Englishman, one of the Duke's famous Six
Countess Helga:	a friend of Princess Flavia
Lauengram:	a Ruritanian, one of the Duke's famous Six
Krafstein:	a Ruritanian, one of the Duke's famous Six
Rupert Hentzau:	a Ruritanian, one of the Duke's famous Six

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Chapter 1 The Rassendylls

'When in the world are you going to *do* anything, Rudolf?' asked my brother's wife one morning at breakfast.

'My dear Rose,' I answered, 'why should I do anything? 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 brother to Lord Burlesdon 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 Burlesdon, 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.'

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'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, Rudolf, how good of you! *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.

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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 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. As we stood talking by the train, 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

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looked at me as if he had seen a ghost), I bought the papers, and 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 crowded. Rooms were all booked and hotels overflowing; there would be very little chance of my getting a room without paying a very high price.

So 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.'

* Madame: the French word for Mrs or madam.

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'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 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

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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 of great importance to a man.

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