

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA

Rudolf Rassendyll is young, rich, and comes from an old English family. But he has the dark red hair and the long straight nose of the royal family of Ruritania – the result of a little family ‘accident’ many years before.

Rudolf decides to visit Ruritania for the coronation of the new king. He arrives in the town of Zenda and goes for a quiet walk in the forest. By the next morning he is in the middle of adventures beyond his wildest dreams. With his new friends, Captain Sapt and Fritz von Tarlenheim, he is making plans to rescue the prisoner in the Castle of Zenda. Soon he is fighting the King’s enemies, Black Michael the Duke, and Rupert of Hentzau – and falling in love with the King’s cousin, the lovely Princess Flavia.

And the King . . . But who *is* the King of Ruritania?



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The Prisoner of Zenda

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The Rassendylls – and the Elphbergs

‘I wonder when you’re going to do something useful, Rudolf,’ my brother’s wife said. She looked at me crossly over the breakfast table.

‘But why should I do anything, Rose?’ I answered, calmly eating my egg. ‘I’ve got nearly enough money for the things I want, and my brother, Robert, is a lord – Lord Burlesdon. I’m very happy.’

‘You’re twenty-nine, and you’ve done nothing except . . .’

‘Play about? It’s true. We Rassendylls are a rich and famous family, and we don’t need to do anything.’



‘We Rassendylls don’t need to do anything,’ I said.

This made Rose angry. 'Rich and famous families usually behave worse than less important families,' she said.

When I heard this, I touched my dark red hair. I knew what she meant.

'I'm so pleased that Robert's hair is black!' she cried.

Just then my brother, Robert, came in. When he looked at Rose, he could see that there was something wrong.

'What's the matter, my dear?' he said.

'Oh, she's angry because I never do anything useful, and because I've got red hair,' I said.

'Well, I know he can't do much about his hair, or his nose . . .' Rose began.

'No, the nose and the hair are in the family,' my brother agreed. 'And Rudolf has both of them.'

In the room there were many family pictures, and one of them was of a very beautiful woman, Lady Amelia, who lived a hundred and fifty years ago. I stood up and turned to look at it.

'If you took that picture away, Robert,' Rose cried, 'we could forget all about it.'

'Oh, but I don't want to forget about it,' I replied. 'I like being an Elphberg.'

But perhaps I should stop for a moment and explain why Rose was angry about my nose and my hair – and why I, a Rassendyll, said I was an Elphberg. After all, the Elphbergs are the royal family of Ruritania, and have been for hundreds of years.

The story is told in a book about the Rassendyll family history.



In the year 1733 Prince Rudolf of Ruritania came to England on a visit and he stayed for several months. Like many of the Elphberg royal family, he had blue eyes, an unusually long straight nose and a lot of dark red hair. He was also tall and very good-looking.

During his stay here, he became friendly with Lady Amelia, the beautiful wife of Lord Burlesdon. They became very good friends indeed, which, naturally, did not please Lord Burlesdon. So, one cold wet morning, the two men fought. The Prince was hurt in the fight, but got better and was hurried back to Ruritania. There he married and became King Rudolf the Third. But Lord Burlesdon fell ill, and six months later he died. Two months after that, Lady Amelia had a baby son, who became the next Lord Burlesdon and the head of the Rassendyll family. The boy grew into a man with blue eyes, a long straight nose, and dark red hair.



These things can happen in the best of families, and among the many pictures of the Rassendylls at home, you can see that five or six of them have the same blue eyes, the same nose, and the same red hair.

So, because my hair was red and I had the Elphberg nose, Rose worried about me. In the end, to please her, I promised to get a job in six months' time. This gave me six free months to enjoy myself first.

And an idea came to me – I would visit Ruritania. None of my family had ever been there. They preferred to forget all about the Lady Amelia. But I saw in the newspaper that, in three weeks, the new young King, Rudolf the Fifth, would have his coronation. It would be an interesting time to visit the country.

I knew my family would not like my going, so I told them I was going walking in Austria.

2

The colour of men's hair

On the way to Ruritania I decided to spend a night in Paris with a friend. The next morning he came with me to the station, and as we waited for the train, we watched the crowds. We noticed a tall, dark, very fashionable lady, and my friend told me who she was.



'That's Madame Antoinette de Mauban.'

'That's Madame Antoinette de Mauban. She's travelling on the same train as you, but don't fall in love with her.'

'Why not?' I asked, amused.

'Ah,' said my friend, 'all Paris knows that she's in love with Duke Michael of Strelsau. And he, as you know, is the half-brother of the new King of Ruritania. Although he's only the second son and will never be king himself, he's still an important man and very popular, I hear, with many Ruritarians. The lovely Madame Antoinette won't look twice at you, Rudolf.'

I laughed, but he had woken my interest in the lady. I did not speak to her during the journey, and when we arrived in Ruritania, I left the train at Zenda, a small town outside the capital. But I noticed that Madame de Mauban went on to Strelsau, the capital.

I was welcomed very kindly at my hotel. It belonged to a fat old lady and her pretty daughter. From them I learned that the coronation was to be on the day after next, and not in three weeks.

The old lady was more interested in Duke Michael of Strelsau than in the new King. The Castle of Zenda and all the land around it belonged to the Duke, but the old lady said, 'It's not enough. Duke Michael should be king. He spends all his time with us. Every Ruritania knows him, but we never see the new King.'

But the daughter cried, 'Oh no, I hate Black Michael. I want a red Elphberg – and the King, our friend Johann says, is very red. Johann works for the Duke and he's seen the King. In fact, the King's staying just outside Zenda now,' she added. 'He's resting at the Duke's house in the forest before going on to Strelsau on Wednesday for his coronation. The Duke's already in Strelsau, getting everything ready.'

'They're friends?' I asked.

'Friends who want the same place and the same wife,' the pretty girl replied. 'The Duke wants to marry his cousin, Princess Flavia, but people say she's going to be King Rudolf's wife and the Queen.'

Just then their friend, Johann, entered the room.

'We have a visitor, Johann,' the girl's mother said, and Johann turned towards me. But when he saw me, he stepped back, with a look of wonder on his face.

'What's the matter, Johann?' the daughter asked.

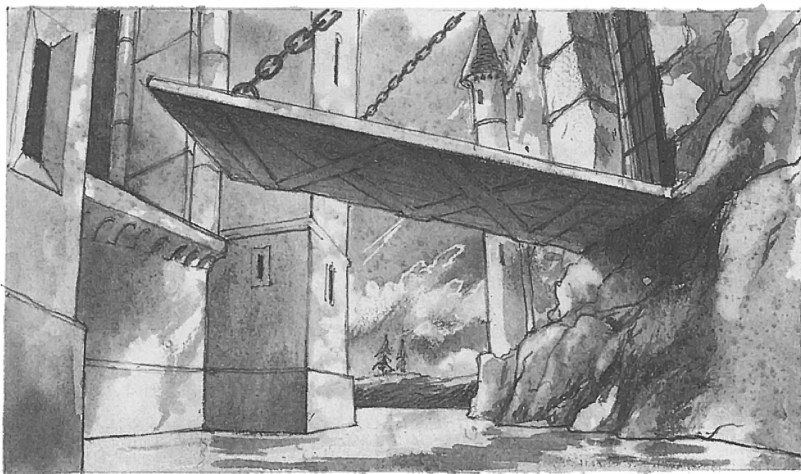
'Good evening, sir,' Johann said, still staring at me. He did

not seem to like what he saw.

The girl began to laugh. 'It's the colour of your hair, sir,' she explained. 'We don't often see that colour here. It's the Elphberg red – not Johann's favourite colour.'

*

The next day I decided to walk through the forest for a few miles and take the train to Strelsau from a little station along the road. I sent my luggage on by train and after lunch, I started out on foot. First, I wanted to see the Castle of Zenda and in half an hour I had climbed the hill to it. There were two buildings – the old one, with a moat around it, and the new, modern building. Duke Michael could have friends to stay with him in the new castle, but he could go into the old castle when he wanted to be alone. The water in the moat was deep, and if he pulled up the drawbridge over the moat, no one could get to him.



The water in the moat was deep.

I stayed there for some time and looked at the castle, and then I walked on through the forest for about an hour. It was beautiful and I sat down to enjoy it. Before I knew what had happened, I was asleep.

Suddenly I heard a voice say, 'Good heavens! He looks just like the King!'

When I opened my eyes, there were two men in front of me. One of them came nearer.

'May I ask your name?' he said.

'Well, why don't you tell me your names first?' I replied.

The younger of the two men said, 'This is Captain Sapt, and I am Fritz von Tarlenheim. We work for the King of Ruritania.'

'And I am Rudolf Rassendyll,' I answered, 'a traveller from England. My brother is Lord Burlesdon.'

'Of course! The hair!' Sapt cried. 'You know the story, Fritz?'

Just then a voice called out from the trees behind us. 'Fritz! Fritz! Where are you, man?'

'It's the King!' Fritz said, and Sapt laughed.

Then a young man jumped out from behind a tree. I gave a cry, and when he saw me, he stepped back in sudden surprise. The King of Ruritania looked just like Rudolf Rassendyll, and Rudolf Rassendyll looked just like the King!

For a moment the King said nothing, but then he asked, 'Captain . . . Fritz . . . who is this?'

Sapt went to the King and spoke quietly in his ear. The King's surprise changed slowly to an amused smile, then suddenly he began to laugh loudly. 'Well met, cousin!'

he cried. 'Where are you travelling to?'

'To Strelsau, sir – to the coronation.'

The King looked at his friends, and, for a moment, he was serious. But then he began to laugh again. 'Wait until brother Michael sees that there are two of us!' he cried.

'Perhaps it isn't a very good idea for Mr Rassendyll to go to Strelsau,' Fritz said, worried, and Sapt agreed with him.

'Oh, we'll think about the coronation tomorrow,' the King said. 'Tonight we'll enjoy ourselves. Come, cousin!'

We returned to the Duke's house in the forest, where we had an excellent dinner. The King called loudly for a drink, and Captain Sapt and Fritz seemed worried. Clearly, the King liked his drink a little too much.

'Remember the coronation is tomorrow,' warned old Sapt.



The King liked his drink a little too much.

But the King was only interested in enjoying himself tonight, so we all drank and talked, and drank again. At last the King put down his glass and said, 'I've drunk enough.'

As he said that, old Josef, the King's servant, came in. He put some very special old drink on the table in front of the King and said, 'Duke Michael offers you this juice and asks you to drink it for love of him.'

'Well done, Black Michael!' the King cried. 'Well, I'm not afraid to drink!'

And he drank every drop of juice in the bottle, himself. Then his head fell forward on to the table, and soon afterwards I too remembered no more of that wild evening.

3

The King goes to his coronation

I do not know how long I was asleep, but when I woke up I was cold and wet. Sapt and Fritz stood there looking at me. 'We had to wake you,' Sapt said. 'Cold water was the only way.'

Fritz took my arm and turned me round. 'Look!' he said.

The King was on the floor, and when Sapt pushed him with his foot, he did not move.

'We've been trying to wake him for half an hour,' said Fritz. 'But he's sleeping like a dead man.'

The three of us looked at each other.

‘Was there something in that last bottle of juice?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Sapt said, ‘but if he doesn’t get to his coronation today, there’ll never be a coronation for him. All Ruritania is waiting for him in Strelsau and Black Michael with half the army, too. We can’t tell them that the King is too drunk to go to his own coronation!’

‘You can say he’s ill,’ I said.

‘Ill!’ Sapt laughed angrily. ‘Everybody will know what that means. He’s been “ill” too many times before.’

‘Tell me, do you think somebody put something in his juice?’ I asked.

‘It was Black Michael!’ Fritz replied. ‘We all know he wants to be King himself.’

For a moment or two we were all silent, and then Sapt looked at me, ‘You must go to Strelsau and take his place!’

I stared at him. ‘You’re crazy, man! How can I do that? The King . . .’

‘It’s dangerous, I know,’ said Sapt. ‘But it’s our only chance. If you don’t go, Black Michael will be King and the real king will be dead or a prisoner.’

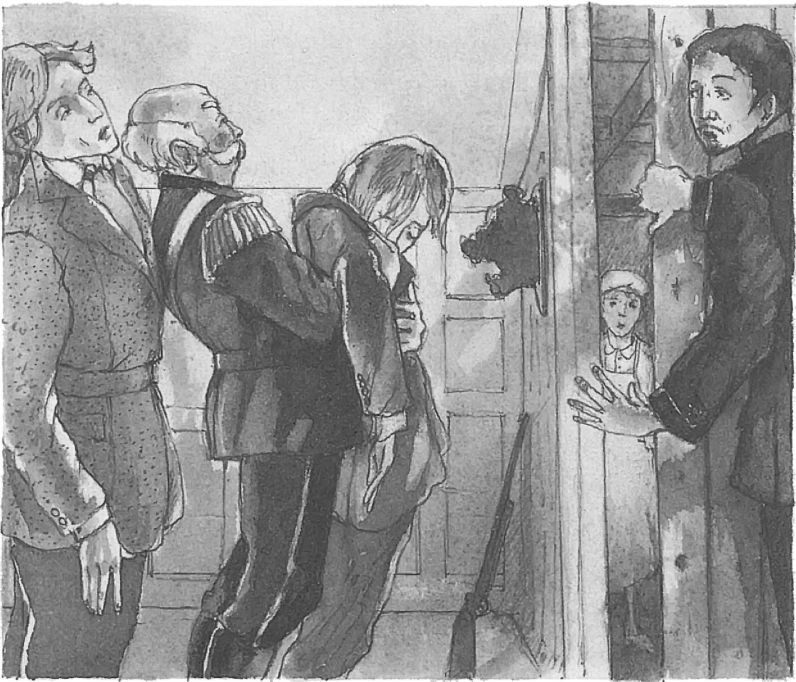
How could I refuse? It took me two minutes to decide.

‘I’ll go!’ I said.

‘Well done, boy!’ cried Sapt. He went on quickly and quietly. ‘After the coronation they’ll take us to the palace for the night. When we’re alone, you and I will leave and ride back here to fetch the King. He’ll be all right by then. I’ll take him back to Strelsau and you must get out of the country as fast as you can.’

‘But what about the soldiers?’ Fritz asked. ‘They’re Duke Michael’s men, and they’re coming to take the King back to Strelsau for the coronation.’

‘We’ll go before the soldiers get here,’ Sapt said, ‘and we’ll hide the King.’



Sapt picked up the King in his arms.

He picked up the King in his arms and we opened the door. An old woman, Johann’s mother, was standing there. She turned, without a word, and went back to the kitchen.

‘Did she hear?’ Fritz asked.