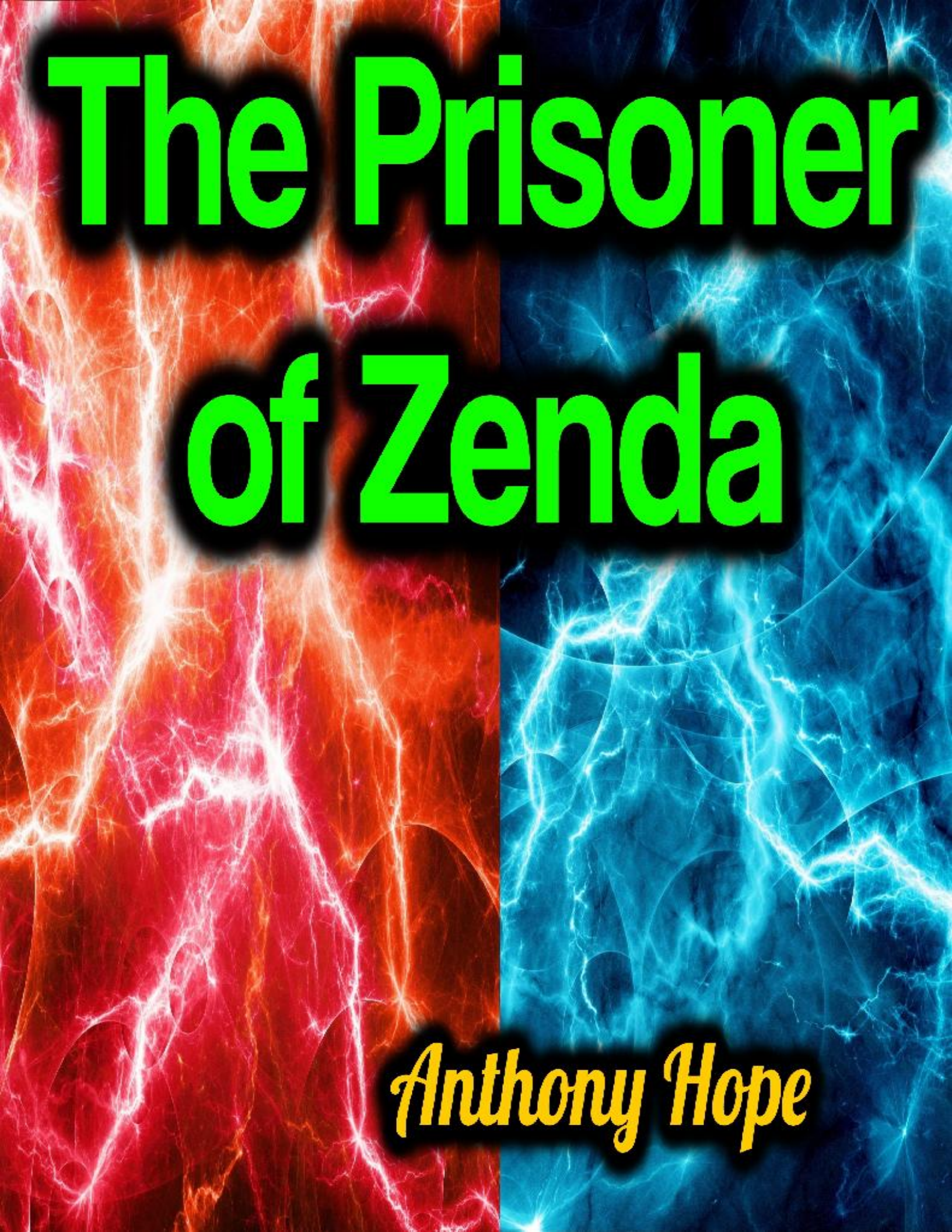
The Prisoner of Zenda
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Chapter

1 The Rassendylls—With a Word on the Elphbergs

"I wonder when in the world you're going to do anything, Rudolf?" said my brother's wife.

"My dear Rose," I answered, laying down my egg-spoon, "why in the world should I do anything? My position is a comfortable one. I have an income nearly sufficient for my wants (no one's income is ever quite sufficient, you know), I enjoy an enviable social position: I am brother to Lord Burlesdon, and brother-in-law to that charming lady, his countess. Behold, it is enough!"

"You are nine-and-twenty," she observed, "and you've done nothing but—"

"Knock about? It is true. Our family doesn't need to do things."

This remark of mine rather annoyed Rose, for everybody knows (and therefore there can be no harm in referring to the fact) that, pretty and accomplished as she herself is, her family is hardly of the same standing as the Rassendylls. Besides her attractions, she possessed a large fortune, and my brother Robert was wise enough not to mind about her ancestry. Ancestry is, in fact, a matter concerning which the next observation of Rose's has some truth.

"Good families are generally worse than any others," she said.

Upon this I stroked my hair: I knew quite well what she meant.

"I'm so glad Robert's is black!" she cried.

At this moment Robert (who rises at seven and works before breakfast) came in. He glanced at his wife: her cheek was slightly flushed; he patted it caressingly.

"What's the matter, my dear?" he asked.

"She objects to my doing nothing and having red hair," said I, in an injured tone.

"Oh! of course he can't help his hair," admitted Rose.

"It generally crops out once in a generation," said my brother. "So does the nose. Rudolf has got them both."

"I wish they didn't crop out," said Rose, still flushed.

"I rather like them myself," said I, and, rising, I bowed to the portrait of Countess Amelia.

My brother's wife uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"I wish you'd take that picture away, Robert," said she.

"My dear!" he cried.

"Good heavens!" I added.

"Then it might be forgotten," she continued.

"Hardly—with Rudolf about," said Robert, shaking his head.

"Why should it be forgotten?" I asked.

"Rudolf!" exclaimed my brother's wife, blushing very prettily.

I laughed, and went on with my egg. At least I had shelved the question of what (if anything) I ought to do. And, by way of closing the discussion—and also, I must admit, of exasperating my strict little sister-in-law a trifle more—I observed:

"I rather like being an Elphberg myself."

When I read a story, I skip the explanations; yet the moment I begin to write one, I find that I must have an explanation. For it is manifest that I must explain why my sister-in-law was vexed with my nose and hair, and why I ventured to call myself an Elphberg. For eminent as, I must protest, the Rassendylls have been for many generations, yet participation in their blood of course does not, at first sight, justify the boast of a connection with the grander stock of the Elphbergs or a claim to be one of that Royal House. For what relationship is there between Ruritania and Burlesdon, between the Palace at Strelsau or the Castle of Zenda and Number 305 Park Lane, W.?

Well then—and I must premise that I am going, perforce, to rake up the very scandal which my dear Lady Burlesdon wishes forgotten—in the year 1733, George II. sitting then on the throne, peace reigning for the moment, and the King and the Prince of Wales being not yet at loggerheads, there came on a visit to the English Court a certain prince, who was afterwards known to history as Rudolf the Third of Ruritania. The prince was a tall, handsome young fellow, marked (maybe marred, it is not for me to say) by a somewhat unusually long, sharp and straight nose, and a mass of dark-red hair—in fact, the nose and the hair which have stamped the Elphbergs time out of mind. He stayed some months in England, where he was most courteously received; yet, in the end, he left rather under a cloud. For he fought a duel (it was considered highly well bred of him to waive all question of his rank) with a nobleman, well known in the society of the day, not only for his own merits, but as the husband of a very beautiful wife. In that duel Prince Rudolf received a severe wound, and, recovering therefrom, was adroitly smuggled off by the Ruritanian ambassador, who had found him a pretty handful. The nobleman was not wounded in the duel; but the morning being raw and damp on the occasion of the meeting, he contracted a severe chill, and, failing to throw it off, he died some six months after the departure of Prince Rudolf, without having found leisure to adjust his relations with his wife—who, after another two months, bore an heir to the title and estates of the family of Burlesdon. This lady was the Countess Amelia, whose picture my sister-in-law wished to remove from the drawing-room in Park Lane; and her husband was James, fifth Earl of Burlesdon and twenty-second Baron Rassendyll, both in the peerage of England, and a Knight of the Garter. As for Rudolf, he went back to Ruritania,

married a wife, and ascended the throne, whereon his progeny in the direct line have sat from then till this very hour—with one short interval. And, finally, if you walk through the picture galleries at Burlesdon, among the fifty portraits or so of the last century and a half, you will find five or six, including that of the sixth earl, distinguished by long, sharp, straight noses and a quantity of dark-red hair; these five or six have also blue eyes, whereas among the Rassendylls dark eyes are the commoner.

That is the explanation, and I am glad to have finished it: the blemishes on honourable lineage are a delicate subject, and certainly this heredity we hear so much about is the finest scandalmonger in the world; it laughs at discretion, and writes strange entries between the lines of the "Peerages".

It will be observed that my sister-in-law, with a want of logic that must have been peculiar to herself (since we are no longer allowed to lay it to the charge of her sex), treated my complexion almost as an offence for which I was responsible, hastening to assume from that external sign inward qualities of which I protest my entire innocence; and this unjust inference she sought to buttress by pointing to the uselessness of the life I had led. Well, be that as it may, I had picked up a good deal of pleasure and a good deal of knowledge. I had been to a German school and a German university, and spoke German as readily and perfectly as English; I was thoroughly at home in French; I had a smattering of Italian and enough Spanish to swear by. I was, I believe, a strong, though hardly fine swordsman and a good shot. I could ride anything that had a back to sit on; and my head was as cool a one as you could find, for all its flaming cover. If you say that I ought to have spent my time in useful labour, I am out of Court and have nothing to say, save that my parents had no business to leave me two thousand pounds a year and a roving disposition.

"The difference between you and Robert," said my sister-in-law, who often (bless her!) speaks on a platform, and oftener still as if she were on one, "is that he recognizes the duties of his position, and you see the opportunities of yours."

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

"Nonsense!" said she, tossing her head; and after a moment she went on: "Now, here's Sir Jacob Borrodaile offering you exactly what you might be equal to."

"A thousand thanks!" I murmured.

"He's to have an Embassy in six months, and Robert says he is sure that he'll take you as an attache. Do take it, Rudolf—to please me."

Now, when my sister-in-law puts the matter in that way, wrinkling her pretty brows, twisting her little hands, and growing wistful in the eyes, all on account of an idle scamp like myself, for whom she has no natural

responsibility, I am visited with compunction. Moreover, I thought it possible that I could pass the time in the position suggested with some tolerable amusement. Therefore I said:

"My dear sister, if in six months' time no unforeseen obstacle has arisen, and Sir Jacob invites me, hang me if I don't go with Sir Jacob!"

"Oh, Rudolf, how good of you! I am glad!"

"Where's he going to?"

"He doesn't know yet; but it's sure to be a good Embassy."

"Madame," said I, "for your sake I'll go, if it's no more than a beggarly Legation. When I do a thing, I don't do it by halves."

My promise, then, was given; but six months are six months, and seem an eternity, and, inasmuch as they stretched between me and my prospective industry (I suppose attaches are industrious; but I know not, for I never became attache to Sir Jacob or anybody else), I cast about for some desirable mode of spending them. And it occurred to me suddenly that I would visit Ruritania. It may seem strange that I had never visited that country yet; but my father (in spite of a sneaking fondness for the Elphbergs, which led him to give me, his second son, the famous Elphberg name of Rudolf) had always been averse from my going, and, since his death, my brother, prompted by Rose, had accepted the family tradition which taught that a wide berth was to be given to that country. But the moment Ruritania had come into my head I was eaten up with a curiosity to see it. After all, red hair and long noses are not confined to the House of Elphberg, and the old story seemed a preposterously insufficient reason for debarring myself from acquaintance with a highly interesting and important kingdom, one which had played no small part in European history, and might do the like again under the sway of a young and vigorous ruler, such as the new King was rumoured to be. My determination was clinched by reading in The Times that Rudolf the Fifth was to be crowned at Strelsau in the course of the next three weeks, and that great magnificence was to mark the occasion. At once I made up my mind to be present, and began my preparations. But, inasmuch as it has never been my practice to furnish my relatives with an itinerary of my journeys and in this case I anticipated opposition to my wishes, I gave out that I was going for a ramble in the Tyrol—an old haunt of mine—and propitiated Rose's wrath by declaring that I intended to study the political and social problems of the interesting community which dwells in that neighbourhood.

"Perhaps," I hinted darkly, "there may be an outcome of the expedition."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," said I carelessly, "there seems a gap that might be filled by an exhaustive work on—"

"Oh! will you write a book?" she cried, clapping her hands. "That would be splendid, wouldn't it, Robert?"

"It's the best of introductions to political life nowadays," observed my brother, who has, by the way, introduced himself in this manner several times over. Burlesdon on Ancient Theories and Modern Facts and The Ultimate Outcome, by a Political Student, are both works of recognized eminence.

"I believe you are right, Bob, my boy," said I.

"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!" she said, pouting.

But this time she could get no more than a qualified promise out of me. To tell the truth, I would have wagered a handsome sum that the story of my expedition that summer would stain no paper and spoil not a single pen. And that shows how little we know what the future holds; for here I am, fulfilling my qualified promise, and writing, as I never thought to write, a book—though it will hardly serve as an introduction to political life, and has not a jot to do with the Tyrol.

Neither would it, I fear, please Lady Burlesdon, if I were to submit it to her critical eye—a step which I have no intention of taking.

Chapter

2 Concerning the Colour of Men's Hair

It was a maxim of my Uncle William's that no man should pass through Paris without spending four-and-twenty hours there. My uncle spoke out of a ripe experience of the world, and I honoured his advice by putting up for a day and a night at "The Continental" on my way to—the Tyrol. I called on George Featherly at the Embassy, and we had a bit of dinner together at Durand's, and afterwards dropped in to the Opera; and after that we had a little supper, and after that we called on Bertram Bertrand, a versifier of some repute and Paris correspondent to The Critic. He had a very comfortable suite of rooms, and we found some pleasant fellows smoking and talking. It struck me, however, that Bertram himself was absent and in low spirits, and when everybody except ourselves had gone, I rallied him on his moping preoccupation. He fenced with me for a while, but at last, flinging himself on a sofa, he exclaimed:

"Very well; have it your own way. I am in love—infernally in love!"

"Oh, you'll write the better poetry," said I, by way of consolation.

He ruffled his hair with his hand and smoked furiously. George Featherly, standing with his back to the mantelpiece, smiled unkindly.

"If it's the old affair," said he, "you may as well throw it up, Bert. She's leaving Paris tomorrow."

"I know that," snapped Bertram.

"Not that it would make any difference if she stayed," pursued the relentless George. "She flies higher than the paper trade, my boy!"

"Hang her!" said Bertram.

"It would make it more interesting for me," I ventured to observe, "if I knew who you were talking about."

"Antoinette Mauban," said George.

"De Mauban," growled Bertram.

"Oho!" said I, passing by the question of the `de'. "You don't mean to say, Bert—?"

"Can't you let me alone?"

"Where's she going to?" I asked, for the lady was something of a celebrity.

George jingled his money, smiled cruelly at poor Bertram, and answered pleasantly:

"Nobody knows. By the way, Bert, I met a great man at her house the other night—at least, about a month ago. Did you ever meet him—the Duke of Strelsau?"

"Yes, I did," growled Bertram.

"An extremely accomplished man, I thought him."

It was not hard to see that George's references to the duke were intended to aggravate poor Bertram's sufferings, so that I drew the inference that the duke had distinguished Madame de Mauban by his attentions. She was a widow, rich, handsome, and, according to repute, ambitious. It was quite possible that she, as George put it, was flying as high as a personage who was everything he could be, short of enjoying strictly royal rank: for the duke was the son of the late King of Ruritania by a second and morganatic marriage, and half-brother to the new King. He had been his father's favourite, and it had occasioned some unfavourable comment when he had been created a duke, with a title derived from no less a city than the capital itself. His mother had been of good, but not exalted, birth.

"He's not in Paris now, is he?" I asked.

"Oh no! He's gone back to be present at the King's coronation; a ceremony which, I should say, he'll not enjoy much. But, Bert, old man, don't despair! He won't marry the fair Antoinette—at least, not unless another plan comes to nothing. Still perhaps she—" He paused and added, with a laugh: "Royal attentions are hard to resist—you know that, don't you, Rudolf?"

"Confound you!" said I; and rising, I left the hapless Bertram in George's hands and went home to bed.

The next day George Featherly went with me to the station, where I took a ticket for Dresden.

"Going to see the pictures?" asked George, with a grin.

George is an inveterate gossip, and had I told him that I was off to Ruritania, the news would have been in London in three days and in Park Lane in a week. I was, therefore, about to return an evasive answer, when he saved my conscience by leaving me suddenly and darting across the platform. Following him with my eyes, I saw him lift his hat and accost a graceful, fashionably dressed woman who had just appeared from the booking-office. She was, perhaps, a year or two over thirty, tall, dark, and of rather full figure. As George talked, I saw her glance at me, and my vanity was hurt by the thought that, muffled in a fur coat and a neck-wrapper (for it was a chilly April day) and wearing a soft travelling hat pulled down to my ears, I must be looking very far from my best. A moment later, George rejoined me.

"You've got a charming travelling companion," he said. "That's poor Bert Bertrand's goddess, Antoinette de Mauban, and, like you, she's going to Dresden—also, no doubt, to see the pictures. It's very queer, though, that she doesn't at present desire the honour of your acquaintance."

"I didn't ask to be introduced," I observed, a little annoyed.

"Well, I offered to bring you to her; but she said, 'Another time.' Never mind, old fellow, perhaps there'll be a smash, and you'll have a chance

of rescuing her and cutting out the Duke of Strelsau!"

No smash, however, happened, either to me or to Madame de Mauban. I can speak for her as confidently as for myself; for when, after a night's rest in Dresden, I continued my journey, she got into the same train. Understanding that she wished to be let alone, I avoided her carefully, but I saw that she went the same way as I did to the very end of my journey, and I took opportunities of having a good look at her, when I could do so unobserved.

As soon as we reached the Ruritanian frontier (where the old officer who presided over the Custom House favoured me with such a stare that I felt surer than before of my Elphberg physiognomy), I bought the papers, and found in them news which affected my movements. For some reason, which was not clearly explained, and seemed to be something of a mystery, the date of the coronation had been suddenly advanced, and the ceremony was to take place on the next day but one. The whole country seemed in a stir about it, and it was evident that Strelsau was thronged. Rooms were all let and hotels overflowing; there would be very little chance of my obtaining a lodging, and I should certainly have to pay an exorbitant charge for it. I made up my mind to stop at Zenda, a small town fifty miles short of the capital, and about ten from the frontier. My train reached there in the evening; I would spend the next day, Tuesday, in a wander over the hills, which were said to be very fine, and in taking a glance at the famous Castle, and go over by train to Strelsau on the Wednesday morning, returning at night to sleep at Zenda.

Accordingly at Zenda I got out, and as the train passed where I stood on the platform, I saw my friend Madame de Mauban in her place; clearly she was going through to Strelsau, having, with more providence than I could boast, secured apartments there. I smiled to think how surprised George Featherly would have been to know that she and I had been fellow travellers for so long.

I was very kindly received at the hotel—it was really no more than an inn—kept by a fat old lady and her two daughters. They were good, quiet people, and seemed very little interested in the great doings at Strelsau. The old lady's hero was the duke, for he was now, under the late King's will, master of the Zenda estates and of the Castle, which rose grandly on its steep hill at the end of the valley a mile or so from the inn. The old lady, indeed, did not hesitate to express regret 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 so much abroad, not one in ten knows him even by sight."

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

"Shaved his beard!" exclaimed her mother. "Who says so?"

"Johann, the duke's keeper. 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 to walk next day in the direction of the lodge, on the chance of coming across the King. The old lady ran on garrulously:

"Ah, and I wish he would stay at his hunting—that and wine (and one thing more) are all he loves, they say—and suffer our duke to be crowned on Wednesday. That I wish, and I don't care who knows it."

"Hush, mother!" urged the daughters.

"Oh, there's many to think as I do!" cried the old woman stubbornly.

I threw myself back in my deep armchair, and laughed at her zeal.

"For my part," said the younger and prettier of the two daughters, a fair, buxom, smiling wench, "I hate Black Michael! A red Elphberg for me, mother! The King, they say, is as red as a fox or as—"

And she laughed mischievously as she cast a glance at me, and tossed her head at her sister's reproving face.

"Many a man has cursed their red hair before now," muttered the old lady—and I remembered James, fifth Earl of Burlesdon.

"But never a woman!" cried the girl.

"Ay, and women, when it was too late," was the stern answer, reducing the girl to silence and blushes.

"How comes the King here?" I asked, to break an embarrassed silence. "It is the duke's land here, you say."

"The duke invited him, sir, to rest here till Wednesday. The duke is at Strelsau, preparing the King's reception."

"Then they're friends?"

"None better," said the old lady.

But my rosy damsel tossed her head again; she was not to be repressed for long, and she broke out again:

"Ay, they love one another as men do who want the same place and the same wife!"

The old woman glowered; but the last words pricked my curiosity, and I interposed before she could begin scolding:

"What, the same wife, too! 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, and that she is to be the queen."

"Upon my word," said I, "I begin to be sorry for your duke. But if a man will be a younger son, why he must take what the elder leaves, and be as thankful to God as he can;" and, thinking of myself, I shrugged my shoulders and laughed. And then I thought also of Antoinette de Mauban and her journey to Strelsau.