

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.

The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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Anthony Hope, *The Prisoner of Zenda* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

“My dear Rudolf, when will you finally do something with your life?” my brother’s wife asked me one morning at breakfast. She spoke in a serious tone, though the sunlight coming through the window made the room feel warm and calm.

I put down my spoon and smiled at her. “Why should I do anything?” I answered. “My life is already comfortable. I have enough money for my needs, even if no man ever feels he has quite enough. I enjoy good society. I am the brother of Lord Buresdon and the brother-in-law of a very charming lady. Surely that is enough work for one man.”

She frowned slightly. “You are twenty-nine years old,” she said. “And you have done nothing except wander about.”

“That is true,” I said easily. “But our family has never needed to hurry.”

My answer did not please her. Everyone knew that, although she was clever and beautiful, her family was not as old or famous as ours. My brother had married her because he loved her and because she was rich, not because of her family name. She knew this, and sometimes it troubled her.

“Old families are often worse than others,” she said sharply.

I touched my hair with amusement, for I understood her meaning very well.

“I am glad Robert’s hair is black,” she added quickly.

At that moment my brother Robert entered the room. He always rose early and worked before breakfast. Seeing his wife’s flushed face, he asked gently, “What is wrong, my dear?”

“She complains that I do nothing and that my hair is red,” I said before she could answer.

“Well, he cannot help his hair,” she admitted.

“The red hair appears once every generation,” said my brother calmly. “And so

does the long nose. Rudolf has both.”

“I wish they did not appear at all,” she said.

“I rather like them,” I replied, bowing playfully toward a portrait hanging on the wall.

She sighed with impatience. “I wish that picture would be removed,” she said to my brother.

“My dear!” he cried in surprise.

“It would help people forget,” she continued.

“Not while Rudolf is here,” my brother answered, laughing.

“Why should it be forgotten?” I asked.

She blushed deeply and said nothing more. I returned peacefully to my breakfast, pleased that the conversation had moved away from the question of my future. To tease her a little more, I added, “Personally, I rather enjoy being an Elphberg.”

At this point I must explain what I meant. When one reads a story, one often skips explanations, but when writing one, explanations become necessary. My sister-in-law disliked my red hair and long nose because they reminded her of an old family scandal.

Many years ago, in 1733, a prince from the country of Ruritania visited the English court. His name was Rudolf, later known as King Rudolf the Third. He was tall and handsome, with bright red hair and a long straight nose—features famous in the royal house of Elphberg.

During his visit he fought a duel with an English nobleman. The prince was wounded but survived. Soon afterward he returned to Ruritania. Some months later, the nobleman’s wife gave birth to a son. From that time onward, members of our family sometimes showed the same red hair and sharp features as the Elphbergs.

This connection was never spoken of openly, yet portraits in our house clearly showed it. Every few generations a child appeared who looked more like a Ruritanian king than an English gentleman. I was one of those unlucky—or perhaps fortunate—examples.

My sister-in-law believed that such appearance suggested a careless character. She also thought my life useless, since I had never chosen a profession. In truth, I had enjoyed myself greatly. I spoke German and French well, knew some Italian and Spanish, rode horses easily, fenced fairly well, and travelled widely. My parents had left me a good income, and I saw no reason to refuse the pleasures it allowed.

“The difference between you and Robert,” she said firmly, “is that he understands duty, while you only look for enjoyment.”

“To a man with spirit,” I answered, “opportunity itself becomes duty.”

“Nonsense,” she said.

Then she mentioned a plan. A diplomat named Sir Jacob Borrodaile might soon receive an important post abroad and needed an assistant. My brother believed I could obtain the position.

“Please accept it,” she said earnestly. “Do it for me.”

When she spoke so kindly, I felt ashamed of disappointing her. After a moment I said, “Very well. If nothing prevents it in six months, I will accept.”

Her face brightened with pleasure, and my brother nodded approval.

Yet six months seemed a long time. I began thinking of how to spend that period. Suddenly an idea came to me: I would visit Ruritania, the land connected with our strange family history. My father had always discouraged such a journey, and my brother continued that tradition, but curiosity now overcame me.

I read in a newspaper that the new King of Ruritania, Rudolf the Fifth, would soon be crowned in the capital city of Strelsau. The ceremony promised great celebration. At once I decided to attend.

Since I expected objections, I told my family that I planned to travel in the Tyrol mountains instead. To calm my sister-in-law further, I hinted that I might even write a serious book about politics and society.

“A book!” she cried happily. “That would be wonderful.”

My brother agreed. Writing books had helped his own political career greatly.

“I promise nothing,” I said carefully, “but if I find good material, I may write.”

She accepted this answer, though she clearly wished for more certainty. In truth,

I had no intention of writing anything at all. I believed my journey would leave no record beyond pleasant memories.

How little we understand the future. For now I sit writing this story myself, though not the book she imagined, and certainly not about the Tyrol.

My journey began with a stop in Paris. An uncle of mine once declared that no man should pass through that city without staying at least one day, and I respected his wisdom. I met an old friend, George Featherly, at the embassy, and we dined together, visited the opera, and later called on a poet named Bertram Bertrand.

We found him unhappy. After some questioning he finally admitted, “I am deeply in love.”

George laughed unkindly. “Then give up hope. The lady leaves Paris tomorrow.”

Her name, I learned, was Antoinette de Mauban—a beautiful and ambitious widow. George hinted that she attracted the attention of an important nobleman from Ruritania, the Duke of Strelsau, half-brother to the new king.

The conversation amused me, and soon afterward I returned to my hotel to sleep, thinking little of it. The next day, as I prepared to leave Paris, George suddenly ran across the station platform to greet a fashionable lady. When he returned, he told me she was Madame de Mauban herself—and that she was travelling in the same direction as I was.

Our journey continued without incident. She clearly preferred not to speak with strangers, and I respected her wish, though I observed her from a distance. We travelled together as far as the border of Ruritania.

There, reading the newspapers, I discovered surprising news: the coronation had been moved forward and would occur sooner than expected. Hotels in the capital were already full. Therefore I decided to stop first at a small town called Zenda, not far from the frontier, and travel onward later.

As my train left the station, I saw Madame de Mauban continuing toward Strelsau. I smiled to think how astonished George would have been to know how long we had travelled together without speaking.

I did not yet realize how closely our paths—and my fate—were about to join with the destiny of Ruritania.

Part 2

The inn at Zenda was small but comfortable. A cheerful old woman owned it, and her two daughters helped her manage the house. They welcomed me warmly, treating me less like a stranger and more like an honoured guest. The evening air was cool, and after supper we sat together in a low-ceilinged room where a fire burned gently.

The old woman spoke freely about the coming coronation. Unlike many people in the capital, she showed little excitement about the new king.

“We know Duke Michael,” she said firmly. “He has lived among us for years. Every man here knows him. But the King—he is almost a stranger.”

One of the daughters nodded eagerly. “They say he has shaved his beard. Now no one will even recognize him.”

“Shaved his beard?” the mother cried in surprise. “Who told you that?”

“Johann, the duke’s keeper. He has seen the King.”

I listened with interest. The King, it seemed, was staying nearby in a hunting lodge within the forest until the coronation day. This information pleased me greatly, for I decided at once that I would walk in that direction the next morning. Perhaps I might even see the monarch before the ceremony.

The old woman continued speaking, lowering her voice slightly. “If it were up to me,” she said, “the King would stay hunting forever, and our Duke Michael would be crowned instead.”

Her daughters tried to silence her, but she only shook her head stubbornly.

I leaned back in my chair and laughed at her boldness. The younger daughter, a lively girl with bright eyes, suddenly declared, “I prefer a red Elphberg myself! They say the King’s hair is bright red—like a fox!”

She glanced teasingly at me, and I realized she referred to my own hair. Her mother muttered darkly that many men had cursed such colouring before. The girl laughed, insisting that women never complained—at least not until it was too late. Her mother’s stern reply silenced her at once.

To change the subject, I asked why the King was staying on land belonging to Duke Michael.

“The duke invited him,” the old woman explained. “The duke prepares everything in the capital while the King rests here.”

“Then they are friends?” I asked.

“The best of friends,” she answered.

Yet the younger daughter tossed her head and spoke again. “Friends? Perhaps. But men who want the same throne and the same bride cannot love each other forever.”

My curiosity grew stronger. She explained that Duke Michael wished to marry Princess Flavia, cousin to the King and future queen of Ruritania.

“Then I pity the duke,” I said lightly. “A younger brother must accept what the elder leaves him.”

At that moment heavy footsteps sounded behind us, and a rough voice demanded, “Who speaks of ‘Black Michael’ here?”

A large man entered the room. The girls grew suddenly quiet. He removed his cap respectfully when he saw me, but as his eyes met mine he started back in astonishment, staring as if he had seen a ghost.

“What troubles you?” one of the girls asked.

He continued to examine my face closely, almost fiercely.

“Good evening,” I said calmly.

“Good evening, sir,” he muttered, still staring.

The younger daughter laughed. “He is surprised by your hair. We do not often see that colour here.”

The man apologized awkwardly, claiming he had expected no visitors. As I prepared to leave for the night, he suddenly asked, “Sir, have you ever seen our King?”

“No,” I answered. “I hope to see him at the coronation.”

He said nothing more, but I felt his eyes follow me until I disappeared upstairs.

My guide, carrying a candle, smiled over her shoulder. “Johann does not like men with your colouring,” she said.

“Does colour matter so much?” I asked.

She laughed softly. “I like it. It is the Elphberg red.”

I joked that such things meant nothing, gave her a small coin, and retired to my room. Yet later I learned that colour can matter greatly indeed.

The next morning Johann himself visited me while I was eating breakfast. He behaved with perfect politeness and explained that he had arranged a room for me in Strelsau at his sister’s house. Since accommodations were scarce, his offer saved me considerable trouble, and I accepted gratefully.

After sending my luggage ahead, I decided to walk through the forest before travelling to the capital. The weather was fine, and curiosity drew me toward the hunting lodge where the King was said to stay.

Passing the Castle of Zenda, I admired its strong old walls and the newer residence built beside it. Beyond lay the forest, deep and quiet. Tall trees met overhead, and sunlight fell through the leaves in bright patches. The place felt peaceful beyond description.

After walking for more than an hour, I sat upon a fallen tree and lit a cigar. The silence and beauty soon made me drowsy. I stretched out comfortably and fell asleep, dreaming pleasantly that I lived in the castle and walked through the woods beside Princess Flavia herself.

Just as I leaned forward in my dream to kiss her, a rough voice cried nearby, “Why, shave him and he would be the King!”

I opened my eyes and saw two men standing over me, both carrying guns. One was short and heavily built with grey moustaches and sharp eyes. The other was younger, graceful, and clearly a gentleman.

The older man studied me closely. “May I ask your name?” he said.

I smiled. “Since you began the conversation, perhaps you should introduce yourselves first.”

The younger man stepped forward politely. “This is Colonel Sapt,” he said. “I am Fritz von Tarlenheim. We serve the King of Ruritania.”

I bowed. “Rudolf Rassendyll, an English traveller.”

Colonel Sapt suddenly exclaimed, “Of the Burlesdon family?”

“My brother holds the title,” I replied.

He laughed loudly and pointed at my hair. “Your head tells the story clearly!”

I realized then that my resemblance to the royal family was widely known. Before I could reply further, a voice called through the trees, “Fritz! Where are you?”

“The King!” whispered Fritz.

A young man appeared moments later—and I cried out in astonishment.

He and I were almost identical.

Aside from my beard and a slight difference in expression, the King of Ruritania stood before me like my reflection in a mirror. We stared at one another in amazement until he suddenly burst into laughter.

“Well met, cousin!” he cried warmly, clapping my shoulder. “A man does not expect to meet himself in a forest!”

He welcomed me kindly and insisted that I dine with him that evening at the hunting lodge. Despite some hesitation from his companions, he would not accept refusal.

We walked together through the forest, talking easily. The King proved cheerful, friendly, and full of humour. Soon we reached the wooden lodge where a simple meal awaited us.

The food was plain but plentiful, and the wine excellent. The King drank freely, laughing and telling stories, while Colonel Sapt and Fritz occasionally warned him to remember the early start required the next morning.

Eventually a special bottle arrived, sent by Duke Michael with compliments. The King laughed loudly and declared he would drink it alone in honour of his brother.

He emptied the bottle completely, set it down heavily, and rested his head upon his arms.

That was the last thing I remembered before sleep overcame us all.

Part 3

I awoke suddenly, cold water running down my face and into my clothes. For a moment I could not understand where I was. Then I saw Colonel Sapt standing over me with an empty bucket in his hand and a grim smile on his face.

I sprang to my feet in anger. "Sir, this joke goes too far!" I cried.

"No time for anger," he answered calmly. "Nothing else would wake you. It is five o'clock."

Fritz von Tarlenheim stood nearby, pale and anxious. He took my arm and said quietly, "Look there."

On the floor lay the King.

He was stretched full length, breathing heavily, his face red and motionless. Water covered his hair and clothes, yet he did not stir. I knelt beside him and felt his pulse. It was slow—far too slow.

We looked at one another in silence.

"We have tried for half an hour to wake him," Fritz said. "Nothing works."

"He drank far more than any of us," growled Sapt.

"Was the last wine drugged?" I asked in a low voice.

Sapt shrugged. "I do not know."

The horror of the situation struck me at once. "We must call a doctor!"

"There is none within ten miles," Sapt replied. "And no doctor could wake him in time. He will sleep for many hours yet."

"But the coronation!" I exclaimed.

Fritz covered his face with his hands. "We must send word that the King is ill."

Sapt laughed harshly. "Ill? They know too well what that means. If he does not appear today, he will never be crowned."

I stared at him. "Why?"

"Because Michael waits," he said grimly. "Half the army stands ready. If the King fails to arrive, another will take his place. I know Duke Michael."

The truth became clear. If the King did not appear in Strelsau that day, the throne might be lost forever.

"We could carry him there," I suggested weakly.

Sapt shook his head. "In that condition? He would look like a drunken fool."

Silence followed. The King continued to breathe heavily on the floor.

Then Sapt turned slowly toward me. His eyes were sharp and thoughtful.

“Fate brought you here,” he said. “And fate now sends you to Strelsau.”

I stepped back. “You cannot mean—”

Fritz suddenly looked up, hope and fear mixed on his face.

“Impossible,” I whispered. “I would be discovered.”

“A risk,” said Sapt, “against certain ruin. Shave your beard and no man will know. Are you afraid?”

“Sir!” I protested.

“It is your life,” he continued calmly. “If you are discovered, you die. Perhaps we die with you. But if you refuse, Michael will be king before nightfall.”

I looked again at the unconscious ruler lying before us. The room was silent except for his heavy breathing and the ticking of a clock.

At last I said quietly, “Yes. I will go.”

Sapt seized my hand. “Good lad!”

The plan formed quickly. I would ride to Strelsau in the King’s place, attend the coronation, and return afterward. Meanwhile the real King would remain hidden until he recovered.

Josef, the servant, was summoned with hot water and razors. My beard and moustache were shaved away. When Fritz saw my face uncovered, he breathed deeply.

“We shall succeed,” he said.

I was dressed in the King’s uniform—a colonel of the Guard. His sword hung at my side; his helmet rested upon my head. Looking into a mirror, I almost believed the deception myself.

Meanwhile Sapt carried the unconscious King to a cellar and secured the old woman who had witnessed too much, locking her safely away so no alarm could be raised.

Soon horses stood ready outside. The morning air was cold and fresh as we rode hard toward the railway station. As we travelled, Sapt instructed me rapidly in every detail of the King’s life—his habits, friends, enemies, and court customs.

“You are Catholic,” he said suddenly.

“I am not,” I answered.

He groaned. “Then you must learn quickly. Be polite to the Cardinal and say little.”

The train carried us swiftly toward Strelsau. My heart beat faster as the towers of the capital appeared in the distance.

“Your city, sire,” Sapt said with a grin, checking my pulse. “A little quick—but you will do.”

When the train stopped, Fritz and Sapt leapt out and held the door open for me. I whispered a brief prayer and stepped onto the platform.

At once officials hurried forward, bowing deeply. No one doubted me. I answered calmly, imitating royal confidence as best I could.

Soon bells rang throughout the city, and crowds cheered loudly.

“God save the King!” they cried.

Sapt leaned close and whispered, “God save them both.”

We mounted horses and rode through the streets toward the Cathedral. The new districts welcomed me warmly. Flags waved, flowers fell around me, and ladies leaned from balconies smiling and cheering.

Excitement filled me. For a moment I almost believed I truly was king.

Then I saw a familiar face in a balcony—Antoinette de Mauban. She stared at me in astonishment, clearly recognizing something strange. I forced myself to meet her gaze calmly and rode on.

Entering the older quarter of the city, the mood changed. Here many supported Duke Michael. The streets were darker, the cheers fewer, and suspicious eyes watched me closely. Yet none spoke.

At last we reached the Cathedral. My courage nearly failed as I dismounted, realizing the boldness of what I attempted. Priests waited inside, music thundered from the organ, and the ceremony began.

I remember little clearly. I knelt before the altar, received the sacred oil upon my head, and placed the crown upon myself. Before the entire kingdom, I swore the oath and became—at least in appearance—King Rudolf the Fifth.

Princess Flavia approached me then. She was beautiful beyond words, with shining red hair like my own. She kissed my hand, and I kissed her gently upon the cheek, unsure how the real King would have behaved but trusting instinct.

Then Duke Michael came forward. His face turned pale when he saw me alive and crowned. His hand trembled as I embraced him like a loving brother.

No one suspected the truth.

The ceremony ended, and we returned through cheering crowds to the palace. Beside me in the carriage sat Princess Flavia, silent and thoughtful. I wondered what place I held in her heart—and what danger awaited when the true King awoke.

Thus ended the strangest morning of my life, and thus began my role as an understudy upon the greatest stage a man could imagine.

Part 4

The ride from the Cathedral to the Royal Palace passed like a dream. The cheering crowds, the ringing bells, and the bright colours of banners and uniforms surrounded me on every side, yet I felt strangely removed from it all, as though I watched another man living my life. Princess Flavia sat beside me in the carriage, calm and dignified, though now and then I noticed her studying my face with quiet curiosity.

I dared not speak freely. I did not know how close she stood to the King, nor what words might betray me. Therefore I answered only when she addressed me, and then briefly.

“You seem tired today, cousin,” she said gently.

“The journey has been long,” I replied, hoping the answer would satisfy her.

She inclined her head, accepting the explanation, yet her thoughtful gaze remained.

Soon we reached the Palace. Servants hurried forward, bowing deeply, and I was led through halls filled with nobles, officers, and officials. Each greeted me with loyalty and respect. I returned their bows carefully, following Sapt’s quiet

signals whenever uncertainty threatened me.

At last I found myself alone for a moment with Sapt and Fritz in a private chamber.

Fritz sank into a chair, wiping his forehead. "It is done," he whispered.

"Half done," corrected Sapt. "The dangerous half begins now."

I removed my helmet and drew a long breath. "How long before the real King wakes?"

"Hours yet," said Sapt. "We must keep you safe until tonight. Then we ride back and change places again."

The thought comforted me. My strange duty would soon end, and I could return to being merely Rudolf Rassendyll.

But events were already moving beyond our control.

A servant entered to announce that the Princess requested a private audience. Sapt frowned but nodded for me to go.

I followed the servant into a quiet room overlooking the gardens. Princess Flavia stood by a window, sunlight falling across her hair like fire. When we were alone, she turned toward me.

"You are changed," she said softly.

My heart jumped. "Changed?"

"You seem... more serious," she continued. "Almost another man."

I smiled carefully. "A crown is a heavy thing."

She laughed gently. "Perhaps. Yet today you seemed stronger than before."

Her words troubled me deeply. She admired qualities that belonged not to the King but to me. I felt suddenly ashamed of the deception, yet I could not reveal the truth.

We spoke for several minutes about the ceremony and the people's welcome. Her intelligence and kindness impressed me greatly, and I understood at once why both brothers might wish to marry her.

At length she said quietly, "You must take care. There are many who do not wish you well."

"You speak of Duke Michael?" I asked.

She hesitated. "He has friends in the city."

I nodded, pretending confidence I did not feel. Soon afterward the audience ended, and I returned to Sapt and Fritz.

"Well?" Sapt asked.

"She suspects nothing," I said.

He grunted with relief. "Good. Now we must survive the evening."

The day passed in endless ceremonies. Delegations arrived one after another. I listened, smiled, and spoke as little as possible. Sapt remained close at my side, whispering names and warnings whenever needed. Without him I would have failed within minutes.

Late in the afternoon a message arrived: Duke Michael invited me to dine that evening.

Sapt's face darkened immediately. "A trap," he muttered.

"We cannot refuse," Fritz said. "It would look like fear."

I agreed. Refusal might reveal suspicion. Therefore acceptance was sent.

Before the dinner, however, another surprise awaited me. While walking through a corridor, I encountered Antoinette de Mauban.

She stopped suddenly, her eyes fixed on mine.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing slightly, though her tone held uncertainty.

I returned the bow. "Madame."

For a moment neither of us spoke. Then she stepped closer and said very quietly, "We travelled together recently, did we not?"

My heart pounded. Denial would be useless; she had seen me too clearly before.

"You are mistaken," I answered calmly.

She studied my face, searching for confirmation. At last she smiled faintly. "Perhaps," she said. "Travel confuses memory."

Yet as she moved away she added in a whisper only I could hear, "Take care tonight."

Her warning chilled me.

I reported the meeting to Sapt at once.

"Does she know?" Fritz asked anxiously.

“I cannot be certain,” I replied.

Sapt nodded slowly. “Then she may help us—or destroy us. We must watch her closely.”

Evening came, and with it the dinner at Duke Michael’s residence. The palace rooms were richly decorated, yet an uneasy tension filled the air. Michael greeted me with perfect politeness, but his dark eyes never left my face.

“My dear brother,” he said smoothly, “your arrival delighted us all.”

“You are most kind,” I answered, matching his tone.

Throughout dinner he observed me carefully, asking questions about hunting, travel, and mutual acquaintances. Each question felt like a test. Thanks to Sapt’s lessons, I answered well enough, though more than once I sensed danger near.

Michael smiled often, yet something cold lay beneath his courtesy.

After the meal music began, and guests moved into a larger hall. Princess Flavia joined me, and we spoke quietly while dancers passed before us. I found myself forgetting the danger, absorbed instead by her grace and warmth.

But Sapt soon approached, his expression urgent.

“Sire,” he murmured, “we must return to the Palace at once.”

I rose immediately, offering apologies to our host. Michael’s eyes narrowed slightly, but he allowed us to depart.

Once outside, Sapt spoke quickly. “I do not trust him. We leave tonight sooner than planned.”

“Is the King awake?” I asked.

“We do not know,” Fritz answered. “But we must reach him before Michael does.”

The game, it seemed, had only begun.

Part 5

Night had fallen over Strelsau when we returned to the Palace. Torches burned along the walls, and guards stood at every entrance. The celebrations of the coronation still filled the city with noise, yet inside our rooms all was tense and

quiet.

Sapt closed the door carefully behind us and turned at once to Fritz.

“We ride within the hour,” he said. “No delay now.”

Fritz nodded, though his face showed deep worry. “If Michael suspects anything, he may already have sent men toward Zenda.”

“Then we must be faster,” Sapt replied.

I removed the heavy uniform coat and sat down, suddenly aware of my exhaustion. The excitement of the day faded, leaving only the weight of danger. Until that moment I had played the part almost joyfully; now the risks stood clear before me.

“Suppose,” I said slowly, “that the King has not yet awakened?”

Sapt looked at me steadily. “Then we wait until he does. But you must not remain here longer than necessary. Too many eyes watch.”

A servant entered quietly with food, but none of us felt hungry. We ate only enough to keep our strength, speaking little while we waited for the signal to depart.

At last Sapt rose. “Time.”

We left the Palace secretly through a side entrance. Three horses waited in a dark courtyard. The guards saluted, believing they escorted their King on some private errand. Within minutes we were riding hard through silent streets and out toward the open country.

The cold night air cleared my thoughts. The moon shone faintly above us, lighting the road as our horses galloped toward Zenda.

For a long while none of us spoke. Then Fritz said quietly, “You have done more today than any man could ask.”

“Let us first survive the night,” I answered.

Sapt rode slightly ahead, watching the road constantly. His experience showed in every movement. At times he slowed us to listen; at others he urged us faster without explanation. Clearly he feared pursuit.

After several hours we reached the forest. The trees stood dark and still, their branches moving softly in the wind. The hunting lodge lay somewhere ahead.

Suddenly Sapt raised his hand and halted.

“Listen,” he whispered.

We heard faint sounds—voices, perhaps, or movement among the trees.

“Men,” Fritz said under his breath.

Sapt nodded grimly. “Michael’s work.”

We left the road and moved quietly through the forest, guiding our horses carefully to avoid noise. Every shadow seemed an enemy. My hand rested on my revolver, ready for the worst.

At last the hunting lodge appeared between the trees. A single light burned inside.

Josef rushed out when he saw us. Relief filled his face.

“Thank heaven you have come!” he cried softly.

“The King?” Sapt demanded.

“Still asleep—but breathing well.”

We entered quickly. The lodge looked unchanged, though signs of struggle remained from the morning. In the cellar we found the King lying where Sapt had hidden him. His colour had improved slightly, and as we watched he stirred faintly.

“He wakes,” Fritz whispered.

Slowly the King opened his eyes. Confusion crossed his face as he struggled to sit up.

“What—what has happened?” he murmured.

Sapt helped him gently. “Your Majesty drank too deeply,” he said dryly. “But all is well. You were crowned this morning.”

The King stared in astonishment. “Crowned? Impossible!”

All eyes turned toward me. For a moment he did not understand. Then recognition came, and he began to laugh weakly.

“You!” he cried. “You did it?”

I bowed slightly. “With the help of your friends.”

Sapt quickly explained everything—the drugged wine, the danger from Duke Michael, and the desperate plan. The King listened silently, his expression growing serious.

At last he stood, though unsteadily, and grasped my hand.

“You have saved my crown,” he said quietly. “And perhaps my life.”

I felt embarrassed by his gratitude. “It was necessity, sire.”

“It was courage,” he corrected.

There was little time for further talk. We helped him dress, and once more I exchanged clothes with him. My own garments felt strangely light after the royal uniform.

Before leaving, the King turned to me again.

“You must go at once,” he said. “Michael will soon learn the truth. You are in greater danger than I.”

The plan now reversed itself. The King and Sapt would return openly to Strelsau, claiming illness had delayed him earlier, while I would ride toward the frontier and disappear from Ruritania.

Fritz clasped my hand warmly. “I shall never forget this,” he said.

We mounted our horses once more. Dawn began to colour the sky as we separated at a crossroads—the King riding toward his capital, and I toward safety.

For a time I rode alone, believing the adventure nearly finished. Yet fate had not done with me.

Behind me, faint but unmistakable, came the sound of pursuing riders.

I urged my horse forward, realizing that Duke Michael’s game was far from over.

Part 6

The sound of horses behind me grew clearer with every moment. At first I hoped it might be travellers on the same road, but the steady rhythm of pursuit soon destroyed that hope. Whoever followed rode fast and with purpose.

I bent low over my horse’s neck and urged him forward. The early light of dawn spread slowly across the hills, revealing the winding road ahead. My horse was strong, yet he had already travelled far that night, and I knew he could not maintain such speed forever.

I turned once in the saddle and saw three riders in the distance. Even from afar their determination was plain. They followed my path exactly.

“Michael’s men,” I muttered.

The forest thinned, opening into rolling country broken by fields and small farms. Smoke rose from cottages as villagers began their day, unaware of the danger racing past them. I dared not stop to ask help; the fewer witnesses, the safer for all.

My only chance lay in reaching the frontier before my pursuers overtook me.

For nearly an hour the chase continued. Sometimes the road climbed steeply, forcing my horse to slow; sometimes it descended sharply, allowing me to gain distance again. Sweat darkened the animal’s neck, and his breathing grew heavy.

At last I saw a small roadside inn ahead. A sudden idea came to me. Pulling sharply to the side, I rode behind the building and dismounted quickly. Leading my horse through a narrow lane, I circled toward a grove of trees and waited in silence.

Moments later the three riders thundered past along the main road without stopping.

I allowed myself a brief smile. Their haste had saved me. After giving them time to disappear, I mounted again and took a smaller path leading toward the frontier by another route.

By midday I reached a quiet village near the border. There I rested my horse, changed part of my clothing to appear less noticeable, and continued at a calmer pace. No further pursuers appeared.

When at last I crossed out of Ruritania, relief washed over me. The strange adventure seemed already unreal, like a vivid dream fading with morning light.

Yet my thoughts did not rest easily. I found myself thinking constantly of Princess Flavia—her kindness, her courage, and the trust she had shown the man she believed to be her King.

I told myself that I would soon forget. I was returning to my ordinary life. The affair belonged to another world.

Several days later, however, while staying in a quiet town across the border, I

received unexpected visitors.

Colonel Sapt and Fritz von Tarlenheim entered my room without ceremony. Their appearance startled me so greatly that I sprang to my feet.

“What has happened?” I asked at once. “Is the King safe?”

“Safe—for the moment,” Sapt answered. His grave expression warned me that trouble remained.

Fritz spoke next. “The King returned successfully. No one suspects the truth of the coronation. But Michael has acted quickly.”

My heart tightened. “What has he done?”

Sapt drew closer and lowered his voice. “The King has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” I repeated in disbelief.

“Taken,” Sapt corrected. “Kidnapped.”

The room seemed suddenly smaller, the air heavier.

They explained rapidly. Shortly after returning to Strelsau, the King had accepted an invitation from Duke Michael. During the night he vanished. Officially he was said to be resting in private, but Sapt and Fritz knew better. Michael now held him prisoner somewhere—almost certainly in the Castle of Zenda.

“Michael cannot openly claim the throne while the King lives,” Fritz said. “But he can rule in his name.”

I understood at once. The coronation had failed to end the struggle; it had only begun it.

Sapt looked directly at me. “We need you again.”

I laughed bitterly. “You have already risked my life once.”

“And saved a kingdom,” he replied calmly.

Silence followed. I knew what he would ask before he spoke.

“You must return,” he said. “As long as you live, Michael cannot safely kill the King. The likeness between you is our greatest weapon.”

I walked slowly to the window, staring out at the quiet street below. My sensible course was clear: refuse, return to England, and forget everything.

Yet the memory of Flavia’s face rose before me, and with it the knowledge that

an innocent man—and perhaps a nation—depended upon courage.

I turned back toward them.

“Very well,” I said quietly. “I will come.”

Fritz grasped my hand in gratitude, while Sapt merely nodded, as though he had expected no other answer.

Thus I prepared to return once more to Ruritania, no longer as an accidental actor but as a willing partner in a dangerous game—one that would soon lead us back to the dark walls of the Castle of Zenda itself.

Part 7

We travelled back toward Ruritania without delay. This time our journey lacked the light spirit of adventure that had marked my first arrival. Now we rode with purpose, bound by danger and secrecy. Colonel Sapt spoke little, spending most of the journey deep in thought, while Fritz explained the situation more fully whenever we rested.

Duke Michael, he told me, now controlled the government in practice. Official messages claimed that the King required privacy after the strain of the coronation. Only a few trusted nobles suspected the truth, and even they dared not speak openly.

“If Michael announces the King’s death,” Fritz said, “he must produce a body. Until then he rules carefully, pretending loyalty.”

“And the King is certainly alive?” I asked.

Sapt answered firmly. “Michael needs him alive. Dead, the King becomes a martyr. Alive, he is a prisoner.”

The thought chilled me. Somewhere within the Castle of Zenda, the cheerful young man I had met in the forest now lived under guard, cut off from freedom by his own brother.

We reached Zenda after nightfall and took rooms secretly at the same inn where I had first stayed. The old woman recognized me at once but wisely asked no questions. News travelled quickly in small towns, yet loyalty to Duke Michael—

or fear of him—kept most tongues silent.

After supper Sapt spread a rough map across the table.

“The King must be inside the old castle,” he said. “Not the new residence—the ancient keep beyond the moat. It is strong, easy to defend, and difficult to enter unnoticed.”

He pointed to narrow passages and towers drawn in faded ink.

“Michael keeps a small but loyal group of men there. Six are known to be dangerous beyond measure.”

Fritz named them one by one. “De Gautet, Bersonin, Detchard, Lauengram, Krafstein—and Rupert of Hentzau.”

The last name carried a special weight.

“Rupert is young,” Fritz continued, “but reckless and deadly. He enjoys danger as other men enjoy wine.”

Sapt grunted. “He is the worst of them.”

We planned late into the night. A direct attack would fail; the castle could resist an army. Instead we must watch, gather information, and wait for a chance to rescue the King secretly.

“Meanwhile,” Sapt said, turning to me, “you must appear in public again.”

I stared at him. “Again play the King?”

“Exactly,” he replied. “Michael cannot move openly while two kings exist.”

The plan was daring. I would remain visible, allowing rumours to spread that the King moved freely. Michael would be forced to keep his prisoner alive and hidden.

Though the idea troubled me, I agreed. Once more I put on royal clothing, though this time only for selected appearances carefully arranged by Sapt’s allies.

The following day I walked openly through parts of the town, guarded discreetly by loyal soldiers. People bowed and cheered, convinced their King lived among them. The deception strengthened hope among supporters and confused Michael’s followers.

Yet danger surrounded us constantly.

That evening, while returning to the inn, a young officer approached and saluted.

“Your Majesty,” he said, smiling slightly, “may I escort you?”

His tone held amusement rather than respect. I recognized him instantly—Rupert of Hentzau.

He was handsome, dark-haired, and carried himself with careless confidence. His eyes shone with intelligence and mischief.

“You are very active for a man recovering from illness,” he remarked quietly as we walked.

“Fresh air restores strength,” I answered calmly.

He laughed softly. “Indeed. And miracles restore kings.”

My hand moved toward my sword, but he raised his own lightly in warning.

“Peace,” he said. “If I wished to expose you, I would have done so already.”

My heart beat faster. “You speak strangely.”

Rupert leaned closer. “I admire bold games. You play one magnificently. Tell Colonel Sapt that Rupert of Hentzau enjoys the sport.”

With that he bowed deeply and departed, leaving me shaken.

When I reported the meeting, Sapt cursed under his breath.

“He knows—or suspects,” Fritz said anxiously.

“Yes,” Sapt replied. “But Rupert serves himself before Michael. That may save us.”

Days passed as we watched the castle carefully. Through spies and loyal servants we learned more about its defenses. The King was held in a hidden chamber deep within the old keep, guarded day and night.

Each evening I found myself thinking more of Princess Flavia. She believed her King safe, unaware that another man risked his life wearing his face. I longed to see her again, yet feared such a meeting might weaken my resolve.

One night Fritz brought news that changed everything.

“Michael plans to move the King,” he said urgently. “Perhaps to another fortress.”

Sapt struck the table with his fist. “Then we must act at once.”

The time for waiting had ended. We would attempt the rescue within days, risking everything on a single desperate plan.

As I prepared for sleep that night, I realized how far I had travelled from the idle gentleman who once claimed life required no effort. Fate had given me purpose—and danger in equal measure.

Soon we would face the Castle of Zenda itself, and the outcome would decide not only the King's fate, but my own.

Part 8

The decision once made, Colonel Sapt wasted no time. Before dawn the next morning we left the inn and rode to a hill overlooking the Castle of Zenda. From there the fortress rose dark and silent above the valley, its ancient walls reflected in the still water of the moat that surrounded the old keep.

The newer chateau stood nearer the road, bright and comfortable in appearance, but the true strength of the place lay behind it. The old castle, built of heavy stone, seemed almost part of the rock itself. Narrow windows watched the countryside like cold eyes.

“There,” said Sapt quietly, pointing with his pipe. “That is where they keep him.”

Fritz studied the building carefully. “Too strong for attack.”

“We shall not attack,” Sapt replied. “We shall enter.”

The plan depended on secrecy and precision. Loyal servants within the chateau would assist us. At night we would cross the moat, reach a small postern door, and attempt to reach the King before Michael's men realized what was happening.

“Speed is everything,” Sapt said. “If they understand our purpose too soon, they will kill the King.”

That danger hung over every word we spoke. Michael's followers needed the King alive only while useful. If rescue seemed certain, they might end his life rather than lose power.

We returned to Zenda and prepared quietly. Weapons were cleaned, horses rested, and messages sent to trusted allies. Every movement had to appear ordinary.

Late that afternoon Fritz brought unexpected news.

“Princess Flavia has arrived in the town,” he said.

My heart gave a sudden leap. “Here?”

“She believes the King hunts nearby,” Fritz explained. “Michael encouraged the visit.”

Sapt frowned deeply. “That complicates matters.”

For me it complicated far more than our plan. I wished to see her and feared it equally.

That evening, while walking near the gardens, I encountered her by chance—or perhaps not entirely by chance. She stood alone beside a fountain, her expression troubled.

She turned as I approached and smiled with visible relief.

“I am glad to see you,” she said. “The court feels strange and uncertain. Everyone whispers.”

I bowed. “Your Highness honours me.”

She studied my face closely. “You seem different again. Sometimes I feel I do not fully know you.”

Her words pierced me. I struggled to answer calmly.

“Perhaps events change us all.”

She sighed softly. “I wish only for peace in the kingdom.”

For a moment we stood in silence. I felt an overwhelming desire to tell her everything—to confess that the man before her was not the King she trusted. Yet such truth would endanger us all.

Instead I said gently, “You must have courage.”

She smiled faintly. “I believe I shall, if you stand firm.”

Those words filled me with both pride and sorrow. I knew that soon I must disappear from her life forever.

When we parted, I returned to Sapt more determined than ever to succeed. The real King must be restored—not only for the kingdom, but for her.

Night came at last.

We dressed in dark clothing and armed ourselves lightly. Heavy armour would

only slow us. The moon hid behind clouds, giving us welcome darkness.

Guided by a loyal servant, we approached the castle through woods at the rear. The air felt cold and still. Every sound seemed loud—the rustle of leaves, the faint splash of water against stone.

At the moat a rope waited, hidden beneath bushes. Fritz crossed first, moving carefully hand over hand. I followed, feeling the cold damp air rise from the water below. Sapt came last, silent despite his age.

We reached the far side safely and crept toward a narrow door half concealed by ivy. A servant opened it softly from within and motioned us inside.

The corridors were dim and twisting, lit only by distant lamps. The old castle smelled of stone and damp air. Somewhere above, voices echoed faintly.

“The King lies below,” whispered our guide.

We descended a narrow stair, each step taken slowly to avoid noise. My heart beat loudly in my ears. Every moment felt stretched thin with danger.

Suddenly footsteps sounded above us.

We pressed ourselves into the shadows as two guards passed, laughing quietly. When they disappeared, we continued downward.

At last we reached a heavy wooden door guarded by a single man seated on a stool. He rose in surprise as we approached—but Sapt moved faster. One swift blow silenced him, and Fritz caught the falling body before it struck the floor.

Sapt tried the key ring taken from the guard. After a tense moment the lock turned.

The door opened.

Inside, lit by a single candle, sat the King.

He sprang to his feet in astonishment. “Rassendyll!” he whispered.

“We have come to take you home, sire,” I said.

Joy flashed across his face, but Sapt raised a warning hand.

“No noise. We must leave at once.”

The King seized my arm gratefully. “I knew you would return.”

We turned toward the passage—but at that instant a voice rang out behind us.

“How touching,” it said lightly. “A family reunion.”

Rupert of Hentzau stood in the doorway, sword drawn, smiling as though he watched a play.

The rescue had begun—but whether it would end in freedom or disaster remained uncertain.

Part 9

Rupert of Hentzau leaned easily against the doorway, his sword resting lightly in his hand. The candlelight shone on his smiling face, and his calm manner frightened me more than open anger would have done.

“Pray continue,” he said softly. “I dislike interrupting such moving scenes.”

Colonel Sapt stepped forward at once, placing himself between Rupert and the King.

“Stand aside,” he growled. “You have seen nothing.”

Rupert laughed quietly. “My dear colonel, I have seen everything. Three brave gentlemen creeping through secret passages at night rarely come for innocent reasons.”

Fritz moved closer to me, whispering, “If he calls the guard, we are lost.”

Rupert heard him and shook his head. “No shouting tonight. I prefer more interesting games.”

His eyes turned toward me. “Your Majesty—or perhaps I should say, Your Majesties. The likeness is even more delightful at close range.”

The King stared at him in confusion. “What does he mean?”

“Later,” Sapt muttered. “We must move now.”

Rupert raised his sword slightly, blocking the passage. “I cannot allow that so easily.”

For a moment none of us moved. The narrow corridor allowed little space to fight, and any noise might bring guards running.

I stepped forward. “What do you want?” I asked.

Rupert considered me thoughtfully. “Adventure,” he said at last. “And perhaps a favour.”

Sapt snorted impatiently. “Speak plainly.”

Rupert shrugged. “Very well. I do not wish Michael to rule forever. He is dull. You, on the other hand, make life interesting.”

Fritz stared at him. “You would betray your master?”

“I serve myself,” Rupert replied calmly. “Tonight I choose not to see you escape.”

He stepped aside from the doorway.

None of us moved at once. The offer seemed too easy.

“Why?” I demanded.

Rupert smiled again. “Because chaos amuses me. Also, I admire courage. Go quickly, before I change my mind.”

Sapt wasted no more time. “Move!” he whispered sharply.

We hurried into the corridor, the King between Fritz and me. Rupert remained behind, humming softly as though nothing unusual had occurred.

Our guide led us upward through twisting passages. Every sound seemed magnified—the scrape of boots, the rustle of clothing, the quick breathing of the King, still weak from captivity.

Halfway to the exit shouts echoed faintly above us.

“Too late,” Fritz whispered.

Someone had discovered the unconscious guard.

We ran now, caution abandoned. Turning a corner, we nearly collided with two armed men. Sapt fired instantly. The noise thundered through the corridor, and both guards fell.

“No stopping!” Sapt cried.

We reached the postern door just as alarm bells began ringing throughout the castle. Outside, moonlight flashed across the moat.

Crossing the rope proved harder with the weakened King. Fritz went first again, then helped pull him across. I followed while Sapt covered us, pistol ready.

A shout rose behind us. Figures appeared at the doorway.

Shots rang out. Water splashed below as bullets struck near us. My hands burned against the rope, but at last we reached the far side.

Horses waited where we had hidden them. We mounted quickly and rode into the forest at full speed.

Behind us the castle bells continued to ring, echoing through the night like cries of anger.

For nearly an hour we rode without slowing. Only when the sounds faded completely did Sapt allow us to halt.

The King drew a long breath. "I owe my life to you all," he said quietly.

Sapt shook his head. "Thank Mr. Rassendyll. Without him none of this would have been possible."

The King turned to me with deep emotion. "You risked everything—for a stranger."

I smiled faintly. "Not entirely a stranger, sire. We share a face, after all."

He laughed softly, though exhaustion showed clearly upon him.

Dawn began to lighten the sky as we reached a safe hunting lodge belonging to loyal friends. There we rested briefly while messengers rode ahead to prepare the King's return to Strelsau.

News of his escape would soon spread, ending Michael's hopes forever.

As we waited, the King spoke privately with me.

"You must leave Ruritania soon," he said gently. "Your presence will always remind people of this deception. It is safer for you—and for me."

I knew he was right. Already I felt the strange adventure drawing toward its end.

Yet one matter remained unresolved in my heart.

"Princess Flavia," I said quietly.

The King looked at me carefully, understanding at once.

"She believes she loves me," he answered. "Perhaps she truly does. But I think... she might also have loved the man who saved my crown."

His kindness only deepened my sadness.

Later that day we returned secretly to the capital. This time the true King entered his palace openly. Loyal supporters gathered quickly, and Duke Michael's position collapsed almost at once. He fled before arrest could reach him.

The kingdom rejoiced, believing their ruler had recovered from illness and defeated hidden enemies. Only a handful of us knew how close Ruritania had come to losing its crown.

That evening I walked alone through the palace gardens one last time. Soon I would depart forever, leaving behind glory that was never truly mine—and a woman I could never claim.

Footsteps approached softly behind me.

Princess Flavia stood there.

“You are leaving,” she said quietly.

I could not deny it. “Yes.”

She looked at me long, her eyes filled with understanding deeper than words.

“I think,” she said slowly, “that I have met two men who looked the same—but were not the same.”

My heart stopped.

She smiled sadly. “Do not fear. I shall never speak of it.”

I bowed deeply, unable to answer.

After a moment she held out her hand. I kissed it once, knowing it must be the last time.

“Farewell,” she said.

“Farewell,” I replied.

And so my part in the great adventure of Zenda drew toward its close, though its memory would remain with me always—proof that even an idle man may, for a brief moment, live as a king.

Part 10

The next morning dawned clear and quiet over Strelsau. Bells rang again through the city, this time not for ceremony but for celebration. News had spread that the King appeared strong and well, and that danger to the throne had passed. Crowds gathered outside the Palace, cheering with renewed loyalty.

From a window I watched them for a long time. Their joy belonged to Rudolf

the Fifth, not to me, yet I felt strangely connected to their happiness. For a few days I had carried their hopes upon my shoulders, and the memory would never leave me.

Colonel Sapt entered the room behind me.

“Your horse is ready,” he said simply.

I nodded. Neither of us wished for long speeches. Between us words were unnecessary.

Fritz arrived soon after, his usual calm manner softened by emotion. “You must travel carefully,” he said. “Michael still has friends beyond the frontier.”

“I shall be cautious,” I replied.

The King himself came last. He wore simple dress instead of royal uniform, and for a moment he looked again like the cheerful young man I had first met in the forest.

He dismissed the others and spoke to me alone.

“I cannot repay you,” he said quietly.

“You owe me nothing, sire.”

He shook his head. “You gave me more than a crown. You gave me time to become worthy of it.”

His honesty moved me deeply.

“Rule well,” I said. “That will be reward enough.”

He smiled. “You will always have a friend in Ruritania. Should you ever return, you will come not as a stranger but as my brother.”

We clasped hands warmly. Then, after a brief silence, he added, “Flavia understands more than she says.”

I looked away. “She is wise.”

“And brave,” he replied softly.

Soon afterward we left by a private gate to avoid attention. Only Sapt and Fritz accompanied me beyond the city walls. There we halted.

Sapt extended his hand. “You played the game well,” he said gruffly. “Better than many born to crowns.”

Fritz embraced me quickly. “I shall miss you, my friend.”

I mounted my horse, feeling an unexpected heaviness in my chest.

“Take care of him,” I said, meaning the King.

“With my life,” Fritz answered.

Without another word I turned toward the open road.

The journey away from Strelsau felt longer than my arrival had been. Each mile carried me farther from danger—and from something far more difficult to leave behind. The forests and hills of Ruritania faded slowly behind me until at last the frontier lay ahead.

When I crossed it, I paused and looked back once. The distant mountains stood calm beneath the sky, giving no sign of the extraordinary events that had taken place within them.

I resumed my travel toward Paris and then England. My ordinary life welcomed me again: familiar rooms, familiar friends, and the comfortable idleness my sister-in-law had once criticized so strongly.

Yet I was no longer the same man.

Often I found myself remembering small moments—the laughter of the King in the forest, Sapt’s stern loyalty, Fritz’s steady courage, and above all the quiet strength of Princess Flavia. At times I wondered what might have happened had fate chosen differently.

Some weeks later a letter reached me bearing the royal seal of Ruritania. Inside lay only a few lines written in the King’s own hand:

“All is well. The kingdom stands secure. My cousin is not forgotten.”

No signature was needed.

I placed the letter carefully among my private papers. It remains there still.

And now, having fulfilled at last the promise I once made lightly—to write of my travels—I set down this account so that the truth may exist somewhere, even if only on these pages. The world believes that King Rudolf the Fifth was crowned without difficulty and ruled by his own courage alone.

Let the world believe it.

For my part, I ask no recognition. It is enough to know that for a brief and dangerous time I lived another man’s life, wore a crown not mine, and helped save

a kingdom.

Such adventures come rarely to ordinary men. When they do, they leave memories stronger than glory itself.

And so ends the story of how an idle English gentleman became, for a little while, a king.