

THE PRISONER  
OF ZENDA

*Being the History of  
Three Months in the Life of  
an English Gentleman*

. . .

RUPERT  
OF HENTZAU

*Being the Sequel*

---

ANTHONY HOPE

WITH AN  
INTRODUCTION BY  
GARY HOPPENSTAND

PENGUIN BOOKS



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## THE PRISONER OF ZENDA

RUPERT OF HENTZAU

Anthony Hope is the pseudonym of Anthony Hope Hawkins, a successful and prolific author of fiction and drama. The son of a school headmaster, Hope was born in London in 1863. From 1876 to 1881 he attended public school at Marlborough, where he excelled at both sports and academics. He won a “Exhibition” at Balliol College, Oxford, and during his first term there was promoted to “Scholarship,” which greatly improved his limited financial means. Graduating with honors, he left Oxford in 1886 to pursue a legal career at Middle Temple in London. While practicing law, Hope also experimented with creative writing, and he published his first novel, a political satire entitled *A Man of Mark*, at his own expense in 1890. With the publication of his most famous novel, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, in 1894, Hope felt he was earning enough as a professional author to abandon his career in the law. He eventually returned twice more to the fertile Ruritanian setting of *The Prisoner of Zenda*—first in the short story collection *The Heart of Princess Osra* (1896), and later in the *Zenda* sequel, *Rupert of Hentzau* (1899)—but neither of these efforts was quite so successful as his first attempt. During the course of his productive life, Hope went on to publish a wide variety of fiction, in areas ranging from the light domestic comedy of *The Dolly Dialogues* (1894) to the more serious historical fiction of *Simon Doon* (1898). Enjoying a long-standing love of the theater, Hope also scripted a number of successful plays, some of which were adaptations of his own novels. During World War I, he wrote political propaganda for the British government, and for his wartime service was knighted in 1918. In the years since his death, on July 8, 1933, many devoted readers have agreed that Hope’s legacy to literature in general and to the adventure story in particular is worthy of esteem. *The Prisoner of Zenda* alone ranks as one of the finest romances ever published in the English language.

Gary Hoppenstand is a professor of American Thought and Language at Michigan State University. He has published numerous books and articles on topics ranging from nineteenth-century literature to film studies. His work has been nominated twice for the World Fantasy Award, and he has won the Popular Culture Association’s National Book Award for his textbook *Popular Fiction: An Anthology*. He has recently completed work on a Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics edition of P. C. Wren’s *Beau Geste*.

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## INTRODUCTION

In his biography *Anthony Hope and His Books* (1935), Sir Charles Mallet writes that Anthony Hope (the pseudonym of Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins) occupied an “enviable place” in Great Britain during the years just before the advent of World War I. Mallet argues that this historic moment was the “high-water mark of prosperity” for the English, a time when abundant personal wealth was the evidence and a time when British society was never more stable.<sup>1</sup> In retrospect, Mallet’s assessment is an accurate one. Anthony Hope Hawkins was among a select handful of popular British writers during this period—including W. W. Jacobs, Stanley J. Weyman, A. E. W. Mason, Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, and H. Rider Haggard—who enjoyed great financial success from their writing, a success that paralleled (and perhaps even reflected) the British Empire’s own sense of enduring prosperity.

Though much of his fiction is unknown to the contemporary reader, Hope published a short novel in 1894, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, that would soon be regarded by many literary critics and readers as the finest adventure story ever written. Geoffrey Household calls it “brilliant,”<sup>2</sup> while Roger Lancelyn Green states that it “has the lightness of touch and the glorious inevitability of the complete spontaneous imagination.”<sup>3</sup> The noted literary critic A. St. John Adcock speaks to the impact the novel had on literature in his book, *Gods of Modern Grub Street: Impressions of Contemporary Authors* (1923): “[*The Prisoner of Zenda*] inspired a large school of imitators, which increased and multiplied until the sword and cloak romance, and stories of imaginary kingdoms were, in a few years, almost plentiful as blackberries and began to become a drug in the market.”<sup>4</sup> Listed among those who sang the novel’s praise following its publication in 1894 were Andrew Lang, Walter Besant, Arthur Quiller-Couch, and Robert Louis Stevenson, who, in a letter which was discovered on his writing table following his death, called *The Prisoner of Zenda* a “very spirited and gallant little book.”<sup>5</sup>

Without a doubt, Hope’s little book launched uncountable imitations and entered forever the collective popular culture of the twentieth century. In recent years, variations of *The Prisoner of Zenda* have appeared as affectionate literary pastiche and parody. Included among the better efforts are British author George Mac-Donald Fraser’s marvelously wicked novel *Royal Flash* (1970) featuring one of the great antiheroes of adventure fiction, Harry Flashman, and the lighthearted cinematic comedy *The Great Race* (1965), directed by Blake Edwards and starring Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon.

To this day, *The Prisoner of Zenda* remains one of the most popular adventure novels ever written and its appeal is both universal and timeless. Hope’s political fairy tale of a dashing British public school gentleman who masquerades as the king of a fictional European kingdom, while in the process winning the heart of a beautiful princess and defeating the nefarious schemes of an evil duke, won the admiration of a wide and devoted readership. It was perhaps the first popular novel to be read and enjoyed by both the working class and the literati alike, and its enduring fame has lasted over a hundred years in print, and in numerous stage and cinematic adaptations. Hope’s story of the political conflict of blue-blooded nobles became, somewhat ironically, the most democratic of novels as a result of its broad appeal.

Regarding its success as a best-selling novel, biographer Charles Mallet reports that the sal

figures for *The Prisoner of Zenda* were most impressive. By 1934, more than 500,000 copies of the book had been sold in England, and about 260,000 in the United States. It had been adopted for use in Egyptian schools, and an abridged version had been developed as a primer for schools in India. Immediately following its release in 1894 alone, by June of that year the novel had sold some 7,000 copies, and by November about 12,000. In the United States nearly 20,000 copies were sold by December.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Hope's charming tale of mistaken identity, high romance, swashbuckling heroism, and ennobling sacrifice had attained in the forty years following its initial publication an unprecedented standing as possibly the widest read and most admired novel in the English-speaking world. As "Anthony Hope," Anthony Hope Hawkins would eventually publish some thirty-one novels and eight short story collections during the course of his prolific and versatile literary career, yet his work would never again match the astounding success of *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Born on February 9, 1863, at Clapton, in London, as the third of three children of a father who was a school headmaster and a mother of Scottish ancestry (a cousin on his mother's side was the noted children's writer Kenneth Grahame), Anthony Hope Hawkins attended public school at Marlborough from 1876 to 1881, where he excelled at sports and in his studies. He later won an "Exhibition" at Balliol College, Oxford. During his first term at Balliol in 1881, he was promoted to "Scholar," an honor which offered him much-needed financial support for his education. After receiving first-class degrees in classics and in humane letters, he left Oxford in 1886 to attempt a career as a lawyer at the Middle Temple, in London, and though he showed great promise in the legal profession, he had a difficult time finding consistent employment. He subsequently filled many of his spare moments with writing sketches and longer fiction. He published his first book, *A Man of Mark*, in 1890, at his own expense. The novel—a political satire set in the mythical Republic of Aureataland on the coast of South America—cost the author fifty pounds to publish and earned him only thirteen pounds in royalties. (As a narrative device, his invention of Aureataland anticipates his later use of the mythical kingdom of Ruritania, the famous setting of *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Rupert of Hentzau*.)

The young Hope's thinking became conflicted at this crucial point in his life. On the one hand he felt the need to make a living as a lawyer, and on the other hand he was consumed by his desire to become an author. He writes in his autobiography, *Memories and Notes* (1927):

The trouble was that the legal work, when it came, paid, and the writing, when it came, did not—and it came, as it always has with me, not at command, but intermittently and capriciously—violent fit, followed by a long period of barrenness. But it was laying hold of me more and more, in spite of a complete lack of success.<sup>8</sup>

Hope finally achieved his first significant literary success with his third novel, *Mr. Witt's Widow* (1892), a social melodrama described by Hope as a "frivolous tale," but a story that nonetheless earned praise from literary critics who had previously ignored his work. The year 1894 was an auspicious one for the struggling author, as it saw the publication of three of his books that would dramatically change his professional life. The first was *The Prisoner of Zenda*. The second was *The God in the Car*, which cemented his reputation with the critics and his readers as a first-rate author of "serious" fiction. And the third was *The Dolly Dialogues*, a collection of loosely connected sketches featuring light romantic comedy that first appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*. The financially struggling Hope was made rich by *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *The Dolly Dialogues*, and he therefore thought himself secure enough in his newfound wealth to abandon his legal career on July 4, 1894, in order to become a full-time professional novelist. Hope wrote this entry in his diary: "July 4. A day of importance to me, for I have written my farewell letters to the Bar. It is all an uncertainty, but I could

not stand the worry and must chance it.”<sup>9</sup> Hope thenceforth became an unofficial member of an esteemed literary society during the nineteenth century—which included authors such as Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, and H. Rider Haggard—who also relinquished a career in the law in order to see a career in writing. In fact, it could be argued that no other vocation in Victorian Europe so influenced that era’s popular literature as did the law. A legal education, no doubt, trained its students in the discipline of writing, but once they were trained, it failed to offer a meaningful creative outlet for the aspiring novelist.

In any event, despite the early financial windfall in his writing career, uncertainty would plague Hope throughout his entire life. His diary, begun in the autumn of 1890, reveals frequent bouts of depression and self-doubt. Among his greatest apprehensions was his fear that he would lose the ability to write effectively. He was often terrified that he would not be able to come up with ideas for new stories and that he would be unable to produce marketable fiction. Such expressions of despondency are perplexing, given that Hope maintained a prolific rate of publication that was seldom matched by his peers. Between 1894 and 1920, for example, Hope published on average more than one book a year.

His long-standing and recurrent despondency is also perplexing when one considers how popular he was with friends and professional associates. By all accounts he was a gregarious and eloquent speaker who was frequently courted by London’s high society. Mallet states that from the start Hope’s “great gift as an after-dinner speaker had been recognised.”<sup>10</sup> When he traveled, he was often met with cheering well-wishers and devoted admirers. On his first trip to North America, in October of 1897, he visited most of the major cities, delivered more than seventy-five lectures, and attended various important social functions. By all accounts, Hope was dearly loved by his many readers in the United States. Major J. B. Pond writes about him in *Eccentricities of Genius* (1901): “Anthony Hope Hawkins is an English gentleman in every sense that the words imply. I cannot say that I ever associated with a man whom I held in higher esteem. . . . He charms invariably his audiences, because he feels his characters and is able to exploit them.”<sup>11</sup> As well as discovering professional success and adoration in America, Hope also found a young bride, eighteen-year-old Betty Sheldon, the future Lady Hawkins, while on the return voyage from his second trip to the United States in 1903. Even though many others were greatly impressed with his talents as a successful author and speaker, this fact obviously did not persuade him to believe in his own abilities as an accomplished artist.

During the last decade of his life, when his writing of new fiction did eventually slacken, concern over his reduced levels of income initiated fresh periods of despair. True, he was not making money from the publication of new books, but he nevertheless earned incredible sums from the sale of cheap paperback reprint editions of his work, an interesting fact when one considers that as a member of the Authors’ Society he had fought against the rapid intrusion of such publications in the book marketplace. Hope also made a great deal of money from the sale of the film rights to his novels. Both *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Rupert of Hentzau* were filmed a number of times. In 1930 alone, for example, around the period of his sixty-seventh birthday, the re-marketing of the film rights to *Zenda* and *Hentzau* earned Hope the then staggering sum of four thousand pounds.

Why, then, was Hope so depressed so often? Here was an author who frequently worried about money, but who was one of the wealthiest members of his profession. Here was an author who frequently worried about his ability to write, but who, because of his stringent work ethic, produced an amazing body of popular fiction. Part of the answer to the question of Hope’s emotional problems may lie in his perception of success. As an adolescent, Hope wanted a career as an actor. He

pragmatic father quickly discouraged this ambition, though for the remainder of his life Hope loved the theater; in a number of instances he even turned his considerable talents to the writing of plays. Hope loved politics, but he was a failed politician. In 1892 he ran for Parliament as a Liberal candidate representing South Buckinghamshire, and when he lost the election he was discouraged enough that when he withdrew from campaigning in 1900 because of poor health, he never ran for public office again. He writes in his autobiography: “There remains only a gentle regret that I have never sat in the House of Commons. I should like to have had that experience.”<sup>12</sup> Finally, at mid-career Hope dreaded being identified as a writer of mere “pot-boilers,” which explains why the bulk of his later work avoided the types of fiction that first established his popularity, such as the light romantic comedy of *The Dolly Dialogues* and the escapist adventure fantasy of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. When he did return to the genre that he created, the “invented kingdom” adventure, or the “Ruritania Romance,” his efforts were less than successful. One of these efforts, for example, *Sophy of Kravon* (1906), fails to capture the charm of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. It is too wordy and plodding, and its characters fail to capture the reader’s imagination. Even *Zenda*’s sequel, *Rupert of Hentzau* (1898), somewhat inferior to the original. It is perhaps too humorless, too pessimistic, and the layers of political intrigue in the story seem to swallow the physical action in the plot.

Certainly, these latter efforts are less the purely escapist fantasy. “Ruritania is not England,” Rassendyll tells the reader at the beginning of Chapter XV of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, and this explains exactly the reason for its entertainment value among generations of readers. *Zenda* works best as escapism because it places its action in a mythical Balkan kingdom,<sup>13</sup> an invented world, where anything can happen, such as falling in love with a princess and becoming king. Hence, even though *The Prisoner of Zenda*, strictly speaking, is not high fantasy (magic and dragons do not exist in Hope’s Ruritania), it does serve as an important antecedent to the great fantasy classics of the twentieth century, such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

In any event, despite the outward-appearing success of Hope’s professional life (which included his being knighted in 1918 for his efforts as a writer of political propaganda for the British government during World War I), up until the moment of his death on July 8, 1933, the final years of his personal life were tormented by an ever-growing sense of unease. Sir J. M. Barrie, the famous creator of Peter Pan, once summed up Hope’s contributions to literature by stating: “He made more people happy than any other author of our time.”<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the only person whom he ultimately failed to make happy was himself.

Elements of Hope’s Ruritanian Romance appeared in his earlier work. He experimented with the concept of an invented country in his first novel, *A Man of Mark*, and in his short story “Sport Royal,” which was collected in *Sport Royal and Other Stories* (1893), Hope begins envisioning the intrepid British gentleman adventurer who would soon evolve into the hero of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Rudolf Rassendyll. Princess Ferdinand of Glottenberg in “Sport Royal” also bears a striking resemblance to the future Princess Flavia, though again she is but a character in the making. However, neither of these efforts—neither *A Man of Mark* nor “Sport Royal”—would bring its author fame or fortune. Ruritania had yet to be conceptualized fully by Hope, and his engaging knave, Count Rupert of Hentzau, had yet to be created.

In his autobiography, Hope discusses how he first developed the idea for writing *The Prisoner of Zenda*:

One day—it was the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 1893—I was walking back from the Westminster

County Court (where I had won my case) to the Temple when the idea of “Ruritania” came in my head. Arrived at my chambers, I reviewed it over a pipe, and the next day I wrote the first chapter. Though sometimes interrupted by law work, I sat tight at the story, sometimes writing as much as two chapters a day.<sup>15</sup>

Hope goes on to explain that he experienced a mild form of writer’s block only once, and that was figuring out how to resolve the novel’s plot. “I seemed to have got ‘The Prisoner’ so tightly shut up ‘Zenda,’ ” wrote Hope, “that it was impossible to get him out of it.”<sup>16</sup> But get him out he did, and completed the first draft of the novel in just a month, by December 29.

Hope states that his “root idea” behind *The Prisoner of Zenda* was a variation of what he calls the “ancient” narrative device of mistaken identity. Hope found a type of elegantly powerful simplicity in the use of this device historically in English theatrical comedy since the time of Shakespeare, and he saw its potentiality as the basic foundation of his novel’s plot. “In itself,” Hope noted, “it is no more than a starting-point for the characters, emotions, and incidents which it is the writer’s real business to develop, but it opens a fruitful field to an imagination which can see and work out its dramatic possibilities and the ways in which it can be varied.”<sup>17</sup> He even toyed with the concept of mistaken identity in his earlier tale, “Sport Royal,” though it was an inferior attempt when compared to what he accomplished in *The Prisoner of Zenda*. For Hope, the basic “variations” in his use of the device of mistaken identity in his novel were the inclusion of royalty as the novel’s principal players and the use of red hair to distinguish both the hero, Rudolf Rassendyll, and his look-alike, the future King of Ruritania, Rudolf the Fifth.<sup>18</sup> The two Rudolfs’ red hair also serves as an effective visual foil to the story’s main villain, Michael. The scheming Duke of Strelsau is nicknamed “Black Michael,” a distinction from the red Elphbergs based on more than his appearance. Black Michael is, after all, a craven scoundrel and born from an inferior bloodline. He is black in both appearance and heart.

Yet, the use of mistaken identity alone does not explain why *The Prisoner of Zenda* became Hope’s most popular work among his many literary efforts, nor does it explain why it has succeeded so brilliantly as a timeless adventure story, arguably the most widely read and best loved adventure novel in the English language. The answer may lie not in how Hope observed traditional narrative, but in how he brought to the adventure story a highly defined and very contemporary sense of pacing. As a romance, *The Prisoner of Zenda* straddles the popular fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It does not share a close similarity with the best-selling romances of his colleagues H. Rider Haggard, Arthur Conan Doyle, or Stanley J. Weyman. Haggard, Doyle, and Weyman wrote adventure stories that were somewhat casual in their plotting and in their use of time as an element of dramatic conflict. Hope’s colleagues wrote adventure fiction in which time is basically ignored; to them, it was not important in the development of the romance’s sense of action. Conversely, Hope’s novel seems to be closer in intent to the work of the American crime fiction writers that began to appear near the time of his death, authors such as Dashiell Hammett and Cornell Woolrich. Indeed, it can be argued that *The Prisoner of Zenda* anticipates the development of *noir* in the American pulp fiction magazines of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s in how a heightened and acute sense of time is employed to construct the story’s plot.

Time, or more precisely the ever-presence of elapsing time, dominates the action of *Zenda*. For example, as the novel opens, its narrative pace seems to be as leisurely as the story’s central protagonist, Rudolf Rassendyll. Younger brother to Lord Burlesdon, the twenty-nine-year-old Rassendyll is chastised by his well-meaning sister-in-law for not having a more productive sense of ambition. In the first chapter, Hope appears almost nonchalant in providing the reader the scandalous

tale of Rudolf III's sexual indiscretion in England during the reign of George II (which subsequently provides the rationale for Rassendyll's uncanny resemblance to the current Elphberg prince and namesake, Rudolf the Fifth, and the motivation for Hope's mistaken-identity trick).

But once the story travels to Ruritania with the hero, and when Rudolf the king-to-be encounters Rudolf the British gentleman adventurer in the forests of Zenda, the narrative pacing becomes more deliberate. And when Prince Rudolf is abducted by Black Michael and his villainous associates, Hope uses elapsing time to structure and define all other aspects of the story's plot. The moment Rudolf Rassendyll agrees to impersonate his "cousin" during the coronation ceremony at Strelsau, the metaphoric clock in the novel starts ticking loudly. After it is discovered that the future king has been abducted, Rassendyll's actions become a frantic race against death. Rassendyll tells Colonel Sapt in Chapter IX, "We're playing against time. . . . Every day we leave the king where he is there is fresh risk. Every day I masquerade like this, there is fresh risk." Indeed, from Chapter VI on, Hope frequently makes a point of telling the reader what time it is, and by inference reminding the reader how little time is left to save the life of the future King of Ruritania. *The Prisoner of Zenda* thus anticipates modern suspense fiction, the type of story written by pulp fiction *noir* writers such as Cornell Woolrich, whose story "Three O'Clock" (*Detective Fiction Weekly*, October 1, 1934) amazingly duplicates Hope's technique.<sup>19</sup>

Even the Castle of Zenda itself serves as an overt symbol of the old world confronting the new. Hope intended this specific setting to be the single crucial physical locale of the novel. It is the country home of the story's principal villain, the Duke of Strelsau, Black Michael, and it is the place where the abducted king is taken for safekeeping. It is where Rupert attempts to rape Black Michael's mistress, Antoinette de Mauban, and it is where Rupert kills Michael. Additionally, it is where Rudolf Rassendyll duels to the death with his villainous fellow countryman, Detchard, for the life of the king and the fate of Ruritania. In a number of early editions of the novel, a detailed ground plan of the castle is even provided as a frontispiece. The Castle of Zenda, it can be argued, divided as it is between the old castle and the new château, is emblematic at a larger level of the adventure story's transition from the traditional nineteenth-century historical romance of Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) to the twentieth-century political thriller.

Concerning Rudolf Rassendyll's appeal as a swashbuckling protagonist for a late-Victorian readership, a large measure of his allure may have resulted in the fact that he is not a professional soldier-of-fortune in the story. British readers of this time liked their heroes to be proper gentlemen. A proper gentleman was not a paid professional. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, for example, is not a professional detective, but an amateur. Professionalism implied vulgarity to Conan Doyle's and Anthony Hope's audiences. The amateur hero was above the pedestrian middle-class concerns of money and income. The amateur hero was of the noble class, not the laboring class. And the amateur hero, such as Rudolf Rassendyll, worked for the mere thrill of adventure, or for the love of accomplishment, or for the requirements of duty, or for protecting a higher understanding of justice and righteousness.

The proper gentleman adventurer also tended to be a product of the British public school, which, despite its misleading name, operated then (and now) as an exclusive private school system that trained and educated the bureaucrats who would run Great Britain's empire. P. C. Wren's Michael "Beau" Geste is the self-sacrificing hero of the classic French Foreign Legion adventure *Beau Geste* (1924), because he possesses the powerful moral sense and ideological devotion to duty and honor that were part of his public school upbringing. Rudolf Rassendyll, too, possesses this public school sensibility that British readers came to expect from their literary heroes. Having met and fallen in love with the Princess Flavia, he is sorely tempted to make permanent his temporary position as king,

temptation that he and Flavia both ultimately dismiss. (“Is love the only thing?” Flavia asks Rassendyll in Chapter XXI; “But if love had been the only thing, you would have let the king die in his cell,” she concludes.) Part of this temptation results from Hope’s desire to make his hero more human and hence more sympathetic to readers, but the major reason that it was important for Rassendyll to turn down both love and power was to demonstrate his public school devotion to honor and duty, a devotion that rises above simple personal gratification. Unlike Black Michael, Rassendyll behaves appropriately toward his elder brother, the minor English aristocrat Lord Burlesdon. Because he is a proper gentleman, he does not seek to claim his brother’s position and authority. Black Michael, because he is an improper scoundrel, does everything in his power to wrest the throne from his elder brother.

Rassendyll’s rejection of high political rank and possible future happiness with Flavia was applauded by a Victorian readership that revered self-denial. This was heady literary propaganda for the period. Historically, popular fiction has always possessed the ability to both affect and reflect its audience, and the ideal (and idealized) public school gentleman in the traditional adventure romance was intended to forgo the pleasures of the flesh and the petty desires of personal ambition, though he (and occasionally she) may have deeply felt them both. Indeed, *The Prisoner of Zenda* and many other similar adventure novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries idealized and reinforced the cultural ideology of the British Empire. Great Britain wanted its young men and women to colonize the world, but not to become too closely associated with the worldly.

Finally, the proper gentleman adventurer resorts to violence only when there is no alternative. He prefers leisure, but will resort to action when the need arises. Rassendyll describes himself in Chapter I as “a strong, though hardly a fine, swordsman and a good shot.” He is also an expert horseman, and his “head was as cool a one as you could find,” yet he is an indifferent swashbuckler until there is a king to save and a princess to love. The protagonist of James Hilton’s classic utopian fantasy, *Lost Horizon* (1933), “Glory” Conway, like Rudolf Rassendyll, is also a character who tends to avoid physical exertion of any kind, but when he is required to act the part of hero, he rises successfully to the occasion. In the opening chapter of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Rassendyll enjoys a life of ease. But once he is recruited by Colonel Sapt and Fritz von Tarlenheim to act the role of King of Ruritania, he becomes a decisive man of action.

It is not an instantaneous transformation, however. Following Rassendyll’s frantically brief indoctrination into royalty in Chapter IV, as his train arrives in the Ruritanian capital of Strelsau, he is nervous; Sapt even notes that Rassendyll’s pulse is a “little too quick,” to which the future monarch responds, “I’m not made of stone!” Hope suggests in this scene that the assumption of responsibility is not an easy thing, and as Rassendyll discovers in the sequel, *Rupert of Hentzau*, once it is achieved it is not easily dispensed with. When, at last, he is crowned Rudolf the Fifth, Rassendyll’s behavior changes to meet the growing expectations of those others whose honor and very lives depend on his future action: the real king, the loyal Colonel Sapt and Fritz von Tarlenheim, and the innocent Princess Flavia. From beginning to end, the events of *The Prisoner of Zenda* serve as a rite-of-passage for an indolent young man who eventually comes to discover his usefulness to society. British readers wanted their heroes, both in real life and in fiction, not to be impulsive and headstrong, but instead to be capable of resolving violent conflict when the need arose.

In addition to his successful characterization of the gentleman-adventurer hero, Hope gives to his plot a lighthearted *esprit*. He forsakes the grim determinism that so darkens the sequel, *Rupert of Hentzau*, in favor of a carefree and highly romanticized depiction of heroism. Throughout the novel, Hope often reminds his reader that the conflict between the forces of good—Rassendyll, Sapt, and



Tarlenheim—and the forces of evil—Black Michael, Rupert, Detchard, and the remainder of Black Michael's Six—is but a game. The novel opens with a bet. Pressured by his sister-in-law, Lady Burlesdon, to find employment as an assistant to the British ambassador, Sir Jacob Borrodail, Rassendyll tells her that “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!” As the reader eventually discovers, Rassendyll loses the wager. In Chapter IV, when Rassendyll agrees to Sapt’s plan to impersonate the Elphberg king Rudolf, he proclaims, “The game had begun.” Later, in Chapter VII, as Rassendyll contemplates Sapt’s revised scheme to extend and expand his impersonation of the king, he informs the reader, “as I listened to Sapt I saw the strong points in our game. And then I was a young man and I loved action and I was offered such a hand in such a game as perhaps never man played yet.” And in Chapter IX, Rassendyll argues heatedly with Colonel Sapt about meeting alone and in secret with Antoinette de Mauban, Rassendyll tells his concerned associate, “Sapt, we must play high; we must force the game.”

Theatrical allusions abound in the novel, as well. Rupert, aware of Rassendyll’s deception, laughingly calls his adversary a “play-actor,” and there is very much a feeling in the development of the novel’s plot of a histrionic staging of action and dialogue, which is easily understood when considering Hope’s considerable skill as a playwright. Early in Chapter IX, for example, Hope makes the theatrical connection rather obvious when he has Rassendyll tell the reader, “I feel that I had far better confine myself strictly to the underground drama which was being played beneath the surface of Ruritanian politics.” Hope was deservedly proud of his mastery of the techniques of dialogue. It was a skill readily identified by the literary critics of his time. Hope interspaced the novel’s action with dialogue set pieces, including the initial meeting of the two Rudolfs in Chapter III, Rassendyll’s wooing of Princess Flavia in Chapter VIII, and the confrontation between Rassendyll and Rupert in Chapter XV. Ultimately, this overweening theatricality in the novel may explain why *The Prisoner of Zenda* was successfully translated with relative ease into numerous stage and cinematic productions. *Zenda* is a tale worthy of performance.

Of the various sound motion picture adaptations of *Zenda*, without a doubt the finest is the 1937 production directed by John Cromwell, and starring Ronald Colman as the two Rudolfs, Madeleine Carroll as Princess Flavia, Raymond Massey as Black Michael, and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., as Rupert of Hentzau. Aside from the stellar cast, the production design of the film alone is spectacular and fully complements the escapist fantasy setting of Hope’s mythical Ruritania. The film’s script even repairs some of the novel’s apparent weaknesses, most notably by extending Rudolf Rassendyll’s moments of swashbuckling action (as in the “tea table” fight scene at the summerhouse in Chapter IX) and in the restaging of Rassendyll’s duel with Rupert (by eliminating the extraneous villain, Detchard). Another motion picture version of *The Prisoner of Zenda*—directed by Richard Thorpe and starring Stewart Granger as the two Rudolfs, Deborah Kerr as Flavia, and James Mason as Rupert (in what was to become one of the most miscast roles in Mason’s otherwise illustrious cinematic career)—was released in 1952, but it is inferior in many ways to the 1937 film. Most regrettably, the 1952 version is a virtual shot-for-shot remake of the 1937 classic, the only major difference being that the 1952 version was filmed in color, rather than black and white. The worst movie adaptation of *Zenda* is the 1979 version, directed by Richard Quine and starring Peter Sellers as “the crazy old monarch of Ruritania,” the monarch’s son, Rudolph, and a look-alike “London cabby named Syd.” The film is profoundly awful, butchering to the point of unconscionable brutality (for the sake of low comedy) the original *Zenda* story.<sup>20</sup>

As he did with *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Hope wrote its sequel, *Rupert of Hentzau*, in about a month. He revised and completed the novel by January 1895.<sup>21</sup> By the time the book was published in 1898, Hope had discovered the value of serializing his work in periodicals, so whereas *The Prisoner of Zenda* appeared only in book form, the serial rights to *Rupert of Hentzau* earned its author 900 pounds even before the book appeared in print.<sup>22</sup> Following its initial publication in July of 1898, *Rupert* was produced as a play in New York City in November of the same year.<sup>23</sup>

Hope's biographer, Sir Charles Mallet, reports that as popular as *The Prisoner of Zenda* was with London's literary establishment, *Rupert of Hentzau* was even more popular,<sup>24</sup> which is ironic in retrospect, since of the two *Rupert* is the novel less read by a contemporary audience. The reasons for its decline in popularity are, I would suggest, fivefold. First, Hope is not consistent with several of his characters' motivations. King Rudolf, for example, in *The Prisoner of Zenda*, despite his flaws is fundamentally a good person and feels genuine affection for his rescuer, Rudolf Rassendyll. In the sequel, King Rudolf is depicted as a jealous and petty ruler; he has become unlikable. Second, Queen Flavia seems to have abandoned the sense of duty and honor that motivated her when she was Princess Flavia. Her passion for Rudolf Rassendyll in *Rupert of Hentzau*, though well justified and still unrequited, seems strangely out of place.

Third, Hope's use of the queen's indiscreet letter to Rassendyll in the sequel as the device around which the plot revolves does not seem to evoke the same sense of danger and urgency as found in the kidnapping of a king. Fourth, by killing the lovable Rassendyll at the conclusion of *Rupert of Hentzau*, Hope ends his series in abject tragedy. What emotion Rassendyll's death elicits in the reader is compromised by the undermining of Rassendyll's character as a decisive man of action. Hope, no doubt, kills Rassendyll because this allows him to conclude satisfactorily the dilemma of his relationship with Flavia and the possibility of his assuming the king's identity forever. Hope's late Victorian readership would not have condoned Rassendyll's advantaging himself by the fortuitous death of a rival in love. Nor would they have condoned the elevation of a pretender, no matter how deserving, to the highest rank of the nobility. And even if a strong argument could be made for Rassendyll's being a better man (and hence a better king) than Rudolf the Fifth, having Rassendyll expire just at the moment when he should become king accentuates the tragedy of the story. Finally, and most perplexingly, Hope changed the story's narrator in the sequel. Rudolf Rassendyll is the narrator of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, a strategy that works quite well. The reader sees that story's action through the hero's eyes, which enhances the novel's suspense and sense of adventure. In the sequel, Hope makes the tactical mistake of changing the narrator to Fritz von Tarlenheim, a less than satisfactory hero who lacks Rassendyll's charisma. The narrative logic of the novel also unravels when von Tarlenheim has to describe events in the story that he does not directly witness.

The only character, in fact, who remains the same from first to last is Rupert of Hentzau, who ranks as one of the great villains of English fiction, joining company with the nefarious likes of Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty, Guy Boothby's Dr. Nikola, and Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu. In *The Prisoner of Zenda*, Rupert functions as a secondary antagonist to Black Michael. He is not even mentioned until relatively late in the novel, and then only as one of Black Michael's "Six." But the reader senses that as Hope developed Rupert as a character during the course of the story, he came to like him even more than Black Michael, finding in him a more complex personality, a rogue whom the reader loves to hate. Hope, after all, kills Black Michael at the conclusion of *Zenda*, while Rupert lives on to continue the harassment of his nemesis, Rassendyll. Rudolf Rassendyll himself admires Rupert's audacity and flair for the dramatic. Hope thus decided to name his *Zenda* sequel after Rupert, and the

events of this lesser, though certainly enjoyable, novel inevitably lead to the climactic final duels between Rupert and Rudolf Rassendyll in Chapters XVII and XVIII. This scene in *Rupert of Hentzau* (the best in the novel) stands now as then as perhaps the finest single example of swashbuckling action ever published in late-Victorian adventure fiction.

Hope returned one other time to Ruritania in *The Heart of Princess Osra* (1896), a collection of closely related short stories set in the year 1734, during the reign of Rudolf the Third, whose scandalous reputation is discussed at length in the opening chapter of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Princess Osra, the featured protagonist of these stories, is sister to an earlier King Rudolf, and her life is complicated by a succession of devoted suitors. Though the tales are ingeniously told, *The Heart of Princess Osra*, like *Rupert of Hentzau*, failed to capture entirely the enchantment of the original Ruritanian Romance. Though Anthony Hope Hawkins appears destined to be remembered for just one book, it is a truly magnificent one. Yet, during his lifetime, in several important ways, he elevated the general welfare of his profession. Along with Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, H. Rider Haggard, and a handful of other British popular fiction writers, Hope encouraged the act of writing for money to become a more commercially profitable occupation. In addition, Hope was one of the first authors to recognize and exploit the growing film industry as an additional creative outlet and income source. And, finally, Hope democratized the act of reading by successfully appealing to diverse social and economic audiences. He helped to tear down the walls of literary elitism that others, such as Henry James, were so determined to build. If nothing else, Hope always told a ripping good story, and for many that was enough.

## Notes

- [1](#) Sir Charles Mallet, *Anthony Hope and His Books: Being the Authorised Life of Sir Anthony Hope* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1935), p. 201.
- [2](#) Geoffrey Household, Introduction to *The Prisoner of Zenda* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1984), p. vii.
- [3](#) Roger Lancelyn Green, Introduction to *The Prisoner of Zenda* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1966), p. xii.
- [4](#) A. St. John Adcock, *Gods of Modern Grub Street: Impressions of Contemporary Authors* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1923), p. 125. Adcock goes on to add that *The Prisoner of Zenda*, along with Stanley J. Weyman's romance *Under the Red Robe* (which was published the same year as *Zenda*), helped to reawaken "the spirit of romance" in the English fiction of the period.
- [5](#) Mallet, p. 76.
- [6](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
- [7](#) Ellen Miller Casey, "Anthony Hope (Sir Anthony Hope Hope)," in *Late-Victorian and Edwardian British Novelists (First Series)*, edited by George M. Johnson (Detroit: Brucoli Clark Layman, 1995), p. 130.
- [8](#) Anthony Hope, *Memories and Notes* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1927), p. 112.
- [9](#) Mallet, p. 78.

[10](#) *Ibid.*, p. 88.

[11](#) Major J. B. Pond, *Eccentricities of Genius: Memoirs of Famous Men and Women of the Platform and Stage* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901), pp. 477-78.

[12](#) Hope, *Memories and Notes*, p. 116.

[13](#) Vesna Goldsworthy examines historically how the “Balkan identity” has been portrayed in British literature and culture in her study *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (1998). She suggests: “The fact that Ruritania . . . came to establish itself in the popular imagination as a Balkan land is probably related to the goings-on among Balkan dynasties which filled the columns of the popular press around the time when Hope’s novel appeared” (p. 47).

[14](#) Mallet, in fact, uses this quote to introduce his biography, and he concludes it with a letter that Barrie wrote to Hope’s widow, Betty, following his death in 1933, that reads, in part:

How good for all of us that he did not become some great legal luminary instead of the creator of Ruritania! . . . He was of course one of the most graceful of writers and fastidious to degree, but so modest about his work that, though I have known many modest men of great parts, I think he was the most modest of all. (p. 282)

[15](#) Hope, *Memories and Notes*, p. 119.

[16](#) *Ibid.*

[17](#) *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[18](#) *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[19](#) The finest and most comprehensive study of Woolrich’s life and work is Francis M. Nevins, Jr.’s, *Cornell Woolrich: First You Dream, Then You Die* (New York: Mysterious Press, 1988). Nevins’s massive biography not only provides a detailed analysis of Woolrich’s *noir* pulp magazine fiction, but it also offers a useful overview of the literary conventions of *roman noir* itself.

[20](#) These descriptions of the film are quoted from the advertising blurb on the box of the movie’s video re-release.

[21](#) Mallet, p. 87.

[22](#) *Ibid.*, p. 90.

[23](#) *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[24](#) *Ibid.*, p. 128.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

### *Selected Bibliography of Anthony Hope Hawkins*

- A Man of Mark* (1890), novel  
*Father Stafford* (1891), novel  
*Mr. Witt's Widow* (1892), novel  
*A Change of Air* (1893), novel  
*Half a Hero* (1893), novel  
*Sport Royal and Other Stories* (1893), short story collection  
*The Dolly Dialogues* (1894), novel composed of interrelated short stories  
*The God in the Car* (1894), novel  
*The Indiscretion of the Duchess* (1894), novel  
*The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894), novel  
*The Chronicles of Count Antonio* (1895), novel composed of interrelated short stories  
*Comedies of Courtship* (1896), short story collection  
*The Heart of Princess Osra* (1896), short story collection  
*Phroso* (1897), novel  
*Rupert of Hentzau* (1898), novel  
*Simon Dole* (1898), novel  
*The King's Mirror* (1899), novel  
*A Cut and a Kiss* (1899), short story collection  
*Captain Dieppe* (1900), novel  
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*Helena's Path* (1907), novel  
*Tales of Two People* (1907), novel  
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*Second String* (1910), novel  
*Mrs. Maxon Protests* (1911), novel  
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## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

*The Prisoner of Zenda* first appeared as a hardcover book in 1894, published by J. W. Arrowsmith, in London. *Rupert of Hentzau* first appeared in book form in 1898 and was published by J. W. Arrowsmith as well. This reprint of *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Rupert of Hentzau* is based on the two first editions.

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# THE PRISONER OF ZENDA



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