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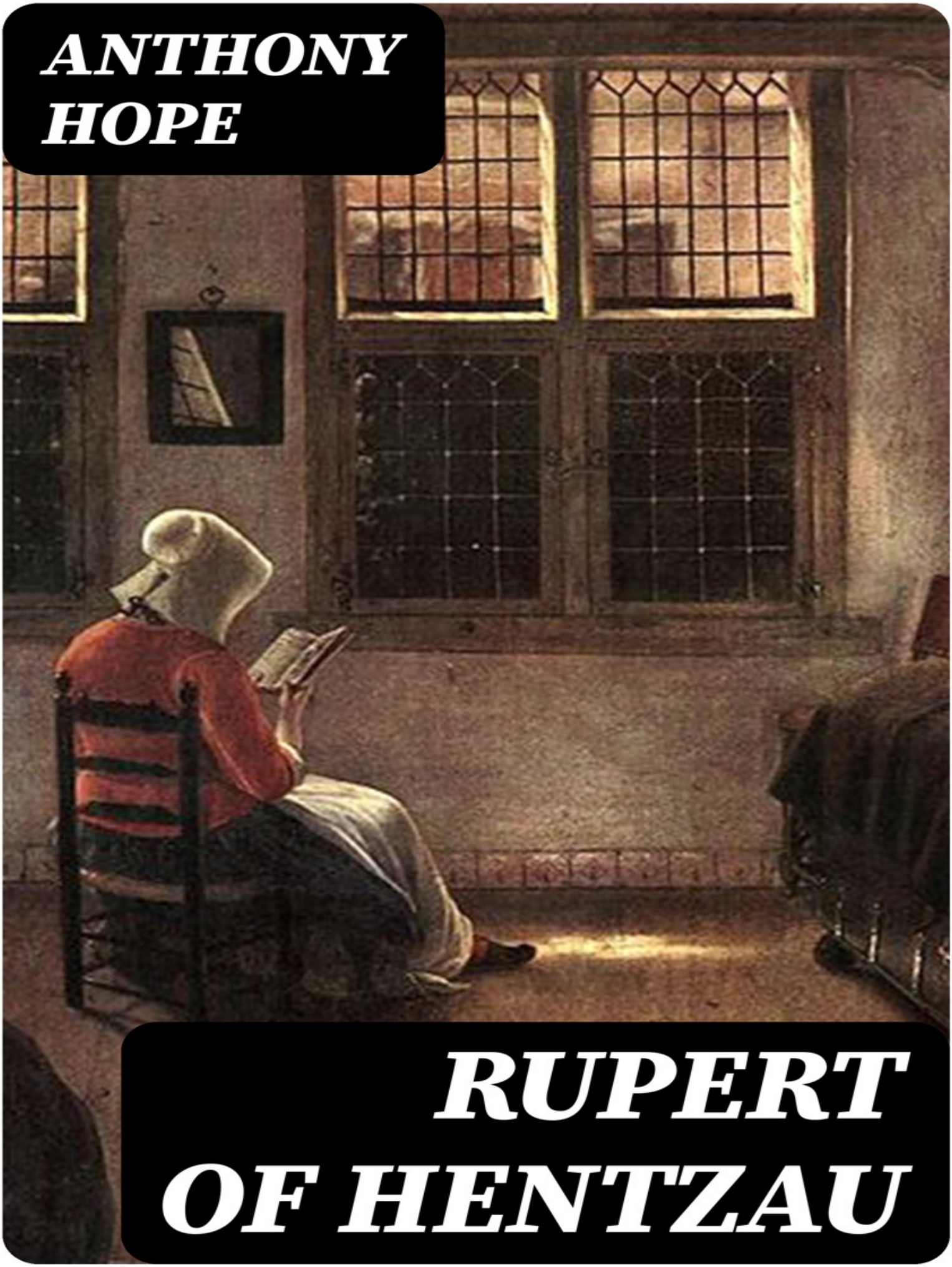

RUPERT OF HENTZAU

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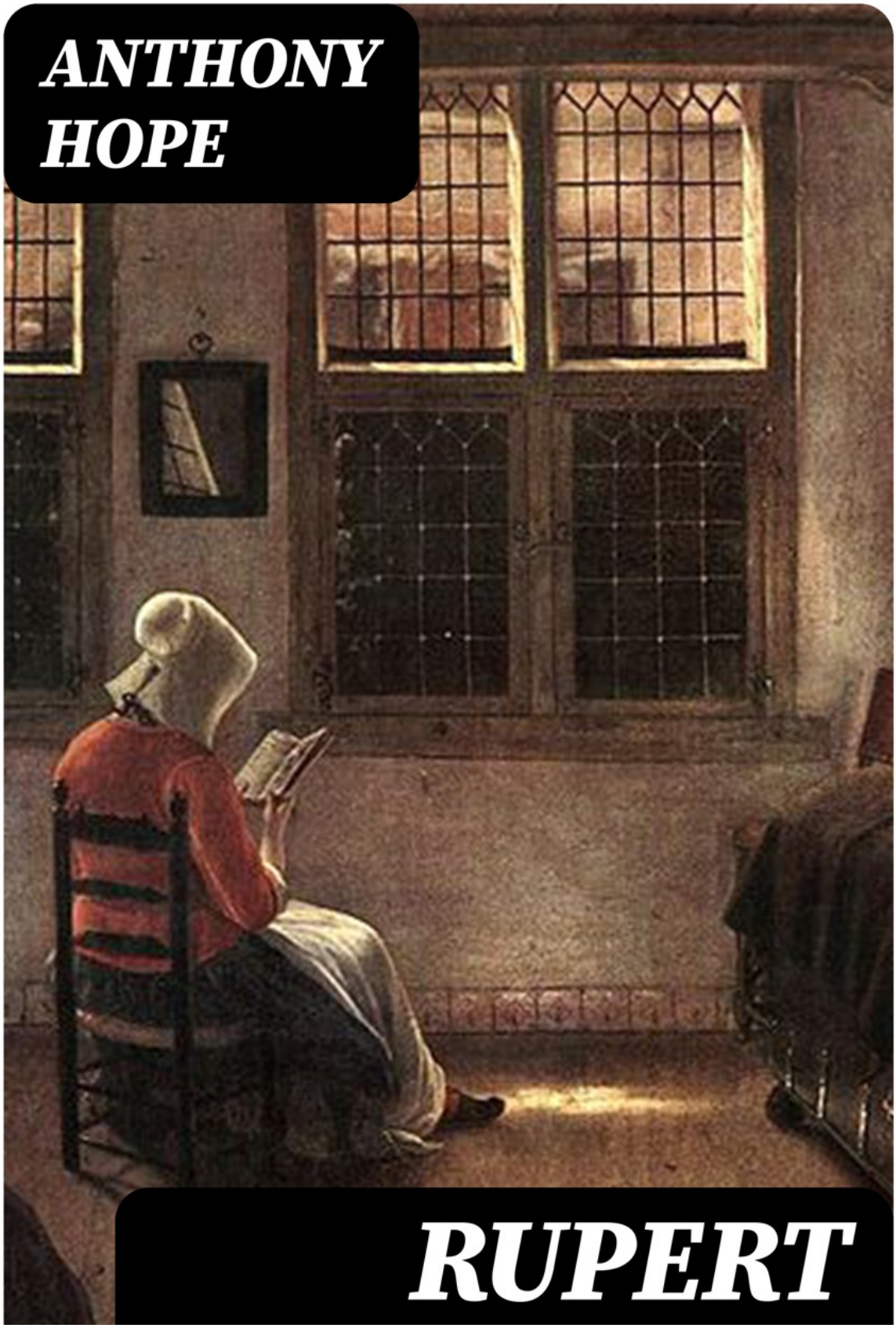

RUPERT


OF HENTZAU

Anthony Hope

Rupert of Hentzau

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Chapter I.
The Queen’s Good-By

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A man who has lived in the world, marking how every act, although in itself perhaps light and insignificant, may become the source of consequences that spread far and wide, and flow for years or centuries, could scarcely feel secure in reckoning that with the death of the Duke of Strelsau and the restoration of King Rudolf to liberty and his throne, there would end, for good and all, the troubles born of Black Michael’s daring conspiracy. The stakes had been high, the struggle keen; the edge of passion had been sharpened, and the seeds of enmity sown. Yet Michael, having struck for the crown, had paid for the blow with his life: should there not then be an end? Michael was dead, the Princess her cousin’s wife, the story in safe keeping, and Mr. Rassendyll’s face seen no more in Ruritania. Should there not then be an end? So said I to my friend the Constable of Zenda, as we talked by the bedside of Marshal Strakencz. The old man, already nearing the death that soon after robbed us of his aid and counsel, bowed his head in assent: in the aged and ailing the love of peace breeds hope of it. But Colonel Sapt tugged at his gray moustache, and twisted his black cigar in his mouth, saying, “You’re very sanguine, friend Fritz. But is Rupert of Hentzau dead? I had not heard it.”

Well said, and like old Sapt! Yet the man is little without the opportunity, and Rupert by himself could hardly have troubled our repose. Hampered by his own guilt, he dared not set his foot in the kingdom from which by rare good luck he had escaped, but wandered to and fro over Europe, making a living by his wits, and, as some said, adding to his

resources by gallantries for which he did not refuse substantial recompense. But he kept himself constantly before our eyes, and never ceased to contrive how he might gain permission to return and enjoy the estates to which his uncle's death had entitled him. The chief agent through whom he had the effrontery to approach the king was his relative, the Count of Luzau–Rischenheim, a young man of high rank and great wealth who was devoted to Rupert. The count fulfilled his mission well: acknowledging Rupert's heavy offences, he put forward in his behalf the pleas of youth and of the predominant influence which Duke Michael had exercised over his adherent, and promised, in words so significant as to betray Rupert's own dictation, a future fidelity no less discreet than hearty. "Give me my price and I'll hold my tongue," seemed to come in Rupert's off-hand accents through his cousin's deferential lips. As may be supposed, however, the king and those who advised him in the matter, knowing too well the manner of man the Count of Hentzau was, were not inclined to give ear to his ambassador's prayer. We kept firm hold on Master Rupert's revenues, and as good watch as we could on his movements; for we were most firmly determined that he should never return to Ruritania. Perhaps we might have obtained his extradition and hanged him on the score of his crimes; but in these days every rogue who deserves no better than to be strung up to the nearest tree must have what they call a fair trial; and we feared that, if Rupert were handed over to our police and arraigned before the courts at Strelsau, the secret which we guarded so sedulously would become the gossip of all the city, ay, and of all Europe. So Rupert went unpunished except by banishment and the impounding of his rents.

Yet Sapt was in the right about him. Helpless as he seemed, he did not for an instant abandon the contest. He lived in the faith that his chance would come, and from day to day was ready for its coming. He schemed against us as

we schemed to protect ourselves from him; if we watched him, he kept his eye on us. His ascendency over Luzau–Rischenheim grew markedly greater after a visit which his cousin paid to him in Paris. From this time the young count began to supply him with resources. Thus armed, he gathered instruments round him and organized a system of espionage that carried to his ears all our actions and the whole position of affairs at court. He knew, far more accurately than anyone else outside the royal circle, the measures taken for the government of the kingdom and the considerations that dictated the royal policy. More than this, he possessed himself of every detail concerning the king's health, although the utmost reticence was observed on this subject. Had his discoveries stopped there, they would have been vexatious and disquieting, but perhaps of little serious harm. They went further. Set on the track by his acquaintance with what had passed during Mr. Rassendyll's tenure of the throne, he penetrated the secret which had been kept successfully from the king himself. In the knowledge of it he found the opportunity for which he had waited; in its bold use he discerned his chance. I cannot say whether he were influenced more strongly by his desire to reestablish his position in the kingdom or by the grudge he bore against Mr. Rassendyll. He loved power and money; dearly he loved revenge also. No doubt both motives worked together, and he was rejoiced to find that the weapon put into his hand had a double edge; with one he hoped to cut his own path clear; with the other, to wound the man he hated through the woman whom that man loved. In fine, the Count of Hentzau, shrewdly discerning the feeling that existed between the queen and Rudolf Rassendyll, set his spies to work, and was rewarded by discovering the object of my yearly meetings with Mr. Rassendyll. At least he conjectured the nature of my errand; this was enough for him. Head and hand were soon busy in

turning the knowledge to account; scruples of the heart never stood in Rupert's way.

The marriage which had set all Ruritania on fire with joy and formed in the people's eyes the visible triumph over Black Michael and his fellow-conspirators was now three years old. For three years the Princess Flavia had been queen. I am come by now to the age when a man should look out on life with an eye undimmed by the mists of passion. My love-making days are over; yet there is nothing for which I am more thankful to Almighty God than the gift of my wife's love. In storm it has been my anchor, and in clear skies my star. But we common folk are free to follow our hearts; am I an old fool for saying that he is a fool who follows anything else? Our liberty is not for princes. We need wait for no future world to balance the luck of men; even here there is an equipoise. From the highly placed a price is exacted for their state, their wealth, and their honors, as heavy as these are great; to the poor, what is to us mean and of no sweetness may appear decked in the robes of pleasure and delight. Well, if it were not so, who could sleep at nights? The burden laid on Queen Flavia I knew, and know, so well as a man can know it. I think it needs a woman to know it fully; for even now my wife's eyes fill with tears when we speak of it. Yet she bore it, and if she failed in anything, I wonder that it was in so little. For it was not only that she had never loved the king and had loved another with all her heart. The king's health, shattered by the horror and rigors of his imprisonment in the castle of Zenda, soon broke utterly. He lived, indeed; nay, he shot and hunted, and kept in his hand some measure, at least, of government. But always from the day of his release he was a fretful invalid, different utterly from the gay and jovial prince whom Michael's villains had caught in the shooting lodge. There was worse than this. As time went on, the first impulse of gratitude and admiration that he had felt towards Mr. Rassendyll died away. He came to brood more and more on

what had passed while he was a prisoner; he was possessed not only by a haunting dread of Rupert of Hentzau, at whose hands he had suffered so greatly, but also by a morbid, half mad jealousy of Mr. Rassendyll. Rudolf had played the hero while he lay helpless. Rudolf's were the exploits for which his own people cheered him in his own capital. Rudolf's were the laurels that crowned his impatient brow. He had enough nobility to resent his borrowed credit, without the fortitude to endure it manfully. And the hateful comparison struck him nearer home. Sapt would tell him bluntly that Rudolf did this or that, set this precedent or that, laid down this or the other policy, and that the king could do no better than follow in Rudolf's steps. Mr. Rassendyll's name seldom passed his wife's lips, but when she spoke of him it was as one speaks of a great man who is dead, belittling all the living by the shadow of his name. I do not believe that the king discerned that truth which his wife spent her days in hiding from him; yet he was uneasy if Rudolf's name were mentioned by Sapt or myself, and from the queen's mouth he could not bear it. I have seen him fall into fits of passion on the mere sound of it; for he lost control of himself on what seemed slight provocation.

Moved by this disquieting jealousy, he sought continually to exact from the queen proofs of love and care beyond what most husbands can boast of, or, in my humble judgment, make good their right to, always asking of her what in his heart he feared was not hers to give. Much she did in pity and in duty; but in some moments, being but human and herself a woman of high temper, she failed; then the slight rebuff or involuntary coldness was magnified by a sick man's fancy into great offence or studied insult, and nothing that she could do would atone for it. Thus they, who had never in truth come together, drifted yet further apart; he was alone in his sickness and suspicion, she in her sorrows and her memories. There was no child to bridge the gulf between them, and although she was his queen and his

wife, she grew almost a stranger to him. So he seemed to will that it should be.

Thus, worse than widowed, she lived for three years; and once only in each year she sent three words to the man she loved, and received from him three words in answer. Then her strength failed her. A pitiful scene had occurred in which the king peevishly upbraided her in regard to some trivial matter — the occasion escapes my memory — speaking to her before others words that even alone she could not have listened to with dignity. I was there, and Sapt; the colonel's small eyes had gleamed in anger. "I should like to shut his mouth for him," I heard him mutter, for the king's waywardness had well-nigh worn out even his devotion. The thing, of which I will say no more, happened a day or two before I was to set out to meet Mr. Rassendyll. I was to seek him this time at Wintenberg, for I had been recognized the year before at Dresden; and Wintenberg, being a smaller place and less in the way of chance visitors, was deemed safer. I remember well how she was when she called me into her own room, a few hours after she had left the king. She stood by the table; the box was on it, and I knew well that the red rose and the message were within. But there was more today. Without preface she broke into the subject of my errand.

"I must write to him," she said. "I can't bear it, I must write. My dear friend Fritz, you will carry it safely for me, won't you? And he must write to me. And you'll bring that safely, won't you? Ah, Fritz, I know I'm wrong, but I'm starved, starved, starved! And it's for the last time. For I know now that if I send anything, I must send more. So after this time I won't send at all. But I must say good-by to him; I must have his good-by to carry me through my life. This once, then, Fritz, do it for me."

The tears rolled down her cheeks, which today were flushed out of their paleness to a stormy red; her eyes

defied me even while they pleaded. I bent my head and kissed her hand.

“With God’s help I’ll carry it safely and bring his safely, my queen,” said I.

“And tell me how he looks. Look at him closely, Fritz. See if he is well and seems strong. Oh, and make him merry and happy! Bring that smile to his lips, Fritz, and the merry twinkle to his eyes. When you speak of me, see if he — if he looks as if he still loved me.” But then she broke off, crying, “But don’t tell him I said that. He’d be grieved if I doubted his love. I don’t doubt it; I don’t, indeed; but still tell me how he looks when you speak of me, won’t you, Fritz? See, here’s the letter.”

Taking it from her bosom, she kissed it before she gave it to me. Then she added a thousand cautions, how I was to carry her letter, how I was to go and how return, and how I was to run no danger, because my wife Helga loved me as well as she would have loved her husband had Heaven been kinder. “At least, almost as I should, Fritz,” she said, now between smiles and tears. She would not believe that any woman could love as she loved.

I left the queen and went to prepare for my journey. I used to take only one servant with me, and I had chosen a different man each year. None of them had known that I met Mr. Rassendyll, but supposed that I was engaged on the private business which I made my pretext for obtaining leave of absence from the king. This time I had determined to take with me a Swiss youth who had entered my service only a few weeks before. His name was Bauer; he seemed a stolid, somewhat stupid fellow, but as honest as the day and very obliging.

He had come to me well recommended, and I had not hesitated to engage him. I chose him for my companion now, chiefly because he was a foreigner and therefore less likely to gossip with the other servants when we returned. I do not pretend to much cleverness, but I confess that it

vexes me to remember how that stout, guileless-looking youth made a fool of me. For Rupert knew that I had met Mr. Rassendyll the year before at Dresden; Rupert was keeping a watchful eye on all that passed in Strelsau; Rupert had procured the fellow his fine testimonials and sent him to me, in the hope that he would chance on something of advantage to his employer. My resolve to take him to Wintenberg may have been hoped for, but could scarcely have been counted on; it was the added luck that waits so often on the plans of a clever schemer.

Going to take leave of the king, I found him huddled over the fire. The day was not cold, but the damp chill of his dungeon seemed to have penetrated to the very core of his bones. He was annoyed at my going, and questioned me peevishly about the business that occasioned my journey. I parried his curiosity as I best could, but did not succeed in appeasing his ill-humor. Half ashamed of his recent outburst, half-anxious to justify it to himself, he cried fretfully:

“Business! Yes, any business is a good enough excuse for leaving me! By Heaven, I wonder if a king was ever served so badly as I am! Why did you trouble to get me out of Zenda? Nobody wants me, nobody cares whether I live or die.”

To reason with such a mood was impossible. I could only assure him that I would hasten my return by all possible means.

“Yes, pray do,” said he. “I want somebody to look after me. Who knows what that villain Rupert may attempt against me? And I can’t defend myself can I? I’m not Rudolf Rassendyll, am I?”

Thus, with a mixture of plaintiveness and malice, he scolded me. At last I stood silent, waiting till he should be pleased to dismiss me. At any rate I was thankful that he entertained no suspicion as to my errand. Had I spoken a word of Mr. Rassendyll he would not have let me go. He had

fallen foul of me before on learning that I was in communication with Rudolf; so completely had jealousy destroyed gratitude in his breast. If he had known what I carried, I do not think that he could have hated his preserver more. Very likely some such feeling was natural enough; it was none the less painful to perceive.

On leaving the king's presence, I sought out the Constable of Zenda. He knew my errand; and, sitting down beside him, I told him of the letter I carried, and arranged how to apprise him of my fortune surely and quickly. He was not in a good humor that day: the king had ruffled him also, and Colonel Sapt had no great reserve of patience.

"If we haven't cut one another's throats before then, we shall all be at Zenda by the time you arrive at Wintenberg," he said. "The court moves there tomorrow, and I shall be there as long as the king is."

He paused, and then added: "Destroy the letter if there's any danger."

I nodded my head.

"And destroy yourself with it, if there's the only way," he went on with a surly smile. "Heaven knows why she must send such a silly message at all; but since she must, she'd better have sent me with it."

I knew that Sapt was in the way of jeering at all sentiment, and I took no notice of the terms that he applied to the queen's farewell. I contented myself with answering the last part of what he said.

"No, it's better you should be here," I urged. "For if I should lose the letter — though there's little chance of it — you could prevent it from coming to the king."

"I could try," he grinned. "But on my life, to run the chance for a letter's sake! A letter's a poor thing to risk the peace of a kingdom for."

"Unhappily," said I, "it's the only thing that a messenger can well carry."

“Off with you, then,” grumbled the colonel. “Tell Rassendyll from me that he did well. But tell him to do something more. Let ’em say good-by and have done with it. Good God, is he going to waste all his life thinking of a woman he never sees?” Sapt’s air was full of indignation.

“What more is he to do?” I asked. “Isn’t his work here done?”

“Ay, it’s done. Perhaps it’s done,” he answered. “At least he has given us back our good king.”

To lay on the king the full blame for what he was would have been rank injustice. Sapt was not guilty of it, but his disappointment was bitter that all our efforts had secured no better ruler for Ruritania. Sapt could serve, but he liked his master to be a man.

“Ay, I’m afraid the lad’s work here is done,” he said, as I shook him by the hand. Then a sudden light came in his eyes. “Perhaps not,” he muttered. “Who knows?”

A man need not, I hope, be deemed uxorious for liking a quiet dinner alone with his wife before he starts on a long journey. Such, at least, was my fancy; and I was annoyed to find that Helga’s cousin, Anton von Strofzin, had invited himself to share our meal and our farewell. He conversed with his usual airy emptiness on all the topics that were supplying Strelsau with gossip. There were rumors that the king was ill; that the queen was angry at being carried off to Zenda; that the archbishop meant to preach against low dresses; that the chancellor was to be dismissed; that his daughter was to be married; and so forth. I heard without listening. But the last bit of his budget caught my wandering attention.

“They were betting at the club,” said Anton, “that Rupert of Hentzau would be recalled. Have you heard anything about it, Fritz?”

If I had known anything, it is needless to say that I should not have confided it to Anton. But the suggested step was so utterly at variance with the king’s intentions that I made

no difficulty about contradicting the report with an authoritative air. Anton heard me with a judicial wrinkle on his smooth brow.

“That’s all very well,” said he, “and I dare say you’re bound to say so. All I know is that Rischenheim dropped a hint to Colonel Markel a day or two ago.”

“Rischenheim believes what he hopes,” said I.

“And where’s he gone?” cried Anton, exultantly. “Why has he suddenly left Strelsau? I tell you he’s gone to meet Rupert, and I’ll bet you what you like he carries some proposal. Ah, you don’t know everything, Fritz, my boy?”

It was indeed true that I did not know everything. I made haste to admit as much. “I didn’t even know that the count was gone, much less why he’s gone,” said I.

“You see?” exclaimed Anton. And he added, patronizingly, “You should keep your ears open, my boy; then you might be worth what the king pays you.”

“No less, I trust,” said I, “for he pays me nothing.” Indeed, at this time I held no office save the honorary position of chamberlain to Her Majesty. Any advice the king needed from me was asked and given unofficially.

Anton went off, persuaded that he had scored a point against me. I could not see where. It was possible that the Count of Luzau–Rischenheim had gone to meet his cousin, equally possible that no such business claimed his care. At any rate, the matter was not for me. I had a more pressing affair in hand. Dismissing the whole thing from my mind, I bade the butler tell Bauer to go forward with my luggage and to let my carriage be at the door in good time. Helga had busied herself, since our guest’s departure, in preparing small comforts for my journey; now she came to me to say good-by. Although she tried to hide all signs of it, I detected an uneasiness in her manner. She did not like these errands of mine, imagining dangers and risks of which I saw no likelihood. I would not give in to her mood, and, as I kissed her, I bade her expect me back in a few days’ time. Not

even to her did I speak of the new and more dangerous burden that I carried, although I was aware that she enjoyed a full measure of the queen's confidence.

"My love to King Rudolf, the real King Rudolf," said she. "Though you carry what will make him think little of my love."

"I have no desire he should think too much of it, sweet," said I. She caught me by the hands, and looked up in my face.

"What a friend you are, aren't you, Fritz?" said she. "You worship Mr. Rassendyll. I know you think I should worship him too, if he asked me. Well, I shouldn't. I am foolish enough to have my own idol." All my modesty did not let me doubt who her idol might be. Suddenly she drew near to me and whispered in my ear. I think that our own happiness brought to her a sudden keen sympathy with her mistress.

"Make him send her a loving message, Fritz," she whispered. "Something that will comfort her. Her idol can't be with her as mine is with me."

"Yes, he'll send something to comfort her," I answered. "And God keep you, my dear."

For he would surely send an answer to the letter that I carried, and that answer I was sworn to bring safely to her. So I set out in good heart, bearing in the pocket of my coat the little box and the queen's good-by. And, as Colonel Sapt said to me, both I would destroy, if need were — ay, and myself with them. A man did not serve Queen Flavia with divided mind.

Chapter II.
A Station Without a Cab

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The arrangements for my meeting with Mr. Rassendyll had been carefully made by correspondence before he left England. He was to be at the Golden Lion Hotel at eleven o’clock on the night of the 15th of October. I reckoned to arrive in the town between eight and nine on the same evening, to proceed to another hotel, and, on pretence of taking a stroll, slip out and call on him at the appointed hour. I should then fulfil my commission, take his answer, and enjoy the rare pleasure of a long talk with him. Early the next morning he would have left Wintenberg, and I should be on my way back to Strelsau. I knew that he would not fail to keep his appointment, and I was perfectly confident of being able to carry out the programme punctually; I had, however, taken the precaution of obtaining a week’s leave of absence, in case any unforeseen accident should delay my return. Conscious of having done all I could to guard against misunderstanding or mishap, I got into the train in a tolerably peaceful frame of mind. The box was in my inner pocket, the letter in a portemonnaie. I could feel them both with my hand. I was not in uniform, but I took my revolver. Although I had no reason to anticipate any difficulties, I did not forget that what I carried must be protected at all hazards and all costs.

The weary night journey wore itself away. Bauer came to me in the morning, performed his small services, repacked my hand-bag, procured me some coffee, and left me. It was then about eight o’clock; we had arrived at a station of some importance and were not to stop again till mid-day. I saw Bauer enter the second-class compartment in which he

was traveling, and settled down in my own coupe. I think it was at this moment that the thought of Rischenheim came again into my head, and I found myself wondering why he clung to the hopeless idea of compassing Rupert's return and what business had taken him from Strelsau. But I made little of the matter, and, drowsy from a broken night's rest, soon fell into a doze. I was alone in the carriage and could sleep without fear or danger. I was awakened by our noontide halt. Here I saw Bauer again. After taking a basin of soup, I went to the telegraph bureau to send a message to my wife; the receipt of it would not merely set her mind at case, but would also ensure word of my safe progress reaching the queen. As I entered the bureau I met Bauer coming out of it. He seemed rather startled at our encounter, but told me readily enough that he had been telegraphing for rooms at Wintenberg, a very needless precaution, since there was no danger of the hotel being full. In fact I was annoyed, as I especially wished to avoid calling attention to my arrival. However, the mischief was done, and to rebuke my servant might have aggravated it by setting his wits at work to find out my motive for secrecy. So I said nothing, but passed by him with a nod. When the whole circumstances came to light, I had reason to suppose that besides his message to the inn-keeper, Bauer sent one of a character and to a quarter unsuspected by me.

We stopped once again before reaching Wintenberg. I put my head out of the window to look about me, and saw Bauer standing near the luggage van. He ran to me eagerly, asking whether I required anything. I told him "nothing"; but instead of going away, he began to talk to me. Growing weary of him, I returned to my seat and waited impatiently for the train to go on. There was a further delay of five minutes, and then we started.

"Thank goodness!" I exclaimed, leaning back comfortably in my seat and taking a cigar from my case.

But in a moment the cigar rolled unheeded on to the floor, as I sprang eagerly to my feet and darted to the window. For just as we were clearing the station, I saw being carried past the carriage, on the shoulders of a porter, a bag which looked very much like mine. Bauer had been in charge of my bag, and it had been put in the van under his directions. It seemed unlikely that it should be taken out now by any mistake. Yet the bag I saw was very like the bag I owned. But I was not sure, and could have done nothing had I been sure. We were not to stop again before Wintenberg, and, with my luggage or without it, I myself must be in the town that evening.

We arrived punctual to our appointed time. I sat in the carriage a moment or two, expecting Bauer to open the door and relieve me of my small baggage. He did not come, so I got out. It seemed that I had few fellow-passengers, and these were quickly disappearing on foot or in carriages and carts that waited outside the station. I stood looking for my servant and my luggage. The evening was mild; I was encumbered with my hand-bag and a heavy fur coat. There were no signs either of Bauer or of baggage. I stayed where I was for five or six minutes. The guard of the train had disappeared, but presently I observed the station-master; he seemed to be taking a last glance round the premises. Going up to him I asked whether he had seen my servant; he could give me no news of him. I had no luggage ticket, for mine had been in Bauer’s hands; but I prevailed on him to allow me to look at the baggage which had arrived; my property was not among it. The station-master was inclined, I think, to be a little skeptical as to the existence both of bag and of servant. His only suggestion was that the man must have been left behind accidentally. I pointed out that in this case he would not have had the bag with him, but that it would have come on in the train. The station-master admitted the force of my argument; he shrugged his

shoulders and spread his hands out; he was evidently at the end of his resources.

Now, for the first time and with sudden force, a doubt of Bauer's fidelity thrust itself into my mind. I remembered how little I knew of the fellow and how great my charge was. Three rapid movements of my hand assured me that letter, box, and revolver were in their respective places. If Bauer had gone hunting in the bag, he had drawn a blank. The station-master noticed nothing; he was stating at the dim gas lamp that hung from the roof. I turned to him.

"Well, tell him when he comes —" I began.

"He won't come to-night, now," interrupted the stationmaster, none too politely. "No other train arrives to-night."

"Tell him when he does come to follow me at once to the Wintenbergerhof. I'm going there immediately." For time was short, and I did not wish to keep Mr. Rassendyll waiting. Besides, in my new-born nervousness, I was anxious to accomplish my errand as soon as might be. What had become of Bauer? The thought returned, and now with it another, that seemed to connect itself in some subtle way with my present position: why and whither had the Count of Luzau–Rischenheim set out from Strelsau a day before I started on my journey to Wintenberg?

"If he comes I'll tell him," said the station-master, and as he spoke he looked round the yard.

There was not a cab to be seen! I knew that the station lay on the extreme outskirts of the town, for I had passed through Wintenberg on my wedding journey, nearly three years before. The trouble involved in walking, and the further waste of time, put the cap on my irritation.

"Why don't you have enough cabs?" I asked angrily.

"There are plenty generally, sir," he answered more civilly, with an apologetic air. "There would be to-night but for an accident."

Another accident! This expedition of mine seemed doomed to be the sport of chance.

“Just before your train arrived,” he continued, “a local came in. As a rule, hardly anybody comes by it, but to-night a number of men — oh, twenty or five-and-twenty, I should think — got out. I collected their tickets myself, and they all came from the first station on the line. Well, that’s not so strange, for there’s a good beer-garden there. But, curiously enough, every one of them hired a separate cab and drove off, laughing and shouting to one another as they went. That’s how it happens that there were only one or two cabs left when your train came in, and they were snapped up at once.”

Taken alone, this occurrence was nothing; but I asked myself whether the conspiracy that had robbed me of my servant had deprived me of a vehicle also.

“What sort of men were they?” I asked.

“All sorts of men, sir,” answered the station-master, “but most of them were shabby-looking fellows. I wondered where some of them had got the money for their ride.”

The vague feeling of uneasiness which had already attacked me grew stronger. Although I fought against it, calling myself an old woman and a coward, I must confess to an impulse which almost made me beg the station-master’s company on my walk; but, besides being ashamed to exhibit a timidity apparently groundless, I was reluctant to draw attention to myself in any way. I would not for the world have it supposed that I carried anything of value.

“Well, there’s no help for it,” said I, and, buttoning my heavy coat about me, I took my hand-bag and stick in one hand, and asked my way to the hotel. My misfortunes had broken down the station-master’s indifference, and he directed me in a sympathetic tone.

“Straight along the road, sir,” said he, “between the poplars, for hard on half a mile; then the houses begin, and your hotel is in the first square you come to, on the right.”

I thanked him curtly (for I had not quite forgiven him his earlier incivility), and started on my walk, weighed down by my big coat and the handbag. When I left the lighted station yard I realized that the evening had fallen very dark, and the shade of the tall lank trees intensified the gloom. I could hardly see my way, and went timidly, with frequent stumbles over the uneven stones of the road. The lamps were dim, few, and widely separated; so far as company was concerned, I might have been a thousand miles from an inhabited house. In spite of myself, the thought of danger persistently assailed my mind. I began to review every circumstance of my journey, twisting the trivial into some ominous shape, magnifying the significance of everything which might justly seem suspicious, studying in the light of my new apprehensions every expression of Bauer's face and every word that had fallen from his lips. I could not persuade myself into security. I carried the queen's letter, and — well, I would have given much to have old Sapt or Rudolf Rassendyll by my side.

Now, when a man suspects danger, let him not spend his time in asking whether there be really danger or in upbraiding himself for timidity, but let him face his cowardice, and act as though the danger were real. If I had followed that rule and kept my eyes about me, scanning the sides of the road and the ground in front of my feet, instead of losing myself in a maze of reflection, I might have had time to avoid the trap, or at least to get my hand to my revolver and make a fight for it; or, indeed, in the last resort, to destroy what I carried before harm came to it. But my mind was preoccupied, and the whole thing seemed to happen in a minute. At the very moment that I had declared to myself the vanity of my fears and determined to be resolute in banishing them, I heard voices — a low, strained whispering; I saw two or three figures in the shadow of the poplars by the wayside. An instant later, a dart was made at me. While I could fly I would not fight; with a sudden forward

plunge I eluded the men who rushed at me, and started at a run towards the lights of the town and the shapes of the houses, now distant about a quarter of a mile. Perhaps I ran twenty yards, perhaps fifty; I do not know. I heard the steps behind me, quick as my own. Then I fell headlong on the road — tripped up! I understood. They had stretched a rope across my path; as I fell a man bounded up from either side, and I found the rope slack under my body. There I lay on my face; a man knelt on me, others held either hand; my face was pressed into the mud of the road, and I was like to have been stifled; my hand-bag had whizzed away from me. Then a voice said:

"Turn him over."

I knew the voice; it was a confirmation of the fears which I had lately been at such pains to banish. It justified the forecast of Anton von Strofzin, and explained the wager of the Count of Luzau–Rischenheim — for it was Rischenheim's voice.

They caught hold of me and began to turn me on my back. Here I saw a chance, and with a great heave of my body I flung them from me. For a short instant I was free; my impetuous attack seemed to have startled the enemy; I gathered myself up on my knees. But my advantage was not to last long. Another man, whom I had not seen, sprang suddenly on me like a bullet from a catapult. His fierce onset overthrew me; I was stretched on the ground again, on my back now, and my throat was clutched viciously in strong fingers. At the same moment my arms were again seized and pinned. The face of the man on my chest bent down towards mine, and through the darkness I discerned the features of Rupert of Hentzau. He was panting with the sudden exertion and the intense force with which he held me, but he was smiling also; and when he saw by my eyes that I knew him, he laughed softly in triumph. Then came Rischenheim's voice again.

"Where's the bag he carried? It may be in the bag."

“You fool, he’ll have it about him,” said Rupert, scornfully. “Hold him fast while I search.”

On either side my hands were still pinned fast. Rupert’s left hand did not leave my throat, but his free right hand began to dart about me, feeling, probing, and rummaging. I lay quite helpless and in the bitterness of great consternation. Rupert found my revolver, drew it out with a gibe, and handed it to Rischenheim, who was now standing beside him. Then he felt the box, he drew it out, his eyes sparkled. He set his knee hard on my chest, so that I could scarcely breathe; then he ventured to loose my throat, and tore the box open eagerly.

“Bring a light here,” he cried. Another ruffian came with a dark-lantern, whose glow he turned on the box. Rupert opened it, and when he saw what was inside, he laughed again, and stowed it away in his pocket.

“Quick, quick!” urged Rischenheim. “We’ve got what we wanted, and somebody may come at any moment.”

A brief hope comforted me. The loss of the box was a calamity, but I would pardon fortune if only the letter escaped capture. Rupert might have suspected that I carried some such token as the box, but he could not know of the letter. Would he listen to Rischenheim? No. The Count of Hentzau did things thoroughly.

“We may as well overhaul him a bit more,” said he, and resumed his search. My hope vanished, for now he was bound to come upon the letter.

Another instant brought him to it. He snatched the pocketbook, and, motioning impatiently to the man to hold the lantern nearer, he began to examine the contents. I remember well the look of his face as the fierce white light threw it up against the darkness in its clear pallor and high-bred comeliness, with its curling lips and scornful eyes. He had the letter now, and a gleam of joy danced in his eyes as he tore it open. A hasty glance showed him what his prize was; then, coolly and deliberately he settled himself to read,

regarding neither Rischenheim's nervous hurry nor my desperate, angry glance that glared up at him. He read leisurely, as though he had been in an armchair in his own house; the lips smiled and curled as he read the last words that the queen had written to her lover. He had indeed come on more than he thought.

Rischenheim laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Quick, Rupert, quick," he urged again, in a voice full of agitation.

"Let me alone, man. I haven't read anything so amusing for a long while," answered Rupert. Then he burst into a laugh, crying, "Look, look!" and pointing to the foot of the last page of the letter. I was mad with anger; my fury gave me new strength. In his enjoyment of what he read Rupert had grown careless; his knee pressed more lightly on me, and as he showed Rischenheim the passage in the letter that caused him so much amusement he turned his head away for an instant. My chance had come. With a sudden movement I displaced him, and with a desperate wrench I freed my right hand. Darting it out, I snatched at the letter. Rupert, alarmed for his treasure, sprang back and off me. I also sprang up on my feet, hurling away the fellow who had gripped my other hand. For a moment I stood facing Rupert; then I darted on him. He was too quick for me; he dodged behind the man with the lantern and hurled the fellow forward against me. The lantern fell on the ground.

"Give me your stick!" I heard Rupert say. "Where is it? That's right!"

Then came Rischenheim's voice again, imploring and timid:

"Rupert, you promised not to kill him."

The only answer was a short, fierce laugh. I hurled away the man who had been thrust into my arms and sprang forward. I saw Rupert of Hentzau; his hand was raised above his head and held a stout club. I do not know what followed; there came — all in a confused blur of instant sequence —