



The Coup

The Coup – *a political complication*

from Anthony Hope's "*The Prisoner of Zenda*"

translated from the Swedish dramatization by Christian Lanciai (2013)

Dramatis personae:

Rudolph Rassendyll
Antoinette de Mauban
Princess Flavia
Duke Michael
a maid
King Rudolph V
Colonel Franz Sapt
Captain Fritz von Tarlenheim
Joseph
Max
Rupert von Hentzau
Bersonin
De Gauter
Detchard
Krafstein
Lauengram
the Court Marshal
a doctor

The stage is somewhere in central Europe before the 1900s.

Act I scene 1. A train compartment.

Rudolph What the deuce am I doing here abroad anyway? Something tells me I should have stayed at home, but now I'm on my way and can't do anything about it. The worst thing I know is binding invitations, but I have no one to blame except the force of destiny. It was nobody's fault that my ancestor tripped in England and fathered an extra family, when he should have stuck to his own family in Ruritania. And that's why I am on my way to pay our family duties and respects to my cousin's coronation in Ruritania, a country which doesn't seem very real. Well, let's just hope

I'll come out of it alive, keeping a stiff upper lip and a positive attitude to help us all survive, and breathe out afterwards. Here comes a lady.

Antoinette May I join you?

Rudolph (raises his hat) It's an honour to be relieved of my loneliness by such qualifications.

Antoinette (startles as she sees his face)

Rudolph You don't have to look that terrified at my compliment. I am no danger, I assure you.

Antoinette (collects herself) I am sorry, but your looks are all too familiar to me.

Rudolph How come? Have we met before?

Antoinette That's just the point. We haven't.

Rudolph And still you know me by my looks?

Antoinette It must be the red hair.

Rudolph I sincerely hope you've had no bad experience of men with red hair.

Antoinette It's not that at all. I assure you, I have nothing against you and have never seen you before, but who are you?

Rudolph (bows politely) Rudolph Rassendyll, at your service.

Antoinette That explains it!

Rudolph Explains what?

Antoinette You are a Rassendyll.

Rudolph Yes, I am a Rassendyll. Does that make it any better?

Antoinette (tries to calm down and take it easy) I must apologize, my behaviour must seem to you somewhat strange.

Rudolph Not at all. You are a lady.

Antoinette It pleases me that you take it so lightly. We would need your kind of easy humour in Ruritania.

Rudolph Why so? Don't you laugh in Ruritania?

Antoinette You can never have too much of a sense of humour, but in Ruritania there is always too little.

Rudolph I see your dilemma. In German-speaking countries you are so solemn and pompous, and when everything is so serious you can't see how funny it is.

Antoinette (amused) Something like that.

Rudolph So you are also on your way to Ruritania?

Antoinette So that's where you are going?

Rudolph Really against my will, but unfortunately I had a formal invitation for my cousin's coronation.

Antoinette I understand. Your cousin is our king to be, Rudolph the Fifth.

Rudolph I never met him. What does he look like?

Antoinette Look in the mirror.

Rudolph You don't say...

Antoinette Without a beard you would be like his twin brother.

Rudolph That's why you were so shocked by seeing me. You thought I was a double.

Antoinette Something like that, yes.

Rudolph I am sorry to disappoint you.

Antoinette On the contrary, I would prefer your company to his.

Rudolph So you know him?

Antoinette I am a friend of Michael's who really rules this country.

Rudolph I have heard about it. Michael works day and night holding the country together, while Rudolph lives for pleasure.

Antoinette Something like that. He is no good-for-nothing, but he is irresponsible and drinks too much.

Rudolph But he is legitimate, while his brother is not.

Antoinette Michael is his elder half-brother and has always done everything for Rudolph, while Rudolph only lives for his pleasures.

Rudolph So you think the wrong man is being crowned?

Antoinette It can't be helped. As you say, Rudolph is legitimate. I just hope he will shoulder his responsibility while I fear he won't.

Rudolph What's wrong with him?

Antoinette Only the same as with everyone in his position. They own so much and are so spoiled that everything bores them and they do anything to get rid of their spleen. That's why he drinks and games and doesn't care about state business.

Rudolph What luck then that Michael does.

Antoinette Michael had to rise to save the king's face and the monarchy from the beginning. If it weren't for Michael, we would be a republic.

Rudolph A loathsome word in our countries, used as we are to kings and emperors since the middle ages.

Antoinette Exactly. So you have no relationship with your cousin?

Rudolph No. The family suggested I should go to represent the English branch of his family. I had no idea I was his double. It makes the whole thing more interesting, though. Or else I would have come to Ruritania only to yawn.

Antoinette I advise you to discretion on your visit. The risk is you will be recognized as the king, who has masked himself in civilian clothes and taken on a beard.

Rudolph Lucky beard then, to make the difference obvious.

Antoinette I try to imagine you without a beard. (*disgusted*) Then I see only Rudolph.

Rudolph Do you despise him?

Antoinette It's unfair that he should be king when Michael is the only qualified regent.

Rudolph Can't he improve and brace himself to the task once he is crowned, like Henry V?

Antoinette Only the princess Flavia can save him, who is to marry him.

Rudolph How can she save him? Do they love each other?

Antoinette Certainly not. They were predestined from birth to be married as soon as he was crowned, but he doesn't care for her at all, and she hardly ever sees him. When convention forces them to appear together he looks as if all he wanted was to get away from her, which he always does as soon as possible.

Rudolph What family life and royal house can be built on such a union?

Antoinette That's it. I am getting off next station to attend to some business, but I hope we'll meet again at the coronation. As I said, keep my advice and stick to discretion. Always keep your hat on except when you must remove it.

Rudolph Is it only the hat that makes me an Englishman?

Antoinette It will convince anyone that fortunately you are not Rudolph.

Rudolph Is it so bad to be Rudolph?

Antoinette You should be glad you aren't.

Rudolph Not that I ever wanted to be king, but he is in no real peril, is he?

Antoinette His dilemma, my friend, is that the last thing he wanted to be was in his own shoes. You have no such dilemma. Thanks for the company. I'm getting off. See you at the coronation. (*leaves*)

Rudolph An exotic lady, beautiful and intriguing. I just hope she and the duke Michael won't try to intrigue against my poor cousin, who is so unfortunate that he must be king. After all, it's not his own fault.

Scene 2. The Princess Flavia's boudoir.

Flavia Tomorrow is the great day, when at last the country shall have its king and I shall have my husband, but how worthy am I and the country of him? Courtesy demands that question, but the truth is rather the contrary: does he deserve the throne, and has he made himself deserved of me? He can't be king unless he becomes my husband, but a throne and a wife is the least thing he wishes for. He always ignored me and escaped me, as if our marriage would be his damnation, and he has done nothing to deserve the highest national position. Michael has done everything for him and gets nothing in return, and by grace he may continue doing everything for him. Yes, what is it?

maid A visitor.

Flavia Who?

maid Duke Michael requests an audience.

Flavia Show him in at once. (*exit maid*) Why this sudden visit? It must be some matter of urgency. I will have nothing of his intrigues.

Michael (enters) Princess. (*kisses her hand*)

Flavia Duke Michael, I did not expect you.

Michael I know. I apologize.

Flavia What is the reason?

Michael Rudolph is to be crowned tomorrow.

Flavia You don't have to remind me.

Michael He is not worth the throne, and you know it. And what's worse: he is not even mature.

Flavia You don't have to remind me of that either.

Michael We can still interrupt this farce.

Flavia What farce? The monarchy? What's the alternative? Republic? And where shall we go? We have after all a history to carry on, of which our people are proud. We are the only living symbol for the imagined greatness and sovereignty of our country. I can't see that we have any choice but to keep the farce going. Or else we have nothing here in this country or in life to do.

Michael You know too well that I am the actual regent of the country. I always had to do everything, maintain the government, keep the administration functioning, summon councils and parliament and everything else. Rudolph is a playboy who doesn't even want to be king. All he wants is to go hunting for animals and girls, and he drinks.

Flavia You don't have to remind me of that either.

Michael I am the one who loves you, Flavia. I always did. Rudolph never cared about you and only pursued his leisure. I care about the country and am the only one who does. It's us that should be married and not Rudolph.

Flavia What do you suggest? A coup?

Michael That would be the only right thing.

Flavia No, Michael. Rudolph may be incompetent, but he is legitimate. You are not. Sorry I have to remind you, but if we did as you suggest the people would rise like one man, and we would be exiled. Is that what you want? No, you want power. It's the only thing you want and the only thing you cared for in all your life. That is also the only reason why you want me, since by my blood I carry power. You imagine that would give you legitimacy, but you are deluded. You can't change your parents. The only right thing for you to do, Michael, is to accept the status quo with patience. You had all the power all your life anyway, since Rudolph showed no interest, so content yourself with what you've got and always had. Nothing can hinder that he at last will be king and that he is married to me, although neither I nor he really desire it. The order of things demands it.

Michael I will do anything to stop it, since my whole being revolts against such an abortive marriage. If I can have Rudolph's coronation cancelled I will and perhaps organize some measure for my installment.

Flavia Will you kill him?

Michael That's the last thing I will do, and only if it is absolutely necessary.

Flavia Michael, I don't want to see you ever again, but for the one reception of the coronation. Thanks for revealing your plans, which I take as a warning, and I will prove my thankfulness by taking no measures against you. But you are warned as well.

Michael (clicks his heels and bows politely) Thank you, Princess. You, at least, are worth the throne. *(bows again and departs)*

Flavia He is too passionate. He would never do for a head of state, since he would be carried away by his own zest and make everyone turn against him. Oh Rudolph, if only at least you were a man!

Scene 3. The hunting lodge.

*Archduke Rudolph at table, the company has just finished their dinner,
but there is still wine on the table.*

Rudolph My last day of liberty! Tomorrow I'll be chained in double bondage of marriage and the crown, and I'll never be able to break loose again. Can you imagine a more devastating future, gentlemen?

Sapt Take it easy, Rudolph. Don't drink too much.

Rudolph You have told me so all my life, Franz. Do you think it helps? No, it has only been a constant reminder of the necessity of the perpetual escape from reality by wine and booze if nothing else is at hand, which it never is, for lovely girls don't grow on trees, and even wild game you have to search for nowadays.

Joseph Still we had a good day of hunting.

Rudolph Yes, nothing was wrong with the weather, even if everything else was wrong.

Fritz We are sorry about your fate, your majesty, but unfortunately we and the country have no other choice. The only alternative would be Michael, who only would make himself unbearable as regent and raise rebellions by his exaggerated discipline.

Rudolph It's he who runs the country, Fritz. He always did, and that's the only reason why we still have a damned monarchy. I really hope he will continue managing the country when I am king and can do even less.

Fritz What do you mean?

Rudolph Since much more than hencetoforth I have to give my time to that princess, who has been hanging over me all my life and now at last will strike down on me and put me out of order.

Sapt You paint the devil on the wall, your majesty.

Rudolph I am not your majesty yet, Franz. I'll be that not until tomorrow, which I had wished would never come. This is my bachelor's party, and you are invited as my only friends. All else that I know of in the country are just unknown anonymous sheeples.

Sapt It's not easy to be regent.

Joseph I regret that I must bring another temptation, your majesty, but I have no choice. Your brother Michael has begged to compliment you.

Rudolph The only one missing but not missed. Where is he?

Joseph He doesn't come himself, but he has sent you a bottle of his finest wine of the best vintage. *(brings a beautifully decorated bottle of wine)*

Rudolph It must be Bingen-Schwarzenberg. He always brings me a bottle of Bingen-Schwarzenberg on special occasions, as if to underscore the propriety of drinking myself uncontrollable to the occasion. Well, he is always welcome with his bottles. Open it up, and don't let me drink the whole bottle alone! *(Joseph opens it accordingly.)*

Fritz Remember you have to get up early for the crowning.

Rudolph We'll have time enough no matter how much we are late. If we are late they'll simply have to wait. But tell me more about that exotic cousin, who was to represent England at my damned coronation hullabaloo. What sort of bloke is he?

Fritz He is your second cousin and almost too much like you.

Rudolph Also in his habits? It would do me an awful lot of good to have someone like me to drink with.

Fritz We don't know much more about him than that he is a gentleman characterized by the red hair of the Rassendylls.

Rudolph Is someone to meet him at the border?

Fritz We have arranged for his immediate transport here as the train reaches its end station.

Rudolph Splendid. I hope he gets here before I drop under the table. (*drinks deep*) This is of a different taste than his ordinary wines. Special herbs. Tastes stronger than usual. Well, I hope it's also more efficient.

Fritz Why have you always avoided the princess Flavia, when yet you were ordained for each other from the beginning, and she even is one of the most beautiful and refined princesses of Europe?

Rudolph Good question, Fritz! Cheers for her unattainable beauty! That's the problem. She is too good for me. She has all the royal virtues, while I lack them all. She is beautiful, well read, meticulous with a vengeance and the consummation of decorum, while I have only amused myself, done nothing, been drunk, partied and danced around, while my only sober moments have been out in the forest hunting with you, my friends, for those poor wild animals we almost exterminated. I have been completely of no use all my life, while she really put an effort in keeping up the outward royal decency and has succeeded so well that, mind you, gentlemen, whether I like it or not, I will be married to her in spite of everything. What have I done to deserve such a heavenly reward? Absolutely nothing, except the contrary! All I deserve is getting scrapped. If only Michael had been prescient enough to poison his wine, so that I could be rescued and not be able to attend on my unhappy coronation! Then he would be welcome to take the throne by a coup d'état and strike me out of the game once and for all. Since that is what he always has dreamed about to do.

Joseph Don't drink too deep, your majesty.

Rudolph What else can I do? What else am I good for? What's the meaning of a glass with contents except that it is to vanish? But this wine really tastes strange. What's the matter with it? I can't let you taste it. Something is wrong with it. After all, wine was the only significant education I ever got. If anyone should know anything about wine, it's me, and this is not a proper wine...

Sapt Your majesty, then drink no more!

Rudolph The bottle isn't empty yet. You can't leave an unfinished bottle. Maybe it's just the cork. (*empties his beaker*) At least it's more wine than poison, since I am more positively affected than not. But I never got so dizzy before, and the bottle isn't even finished yet... (*tries to rise but can't stand*)

Fritz Your majesty!

(Rudolph more drunk than what's good for him can't stand and falls into the arms of Joseph and then loses consciousness completely)

Sapt This has never happened before. Could the wine really have been poisoned?

Fritz I can't imagine Michael taking such a risk.

Sapt Maybe he only wants to sabotage the coronation.

Joseph I have heard that he paid the princess Flavia a visit the other day, and there are rumours he went too far, that she had to throw him out.

Fritz He was always at the princess.

Sapt It doesn't look very good, does it? Rudolph can't be present on his coronation unless he recovers.

Fritz Put him in the room out there and let him try to recover.

Joseph He is completely gone. He has never been so far gone before. *(Sapt and Joseph carry him out.)*

Fritz So the ceremonies might have to be postponed, there will be a new flood of rumours about the king's incompetence and debaucheries, the princess Flavia will be compromised and humiliated, no, this will not do. He must be crowned tomorrow. *(Sapt gets back.)* How is he?

Sapt Completely out.

Fritz This won't do.

Sapt You said it.

Fritz What shall we do?

Sapt We can't do anything until he returns to life. *(Joseph comes back.)*

Fritz Joseph, help us!

Joseph The king is indisposed and can't be crowned. That's today's fact.

Fritz Damned awkward!

Sapt What we need is a miracle.

Joseph I hear some carriage coming. Could it be our expected traveller?

Fritz He arrives at the worst possible moment!

Sapt Unless it's the miracle we need.

Fritz Miracles are not to be expected. Until they happen they simply are not credible.

Sapt Go out and see if it's our expected guest, Joseph. Bring him here quietly, don't make any fuss, and tell him nothing. *(Joseph goes.)*

Fritz Michael's intrigues are behind this all too clearly.

Sapt What's done is done, and we have to accept the game but never give in to him.

Fritz He has always been intriguing to one day have all the power in his hands. Now he has it within reach, and I can see him smirking with the voluptuousness of greed while I feel Flavia trembling with terror.

Sapt It's true. She always had some difficulty keeping him at a distance.

(Enter Joseph with Rudolph dressed as a traveller with baggage. As Fritz sees him, he grasps Sapt's hand.)

Fritz Can this be true? Is fortune pulling our legs?

Sapt I see what you see. Keep calm.

Joseph May I present Rudolph Rassendyll from London.

Sapt We are very happy to see you, Mr Rassendyll. I hope your journey hasn't been too troublesome.

Rudolph At least I have survived. According to my instructions, my cousin the king was supposed to meet me here. Where is he, and who are you?

(Sapt and Fritz rise and straighten themselves up as if at court.)

Fritz Captain Fritz von Tarlenheim, at your service, Mr Rassendyll. It is an honour for us to meet you.

Sapt Colonel Franz Sapt, the king's oldest friend and mentor.

Rudolph And where is my cousin?

Sapt We regret, but there has been a change of program which temporarily has made him indisposed. We hope the situation will clear until tomorrow.

Rudolph Is he not to be crowned tomorrow?

Sapt *(firmly)* Yes, he is to be crowned tomorrow.

Fritz Are you aware that you are more like him than a brother?

Rudolph Yes, I seem to shock everyone who notices this likeness. It's nobody's fault. We just happen to have the same ancestor, and although we are only distant cousins our genetics seem to have coincided.

Fritz Remove your beard, and you will be like his twin.

Rudolph Then I had better keep my beard.

Fritz But sit down and relax, please. Your journey is over, and here you are totally secure. *(They sit down.)*

Rudolph For travelling company I had a certain Antoinette de Mauban, who seems to be quite close to my cousin's half brother the duke Michael, and who prepared me for possible consequences of my likeness with my royal cousin.

Fritz Did she tell you anything about duke Michael?

Rudolph Not much, but that he is evidently quite powerful. Is he involved in the complications?

(Fritz and Sapt exchange glances, and nod in silent agreement.)

Fritz Mr Rassendyll, you came like sent from heaven, since possibly only you could save the situation.

Rudolph What has happened?

Sapt The king is poisoned and unconscious in bed, and we don't know when he will return to life.

Rudolph Poisoned?

Fritz Assumedly. Michael sent him a bottle of wine for a compliment, he drank of the bottle alone and passed out completely.

Rudolph How awkward!

Sapt We hope it will not be necessary, but if it would turn out so badly that he can't go through with the coronation tomorrow, could you imagine for one day to save the situation as a stand-in?

Rudolph (pulls his beard) Then I will have to shave.

Fritz I am afraid so.

Rudolph It will take months to grow it again, and until it's there I'll constantly be taken for the king's twin. This is a precarious predicament.

Sapt If the king isn't crowned tomorrow we fear the people might be troubled and Michael might venture a coup.

Rudolph Only if it becomes necessary. This was not at all included in my plans. I hoped I would meet my royal cousin, enjoy his coronation festivities and then go home. Now I am cast into a process of unprecedented and possibly uncomfortable complications.

Fritz Only if it becomes necessary.

Rudolph May I at all see my cousin?

Joseph Not now. Nothing can awake him.

Rudolph May I just see him to have it confirmed that he is here at all and that our likeness actually is phenomenal?

Sapt (to Joseph) Bring him to Rudolph and show him, and he will better understand the situation.

Joseph (to Rudolph) Come with me. (*brings Rudolph to a neighbouring room. The king lies there in bed but is not seen. Sapt and Fritz eventually join them.*)

Rudolph So this is my poor cousin, worked out more than enough, totally gone and helpless, and nothing can wake him up, you said?

Joseph I tried everything.

Sapt Unfortunately it has happened before, but it was never bad like this. It could take a whole day for him to recover.

Rudolph I am sad to see your dilemma. The state of your country depends on a king who lies knocked out and senseless, and nothing can recall him to life, and if he is not crowned tomorrow there might be a revolution, or even worse, a military coup. Is that the full scenario?

Sapt I am afraid you have got it right.

Rudolph I can't just let him down.

Fritz None of us can.

Rudolph What do you suggest? Do you have a real plan?

Sapt We can make it very simple. We shave you, you stand in for his majesty, so that he is crowned according to protocol, so that no one in the country will have any reason to even raise an eye-brow. Thus the state and the monarchy will be saved. As soon as the ceremonies are over we bring you directly across the border while the king then must have returned to life and can reassume his duties. He will then owe you thanks for the rest of his life.

Rudolph It doesn't have to become worse?

Sapt No, there will be no reason why it possibly could become worse.

Rudolph It all depends on that I will not be recognized. Are all risks eliminated?

Sapt Nature herself has come to our rescue. You are like a better copy of him. Even if some who have been with us long could get a suspicious thought no one

would express it, since there would be no reason. You can save the country by just being what you are.

Rudolph That is, someone else.

Fritz You are too much like him for you to need to even make an effort. Without your beard you have identical looks, size, voice and are even the same type. Of his qualities you lack only his penchant for revels and drinking.

Rudolph You have no idea what I am doing at home.

Sapt But now you are here, to our great relief and salvation.

Rudolph I have some misgivings on one point which you haven't mentioned.

Sapt Well?

Rudolph The princess Flavia. Is she to be married, and to me?

Fritz That's the smallest risk, Rassendyll. She has seen less of you in life than any of us, and she is used to having her marriage constantly postponed. At most you have seen each other twice a year. Possibly she will note to her great relief that you have turned out sober and orderly, but that is all. By just being what you are you will raise her esteem of the king by many points.

Rudolph And the duke Michael?

Sapt (*clears his throat*) He will of course be present at the coronation and probably be surprised that you are there and get perplexed, when he has been so certain of having you out-maneuvred, but he least of all will be able to say a thing about it.

Rudolph Let's go for it then.

Fritz That's the spirit. You'll be a national hero.

Rudolph Shave me at once and get done with it.

Sapt Joseph, you need to shave the king.

Joseph He will never be better shaved than now. Pity though for a fine beard.

Rudolph It will grow out again when it's over. Get on with it! Make me a king for one day!

(*Joseph chooses a chair, offers Rudolph to take a seat, who is ready immediately for the shave.*)

Sapt I think we'll well get through with it, Fritz.

Fritz I would like to see the fallen face of Black Michael when he sees his victim crowned.

Sapt Me too. (*They drink to each other from a different wine while Rudolph is shaved.*)

Act II scene 1.

Flavia No, Michael, I told you before, and I tell you again. You have no business here.

Michael Try to be a bit realistic, princess. In contrast to Rudolph you are famous for that quality.

Flavia You know that your constant denigration of him never has had any effect to my mind.

Michael Then you are blinding yourself to reality. He is incompetent. He can never be king. Marry me instead, and I promise you a stable government of an ideal

state with an exemplary order of things well advanced of our more potent neighbours Germany and Austria. You must be able to see what's best for the nation.

Flavia And must I then turn a blind eye to justice and the human factor? You can only run Rudolph over as long as he is the rightful king and retains his title, and you have been doing this all your life for the best of the nation. Go on with that and forget the crown and me, for I belong to him.

Michael You hardly ever saw him! He has ever only neglected you and avoided you! What kind of a fiancé is that? His whole life is nothing but a failure, while I am the only competent party, which the whole country knows and even you!

Flavia We can't ignore the law and the succession with its honour and traditions.

Michael Honour! He has nothing but dishonoured himself all his life! Right now he is lying dead drunk and out of order in the hunting lodge of Zenda and can't even move. He can't be crowned today, and when people learn about it they will become restless, and then there will be only me to restore order.

Flavia Senseless? Dead drunk? Is it true? Is it some absurd rumour you have heard?

Michael According to witnesses that's how it is. There will be a national crisis, which only can be resolved by disposing of him. When he has sobered up and missed his coronation we'll send him abroad in exile.

Flavia It's you who are unrealistic, Michael, who believes such stories without a shred of evidence!

Michael The evidence will be his absence at the coronation.

a servant Your royal highness, colonel Sapt is here with the archduke and asks your permission to enter.

Michael (can't believe his ears) The archduke?

Flavia They are expected. Show them in at once. *(exit servant)*

Well, Michael, they seem to be here in good time for the coronation. Where have you got your weird stories from?

Michael I had it confirmed this morning that he was indisposed.

(The servant returns with Sapt and Rudolph.)

servant Your highness, colonel Sapt and archduke Rudolph. *(bows them in)*

Flavia (walks up to Rudolph with outstretched hands, he takes one of them and kisses it gently.) Welcome, cousin and future husband! For once you are here on time.

Rudolph (throws an eye at Sapt now and then, like trying to assure himself he says nothing wrong) Princess, I would never dream of being too late at your side.

Flavia Then why were you always late before?

Rudolph (with a glance to Sapt) I will try to improve.

Flavia I am only joking! I am so relieved to see you, Rudolph! Michael here had heard a weird rumour that you were lying paralyzed somewhere up in the forest!

Rudolph It pleases me to be able to prove such a rumour false.

Flavia But I hardly recognize you. It's so long since we last saw each other. You almost look younger and better than last time. Have you lost some weight? Have you adopted a stricter lifestyle? It almost looks like it. *(Sapt gives Rudolph a sign that he should greet Michael.)*

Rudolph But I mustn't neglect my brother. Whatever gave you such an idea, Michael?

Michael (put off, observes him scrutinizingly) I must have got something wrong.

Rudolph Perhaps the one you got it from was somewhat off line. Well, as you see, Michael, I am here and punctual for once. Shall we get on with the formalities of the coronation at the cathedral and get the whole thing over with?

Flavia That's to the best interest of us all, Rudolph. You seem more fit than ever.

Rudolph You are right, cousin. This morning I managed to wake up on the right side.

Sapt (politely, to Michael) If you'll excuse me, your grace, but we should prepare for the ceremonies. We have much to go through. We'll see you at the cathedral, of course?

Michael Of course. *(still put off, to Flavia)* I beg your pardon, madame, that I brought you a false alarm. It will not happen again.

Flavia We thank you for that. We have so many other more important matters to care about.

Michael Indeed. Good luck with the coronation, brother. Everything will now turn out smoothly, judging from your ease.

Rudolph I think the worst is over. *(exit Michael)*

Flavia Take care of him, Sapt, and shroud him well. You can't dress well enough for his coronation and our wedding, and the more you overload it, the greater will be the party afterwards. I leave you to your preparations.

Rudolph (takes her hand for the departure and kisses it anew) You have also been a pleasant surprise to me, princess.

Flavia How is it possible?

Rudolph I am beginning to realize what I missed in my constantly impardonable neglect of you.

Flavia Strange words to come from you, Rudolph. You never apologized to me before.

Rudolph Then it was about time before it was too late.

Flavia You astonish me with your sudden courtesy. Who has taught you such noble manners?

Rudolph I found it opportune to brace myself to the seriousness of the moment.

Flavia (moved and almost embarrassed) You are catching on, Rudolph. I had better go, before you have made a conquest of me. Or is this sudden politeness just another preparation for a further postponement of our wedding?

Sapt (interferes) Your royal highness could never be fooled by the king. I tried to make him smooth the ground for you for his wish of a further postponement.

Flavia As I said, I had better go. *(leaves)*

Rudolph (to Sapt) Did I go too far?

Sapt You did well, your majesty. I am proud of you. You have honoured both your princess and your coming crown, and nothing could have been more opportune in view of your coronation.

Rudolph I could never imagine an ordinary princess to be so beautiful.

Sapt Just don't fall in love with her.

Rudolph How could Rudolph in all these years avoid it?

Sapt He was doomed to have her. You will never get her. There is a difference.

Rudolph Please don't remind me thereof.

Sapt Just continue acting your part, and all will turn out well. As soon as the king returns to normal your troubles will be over.

Rudolph When will you collect him?

Sapt As soon as the ceremonies are over. He must have come back to his senses by then.

Rudolph Well, Sapt, let's get it done with. With such a charming princess to live up to I'll feel inspired to even endure the longest coronation ceremony in the world.

Sapt It will go off like a dance. Most important was that Michael didn't see you through.

Rudolph Do you think he suspected something?

Sapt He must have wondered, and his surprise at your presence proved his involvement in the plot. But whatever he thought, he can never voice his doubts, which his position forbids him.

Rudolph So we are safe?

Sapt Perfectly safe.

Rudolph On with it then! It will be my first and last coronation!

Scene 2. The hunting lodge.

Joseph How painful! Here I am alone with the King, who is drunk unconscious on his own coronation day which no one must know. I have been put in charge of a state secret, while another plays the king's part to keep up appearances in a fake show, which must be kept up at any price for the deception, since politics demands it. Politics demands continuous lies for its own continuity, since as soon as the truth comes out the establishment is overthrown by revolution which no one wants but always comes anyway. But I am afraid we have a visitor.

Rupert (knocks on the door) Anybody home?

Joseph No, nobody is at home.

Rupert So I see. Yet somebody must be at home since somebody answers.

Joseph What do you want?

Rupert The king.

Joseph He is not here.

Rupert He certainly is.

Joseph Who are you since you don't know he is to be crowned today at the cathedral?

Rupert Don't try to kid me, old fool. We know he is here completely knocked out by booze.

Joseph He isn't.

Rupert (breaks in with three others) Since you are so uncoöperative, old man, you force us to enter without permission. Where is he?

Joseph I just told you he is being crowned in the cathedral! Today is his coronation day!

Rupert Do you believe that lie yourself, since you keep repeating it?

Joseph He is not here!

Rupert Every word you say, poor old fogey, convinces me of the contrary. He certainly is here. He drank Black Michael's wine yesterday, and you don't do that without passing out.

Joseph You are trespassing on the King's property!

Rupert He is not crowned yet.

Joseph If you don't believe me, go to the cathedral yourselves and have a look!

Rupert You actually sound convincing. Maybe someone really is crowned in the cathedral, but it can't be the king.

Joseph It certainly is!

Rupert You bore me by repeating yourself too often. Search the house! He must be here! *(Two of his accomplices grab hold of Joseph while the third goes directly to y'the king's room. When he enters and finds the king in bed the king reacts somewhat.)*

Rudolph What's the noise out there? May a king not sleep in peace to get sober?

Bersonin (to Rupert) Here he is, Rupert.

Rupert Well, didn't I think so? *(enters the chamber)* How do you do, your majesty? Why are you not at your own coronation?

Rudolph You should know. You sabotaged it by poisoning me.

Rupert Did you not as always quite simply drink yourself put out?

Rudolph The wine was tampered with!

Rupert By whom? Who dare you accuse of such a lease majesty?

Rudolph You know that better than me.

Rupert That's why we are here to collect you.

Rudolph Don't say you'll escort me to my coronation.

Rupert Right. That's the last thing we shall do. No, we will simply see to it that you'll neither be crowned today nor any other day.

Rudolph Will you kill me?

Rupert That's not necessary. You are already dead. When people learn that your coronation has been cancelled because of your absence they will revolt and scrap the monarchy, unless Black Michael seizes power to save the country.

Rudolph Is that his plan?

Rupert No, it's his operation.

Rudolph How disappointed he will be then when I am crowned anyway.

Rupert How is that possible when we keep you here?

Rudolph I happen to have a twin brother who stands up for me.

Rupert Ha-ha! At least there's nothing wrong with your wishful thinking.

Rudolph I tell you, that Michael's coup has failed, and you'll know it as soon as you get down to Strelsau.

Rupert That comes later. Our order is to bring you to Zenda.

Rudolph You take me prisoner?

Rupert That's exactly what we do. It will be most convenient to you to come with us voluntarily. Or else there will only be trouble for us all.

Rudolph You make the trouble. I refuse.

Rupert Then you'll have to take the consequences.

Joseph (*interferes*) No, gentlemen, you have no right to bear hand on the King! (*frees himself*)

Rupert So you lied, and the king is here and not on his coronation. Shame on you! (*pulls his sword*) Take care of the king, and I'll take care of the old man here. (*The three others capture the king, while Joseph assaults Rupert, who finishes him instantly.*)

Rudolph You have killed him!

Rupert Have I? Was it not in self defense? Didn't he attack me, the poor old fool?

Rudolph He tried to interfere to save me!

Rupert And sacrificed his life in the effort. How pathetic! Take care of him. We are finished here.

Rudolph You can't get away with it! You have no chance!

Rupert You have no chance to get away in the long run, my lord and king, since you've had one drink too much! The fault is yours! Shut his mouth, tie him up and take him away! (*The others gag, backbind and bring him out brutally.*)

Rupert (*considers Joseph*) So there might really be a coronation going on at Strelsau? In that case I'll be curious about the actor who is to play such a phoney part. It will most probably be his last roleplay in life. (*sheathes his sword and leaves after the others. Curtain on Joseph's body.*)

Scene 3. A fine room in the castle.

Max Well, your majesty, when at last will your wedding be?

Rudolph My good man, let me first collect my breath after the long coronation. I am afraid that I will stick to my habit of postponing the wedding as long as possible.

Max You have no excuse any more. Now you are a king, and nothing stops you from giving the country the Queen it deserves.

Rudolph Don't stress me, Max. I must be allowed some recuperation for a few days before I can even start to think of the next show. Get along now, please, and leave me in peace.

Max Yes, your majesty. (*bows and leaves*)

Sapt The princess Flavia is waiting to congratulate you.

Rudolph How did I manage, colonel? Do you think anyone suspected something?

Sapt The king himself would have been more shaky.

Rudolph Then I concealed it well. You can't imagine how nervous I was. I hope Michael didn't suspect anything.

Sapt He was nonplussed. He didn't know what to think.

Fritz I have never seen him so confused. He was totally disoriented and couldn't get anything together.

Rudolph Still he knows it wasn't me.

Sapt He and possibly his men are the only ones to know, but as long as you play the king's part convincingly enough they can say and do nothing.

Rudolph We must get the king back.

Sapt Yes, that's our next step. Let's ride out as soon as possible.

Fritz You must see the princess Flavia first.

Rudolph Yes, I guess I must. We can't keep her waiting any longer. (*Sapt leaves politely.*) So there was nothing to remark on during the coronation?

Fritz No. You couldn't have kept your face and played your part any better. If anyone thought you made any difference from the common view of the king, it was for the better, younger and smarter.

Rudolph Is the king's drinking a problem?

Fritz Never before yesterday, and then it wasn't drinking but poisoning.

Rudolph Then all we need to do is to restore him.

(Sapt enters with the princess.)

Sapt Her royal highness the princess Flavia, your majesty.

Flavia (enters with outstretched hands) Rudolph, I am proud of you! Many who earlier regarded you condescendingly with disdain have suddenly seen you improved!

Rudolph I am afraid I still am what I always was.

Flavia But you have done something to yourself. You have grown slimmer and almost younger at least as it looks. Have you embarked on a sounder life? That's what people think.

Rudolph They may think what they will. The point is you were satisfied with the coronation.

Flavia Couldn't be more satisfied.

Rudolph My next hope is you are not in a hurry for the wedding.

Flavia I am used to waiting. You know it. How long will you keep me waiting still?

Rudolph Only until a few details have been arranged.

Flavia Like what?

Rudolph Bothersome state affairs that have to be sorted out before we can go on.

Flavia I understand. State secrets. Do they concern Michael?

Rudolph Among others. Me and colonel Sapt and count Fritz von Tarlenheim will ride out presently to fix the matter.

Flavia So it's not just to be the ordinary hunt?

Rudolph (takes her hands) When the last problem has been resolved you'll see, that we can get married at last.

Flavia You sound as if you really believed it.

Rudolph I do.

Flavia That's enough for me. (*to Fritz and Sapt*) Take well care of him, gentlemen. I want him back safely.

Sapt We guarantee as much, madame. (*Flavia retires.*)

Rudolph So it's just to get out, fetch the king and get me out of the country.
Fritz That will be the last inconvenience for you, Mr Rassendyll. Then you will be free and on your own.
Rudolph (sighs) I hope so, Fritz. *(They leave.)*

Scene 4. The hunting lodge, same as scene 2.

Joseph is still on the floor,

tries to move a little and has to whimper in difficult pains.

Fritz (enters with Sapt, Rudolph close behind) Joseph! *(falls down by his side and revives him. To Sapt:)* He is alive but badly wounded.

Sapt Can he survive?

Fritz Hardly.

Rudolph (enters) Where is the king?

Sapt It looks bad. They have been here.

Fritz Joseph! Can you hear me?

Joseph (dying) They took the king. I could do nothing. I tried to defend him, but then they struck me down.

Fritz Who?

Joseph (with his last breath) Rupert von Hentzau. *(dies)*

Fritz He is gone.

Sapt This is a disaster.

Rudolph Mildly speaking. What happens to me now?

Fritz Nothing. We can only ask you to continue playing your part until we have located and freed the king.

Rudolph So I am stuck in the infernal trap to be obliged to play a part in which I landed most unwillingly?

Fritz It doesn't look any better. We can't force you, but we beg you, for the country's sake.

Sapt Black Michael has probably taken him to his castle at Zenda as a hostage to keep him there while he forges new evil plans to take over power and the princess.

Rudolph We can never let him have the princess!

Fritz That's my man.

Sapt Your majesty, you are here to command us.

Rudolph We must liberate the king at any price, before something even worse happens to him. They might kill him if we don't act in time.

Fritz Exactly my thinking.

Sapt Your majesty, we sincerely regret to have put you in this very unpleasant situation.

Rudolph It's simply an emergency. Let's make it turn out for the better.

Fritz I think someone is coming.

Rudolph Someone? It's a whole gang!

Saptz Who are they?

Fritz (*looks out*) It's some of Black Michael's closest associates.

Sapt They probably come to make certain Joseph is dead.

Rudolph We have no time to bury him.

Sapt Definitely not. We must leave that to the gang.

Fritz They are three. De Gauter, Bersonin and Detchard.

Rudolph You seem to know them well.

Fritz It's been necessary to inform ourselves about Michael's closest accomplices if they would ever try anything. Now they have got started.

Rudolph What sort of men are they?

Fritz They are six. Three of them are foreigners, and they are here to visit us now. The three others are from here and much more of a risk. Most of a menace to watch out for is a certain Rupert von Hentzau.

Rudolph So we have only the harmless scouts here to deal with?

Fritz It looks like it.

Rudolph Attack is the best defense. I suggest an advance.

Sapt We can't risk your life, your majesty.

Rudolph It's their own fault who started this. They have no idea they now have a king Rudolph to deal with who has taken part in cavalry shock attacks and who even now is sober!

Fritz How surprised they shall be!

Sapt We are three against three with all strategic advantages on our side. We may succeed.

Rudolph Let's go for it, then.

Fritz Let's wait until they are quite close and take them by surprise.
(*They hide in expectation of the arrival. The voices of the guests are heard:*)

De Gauter Are you sure he was quite dead?

Bersonin That's why we were sent here, stupid. Rupert von Hentzau wasn't quite sure he was completely dead.

Fritz (*raising his sabre*) Attack! (*breaks out with Sapt and Rudolph*)

De Gauter (*terrified*) But it's the king!

Bersonin It can't be! We kidnapped him!

Detchard You idiots, he must be a fake!

De Gauter It can't be, unless it's the king's twin brother! (*They have no time for argument or defense before they are ruthlessly attacked. Detchard and De Gauter fall, Bersonin escapes.*)

Fritz (*sheathes his sword*) Now he has something to tell.

Sapt Black Michael will not be very happy.

Rudolph Back to our duties, gentlemen. We have done well but can do even better if we finally bury our poor Joseph.

Sapt You are right., your majesty. Let's immediately honour him with a prayer and decent burial.

Fritz Black Michael's creatures would hardly have granted him as much.

Sapt And then, your majesty, we had better immediately return to Strelsau. The people can't do without their newly crowned king.

Rudolph (sighs) I accepted an easy part for a day, which already has amounted to my life's most complicated affair.

Fritz I am sure we'll manage to get out of it.

Rudolph (sighs) If at least there hadn't been any beautiful princess involved!
(*Sapt claps his shoulder, and they go out to bury the dead.*)

Scene 5. Like scene 3.

Flavia Although he has come closer and almost become intimate he is still more unknown to me than ever, and I never knew less where I have him. It is as if he had become another person, and still he is only the more himself. I never loved him before, he always put a block to that himself, but suddenly it is as if love had wakened, which frightens me, since royalties really have no right to love.

Fritz (enters) Your highness, his majesty has returned.

Flavia And is he now prepared to marry?

Fritz I am afraid you will have to ask *him* about that.

Flavia Is the problem solved?

Fritz Honestly, I fear his problems have only just started.

Flavia Then I must concentrate on giving him the moral support he needs.

Fritz (bows and retires, as Rudolph enters with Sapt)

Rudolph (to Sapt) That's all for now, thank you, colonel.

Sapt At your service any time.

Rudolph You can be sure I'll always be needing you, so always be ready, please.

Sapt Your majesty shall never find reason to doubt about that. (*bows and leaves with Fritz*)

Flavia What is happening? Will you not share your concern with your becoming?

Rudolph I am sorry, cousin, but the concerns that Michael is causing by his intrigues is not for a woman.

Flavia What is he up to?

Rudolph The less said about that, the better, until the troubles are over, but until they are I can in no way think of marriage. The worst must come first, before we can think of more pleasant duties. I am sorry, cousin.

Flavia I waited my whole life and can continue waiting. I only wish I could help you.

Rudolph No one can help me except destiny and myself, which I intend to do.

Flavia You have shown a remarkable change since you became king, just like the prince in the Shakespeare play. Even your face has changed.

Rudolph (worried) How?

Flavia It has both matured and become younger. You should have aged with this sudden maturity, but instead it seems like the contrary.

Rudolph I am more sober.

Flavia (laughs) If only that was all! No, you have taken on worries, which you never wanted to look at before.

Rudolph They just fell over me. I have to carry them. I didn't have to before.

Flavia And so you matured.

Rudolph Michael is here, isn't he?

Flavia (frowns slightly) Yes, he is here.

Rudolph So he also troubled you?

Flavia It is as if he thought he could be king and get me instead of you.

Rudolph Yes, I am in his way, but it's not my fault that he was born a bastard.

Flavia But what have you done to your hand?

Rudolph (shows his right hand) I am afraid it got damaged in some skirmish.

Flavia Then you can't sign any documents.

Rudolph I can make a mark and stamp.

Flavia So you have been in a fight?

Rudolph A skirmish. It could have ended worse.

Sapt (enters) Your majesty and your royal highness, the duke of Strelsau is here.

Rudolph Does he ask for an audience?

Flavia As long as I am here you don't have to let him in.

Rudolph (to Sapt) Is it important?

Sapt He says that he only really wants to enquire about your health.

Rudolph Tell him, I am all right.

Flavia You shouldn't provoke him by keeping him out.

Rudolph You mean, no matter what evil designs and intrigues he is labouring with, it's our duties as royalties to maintain a positive attitude towards him?

Flavia Alas, that's how it is.

Rudolph Well, show him in.

Flavia I remove myself, I don't need to see him. (*leaves*)

Michael (enters) I beg your pardon for disturbing your privacy, but I heard you had some adventure in the forest.

Rudolph A dog bit me.

Michael And what happened to the dog?

Rudolph I am afraid it will try again.

Michael You should have had it shot.

Rudolph I did, but they were three, and one escaped.

Michael I see.

Rudolph It would be much appreciated if my brother could do something about it.

Michael About what?

Rudolph Assault, for example.

Michael Is my brother thinking of something particular? Is he accusing someone?

Rudolph It was within a hair's breadth that I wouldn't have been crowned today due to undesired complications in a hunting lodge.

Michael Still you succeeded in being crowned. May I congratulate.

Rudolph I don't know if it was worth any congratulations. I know how eagerly my brother desires the crown in my place, while I myself really never desired it.

Michael My brother knows that my birth excludes any succession possibility on my part, unless I marry the princess Flavia.

Rudolph I am sorry I have anticipated him. It was already settled at our birth.

Michael I know. There is nothing to do, as long as my brother lives.

Rudolph Anyone living will live as long as he can. It is the obvious logic of nature.

Michael Of course. I am the last man to stand in the way of my brother.

Rudolph Who is doing it, then?

Michael Is someone doing it?

Rudolph The dog that bit me, and the dogs we were forced to kill.

Michael (retires, feels bitten) I regret the incident. May his majesty quickly recover, so that he can marry the princess Flavia. *(retires)*

Flavia (appears as soon as Michael is gone) I heard every word. Did Michael's men try to kill you?

Rudolph They tried to kidnap me.

Flavia I am glad they failed.

Rudolph Unfortunately another was taken in my place. It's him we have to save before it is too late.

Flavia Did Michael make a mistake?

Rudolph The mistake of his life.

Flavia (feels dangerous ground) I will not interfere. Do what you have to do, and I will stay clinically out of it. But when it's over, can we then marry?

Rudolph You never insisted on it before.

Flavia I know. But suddenly you have become dear to me.

Rudolph We must take one day at a time. I can promise nothing until the crisis is over. Then we'll see.

Flavia You must make it. You have the right on your side and the most righteous and honest men of Ruritania against Michael's crooks and murderers.

Rudolph I know. Leave me to my destiny until it's over, so that you'll not get sullied by dirty intrigues.

Flavia Trust me, cousin. Love conquers all. *(retires with a faint smile)*

Sapt (enters) Your majesty, a letter.

Rudolph From whom?

Sapt It carries the scent of a woman.

Rudolph (opens the letter, worried) I know of no woman except the princess. *(eyes the letter through)* Antoinette de Mauban!

Sapt Do you know her? What does she want?

Rudolph What do you know about her?

Sapt She belongs to Michael's party. She is passionately in love with him, while he constantly neglects her, like you with the princess Flavia so far, if you excuse me.

Rudolph All right. Keep informing me. I am forgetful, and there is so much my memory fails in capacity for.

Sapt Mademoiselle de Mauban is of the highest aristocracy and has always nourished the ambition to be married to the duke. The only thing that has come between them has been his ambition for the throne, which he only can reach if the king is gone and he can marry the princess. In that case he will ditch Antoinette de Mauban. She has every interest to keep him away from the throne.

Rudolph I see. (*reads the letter, is astonished*) She tells me where the king is!

Sapt Hush! The walls have ears. (*lower*) What does she say?

Rudolph Our man is prisoner at the castle of Zenda. No one is allowed to visit the castle, and the drawbridge is left constantly hoisted.

Sapt He wants to use his prisoner to blackmail us. What else?

Rudolph She wants to see me privately and alone for discussions.

Sapt Out of the question. Security forbids.

Rudolph This is our chance, colonel. We must take it.

Sapt Not without careful surveillance.

Rudolph Can you risk the king's death? I refuse to play his part for the rest of my life. I can't marry the princess, however much I would desire it. We must save the king at any price.

Sapt We can't let you meet her alone.

Rudolph Come with me then, but only you.

Sapt What meeting-place does she propose?

Rudolph A deserted monastery outside town after sunset.

Sapt Typical of her. She is romantic.

Rudolph But she is sincere.

Sapt We don't know about that until it's too late. It must be a trap set up by Michael himself. Without doubt his men will wait for you there to kill you.

Rudolph I can make it. Unlike the king I am used to skirmishes and nightly raids. I can always escape.

Sapt I don't like it.

Rudolph None of us likes this most unwelcome roleplay, which was forced upon us, but we have no choice but to play our parts until it's no longer necessary.

Sapt (accepts) You are the king. It's my duty to obey your orders.

Rudolph Good, my colonel! We have managed Michael and his feints so far, so all we have to do is to stay on course straight ahead and refuse to let fear develop into any obstruction.

Sapt Well, your majesty. We have regrettably no other choice than to trust and obey you. (*Rudolph claps his shoulder, and they go out.*)

Act III scene 1. By the chapel in the cemetery.

Antoinette If Michael learns that I have dated the king tonight he would murder me, but it is his life I want to save, not my own. Still the only weakness he suffers from is the same one that all men abandon themselves to in blindest folly: not being content with what they have but at any cost to crave for more. It's the normal roulette disease: you can't win enough but have to raise the bets until you have lost everything. That's what Michael will do, unless I save him. Well, here is our remarkable royal replacement.

Rudolph (appears alone) You kept your promise. I find you alone.

Antoinette I hope you are alone as well.

Rudolph As you see.

Antoinette No secret escort waiting for you outside the wall?

Rudolph Only one single man.

Antoinette Well, it will have to do. Listen to what I have to tell you. The king is in mortal danger. He is kept prisoner at the castle of Zenda and will be liquidated as soon as Michael thinks he can do it in perfect safety. The only thing holding him back from murdering his own half brother for the moment is your existence.

Rudolph He must be saved.

Antoinette That's why we are here.

Rudolph How can he be saved?

Antoinette It's impossible with military means. The castle can't be taken, and if it were attacked or besieged Michael would immediately murder his prisoner. He must be liberated secretly.

Rudolph Do you have a plan?

Antoinette I am working on it. I will keep you informed, but no one must know of our meeting. If Michael knew about it my life would be worthless, and I wouldn't be able to save him.

Rudolph Is he the one who needs saving?

Antoinette From himself. I am the one who loves him. He is a competent statesman who has done everything for his country while the king has done nothing. He thought he could hustle away his half brother and at last get something in return for his self-sacrifice, but by a strange twist of fate you suddenly turned up just in time to take the king's place in the cathedral to save the monarchy, and for the first time in his life Michael was worried.

Rudolph Is he ill?

Antoinette No, only mad for power. He has me for his own with his splendid ducal court but must at any cost also have the princess and the crown, which he can never reach, since the princess loathes him.

Rudolph So he lives for the delusion that he can win the princess.

Antoinette You are the one closest to win the princess now, but you don't want to.

Rudolph Not for anything in the world, although I love her.

Antoinette Is it that bad?

Rudolph No. It's even worse. It's mutual.

Antoinette What an intriguing kettle of fish!

Rudolph All I want is the king's liberation. That's the only reason for my remaining in the country.

a voice outside Ohoy there!

Rudolph (quietly, to Antoinette) Who is it?

Antoinette One of Michael's men. He must not know that I am here.

Rudolph Trust me. *(loudly)* Who is it?

the voice We are looking for the one who feigns to be the king of Ruritania.

Rudolph I AM the king of Ruritania. What do you want?

the voice Duke Michael offers you 50,000 pounds and safe conduct to the border if you leave the country.

Rudolph On condition that you first release the prisoner you have at Zenda.

the voice That prisoner will never again see any daylight.

Rudolph Is he dead?

the voice On his way.

Rudolph Then I can't accept your offer.

the voice Suit yourself. All you can expect then is joining him on his way.

Rudolph Not as long as I live.

the voice It will not be very long. *(tries to force the door)*

Rudolph The door is locked. Let me open it for you, so that you need not use violence.

voice Come on out, and we will reason.

Rudolph I am unarmed.

voice So are we.

Rudolph (lifts silently as tea-table which he intends to use for a protection)
How many are you?

voice Two.

Rudolph And no one is armed?

voice We have no order to kill you – yet.

Rudolph (makes a sudden break-out with the tea-table for protection, the two men outside are taken by surprise and are helplessly struck down, while Rudolph escapes. They try to fire at him but miss him.)

Antoinette Alack these men, so mad about power and shooting, they will never learn. *(exits the other way)*

Sapt (receives Rudolph off stage) Thank goodness you are alive!

Rudolph Good news! We have an ally and a spie on the enemy side and invaluable as such: a woman.

Sapt You'll have to tell me more about it later. We have to get away now for our lives. *(They leave, and you hear the disappearing galloping horses.)*

Rupert (enters in fury) Pulled by our legs! That usurper is much cleverer than the king!

Bersonin We haven't said our last word yet.

Rupert Let's find out what he really did in this place! I suspect that the beautiful Antoinette de Mauban is double playing and intriguing behind Michael's back, for I feel her perfume.

Bersonin There's been a woman here without doubt. But no one wishes Michael better than she.

Rupert But Michael doesn't care for her at all. She is destined to be mine!

Bersonin Do you think she will agree?

Rupert That comes later. The point is I desire it. Come along! *(They leave.)*

Scene 2. The court.

Flavia What's happening? We are giving a ball tonight, and Michael vanishes almost demonstrably although people applaud him while Rudolph's shares are going down for his never leading me to the altar. Michael would have everything to gain from appearing at the ball, while instead he escapes, for what? Has it anything to do with the mysterious prisoner at Zenda? *(Sapt enters.)* Colonel Sapt, you were obviously engaged tonight. And of course you can't tell me anything of what happened?

Sapt I am sorry, madame, but it is a matter of state security.

Flavia I see. Is Rudolph unhurt? I can see that *you* are.

Sapt Absolutely untouched. Like in the earlier skirmish it was one of the others who was wounded.

Flavia Is that why Michael leaves the field?

Sapt Has he gone away?

Flavia He has gone to Zenda in a demonstration to evade the ball.

Sapt The more important that Rudolph is here.

Flavia Is there a problem?

Sapt Let me talk to him first. You had best leave us alone.

Flavia I leave at once. *(leaves)*

Sapt The situation is growing more complicated every day, but at the same time it's a challenge both to our poor unwilling saviour and to us, who are alone about the secret, while the king's life is more in danger every day. And then our friend makes difficulties about an ordinary formal ball at court!

Rudolph (appears) Is there any possibility to get away from the ball?

Sapt Your majesty, people are getting more and more irritated the longer you postpone your formal proposal. You are legally crowned now. There is no impediment any more to your longed for union.

Rudolph Don't tell me that your country also demands of me an heir. Come on, colonel. This comedy is getting less funny and more annoying every day.

Sapt What are you afraid of?

Rudolph Nothing, except my inappropriate feelings for the princess. They scare the wits out of me.

Sapt You have to make a formal proposal.

Rudolph Not that also!

Sapt The people leave you no choice. Protocol demands that you are seriously engaged. I beg you.

Rudolph And all I ask is to get started on the liberation of my poor cousin. It's he and no one else who is in immanent danger. And my so called half brother's looks give me the creeps and worse each time I have to see him.

Sapt That peril is removed.

Rudolph (hopefully) Is he dead?

Sapt Not quite. But he will not be at the ball. He offers you a free playground.

Rudolph What's the meaning? Does he hope for my giving myself away?

Sapt I think he has domestic problems with his wounded men and with the baroness Antoinette de Mauban, who never leaves him in peace.

Rudolph That would be optimal. I wish it were true. Well, colonel, I will play out my part at the ball tonight, but then we have to release the king.

Sapt Yes, we have to. (*enter Fritz*)

Rudolph What news, Fritz?

Fritz Michael is at Zenda, and people wonder why. They think there must be some quarrel between the two of you. It's of the utmost importance that you and the princess are seen together as much as possible tonight.

Rudolph I am aware of it.

Sapt He has promised to propose to her.

Fritz Splendid! That's what people are expecting.

Rudolph Just make it my crucifixion and funeral, as long as the king then can take over.

Fritz Your majesty, we have succeeded so far with our roleplay beyond any expectation. All you have to do is to go on keeping it up.

Rudolph Our deception of the princess gives me bad feelings.

Fritz Pardon me, your majesty, but that's your best part. The more affection you can inspire the princess with for you, the better it will be for the king's marriage.

Rudolph You mean the king has so far only been mean to her?

Fritz Unfortunately you can't come closer to the truth.

Rudolph I am afraid my relationship with her can put me in a more serious dilemma than the king's.

Fritz We are with you all the way. It's our duty to see to it that it all must turn out all right.

Rudolph That's my saving straw in the flood. Well, let's make ready for the ball.

(*exeunt*)

Scene 3. The ball.

(In a film the ball can be made with only the most elegant and most exquisitely dressed participants of only top society, where the princess Flavia and Rudolph take the prize in style and elegance.)

Flavia (out on a balcony from the ball) Who is he, this my king, who suddenly after his coronation comes down to me like the prince of my dreams, while he never was like that before? I don't recognize him, the irresponsible dandy, the easy-going drone, the bored amateur, who never took anything seriously and now suddenly appears the only serious affair in my life. What has happened to him? Has he awakened from a lifetime dream of vanity and suddenly come to his senses and realized his responsibility? It's a phenomenon. And now this evening...

Rudolph (comes out to join her) There you are, cousin. As soon as you are absent from the ball you are missed.

Flavia You never missed me before.

Rudolph May I not miss you?

Flavia Rudolph, the situation between us has suddenly become serious after your crowning. I never loved you before, and you showed even less interest in me, but suddenly you have grown to be someone.

Rudolph I am aware of this dangerous situation.

Flavia So you also feel it dangerous?

Rudolph Why do *you* feel it as dangerous?

Flavia (towards the garden) We can't deny it to ourselves or to each other, but there is love between us, which we both feel too strongly. I was always brought up with the concept that ordinary human love was not for us royalties. We were only allowed to think of marriages of reason and convention and political unions. Love was anathema. And now it's here between us royalties. It almost feels unnatural and alien, which makes me afraid.

Rudolph Afraid of what?

Flavia That I would lose you in some way or another. This love appears so sudden from nowhere, which gives me the feeling that it might just as easily disappear. The situation feels too good to be true, which makes me worried about some unknown threat, which I can't say what it is and which makes it the more alarming.

Rudolph We have our duties to fulfill. We must marry. We can't escape it.

Flavia And this strange situation with some prisoner somewhere, which compels you to postpone our wedding, although nothing is more inevitable than our wedding. Is there something holding you back?

Rudolph Flavia, may I ask you an intimate question?

Flavia Please do.

Rudolph You confirm the love between us. Suppose I wasn't king. Would your love be the same?

Flavia An odd question. Are you thinking of abdication? Is that what this weird affair with Michael is all about? He would be the definite ruin of the monarchy.

Rudolph Not at all. Abdication is no alternative. Nothing is more out of the question than that.

Flavia Then why do you ask?

Rudolph Just out of curiosity. Consider it just a hypothetical experiment.

Flavia Yes, Rudolph, if you were not king I know I would only love you the more. And this certainty fills me even more with ominous worry.

Rudolph Thanks, cousin, for your invaluable honesty.

Flavia I hope to always be able to oblige you with that.

Sapt (*clears his throat in the background*)

Rudolph Colonel! Don't tell me you have eavesdropped!

Sapt Pardon me, your majesties, but at present I am your only security guard, and our guests are wondering where you are. You are both missed on the ball floor, where you must be the nave of the occasion.

Rudolph We should prove ourselves to our guests, Flavia.

Flavia Yes, we should. Thanks for your sincerity, Rudolph. I hope it increases with time.

Rudolph I promise you, that all our worries shall be over the day when the king of Ruritania at last without anything holding him back may bring you to the altar.

Flavia I thank you, Rudolph. (*Rudolph escorts her to the ballroom.*)

Sapt He is getting too intimate and involved with her. We must enforce the operation Save the King. Or else this love situation might lead to complications.

Scene 4.

Marshal There is a crisis in the country, but no one knows what it is about. The king is crowned but still postpones his wedding with his only possible queen, while it is more obvious every day to everyone that they love each other, as if he feared some attempt on his life and therefore would spare the princess Flavia the worries of a marriage as long as possible until the threat was over, but what is the threat? The duke Michael keeps out of the way, but there is a rumour of a mysterious prisoner at Zenda who no one knows anything about. – Well, here is now the king with his closest warriors. He looks anxiously targeted. Perhaps we shall know something now?

Rudolph (*signs to Sapt and Fritz to stay as he accosts the marshal*) My good man, I hereby initiate you in the highest confidence of the realm.

marshal Your majesty, no one can serve the crown more faithfully than I.

Rudolph I know. Therefore I entrust you with the highest mission of confidence. We three, my friends and I, are going out for a boar hunt.

marshal That's perfectly in order.

Rudolph It's not just that. While I am away I will send you a courier every day. If there is no one in three days you shall issue a public order which I will give you, which relieves Michael of his governorship of Strelsau and invests you in his place.

You shall declare the town in a state of emergency. Then you shall send Michael a message that you wish to see the king. Are you with me?

marshal Perfectly.

Rudolph Within 24 hours. If the king is not produced the king is dead. (*puts his hand on his shoulder*) You shall then proclaim the heir for a regent. You know who it is?

marshal The princess Flavia.

Rudolph And you shall stand by her side until your death and place her where I stand now and kill the worm Michael, who in that case has killed his half brother the king. Is it clear?

marshal Perfectly.

Rudolph You swear to fulfill this?

marshal I swear. I am afraid you are embarking on a mission at the peril of your life.

Rudolph It can't be helped. It's not my fault, and it can't be resolved in any other way.

marshal I pray then that you may succeed, Sire.

Rudolph Thank you. We need it. (*produces a document*) Here is the public order with all the details in writing. Hide it well until it's time to bring it out. Hopefully that will never happen. (*to Fritz and Sapt*) We are ready! Let's go!

marshal I wish I could follow you.

Rudolph It's more important that you take care of and protect what I leave behind. The realm is in your hands, until the king returns.

marshal He must return.

Rudolph Yes, he must. We have no choice. (*leaves with Frits and Sapt*)

marshal The duke Michael has taken someone for hostage who for some reason is important for the safety of the realm. But why would the king risk his life for one of his citizens? Everybody knows Michael is dangerous and almost allpowerful, and still the king dares to challenge him in a matter of life and death. Well, state secrets are state secrets, sometimes they never become known, and I have only to obey my orders. God save the King!

Act IV scene 1. Zenda. Card play in the cellar.

Lauengram Your bloody spades!

Krafstein What games are you up to exactly? You mix up the cards!

Rupert You are the incompetent ones, you blackguards! You can't even play a trump!

Lauengram It's you who are bluffing us!

Rupert I never bluff anyone.

Krafstein Listen to him! As if he ever did anything else!

Lauengram That's the very thing he never did!

Rupert What I did was to call everyone's bluff except my own.

Krafstein Bluffing is the only thing you know!

Lauengram He is just bluffing us.

Rupert Take it easy, gentlemen. Remember, this isn't serious.

Lauengram You give the impression, Rupert, that you only exist to pull everyone by their noses.

Rupert What else can you do with all the idiots pestering this world? Have any of you a better suggestion? You can't just liquidate everyone who deserves it!

Krafstein I never understood why Black Michael hired you, and even less why he kept you in his service.

Rupert He has a weakness for *la jeunesse dorée*, which always has to conquer everything.

Lauengram Including your employer's mistress?

Rupert It's only a question of time until she falls.

Krafstein Who falls for Black Michael can fall for anyone including Rupert von Hentzau.

Rupert For whom all my chosen ladies so far have fallen.

Lauengram Antoinette de Mauban would probably prefer an established and potent duke Michael to a constantly cheating debaucher like you.

Rupert He is getting old. I am only getting younger.

Krafstein Not for very much longer.

Lauengram Every lady you drive to her death will contribute to the grey hairs of your middle age.

Rupert I never drove any lady to her death – so far.

Krafstein Not even your mother?

Rupert She is the only sacred thing I had in life. Everything else I trample down.

Krafstein Didn't you give her a heart attack by dragging your wenches home to her for the night?

Rupert No person can be blamed for another's heart and anguish attacks.

Krafstein Still there was a connection.

Lauengram Attention. Your mistress is coming.

Rupert Not yet.

(Antoinette comes down with a light.)

Antoinette How is our patient?

Rupert Only you are keeping him alive.

Antoinette Since when did we forget our titles, Rupert von Hentzau?

Rupert We might as well do it at once, madame. You know as well as I that Michael is worthless.

Antoinette You forget that I love him and owe him everything.

Rupert He has fooled you, the hopeless power maniac. He is just an ordinary psychopath who would do anything for power including sacrificing you and the king.

Antoinette We are both alive so far.

Rupert He, only because you nurse him.

Antoinette Michael has no interest in his death.

Rupert Not yet. It will come. As soon as he gets the princess Flavia you'll be as worthless as the king.

Antoinette He will never get that princess!

Rupert She can never love him, and another man is in his way. The madder and blinder is Michael in his passion.

Antoinette That's how he works for his downfall.

Rupert Let him! Be rational! Let him perish in his psychotic thirst for power, let that jack-in-the-box actor have the princess who loves him, and come to me.

Antoinette Never, you consumer of women!

Rupert They were all grateful for my treatment.

Antoinette My duty is to save Michael and his life as long as it is possible.

Rupert You can't even save the king. He is chronically dying.

Antoinette But is still alive and has an army outside the castle waiting to save him.

Rupert Led by a phoney actor who has deceived the entire country.

Antoinette He has only started on saving the monarchy.

Rupert So let him succeed and win his princess Flavia, abandon Michael to his fate, and let me take care of you.

Antoinette Not as long as Michael lives.

Rupert Is that a promise? Then I will kill him.

Antoinette Take me to the king.

Rupert You mean the patient? The king is out there free and healthy giving Michael the finger by gloriously obstructing him in every way, so that he risks an implosion.

Antoinette Let me remind you, that the prisoner or patient down there is the lawful crowned king of the country.

Rupert It was a usurper who was crowned. There has never been a more powerless or less royal king than the prisoner patient down there.

Antoinette No one wants him dead.

Rupert Except himself.

Antoinette Is the doctor with him?

Rupert You keep him alive by artificial means. Well, it seems to be time for our Florence Nightingale to perform her daily philanthropy. I follow you down. – Keep playing, gentlemen. That's all you are good for.

(Rupert grabs a torch and follows Antoinette down to a lower cell where a doctor sits by the bed of Rudolph the prisoner.)

doctor We were getting worried. You are late tonight, baroness.

Antoinette I was detained by this knave. How is he?

doctor Not very well. He is fading. He is not used to adversities.

Antoinette I know. *(kneels by the prisoner's bed)* Your majesty, it's me.

Rudolph Have you come to kill me off?

Antoinette On the contrary.

Rudolph It's no use. Michael is bent on my death.

Antoinette And I am here to stop it.

Rudolph How can you love him?

Antoinette He seduced me.

Rudolph Is a woman then so completely without character that she allows the first worst man who seduces her to enslave her?

Rupert (laughs scornfully) Ha-ha-ha! Ask the princess Flavia!

Rudolph (to Antoinette) What does he mean?

Antoinette Your cousin, your majesty, has actually saved the throne and the crown by taking your place when Michael started his coup to seize the throne.

Rudolph How could he accomplish that?

Antoinette Your closest servants colonel Sapt and captain Fritz von Tarlenheim must have persuaded him.

Rudolph My goodness! And the princess?

Antoinette She hasn't married him and will not, as long as there is hope to get you out.

Rudolph He hasn't got a chance against Michael's premeditated evil. Is he naïve?

Antoinette No, he is an English gentleman.

Rudolph That's even worse. He is then preparing his own funeral together with me.

Rupert (laughs scornfully) Not if he is sly. He can still realize what's best for himself. Michael has offered him a million and safe conduct across the border if he abandons you and gives up his cheating on the throne.

Antoinette He has declined the offer.

Rupert There will be new offers, more generous and reasonable every time. What about this. I kill Michael, take you and let Rudolph Rassendyll have the princess, whom he loves in contrast to you?

Rudolph You are a demon, Rupert of Hentzau!

Rupert No, just a practical politician.

Rudolph And my fate would be to just disappear.

Rupert Michael has installed a pipe leading down to the water from this cell, through which corpses can be passed unseen with weights to drag them down to the bottom of their watery grave. If the castle is attacked, two of us have the order to defend the cell above us, while the third will come down to you. If the attackers break through you will be killed and sent down the Jacob's ladder, as we call the pipe, before they have broken in. You have no chance, your majesty, whatever happens.

Antoinette Don't mind him. He is just bluffing and bragging.

Rudolph Unfortunately he is a realist.

Rupert If you have wasted enough of your cares for his continued torture by keeping him alive, my friends, I ask you to remove yourselves, so that I can fetter him with the usual decorations.

Rudolph Why does Michael keep me on the rack? Why doesn't he kill me at once?

Rupert Because your English cousin presses him by acting your part. When he tried to take you out he only had an even worse Rudolph on his back, which drives him crazy!

Rudolph Serves him right!

Rupert Honestly speaking, I think so too. But now he can't kill the one without having first killed the other, and the other is much more secure in his saddle than you, Sire! (*chains him to the bed*)

Rudolph May I perish and be forgotten so that he may live and destroy Michael!

Rupert My opinion exactly! That's the only rational solution. You vanish without a trace by Jacob's ladder, as if you never existed, while your cousin takes your place for good and marries your cousin and governs the country better than you ever could have done!

Antoinette It's enough. Leave him alone.

Rupert It's my obligation of honour to torture him to death as slowly as possible.

Rudolph For every spike you drive into me I only get more furiously alive!

Rupert Then at least there is something in you, your majesty. Maybe it was Michael's greatest mistake to underestimate your royal resources.

Rudolph He is just a bastard, unroyal and only a halfblood!

Rupert But he held all the power of the country in his hands until he fell for the temptation to also embrace it formally. With that he will never succeed, no matter if you disappear or die. He should have satisfied himself with what he had and you, Mademoiselle de Mauban.

Antoinette Yes, he should.

Rupert His tragedy is worse than yours. Just wait! (*locks the last fetters of the king*)
Time, ladies and gentlemen! Today's performance is over! (*pushes out the doctor and Antoinette, returns to the card players, who are still going on. Rudolph's cell turns into darkness.*)

Lauengram Your bloody spades again, you sot!

Krafstein You asked for it!

Rupert How is your game going, gentlemen?

Lauengram He keeps cheating me all the time!

Rupert That's what all games are for. Let no one be left when the drawbridge is hoisted.

Krafstein We are coming.

Lauengram Spades! (*They play. Rupert walks out with the doctor and Antoinette. Rupert chivalrously dares to kiss Antoinette's hand. She withdraws it affronted and gives Rupert a box on his ear, before she retires.*)

Rupert Just wait!

Scene 2. Antoinette's bed-chamber.

Antoinette I only want to save his soul. Is that wrong? He is corrupted and obsessed with politics, and I only want to save him as a human being before it is too late. But it might already be too late...

Michael (enters) Madame, how is our patient?

Antoinette You are slowly but irrevocably killing him.

Michael That's my intention.

Antoinette You will gain nothing by it.

Michael Only what is our due. The power. The throne. Legitimacy.

Antoinette You'll never get it, Michael.

Michael What can stop me?

Antoinette You should have realized the game was lost the minute Rudolph Rassendyll popped up and took his place in a far more efficient coup than yours, which failed from the start.

Michael He failed from the start, a playboy, a mothersucker, a bon-vivant rake, who only felt his responsibility as something to constantly escape.

Antoinette And does that give you the right to kill him?

Michael I am just replacing his incompetence.

Antoinette You never gave him a chance. You took all his power away from him from the beginning. All your life and his has been an effort on your side to get rid of him. His only defense has been to avoid an undesired conflict. And what will you do with this fellow Rassendyll? Crush him like the king as another irritating flea? But this double of your brother's has proved capable of defending himself. He has already killed two of your men in self-defense. Your problem with him will only get worse the more you try to resolve it.

Michael I had everything within reach, and in clamps this Rassendyll ruining everything!

Antoinette Like a gift from above. Pull back while you can, Michael. As soon as the king is free, Rassendyll will leave the country, and everything returns to normal. You will keep your power and influence, and I will keep you.

Michael Madame, I can't let go of the princess Flavia, the only woman I ever loved.

Antoinette She doesn't love you and will never be able to. She despizes you and hates you for your constant bullying of Rudolph. She wants nothing to do with you. You have none but me.

Rupert (enters) If he doesn't want you, here is a better lover.

Michael Rupert! You still here? The bridge is up.

Rupert I saw the light in Mademoiselle's window and swam across. It looked as if she needed company.

Michael She doesn't need you.

Antoinette Rupert, go home. You are only making it worse.

Rupert Yes, since I am the only one except you who knows everything. Not even at the court of Strelsau they know what you have done to the king, and the princess Flavia, the only one who intimately knows both the Rudolphs, knows and suspects least of all.

Michael Get out. Your service is no longer needed.

Rupert Since I know too much and am too active? Michael, old fool, you have played out your part. Madame de Mauban is right. Your only chance is to desert your regicide project, abandon the impossible princess and return to her, the only

one who loves you. If you are so stupid that you let her down I will be glad to accept her instead with due honour.

Michael You know both perfectly well that I have gone too far to be able to return.

Rupert You should have turned when Rudolph Rassendyll made his entrance and took the king's place more honourably than the king. You wouldn't have needed to kidnap him. That was your life's great political mistake.

Michael What is done is done. If I give up the enterprise it will all come out, and I will be slaughtered.

Rupert And you think, poor fool, that you will get away with your crime by stubbornly continuing making it worse?

Antoinette That's politics.

Rupert (approaches Antoinette) Madame, allow me to join your party. *(lays his arm around her)*

Michael (pulls his sword) You worm of impertinence without comparison! You should never have been born!

Rupert I was and intend to live. *(pulls his sword)*

Michael You drove your own mother to her grave! *(attacks)*

Rupert And your mother was a whore! *(they fight furiously)*

Michael What devil made me take you in my service!

Rupert You yourself!

Michael Your influence has ruined everything!

Rupert We only carried out your orders.

Michael But you always acted on your own!

Rupert No, I saw the direction of your orders leading you to your own downfall and did nothing about it!

Michael You have turned Mademoiselle against me!

Rupert No, she went behind your back all by herself.

Michael (hesitates) How's that?

Rupert She asked for a secret meeting with Rudolph Rassendyll to thwart your plans and tell him everything about the prisoner of Zenda.

Michael It's not true! She loves me!

Antoinette That is true. *(Rupert pierces Michael.)*

Antoinette (runs to him) You have killed him!

Rupert He asked for it. But he isn't dead yet. He is just crawling in the dust. Let him suffer in his death pangs as long as possible and bewail the disaster of his political career.

Antoinette If you think you can win me over by means like this you are very much mistaken.

Rupert I have only been straight and acted in self defense. You yourself can give no other testimony.

Antoinette You wicked demon! *(brings forth a pistol and aims)*

Rupert (laughs to her face) Ladies never could duel, and least of all they could aim at a lover!

Antoinette (fires, misses him, Rupert keeps on laughing and jumps out of the window. A splosh is heard in the water. She rushes to the window, shoots again and misses again, while Rupert's fading laughter continues. Then she cries:) Help! Help! Michael! Help! (cries terrifyingly and faints)

Rudolph (suddenly visible with Fritz and Sapt outside the wall) The signal! Now it's our turn! Come on!

Scene 3. The cellar with the card players.

Krafstein (upset) You beat me all the time!

Lauengram Is it my fault that I am lucky?

Krafstein No, but it's not fair!

Lauengram That's what you say now, but what will you say when you win? Then you scorn me and laugh me out! (bang, bang)

Krafstein Now they are at it again.

Lauengram What do you think is happening?

Krafstein It doesn't matter. We have our orders. If anyone tries to break in we have to kill the king.

Lauengram As if there was anything left of him to kill.

Krafstein The doctor will say no.

Antoinette('s voice) Michael is dead!

Lauengram Now the devil is loose.

Krafstein Or the contrary. No matter.

Lauengram Who do you think might have killed him?

Krafstein It doesn't matter. We'll have no further orders.

Lauengram But the ones we had are still valid.

Krafstein It must be the wild Rupert. He got obsessed with her.

(The scene shows the drawbridge to the right and Rupert, laughing for scorn.)

Rupert The game is over! All can put off their masks! It's me who have killed Michael in a perfectly proper duel which he started himself! Everyone is free and no longer needed! Everyone may do what he wants! Michael's regime is over and kaputt!

Antoinette (enters the drawbridge in white linen and her rich long hair let loose) It was you who drove him mad from megalomania!

Rupert No, he did it all by himself. I only came with suggestions.

Antoinette To liquidate the king?

Rupert He almost begged for that favour himself. He never wanted to be king and got away from his coronation thanks to us!

Antoinette You didn't give Michael any chance!

Rupert On the contrary, if he was given a chance at all, it was by me!

Antoinette (fires her gun yet another time against him, misses, Rupert jumps into the moat) You didn't allow me to save his soul!

Rupert His soul was mortgaged long ago and only black from rot and worthless! You should have come to me instead! Come back later! (*disappears laughing*)
(Fritz and Sapt appear on the drawbridge with some enforcement)

Fritz In the name of the king, free all prisoners!
(The people of Zenda escape, and Antoinette retires not to be seen any more.)

Krafstein Everyone is cooked! What shall we do?

Lauengram Obey orders. It's the last duty of every soldier. Leave it to me. (*The scene shows the lower cell.*)

Rudolph (*chained to the bed, tired*) Something seems to be happening up there.

doctor Don't worry, your majesty. I am here.

Rudolph It sounds like a palace revolution.

Lauengram (*enters with his sword drawn*) It's time. Your moment has come.

doctor Over my dead body! (*will hinder him*)

Lauengram We have our orders. Sorry, doctor, that you've had to nurse a doomed and worthless prisoner in vain!

doctor He is the only rightful king of our country!

Lauengram No, there is another one crowned in his place. Your wasted patient has no function in existence.

doctor A medical doctor's primal duty is to protect every life against death!

Lauengram Sorry, doctor, but this life can't be defended or justified any more.

Rudolph Let me die, doctor. That was the meaning of my coming here. I have nothing else here to do. I don't want you to sacrifice your life for mine.

doctor Sorry, your majesty, but it's my duty as a doctor. (*attacks Lauengram suddenly in an effort to disarm him, almost succeeds, but Lauengram stabs him with his knife. At the same time Fritz and Sapt break in above with a number to Krafstein, who surrenders at once. They continue down, and just as Lauengram is to cut the king's throat, Fritz shoots him down in a smash shot.*)

Sapt (*enthusiastic*) Long live the king!

Rudolph You shouldn't have bothered so much for my sake, gentlemen. (*faints.*)

Fritz hurries to his side and examines him.)

Sapt Is he alive?

Fritz He is very weak but wholly unharmed. We have saved him.

Sapt The state and monarchy are saved by the bravery of one man.

Fritz (*to Rudolph, who awakens*) Your majesty, it is over.

Rudolph (*faintly*) Do I have to be king now?

Fritz You are and always were our only king.
(They take care of him, release him and escort him out from there with great care and respect.)

Rudolph (*stops*) Why is not my cousin here?

Sapt (*exchanging glances with Fritz and the others*) Your majesty, he is waiting ashore.

Rudolph For what? For me?

Fritz For possible escaping villains.

Rudolph I will see him, won't I?

Sapt (*again exchanging a glance with Fritz*) Of course, your majesty.

Rudolph You are keeping something from me.

Sapt Your majesty, a state secret is a state secret. It's best for the country that it never becomes known that you were the prisoner of Zenda.

Rudolph Back to the royal roleplay, then, with nothing but affected hypocrisy on the agenda, which I saw a chance of an escape from and which Michael desired with such fanatical obsession. Was it my cousin who killed him?

Fritz No, it was Rupert von Hentzau.

Rudolph Who is Rupert von Hentzau?

Fritz Michael's most trusted man.

Rudolph There you are. The devil Michael couldn't trust his own chosen devils.

Sapt He dug his own grave, Sire, blinded by his passion.

Rudolph For whom? The baroness de Mauban?

Sapt No, Sire, the princess Flavia.

Rudolph So there's the core of the poodle, impossible love, the desire for the unattainable, the longing for the temptation of a mirage. He knew he could never have her.

Sapt That's why he ventured on your death.

Rudolph Not even my death would have made it possible. She is too good for any of us. I realized that from the start. I never even tried.

Fritz Still your betrothal was proclaimed less than a week ago. You can't evade it any more, your majesty.

Rudolph My cousin? Did he perform that too?

Fritz He if anyone has won the princess Flavia for you.

Rudolph As if I deserved it. Michael gave me what I deserved: a lesson for life as a permanent the morning after.

Sapt He is dead, your majesty.

Rudolph He was still a duke and shall have a ducal burial with all the obligatory honours and ceremonies. Hypocrisy demands it. I understand, my friends. Close up on the state secret. I was never his prisoner.

Sapt You have never been your brother's prisoner, your majesty.

(They continue up and out.)

Act V scene 1. The hunting lodge.

Flavia (in simple dress) Everything happens, and I am to know nothing. The prisoner of Zenda appears to be released, but no one can tell me who the prisoner was. And where is Rudolph? Why doesn't he appear? He is after all the heart of all this matter.

Rupert (appears)

Flavia You look as if you wanted me something. Who are you?

Rupert One who wishes you only well, Rupert of Hentzau, duke Michael's murderer.

Flavia I heard about the duel. Why do you wish me well?

Rupert Because the only one who is worthy of you loves you.

Flavia Is it the king? Do you know the king?

Rupert I know the king, but he is not the man.

Flavia You speak in riddles.

Rupert It's because you know nothing and must know nothing that I am here.

Flavia Enlighten me.

Rupert The question is if I may. What you if anyone should know is being buried as the history of our country's deepest state secret.

Flavia It's no state secret if someone like you knows about it.

Rupert The question is if I should preserve it or spread it. The problem is that if I spread it no one would believe me.

Flavia The truth is almost always unbelievable.

Rudolph (enters) Don't believe a word he says.

Flavia (rushes in his arms) Rudolph! There you are! What has happened?

Rudolph You shouldn't have come here.

Flavia I heard about the crisis at Zenda with some number dead. I simply had to come to your side. Thank goodness you are unharmed! Is the problem over?

Rudolph The problem is over, but it starts now.

Flavia Don't you owe your future queen some demystifying explanation?

Rupert Sing out, Rudolph! She is yours, after all!

Rudolph Shut up!

Rupert You were stupid to keep away from her so long! You should have accepted her while you could! You could have won her and the whole kingdom, and you declined, you silly coward!

Rudolph Shut up!

Flavia What is this?

Rudolph Go beyond hearing, Flavia, and I will settle with this one.

Flavia Another duel? Will you kill him?

Rudolph No, I will only talk sense with him.

Flavia Then I leave you to it.

Rudolph Follow the road down to Zenda. Fritz von Tarlenheim and colonel Sapt will meet you on the way with a good friend.

Flavia As your majesty commands. (*leaves*)

Rupert Well, you poor fool, what's the reason for your mess? Who the devil can get any sense out of your systematic folly?

Rudolph In the moment Mademoiselle de Mauban gave her shout I understood the game was over, that Michael was lost and that the king would be free. From that moment I left the game, for I was not needed any more.

Rupert You were crowned. You didn't only get the princess' hand but even her love, which the king never had but only brushed aside. How could you desist from such an overwhelming momentum and possibility of happiness?

Rudolph Acceptance of it would have been my ruin. How could I live with such a deception? I suffered every moment I had to play someone who wasn't me. I

accepted it since duty demanded it. My cousinship with the king and your state demanded it since I happened to be like him like a mirror. But such a sense of responsibility you will without doubt never be able to understand, master Hentzau?

Rupert It's you who didn't understand a thing. Life is a roleplay from beginning to end. Everything is cheating and fake, falsehood and hypocrisy, covert calculation and vain deception. You got allotted an ideal role to play and did it so well beyond anyone's expectation. Your betrayal is against that part. We could have made it better than Michael and Rudolph together as partners in the development of an ideally run state governed by the foremost enlightened despotism in Europe, but you allowed that opportunity to pass unnoticed.

Rudolph The issue was first of all about my cousin the king. He is now free, and I can go.

Rupert Do you think the princess Flavia will be able to forget you?

Rudolph She is aware of her royal duties and more mature than anybody else.

Rupert That's the tragedy, which you could have saved her from.

Rudolph It's too late now. The king is back.

Rupert A scarecrow. With Michael gone he will be bored to death for the rest of his life, and the princess will never want to see him after you. Why have you insisted on all this mess?

Rudolph I never wanted to come here in the first place. Duty invited me as representative for my country. All I wanted was to at least get away with my honour intact.

Rupert And what's your honour worth? Lost love? Lost happiness? The loss of a throne? The loss of your life's one great love affair? You can't mean that you willingly sacrificed all this for your honour?

Rudolph Yes, that is what I mean.

Rupert Then you are a greater fool than I thought.

Rudolph No, I am only an English gentleman.

Rupert (laughs his sides off) Well, I'll be damned! The most ridiculous clown in history! Who can live and not be an egoist without missing out on his life?

Rudolph Get lost, count Rupert of Hentzau, and never dare to show yourself in Ruritania again. You are already wanted as duke Michael's murderer, and the penalty for murdering a duke can only be death. I give you the two hours you need to get across the border. That's my last act and command as a king.

Rupert (who chivalrously removes his hat in a sweeping bow fit for a perfect courtier) It pleases your grace to humour me. *(leaves at once)*

Rudolph He has at least a baroness de Mauban to resume contact with, while I have no one. Farewell, Ruritania. I have fulfilled my duties and can leave without notice.

(salutes the horizon with the mountains and forest and leaves forthwith.)

(After some moments enter Fritz and Sapt.)

Fritz He is gone!

Sapt He is going too far in making it easy for us.

Fritz You mean...

Sapt I know him by now. He has left.

Fritz Without thanks and rewards just not to complicate the state of things, or to avoid seeing the princess face to face and be obliged to confess the charade?

Sapt Maybe both. Perhaps even to spare the princess. Now she never needs to know.

Fritz Don't you think she will see us through?

Sapt That we shall see. Here she is now.

Flavia (entering) Here you are, gentlemen. I must demand an explanation. What have you done with him?

Sapt (knocks his heels) We regret that he has gone through a great deal during the crisis at Zenda, but the skirmishes are over now, and he will no doubt be quickly restored.

Flavia But it's not the same man, and still he isn't wounded.

Sapt Don't you recognize him?

Flavia Of course I recognize him, we have after all grown up together, but still I miss the most important about him. He hasn't started drinking again, has he?

Sapt You'll have to ask him.

Fritz Here he is now.

(The others enter with the brushed up Rudolph, still marked by some hardship.)

Welcome home to your princess, your majesty.

Rudolph (looks around, seems not even to notice Flavia) Here it all began, the night of drinking, the party before the coronation, the black wine of Michael's...

Flavia You haven't answered my question, Rudolph.

Rudolph What question?

Flavia What prisoner was all this fuss about? Can anyone at last tell me what this Zenda business really was all about?

Rudolph Ask the gentlemen there. I know nothing.

Flavia Weren't you leading the operation?

Rudolph On the contrary. I was almost made a casualty of it.

Flavia (to Fritz and Sapt) Well?

Fritz If the King knows nothing we know even less.

Sapt In brief, princess, a prisoner was illegally interred by duke Michael in his castle at Zenda. His mistress the baroness Antoinette de Mauban tried to reason with him to have the prisoner released but without results. Then duke Michael's lifeguard Rupert von Hentzau took the matter in his own hands and provoked a duel by appearing as the duke's rival in the grace of the baroness. In the duel the duke was killed, and we could release the prisoner.

Flavia And who was the prisoner?

Fritz A foreign diplomat who came here to represent his country at the coronation who arrived in the company of the baroness.

Flavia So Michael imprisoned him from pure jealousy?

Fritz And we desired least of all a diplomatic crisis with the country in question, which is a world power.

Sapt The diplomat has assured us that his imprisonment will not result in any controversy, as long as his incognito is not revealed.

Flavia I don't believe in your cloak and dagger stories for a moment. Rudolph, do you have nothing to say? What happened after I left you here and you obviously made shortcuts to circumvent me to unite with your friends here and prepare them for what they should tell me to avoid being honest yourself? You are like another man, as if you had gone through some brainwash only during this hour or as if you had had a sharp blow to your head.

Rudolph (after some thought) I can only regret that I could not thank the diplomat for his discretion.

Flavia Then I believe even less in you. Rudolph, I don't know what has happened, but you have taken on again that mask you wore before you were crowned. In between I learned to know you and to love you like a human being. Have you buried that fresh soul alive under the falseness of diplomatic hypocrisy?

Rudolph It's worse than that, my dear. Can it really surprise you that I challenge that falseness by drinking?

Flavia (stamps her foot in anger and leaves without another word.)

Rudolph Poor princess.

Sapt Your engagement is proclaimed. You must now marry as soon as possible.

Rudolph That's why I say poor princess, for she can never love me as she loved that man who was me while I was prisoner. And now she'll never know who that ideal king was. It feels, gentlemen, as if we all had missed our chance to escape our destiny.

Sapt Your majesty, our first duty in life as servants of the state and monarchy is to always keep up appearances.

Rudolph It's more important to stick to style. My cousin did that all too well and showed how to do it. I wish I could learn more of him.

Sapt He was too similar to you to ever be able to come back.

Rudolph I know. And I was too much unlike him to ever be that ideal king he proved himself to be without being born to it, while I as king remain incompetent.

Fritz We will always stand by you, your majesty.

Rudolph Yes, like crutches and stilts. I envy my cousin that he didn't let me die. Then he would have become as bad a king as I.

Sapt You have everything to live for.

Rudolph Still, death is the supreme liberation.

the marshal (enters) Your royal majesty, the princess and your duties are waiting.

Rudolph (resigns) We are ready. Come, colonel Sapt and captain Fritz. We have a state secret to bury.

(exeunt)

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