

THE STAR, ST. JOHN, N. B. SATURDAY, AUGUST 24, 1907.

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA

A Novel, by Anthony Hope.

Author of "Prisoner of Zenda" "The Intrusions of Peggy," Etc.

(Continued.)

Ingenuous Colonel Staffin.

XVII.

After his happy holiday the Prince

awoke well, and rose in a cheerful mood

still joyful of heart. He anticipated

that the day would bring him a summons

from his father; he had little doubt

that in the course of a personal

interview he would persuade the King

to agree to a postponement of his

journey. Of course he meant to say

nothing—by a reservation necessary

and not inexcusable. It was impossible

not to take into account the knowledge

he had acquired of the state of the

King's health. The result of that con-

dition was that his provision must, in

all likelihood, be for months only, and

not for years. The task for the months

was to avoid disturbing the King's

mind, so long as this course was con-

sistent with the maintenance of his

own favorable position. It must be re-

membered that no man in the kingdom

built more on this latter object than

the King himself, no man was less a

partisan of Countess Ellenburg and

of young Alexis than the husband of one

and the father of the other. The royal

line—the line which boasted Bour-

bon blood—was for the King the only

line of Stenforstovitch.

Of the attack prepared against him

the Prince knew nothing—not even

of the King's mind having been turned

against the Baroness Dobrava, whom

so short a time ago he had delighted

to honor; nothing, of course, of the

Prince's audacious coup, nor of the

plan which Stenforstovitch and the

Colonel had made, and of which

Stenforstovitch was to be the

instrument. Of all the salient

features of the situation, then, he was

ignorant, and his ignorance was

shared by those about his person. On

the other hand, Stenforstovitch had

on every thread save one—the

Zerkovitch thread, if it may so

be called. That was important, but

its importance might be nullified

if Stenforstovitch made good speed.

On the whole, the odds were much

in favor of the coterie. If by any

means they could prevent the King from

going alive and free to Slavna, the

game would be theirs. If he did come

and free, their game would be

be up. His presence would mean a

hard fight—or a surrender; and Slavna

had no stomach for such a fight.

Though it would be a glorious

hard fight, to the King, whether as

Prince or King, without the necessity

of an ordeal so severe.

As a preliminary to the summons

he anticipated, and to a possible stay

of some days with his father at Slavna,

the Prince had details of the

business to transact with

Lokovitch, the captain of his

battery in Volenski. He was early

up, and found Max von Holbrandt

back; Stenforstovitch, Max von

Holbrandt, and the Colonel were

in the next day rode with him as far

as the gates of the city; he

him and turned down to the plain, to

go to a center on the banks of Lake

Talt. The three were to meet again

for the mid-day. Stenforstovitch

had been ailing, and

kept her bed in the morning. The

Prince's mounted guard

and his friends rode behind

him, and he rode in the

Castle there were left only Marie

Zerkovitch and the servants.

The Prince did not anticipate that

any message would come from the

Palace before noon at the earliest.

Following a course of

usual peaceful and simple course at

the Castle; old Vassip, his wife, and

the maids did their cleaning; Peter

the maids did to his master's clothes,

and then, to save his father labor, he

gan to sluice the wooden causeway

the stationmen groomed their horses—

they had been warned that the Prince

might want another mount later in

the day. Marie Zerkovitch lay in her

bed, sleeping soundly after a restless

night. There seemed no hint of trouble

in the air. It must be confessed that

now it looked as though Slavna

would be caught napping.

It was Peter Vassip, busy on the

causeway, who saw Stenforstovitch

coming. He rested and leaned on his

map to watch the head which rose over

the hill, the body that followed, the

horses lumbering along in a slow

sunmy, unwilling gallop. The man

was using stick and spur—came

ag merrily, and a groom came across

from the stable and joined him.

"He's got no call to treat the horse

like that, whoever he is," the groom

observed.

"Not unless he's on urgent busi-

ness," said Peter, twirling the water

from his mop.

Zerkovitch was up to them; he leaped

from his horse. "I must see the

Prince," he cried, "and immediately."

"The Prince is at Volenski, sir; he

rode over to see Captain Lokovitch."

"When will he be back?"

"We don't expect him till twelve

o'clock."

Zerkovitch snatched out his watch.

"There's nobody here but Madame

Zerkovitch, sir; she's still in bed, not

very well, sir."

"Twelve o'clock!" muttered Zerkovitch,

paying no heed to the news about

his wife.

"The baroness and Baron von Hol-

brandt are out riding."

"Can you give me a fresh horse?"

Vassip.

"Oh, yes, sir. He signed to the

groom. "And hurry up," he added.

"There must be time," he said. "They

can't be here at noon for an hour

and a half."

Peter Vassip did not understand him,

but neither did he venture to ask

questions.

"Your horse'll be here in a minute,

sir. I think you'll find the Prince

in his office over the city gate. He

went to do business, not to drill his

morning."

Zerkovitch looked at him for a mo-

ment, wondering, perhaps, whether he

would be wise to tell news. But

what was the use of telling Peter Vas-

sip? Or his own wife? What could

she do? It was for the Prince to say

who should be told. The one thing

was to find the Prince. There was

time—at the very least an hour and a

half.

The groom brought the fresh horse,

and Zerkovitch began to mount.

"A glass of wine, sir?" Peter Vassip

suggested. He had marked Zerkovitch's

pale face and strained air; he

had wondered to see his clothes sprink-

led with white-brown flies—traces of

the sack under whose cover he had slid

out of Slavna.

"No," answered. "But a bumper, Peter,

when I've found the Prince!" He set

up his horse and was off at a gal-

lop for Volenski; the road, though high

on the hills, was nearly level now.

Peter scratched his head as he re-

turned to his mop.

He was just finishing his task, some

twenty minutes later, when he heard

Sophy's laugh. She and Holbrandt

came from a lane which led up to the

lake and joined the main road. Peter

ran and took their horses, and they

mounted the causeway in a

beautiful uniform; her cheeks were

pale, but the star gleamed. The world

seemed good to her that morning.

"And that is, roughly, the story of

my life," she said with a laugh, as

she reached the top of the balustrade

which ran up the side of it.

"A very interesting one—even very

amusing," he said, returning her

laugh. "But much more remains to

be written. I don't doubt, Sophy,

"Something, perhaps," said Sophy.

"A good deal, I imagine."

She shot a mischievous glance at him;

she knew that he was trying to lure

her to the lake, and she knew that

"Who can tell? It all seems like a

dream sometimes, and dreams end

as they please. You know, you know

it. I'm a dream, you make an excel-

lent dream-lady, Baroness."

Peter Vassip put his arm and pall

ied her by the stable and came up and

stood beside them.

"Did the mare carry you well today,

sir?" he asked.

"Admirably, Peter. We had a

splendid ride—at least I thought so."

He hoped the Baroness

Sophy threw out her arms as though

to embrace the gracious world. "I

thought it beautiful. I think you

thing beautiful today. I think you

beautiful, Baron von Holbrandt—and

Peter is beautiful—and so is your

mother, and so is your father. Peter

is beautiful myself. Yes, in spite of

this horrible mark on my cheek!"

"I hear something," said Peter

Vassip.

"Just this morning—I agree with you,"

Vassip. "Not even the mark

shall change my mind! Come, you love

the mark—the Red Star—don't you?"

"Well, yes," said Sophy, with a little

confidential nod and smile.

"I hear something," said Peter

Vassip, with his hand to his ear.

Sophy turned to him, smiling. "What

do you hear, Peter?"

"I gave a sudden start of recollec-

tion. Ah, has that anything to do

with Monsieur Zerkovitch?"

"Monsieur Zerkovitch?" broke from

them both.

"He's been here; he's ridden at a

gallop on to Volenski—to find the

Prince. He added briefly all three

words to add his hand at his ear all the

time.

"Hum! That looks like news," said

Vassip. "What can it be?"

"He didn't stop even to tell Marie!

It must be urgent."

"Then he's in one another's faces."

"Can there be—be anything wrong in

Slavna?"

"You mean—the troops?"

"I had thought of that."

"I can think of nothing but that. It

was anything from the Palace,

it would come by a royal courier sooner

than by any other hand."

"I can hear plainly now," said Peter

Vassip. "Listen."

They obeyed him, but their ears

were not so well trained. A dull, in-

definite sound was all they could dis-

tinguish.

"Horses—a number of them. Mount-

ed men it must be—the hoots are so

regular. Cavalry!"

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