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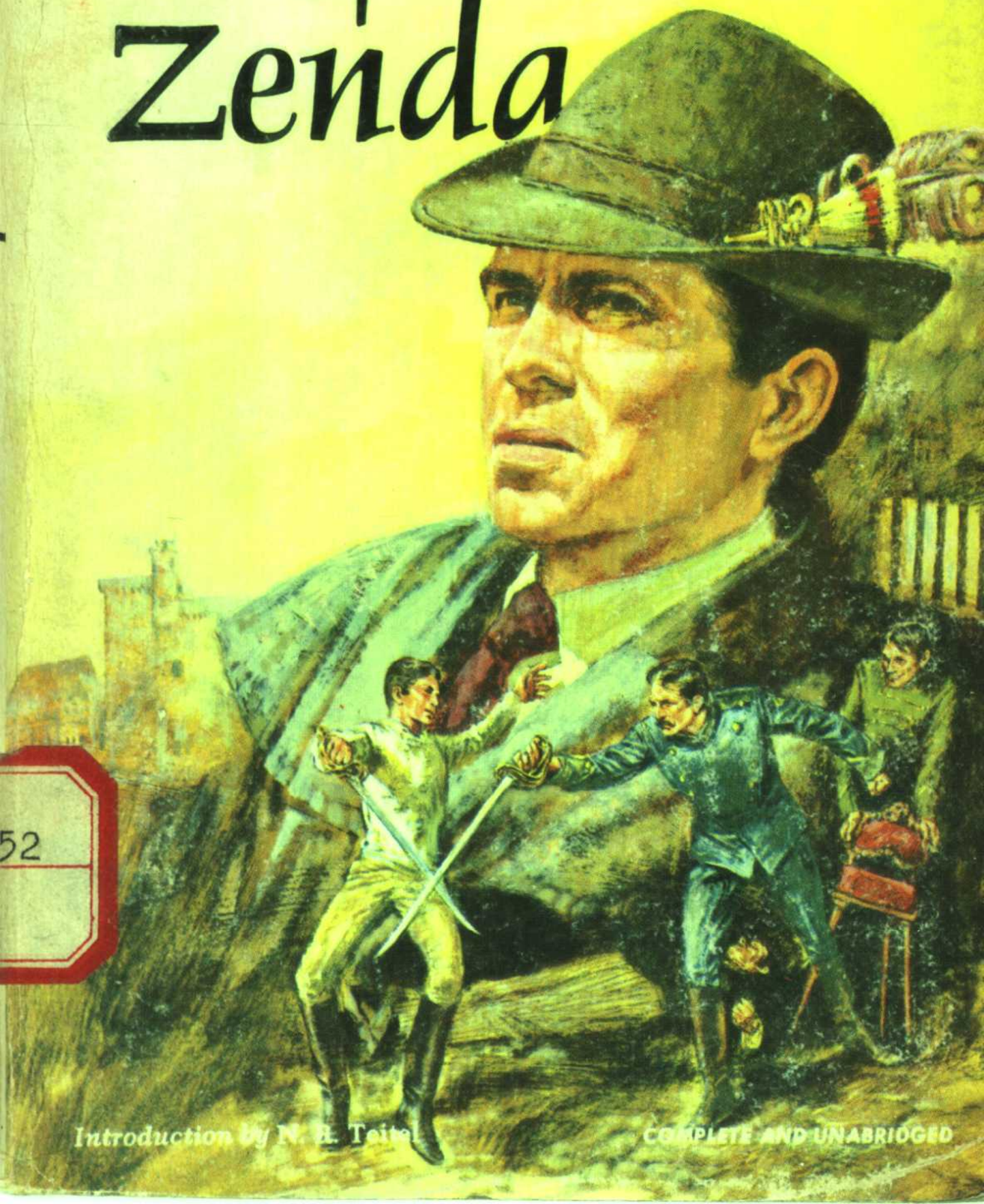
The Prisoner of Zenda

ANTHONY HOPE



Introduction by N. [illegible] Teitel

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA

ANTHONY HOPE

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Introduction

Today, among some fashionable literary critics, the novel is considered quite dead. Perhaps. But the corpse still breathes, in spite of official pronunciamentos. The problem is largely one of definition. What certain critics willfully forget is that the novel, as a literary form, is pre-eminently plastic. It is at once susceptible to every possible thesis and anti-thesis, fully capable of accommodating such antithetical talents as Theodore Dreiser and Henry James. It steadfastly refuses to be rigidly typed and computerized. It insists that the writer who would flesh its protean form have something to say—and say it well. A simple, even humble request, but one, unfortunately, that is too often ignored.

Anthony Hope Hawkins had something to say. And he said it so superlatively well that four generations of readers have devoured his masterpiece, *The Prisoner of Zenda.* The silver screen has charged through four editions of it, and the end is not yet in sight. Hope was a lawyer by trade, and a Walter Mitty at heart. Not for him the demonic imprecations of a Melville, or the soul-searching of a Dos-

toyevsky. He had more mundane things in mind. He wanted to escape the law courts of England via an imaginary journey into a mythical kingdom all his own—a kingdom wherein knighthood was still in flower—he being the flower —and virtue, abetted by invincible swordplay, was its own reward. Miniver Cheevy, alias Anthony Hope, graduate of Balliol College, Oxford, frustrated actor and politician, discovered and peopled the tiny kingdom of Ruritania—a country destined to survive at least as long as Faulkner's vast continent of Yoknapatawpha.

By what alchemy was this accomplished? *The Prisoner of Zenda,* written in 1893, when Hope was a mere thirty, is hardly a work of *belles-lettres.* Moreover, its characters are one-dimensional, and its ethical, moral, and social implications are practically nonexistent. As a matter of fact, the political implications are wholly regressive: the poverty-stricken masses support the arch villain, Black Michael. The answer lies in the undisputed fact that this novel—like other works of art—creates a world entirely its own, a world bounded by its own unique geography, and possessing a reality more real than truth. We enter immediately into Hope's kingdom with "a willing suspension of disbelief," and at the end, when the last word of the drama has been devoured, we are most reluctant to emerge into our complex, fragmented world.

Any novel must be judged by its author's intention. What did the writer seek to do? What private vision of reality did he invite us to share with him? These are basic criteria for judgment. Yet, very often, some critics inveigh against an obvious realistic novel because it is not a study in unconscious motivations. Hope's purpose in writing *The Prisoner of Zenda* is crystal clear from the opening sentence. He wanted to construct an escape novel, a novel of pure entertainment designed for armchair reading, a novel calculated to absorb and excite even the dullest imagination. It is within this context that he must be judged. In the process, he forged no new technique—other novelists had

been there before him: Dumas, Stevenson, Twain—but by a skillful and strategic manipulation of old devices, he succeeded magnificently in restoring their original sheen and glamour.

First and foremost, *The Prisoner of Zenda* is a driving, romantic narrative. Hope has a story to tell, and he tells it with a spontaneous simplicity that conceals a highly conscious art. The tale speeds like an arrow, never deviating from its appointed course. Plot and counterplot fit snugly. There are no loopholes, only a rising tide of intrigue and excitement that never abates. We overlook seeming absurdities. The fact that a Victorian gentleman rides a train into a feudal court—eventually he does exchange the train for a snorting charger—is of little consequence. Only a churl would ask rational questions. To outline or summarize the plot would be a heinous crime. It would rob the reader of the twin pleasures of anticipation and discovery. Let us rather glance at the *dramatis personae.*

Rudolf Rassendyll is the super-hero, the dashing, invincible Englishman of nine-and-twenty—"with a mass of dark, red hair and a somewhat unusually long, sharp, and straight nose"—who, impersonating the King of Ruritania at a most critical juncture in that nation's history, embarks upon a series of hair-raising adventures the like of which have never before been seen on land, sea, or in the air. Undoubtedly, Rudolf is the prototype of all legendary knights since the great King Arthur. But he is neither myth nor frozen symbol. He springs magically into life the moment we are introduced to him: a man of flesh and blood who is all too human. This is Hope's crowning achievement. We *care* about Rudolf. He escapes from the stock mold he has been cast in. He bleeds, loves, and despairs. He almost becomes one of us. For secretly, in our heart of hearts, we know that under similar circumstances we, too, could match the daring and fiery courage of red Rudolf. Possibly outstrip and even surpass him! We can dream, can't we?

A romantic novel of high intrigue is inconceivable with-

out a heroine. She must be beautiful, virtuous, kind, and self-sacrificing. In short, she must be a Princess Flavia. Here, too, however, Hope has endowed his pale and lovely lady with some unusual qualities. Princess Flavia is no mere languishing flower waiting to be rescued by a knight on horseback. Her passion equals that of the redoubtable Rudolf. Amidst the usual swoons and sighs, a real woman emerges, a woman who sacrifices love for duty without straining our credulity. Very much alive, she moves through the fevered pages with a consummate charm and dignity that enlists our wholehearted sympathy and admiration. Hope nearly always manages to avoid sentimentality. And in creating Flavia and Rudolf, he has succeeded in giving us a pair of ill-starred lovers who remind us, not unfavorably, of Romeo and Juliet.

Black Michael is the complete villain. Tough, shrewd, and utterly ruthless, he is the most formidable of antagonists. A master strategist, cunning as well as resolute, he epitomizes all the fairy-tale monsters rolled into one. Yet even this notable Frankenstein is given certain human attributes. He *is* fighting for a kingdom. And if his ambition seems a bit overweening, what of Macbeth's? In any case, the menacing figure of Black Michael casts an ominous, thrilling shadow over *The Prisoner of Zenda, and* is absolutely necessary to the moated landscape.

If John Milton could more than admire the Devil, why deny the same privilege to Anthony Hope? True, Hope's devil is more corporeal. As a matter of fact, he is chief henchman to Black Michael. But in terms of magnificent swagger and fascination he is more than equal to any devil in any clime or planet. For in Rupert Hentzau our author has created the very paragon of all devils.

Rupert is young, handsome, and reckless. He is a great lover, a great swordsman, and not so great a villain. His charm is legendary—even Rudolf is not unaffected by it—and his manly beauty dazzles. What if he does waylay virtuous maidens, do battle with noble Rudolf—the fight ends

in a draw—and kill his own master! He is merely a wondrous gallant of inexhaustible energy and spirit. Boys must be boys. He cannot be killed off, no matter what the plot demands. He *must* live to see another day. For Rupert is larger than life, representing the daydream of every male titmouse the world over.

A word about the setting and atmosphere. It is either Stygian dark or bathed in moonlight. The clatter of swords echo nakedly through primeval woods, a dead body thuds and leaves no trace, unspeakable groans issue from recesses deep, messengers exhaust prancing steeds, bells toll a bogus coronation, crowds stamp and cheer, and we travel back and forth posthaste from the fortress of Zenda to the gilded city of Strelsau.

Hope's style is wholly apropos. It is slightly pompous, slightly anachronistic, and wholly delightful. Although the story is told by the ubiquitous Rudolf, Hope manages on occasion to speak his own mind—a mind and a heart yearning for the fabled glories of a past that never was.

"I wonder when in the world you're going to do anything, Rudolf?" said my brother's wife.

The opening sentence of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Enjoy the rest yourself. In a dark corner, or any secluded nook.

NATHAN R. TEITEL
New York University

Chapter 1 — *The Rassendylls — with a Word on the Elphbergs*

I wonder when in the world you're going to do anything, Rudolf?" said my brother's wife.

"My dear Rose," I answered, laying down my egg-spoon, "why in the world should I do anything? My position is a comfortable one. I have an income nearly sufficient for my wants (no one's income is ever quite sufficient, you know). I enjoy an enviable social position: I am brother to Lord Burlesdon, and brother-in-law to that most charming lady his countess. Behold, it is enough!"

"You are nine-and-twenty," she observed, "and you've done nothing but——"

"Knock about? It is true. Our family doesn't need to do things."

This remark of mine rather annoyed Rose, for everybody knows (and therefore there can be no harm in referring to the fact) that, pretty and accomplished as she herself is, her family is hardly of the same standing as the Rassendylls. Besides her attractions, she possessed a large fortune, and my brother Robert was wise enough not to mind about her ancestry. Ancestry is, in fact, a matter concerning which the next observation of Rose's has some truth.

"Good families are generally worse than any others," she said.

Upon this I stroked my hair: I knew quite well what she meant.

"I'm so glad Robert's is black!" she cried.

At this moment Robert (who rises at seven and works before breakfast) came in. He glanced at his wife: her cheek was slightly flushed; he patted it caressingly.

"What's the matter, my dear?" he asked.

"She objects to my doing nothing and having red hair," said I in an injured tone.

"Oh! of course he can't help his hair," admitted Rose.

"It generally crops out once in a generation," said my brother. "So does the nose. Rudolf has got them both."

"I wish they didn't crop out," said Rose, still flushed.

"I rather like them myself," said I, and, rising, I bowed to the portrait of Countess Amelia.

My brother's wife uttered an exclamation of impatience.

"I wish you'd take that picture away, Robert," said she.

"My dear!" he cried.

"Good Heavens!" I added.

"Then it might be forgotten," she continued.

"Hardly—with Rudolf about," said Robert, shaking his head.

"Why should it be forgotten?" I asked.

"Rudolf!" exclaimed my brother's wife, blushing very prettily.

I laughed, and went on with my egg. At least I had shelved the question of what (if anything) I ought to do. And by way of closing the discussion—and also, I must admit, of exasperating my strict little sister-in-law a trifle more—I observed:

"I rather like being an Elphberg myself."

When I read a story I skip the explanations; yet the moment I begin to write one I find that I must have an explanation. For it is manifest that I must explain why my sister-in-law was vexed with my nose and hair, and why I venture to call myself an Elphberg. For, eminent as, I must protest, the Rassendylls have been for many generations, yet participation in their blood of course does not, at first sight, justify the boast of a connection with the grander stock of the Elphbergs or a claim to be one of that royal house. For what relationship is there between Ruritania and Burlesdon, between the palace at Strelsau or the castle of Zenda and No. 305 Park Lane, W.?

Well, then—and I must premise that I am going, perforce, to rake up the very scandal which my dear Lady Burlesdon wishes forgotten—in the year 1733, George II, sitting then on the throne, peace reigning for the moment, and the king and the Prince of Wales being not yet at loggerheads, there came on a visit to the English court a certain prince, who was afterward known to history as Rudolf the Third of Ruritania. The prince was a tall, handsome young fellow, marked (maybe marred, it is not for me to

say) by a somewhat unusually long, sharp, and straight nose, and a mass of dark-red hair—in fact, the nose and the hair which have stamped the Elphbergs time out of mind. He stayed some months in England, where he was most courteously received; yet in the end he left rather under a cloud. For he fought a duel (it was considered highly well bred of him to waive all question of his rank) with a nobleman, well known in the society of the day, not only for his own merits, but as the husband of a very beautiful wife. In that duel Prince Rudolf received a severe wound, and recovering therefrom, was adroitly smuggled off by the Ruritanian ambassador, who had found him a pretty handful. The nobleman was not wounded in the duel; but the morning being raw and damp on the occasion of the meeting, he contracted a severe chill, and failing to throw it off, he died some six months after the departure of Prince Rudolf, without having found leisure to adjust his relations with his wife—who after another two months bore an heir to the title and estates of the family of Burlesdon. This lady was the Countess Amelia, whose picture my sister-in-law wished to remove from the drawing room in Park Lane; and her husband was James, fifth Earl of Burlesdon and twenty-second Baron Rassendyll, both in the peerages of England, and a Knight of the Garter. As for Rudolf, he went back to Ruritania, married a wife, and ascended the throne, whereon his progeny in the direct line have sat from then till this very hour—with one short interval. And, finally, if you walk through the picture galleries at Burlesdon, among the fifty portraits or so of the last century and a half you will find five or six, including that of the sixth earl, distinguished by long, sharp, straight noses and a quantity of dark-red hair; these five or six have also blue eyes, whereas among the Rassendylls dark eyes are the commoner.

That is the explanation, and I am glad to have finished it: the blemishes on honorable lineage are a delicate subject, and certainly this heredity we hear so much about is the finest scandalmonger in the world; it laughs at discretion, and writes strange entries between the lines of the "Peerages."

It will be observed that my sister-in-law, with a want of logic that must have been peculiar to herself (since we are no longer allowed to lay it to the charge of her sex), treated my complexion almost as an offense for which I was responsible, hastening to assume from that external sign inward qualities of which I protest my entire innocence; and this unjust inference she sought to buttress by pointing to the uselessness of the life I had led. Well, be that as it may, I had picked up a good deal of pleasure and a good deal of knowledge. I had been to a German school and a German university, and spoke German as readily and perfectly as English; I was thoroughly at home in French; I had a smattering of Italian, and enough Spanish to swear by. I was, I believe, a strong, though hardly a fine, swordsman and a good shot. I could ride anything that had a back to sit on; and my head was as cool a one as you could find, for all its flaming cover. If you say that I ought to have spent my time in useful labor I am out of court and have nothing to say, save that my parents had no business to leave me two thousand pounds a year and a roving disposition.

"The difference between you and Robert," said my sister-in-law, who often (bless her!) speaks on a platform, and oftener still as if she were on one, "is that he recognizes the duties of his position, and you only see the opportunities of yours."

"To a man of spirit, my dear Rose," I answered, "opportunities are duties."

"Nonsense!" said she, tossing her head; and after a moment she went on: "Now here's Sir Jacob Borrodaile offering you exactly what you might be equal to."

"A thousand thanks!" I murmured.

"He's to have an embassy in six months, and Robert says he is sure that he'll take you as an *attaché*. Do take it, Rudolf—to please me."

Now when my sister-in-law puts the matter in that way, wrinkling her pretty brows, twisting her little hands, and growing wistful in the eyes, all on account of an idle scamp like myself, for whom she has no natural responsibility, I

am visited with compunction. Moreover, I thought it possible that I could pass the time in the position suggested with some tolerable amusement. Therefore I said:

"My dear sister, if in six months' time no unforeseen obstacle has arisen, and Sir Jacob invites me, hang me if I don't go with Sir Jacob!"

"O Rudolf, how good of you! I am glad!"

"Where's he going to?"

"He doesn't know yet; but it's sure to be a good embassy."

"Madame," said I, "for your sake I'll go if it's no more than a beggarly legation. When I do a thing I don't do it by halves."

My promise, then, was given; but six months are six months, and seem an eternity, and inasmuch as they stretched between me and my prospective industry (I suppose *attachés* are industrious; but I know not, for I never became *attaché* to Sir Jacob or to anybody else) I cast about for some desirable mode of spending them. And it occurred to me suddenly that I would visit Ruritania. It may seem strange that I had never visited that country yet; but my father (in spite of a sneaking fondness for the Elphbergs, which led him to give me, his second son, the famous Elphberg name of Rudolf) had always been averse to my going, and since his death my brother, prompted by Rose, had accepted the family tradition which taught that a wide berth was to be given to that country. But the moment Ruritania had come into my head I was eaten up with curiosity to see it. After all, red hair and long noses are not confined to the House of Elphberg, and the old story seemed a preposterously insufficient reason for debarring myself from acquaintance with a highly interesting and important kingdom, one which had played no small part in European history, and might do the like again under the sway of a young and vigorous ruler, such as the new king was rumored to be. My determination was clinched by reading in *The Times* that Rudolf the Fifth was to be crowned at Strelsau in the course of the next three weeks, and that great magnificence was to mark the

occasion. At once I made up my mind to be present, and began my preparations. But inasmuch as it has never been my practice to furnish my relatives with an itinerary of my journeys, and in this case I anticipated opposition to my wishes, I gave out that I was going for a ramble in the Tyrol—an old haunt of mine—and propitiated Rose's wrath by declaring that I intended to study the political and social problems of the interesting community which dwells in that neighborhood.

"Perhaps," I hinted darkly, "there may be an outcome of the expedition."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well," said I carelessly, "there seems a gap that might be filled by an exhaustive work on——"

"Oh! will you write a book?" she cried, clapping her hands. "That would be splendid, wouldn't it, Robert?"

"It's the best of introductions to political life nowadays," observed my brother, who has, by the way, introduced himself in this manner several times over. Burlesdon on "Ancient Theories and Modern Facts" and "The Ultimate Outcome," by a Political Student, are both work of recognized eminence.

"I believe you are right, Bob, my boy," said I.

"Now promise you'll do it," said Rose earnestly.

"No, I won't promise; but if I find enough material I will."

"That's fair enough," said Robert.

"Oh! material doesn't matter," she said, pouting.

But this time she could get no more than a qualified promise out of me. To tell the truth, I would have wagered a handsome sum that the story of my expedition that summer would stain no paper and spoil not a single pen. And that shows how little we know what the future holds; for here I am, fulfilling my qualified promise, and writing, as I never thought to write, a book—though it will hardly serve as an introduction to political life, and has not a jot to do with the Tyrol.

Neither would it, I fear, please Lady Burlesdon, if I were to submit it to her critical eye—a step which I have no intention of taking.