

the “spider has [her] in its clutches” (168), but in reality its legs are directed outward. The vermilion of the spider’s underside is visible, a conspicuous symbol of a voracious and predatory energy.

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Connell’s THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME

First published in 1924, Richard Connell’s “The Most Dangerous Game” is perhaps the finest example to date of the “hunter-becomes-the-hunted” tale. Connell, a combat veteran of World War I, began with a somewhat hackneyed plot line, but via excellent description, taut pacing, and crisp dialogue, the young writer produced a surprisingly enduring action-adventure story. Winner of the O’Henry Memorial Award the year it was published, the tale remains a staple of anthologies of American short fiction. Although commonly dismissed as little more than an exciting, testosterone-pumping duel between two well-matched professional hunters, there is a deeper political and social meaning to this widely read but rarely critiqued story. Beneath the thrill of the chase, the two main characters—Sanger Rainsford, a young American traveler, and General Zaroff, an old Russian aristocrat—represent competing views of the world that were at strong odds in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Rainsford, the youthful protagonist, is a masculine, elegant, swashbuckling hero. His surname certainly has a sophisticated resonance, like Rockefeller or Roosevelt, but his given name, “Sanger,” carries a wonderful ambiguity: First, it can be read as a play on the Spanish word *sangre*, which means “blood”; second, and even more important symbolically, “Sanger” is almost certainly a play on the adjective “sanguine,” which means optimistic, positive, hopeful,

uncynical. In short, Rainsford represents the great American democratic ideal—a rugged individualist, square-jawed, determined, and capable of taking care of himself in any situation. He is a throwback to the Daniel Boone–Kit Carson American archetype, reared in the free and bracing air of western democracy. Bold-thinking, creative, resourceful, adaptable, he answers to no one and considers no man his superior. The young American hunter is tough, aggressive, and unafraid to kill, but there is never any doubt that a moral compass guides him on his path. His personal morality—his soldierly code of honor—is never breached.

Rainsford is an open and gregarious fellow, a friendly American “democrat with a small d.” In conversation, he shows an optimistic and egalitarian nature. His easy informality and charming humility contrast sharply with the demeanor of his Old World host—the ruthless, cynical, and pessimistic General Zaroff.

Having fought on the monarchist side during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Zaroff is a displaced member of the old Russian aristocracy who has adamantly refused to accept the changing world around him. Living in isolated and sumptuous elegance on a private Caribbean island, enjoying the fruits of his inherited and thus unearned wealth, he is the very antithesis of Rainsford in almost every way. For instance, the General is unapologetically elitist; he lives in a palatial stone chateau and has a nineteenth-century, colonial worldview. He believes in a rigid class system—only those born to authority are entitled to wield it. There is no place in his *Weltanschauung* for social advancement or equality. Whereas Rainsford is a rugged, self-sufficient individualist, a man who designs his own destiny and then pursues it, the General comes from a culture that was—until the Bolsheviks triumphed—rich with group privilege and generational entitlement. The aging, white-haired Zaroff was born to great wealth, power, opportunity, and influence. Though superbly educated and multilingual, the general is not creative; he lives by rote and habit. Further, he is dependent—on his servant, his inheritance, and his dying way of life. While his American guest looks forward with hope to a brighter postwar future, the displaced Russian royalist looks back to a glorious past that has been obliterated by the social and political upheavals of the early twentieth century.

Unlike the outgoing Rainsford, Zaroff uses no first name; he is not a friendly Boris or an affable Igor. Like all proper Old World aristocrats, he uses a title, “the general,” and his interaction with Rainsford is invariably aloof and condescending. As the pampered, borscht-eating, port-sipping antagonist of the tale, Zaroff is a Jamesian-style darker image of what Rainsford could have become had he not been raised in democratic fashion. Although the aging general is certainly not effete, weak, or cowardly, he is nonetheless a fop and a clothes horse, given to wearing London-tailored tweeds and starched evening

clothes in the middle of the steaming Caribbean. Whereas Rainsford enjoys plain brier pipes and American tobacco, the general—decadent to the core—smokes perfumed European cigarettes in fancy holders that fill the air with the sweet smell of incense.

Both the protagonist and the antagonist have close companions during portions of the story. Rainsford's friend is Whitney, a fellow American adventurer and big-game hunter. At the beginning of the tale, when the two men talk of hunting, morality, and compassion, they converse as equals. Their dialogue is informal, untitled, familiar, and respectful. General Zaroff has a close companion as well; however, in marked contrast, his companion is a servant, the hulking, brutal, and obedient Ivan. Of great symbolic importance, Ivan is a deaf mute. He cannot carry on a conversation with the general, and even if he were able, his station in life as servant would prevent it. His life is limited to servitude. Toward the end of the story, when Ivan is killed by a clever booby trap rigged by Rainsford, the general does not mourn for a dead friend; he merely regrets the loss of a skilled body servant and worries over how to replace him.

Although still enjoyed annually by readers as a thrilling example of the ironic "hunter-becomes-the-hunted" narrative (then quickly dismissed as little more than a prose comic book adventure), "The Most Dangerous Game" deserves a deeper analysis and a better reputation. This brief tale subtly addresses—via the contrasting personalities of two violent men—some of the most crucial political and social issues of the tumultuous and uncertain 1920s. In Sanger Rainsford—the rugged American individualist—democratic optimism and Emersonian self-reliance are brought to the fore to vanquish the embodiment of an outdated, intractable, and decadent colonial system that has outlived its time yet still clings stubbornly to the remnants of old grandeur and martial glory, however tattered or decrepit. In essence, a tidal wave of historical change is sweeping aside General Zaroff's Old World order, while Sanger Rainsford rides bravely along on the progressive crest of the New.

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