

Xavier Mauméjean: *The Most Exciting Game*

New York, 1922

*No animal had a chance with me any more.
That is no boast; it is a mathematical certainty.*
Count Zaroff.

A slaughter. There was no other suitable word that one might have used to describe the horror of what had taken place aboard the S.S. *Karaboudjan*. There were torn limbs, bloodied chests clawed open, their living hearts ripped out with undreamed of savagery. The entire crew had been hunted down and slain, from the lowest holds of the ship to her top mast. There was only one survivor: the First Mate, a tall, black-bearded man, dressed in a blue turtle neck sweater, who kept muttering endlessly “Blistering Barnacles!” with his eyes wide open, but entirely unfocused, seeing no one or nothing.

“You’re wasting your time,” said Sergeant Purley Stebbins to the New York D.A. John F.-X. Markham, who had come aboard to inspect the horror and question the survivor.

Markham shook his head with sadness.

“I understand. You think he’s suffering from some severe psychological shock...”

Stebbins laughed.

“No, I think he’s drunk my entire flask of Loch Lomond! It’s top-notch single malt scotch whisky. And he drank almost a month’s pay’s worth of it! Makes me sick to my stomach. I thought he’d only take a gulp to get his spirits back, but he downed it all.”

“If the First Mate is a dipsomaniac, it might be prove important for the investigation...”

“Nah, I’m an Irishman, I can smell drunks from a mile away,” replied the Sergeant, tapping his nose. “He isn’t one, but after an experience like this, I wouldn’t be surprised if he became one. What in the name of Heaven happened on that ship?”

“It was serious enough for the Commissioner to drag me out of bed at 1 a.m. in this rotten weather.”

“You’re telling me? My boys and I’ve been freezing our butts off for a good couple of hours already. My boss left an hour ago, ordering me to wait for you.”

It was December and a piercing drizzle that would soon turn into snow fell like small daggers of ice on the wharves. The silence of the night was only broken by the occasional blaring of a foghorn, far across the dark waters. It wasn’t the kind of night that Markham relished.

“Have you determined the origin of the ship?” asked Markham, lifting the collar of his coat to better guard against the wind.

“Norway,” replied the Sergeant, handing him the *Karaboudjan*’s log.

“What was she carrying?”

“The usual type of goods, with maybe a little smuggling. Plus a large crate that appeared to have contained some kind of animal.”

The D.A. raised an eyebrow. He was normally a rather unexpressive young man, so his reaction betrayed real interest.

“What makes you say that?”

“Because inside we found a bowl of water, some fruit, some half-rotten meat jerky—and this.”

The Sergeant held up a handkerchief. It was blotted with a thick, foul-smelling clear fluid, not unlike saliva.

“Can I keep it?” asked Markham, barely able to conceal his nausea.

“By all means! The wife would only throw it away anyway. Talk about snot!”

The D.A. carefully pocketed the evidence, feeling sad that, after coming into contact with the substance, his finest camel hair coat would be ruined forever, and he would have to buy himself a new one.

“Very well, Sergeant. Try to find out more about the ship’s origin from the Port Authorities. For my part, I’m going to consult a specialist.”

“Don’t tell me. He lives on East 38th?”

“Mr. Vance? Not this time. This is not a case for dilettante experts on Chinese ceramics. We need someone... more worldly.”

Located near Times Square, the Cobalt Club was a very exclusive social club. Once reserved for men, it now welcomed women and organized very popular soirées where couples danced until dawn. It belonged to Lamont Cranston, an amazing character, even by New York’s standards. Having inherited a huge fortune made in the railways, Cranston had, one day, left his family’s estate of Carnegie Hill to join the Lafayette Escadrille during the Great War. Then, the flying ace had vanished; some said that he had become involved in the opium wars in Asia. No one knew for certain. He had returned seven years later, a truly transformed man, not as much marked by his adventurous life as almost a wholly different person.

Markham did not pay much attention to city gossip. Being himself the scion of a wealthy family, he knew that the rich had a tendency to exaggerate things in order to relieve their boredom. He had had to face the recriminations of his father when he had chosen to become a public servant instead of joining the powerful family law firm founded by his grandfather. After facing the harsh realities of the world, Cranston had changed; he wasn’t the first one, and wouldn’t be the last.

Markham stepped through the arched entrance of the Cobalt Club and was welcomed by a doorman in a shiny blue uniform who offered to take his coat. The D.A. refused. He couldn’t risk losing the only hard evidence he had. Inside, the club reeked of wealth and privilege. Conversations took place in hushed whispers around square tables with small table top lamps. There was a dance floor and, behind it, a band of black musicians played jazz on a stage draped in blue and gold.

“John?”

Markham turned around and saw a divine woman dressed in a blue, skin-tight sheath dress. Her jet black hair was cut squarely. She wore rhinestone-studded bracelets and a striking diamond on her right hand. She was the woman hired by Cranston to manage the club.

“Margo Lane.”

“How long has it been, John?” asked the woman in a seductive, husky voice.

“Last time I saw you, you were still taking care of your little sister.”

“Lois? She isn’t so little anymore. She’s going to high school now.”

“Ah,” said Markham politely.

“Yes, she likes the idea of becoming a journalist.”

“She may have a rather exaggerated notion of the importance of journalists. She’ll probably wind up being assigned to the classifieds, not the type of job that gets someone walking on air.”

“What do you want, John?”

“I’ve heard it said that Mr. Cranston is a friend of the Shadow...”

Margo Lane’s smile froze on her lips.

“That’s absurd.”

“Well, I’d like to ask him myself. Where is he?”

The young woman flashed a mocking smile.

“Oh, but you don’t know Lamont. One day, he’s here; the next, he may be in China, or in Tibet...”

She might as well said that he was on a retreat in the legendary Shangri-La. Markham understood that he wouldn’t get any information out of the young woman and was preparing to leave when she put her hand on his arm. The D.A. stopped.

“Don’t go, John,” she said. “You look tired. Have a drink here, on me. I’ll introduce you to someone you might want to meet.”

Markham followed Margo as she made her way through the room to a table where a tall man with thick eyebrows and a pointed black military mustache sat. His eyes, too, were black and very bright. He had high cheekbones, a sharp-cut nose, and a spare, aristocratic face. He wore a white dinner jacket, a new style that had recently come into fashion. Upon seeing Margo, the man snapped his fingers.

“Ivan!”

At once, a gigantic creature, solidly made and black bearded to the waist, dressed in the black astrakhan uniform of the Cossacks, stepped forward and offered two chairs to the newcomers.

After they were seated, Margo made the introductions.

“John, this is Count Zaroff, a White Russian.”

“And a former General in the Czar’s army,” added the man, inserting a Dimitrino into his cigarette holder.

“You fled from the Communists?” inquired Markham.

The D.A. saw a twitch in the Russian’s eye, as if he had hit a nerve.

“Fled? No. I’d rather say that those damned Bolsheviks made life in Holy Mother Russia untenable.”

“I see. And what have you been doing since you left?”

“Unlike many of my former peers, who have blown their fortunes at the roulette table in Monte-Carlo and ended up driving taxis in Paris, I like to travel. In fact, I came here to see my old friend Kent Allard.”

“One of our members,” added Margo.

“Never heard of him,” said Markham.

Zaroff made a dismissive gesture.

“He uses many aliases. In Russia, I knew him as Henry Arnaud, when he was working for the Czar, spying on the mad monk Rasputin, a sorry character whose influence on the Czarina was most nefarious.”

Meanwhile, Ivan served a wonderful Mouton Rothschild wine, Margo’s favorite if Markham’s recollection was right.

“And how do you spend your time?”

“Mostly, I hunt.”

“Really?”

“God made some men poets, some kings, others beggars. He made me a hunter. I have been one since my father gave me my first gun on my fifth birthday, a little carbine made especially for me in Moscow. Today, I travel the world, taking part in safaris, looking for new game...”

“What kind of game?”

“Grizzlies in your wonderful Rockies, tigers in India, jaguars in the Amazon, crocodiles in the Ganges, rhinoceroses in East Africa, Cape buffaloes, the fiercest creatures in the world...”

“This is terribly fascinating,” said Margo, with a bright smile.

“Then I have something that might be of interest to you,” said Markham, pulling out the fetid handkerchief from his pocket.

“Ew,” said Margo, making a face. “What is that horrible thing?”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” said the D.A. “It was the only clue left by some kind of wild beat that killed the entire crew of a ship that docked last night.”

Count Zaroff’s eyes lit up. The former Czarist General used a fork to lift the handkerchief and examine it closely, even sniffing it. Then, in a subdued tone, he whispered:

“Valusia.”

Upon hearing the word, his giant bodyguard pulled out a *kindjal*, a Cossack long knife, but Zaroff sternly gestured for him to sheathe the weapon and addressed Markham.

“You are the city’s District Attorney, yes?” he asked. “I have come to New York to see Kent Allard, and also Sanger Rainsford, one of the world’s top hunters, whom I would have liked to meet. But as they are both away at this time, I would be honored if you allowed me to assist you in this matter.”

“Well... There’s an official investigation... I don’t know if I can...” said Markham, feeling his eyelids growing heavier. He was exhausted and did not know when he would be able to get some sleep.

“Come on, John,” Margo whispered in his ear. “Don’t be such a stickler. You call on Philo Vance all the time.”

The D.A. gave up.

“Where can I get in touch with you?” he asked Zaroff.

The Russian took a magnificent fountain-pen and wrote an address on one of the Cobalt Club matchbooks.

In New York, Count Zaroff was staying at the local branch of the famous Gun Club, located on Lexington. The club was proud to have, at one time or another, accommodated some of the world’s greatest hunters: Allan Quatermain, Hareton Ironcastle, Lord John Roxton... Even the notorious Colonel Sebastian Moran had resided there for several months when, according to some malicious gossip, he had been wanted for questioning by Her Majesty’s Police. “Baseless rubbish,” had growled the valorous officer, who was the author of two of Zaroff’s favorite books, *Heavy Game of the Western Himalayas* (1881) and *Three Months in the Jungle* (1884). The Russian’s other favorite bedside reading was Sanger Rainsford’s *Hunting Snow Leopards in Tibet*, which contained the brilliant epigram: “The world is made up of two classes—the hunters and the huntees.” Zaroff would have liked to meet Rainsford, whom he considered an equal, but the native New Yorker was not in town at present.

The former Russian General was in America for yet another reason. Using the services of the lawfirm of Morrison, Morrison & Dodd, whose reputation was unmatched since the matter of the Giant Rat of Sumatra, he had been looking to purchase an isolated piece of land, preferably an island, where he could retire from a world where the weak increasingly pretended to rule over the strong and enjoy his personal pursuits.

In the meantime, the intriguing case presented to him by John Markham would have to suffice to relieve his boredom. Zaroff took it as a manifest intervention of fate. The D.A.’s handkerchief was covered in a slimy substance

which he had recognized at once. He had seen the very same ooze in the hands of mad Rasputin, who had owned a vial of it, which Allard (as Arnaud) had tried to steal—the same Allard who had been his host tonight under the guise of Lamont Cranston. Fate indeed. It was both a small world and a vast hunting ground.

As the Gun Club was rather devoid of guests at this time, Zaroff had been able to convert several rooms into his private, personal laboratory. If hunting was the Russian's heartfelt obsession, he did not let his passion for it obliterate the need for a methodical, scientific approach. The ability to reason was what made man superior to any beast, as he often liked to say.

During the following days, Zaroff remained in his suite, eating his usual regime of filet mignon and borsch, as only Ivan knew how to make it, drinking Chablis, analyzing the sample with a microscope and taking copious notes. No one was allowed to disturb him, not even his faithful hound, Lazarus, a massive brute of dog. His examination proved, beyond doubt, that the slime came from one of the legendary Serpent Men of Valusia who had ruled the Earth during the Paleozoic Era and had been mostly wiped out by the Atlantean King Kull. A few of the creatures had survived and used their metamorphic abilities to infiltrate the societies of Men afterward. The substance that Zaroff had recovered was protein-based and enabled the creatures' organism to withstand the prodigious stress of shapeshifting while retaining its basic cohesion as per the Theory of Evolution. The Russian smiled, remembering some of the folk tales of his own country that also featured shapechangers: Baba Yaga the witch, the Volkodlaks, wolf-men of the steppes... These could be explained rationally by the substance he had now seen under his microscope. That understanding would give him a definite advantage over his prey.

At the Russian's request, Markham had had photos of the bodies of the victims delivered to Zaroff. From the location of the wounds and the directions of the blows, the Count had deduced that their assassin was tall and bipedal, or at least able to assume an upright position.

Having completed the scientific part of his investigation, Zaroff then opened a flat suitcase that had been especially designed for him by Dunhill. It contained a Mauser which could be turned into a rifle by mounting it onto a butt. The famous blind German gunsmith Von Herder, who had built Moran's notorious air rifle, had modified it according to Zaroff's exacting specifications. The case also contained a *kindjal*, identical to Ivan's, an ideal weapon for throwing or close combat. But Zaroff knew that his most effective weapon in this case was a millennia-old incantation which he had stolen from Rasputin's safe: *Ka nama kaa lajerama*, a *shibboleth* once uttered by throats which were almost-human or not-yet-human in order to defeat the Sons of the Great Serpent, Set.

A modern man, Zaroff found it difficult to remember it, and even more so, to pronounce it, but it would have to do.

For a mind as primitive as that of a Serpent Man, thought Zaroff, the skyscrapers of New York must evoke images of the spires of long-lost Valusia. So he thought his prey would first seek refuge in Central Park, and therefore that became his hunting ground.

Three nights later, Zaroff had Ivan drive him there. He was now dressed in a tight fitting black sweater and wore black *jodhpurs* and black leather officer's boots. Lazarus was growing agitated, next to him, on the backseat of the limousine. The hound knew that the game was afoot.

At the entrance of the park, Zaroff ordered Ivan to remain with the car. The Cossack giant grumbled, but obeyed, fearing his master's *knout*. The brute was entirely devoted to him, thought Zaroff, but it was sometimes hard to get him to obey him unquestioningly. In these troubled times, good servants were hard to come by.

Zaroff entered the night-shrouded park, his prodigious senses on alert. The thrill of the hunt was the greatest thrill of all, he thought, greater than power, greater than sex, greater than everything. Almost at once, Lazarus stopped and turned his massive head towards his master. The hound had uncovered the corpse of a vagrant, who must have been slaughtered by the snake man. Zaroff made a sign to instruct the dog to be utterly quiet and noiselessly made his way through the man-made forest. He noticed immediately that the park was devoid of any animal noises. The silence was unnatural. Every living creature knew how to be afraid of a mortal enemy, be it man or snake.

Suddenly, a shadow leaped from under a bush and attacked the Count. Zaroff felt a searing pain on his left side. He felt the wound: it wasn't deep, but one of his ribs was surely bruised. If his reflexes hadn't been lightning fast, he might have been gored.

The Russian grabbed his Mauser, but the Serpent Man whipped it away. That gave Zaroff an opportunity to stab the creature with his *kindjal*, which slowed his enemy. In the meantime, Lazarus had come to his master's rescue and was talking deep bites out of the Snake Man. However, to Zaroff's horror, if not his surprise, he saw that the shapeshifter's very substance was slowly reconstituting itself. The monster was damn near invulnerable!

It was time to use the incantation. Zaroff took in a deep breath and shouted:

"*Oungawa timba!*"

No, that was the command that Greystoke had taught him in Congo. Zaroff concentrated to remember the ancient ritual.

“*Shub ath ngaa ryla neb shoggoth!*”

Captain Marsh’s prayer. Even more far-fetched. For the first time ever, Zaroff experienced fear. The Serpent Man had now thrown the hound away and was moving towards him again. He had only one more try left.

“*Ka nama kaa lajer—*” he began.

“*—rama,*” finished Lazarus in growling bark so hoarse that it unwittingly mimicked that of the prehistoric throats that had once uttered the ancient warding sign.

At once, the Snake Man from a long buried past stopped dead in his tracks. His body rippled as if it was mere clay in the grasp of some large, inhuman hand. Before Zaroff’s eyes, the thing that had walked like a man began to liquefy, then to quickly resolve into a pile of fetid mire.

“So you destroyed the creature?” said Margo Lane admiringly. “But your hair turned white overnight, Count.”

“That only marks me more as a White Russian,” joked Zaroff. He then turned towards Markham and asked: “Did your men ever find out where the ship came from?”

“The Port Authority said it came from Franz Josef Land, an archipelago near the Arctic Circle. The only clue as to the origins of the crate itself was a label identifying as having belonged to the Ceintras/de Venasque polar expedition that disappeared 17 years ago. Who sent the thing, and to whom, is a mystery that will have to be solved by someone else. In the meantime, the City of New York is extremely grateful to you, Count. If there’s ever anything I can do...”

Zaroff leaned over the table, muffling a groan of pain.

“You have already done much, Mr. Markham,” said the Russian. “Thanks to your father’s lawfirm, I’m now the happy owner of a Caribbean island named Baranka.”

“How enticing,” said Margo.

“It is perfect for my purposes—there are jungles with a maze of traits in them, hills, swamps and cliffs overlooking the ocean... It is surrounded by giant rocks with razor edges that can crush a ship like a nut. The sailors try to avoid it and call it ‘Ship-Trap.’ ”

“Don’t you think you might get bored there?” asked Markham.

“Not at all. That business with the crew hunted aboard the *Karaboudjan* made me think. I could set up lights, pointing to a channel that didn’t exist which would force ships ashore; then, I could hunt the survivors, the scum of the Earth: sailors from tramp ships—blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels—a thoroughbred horse or hound is worth more than a score of them. Maybe someday I might even be lucky enough to have Sanger Rainsford join me for a hunting party...”

Count Zaroff seemed deadpan serious, but the other two thought it was just another eccentric musing from a bored European nobleman.

Margo Lane laughed spiritedly, ordered another round of drinks and soon forgot all about it.