

## THE BALKAN TIGRESS

by Rick Lai

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Princess Zena radiated evil. The dark-haired beauty from the Balkans possessed the ferocity of a tigress. Born of royal blood, she had been raised to enjoy luxury and idleness. However, Zena was more than merely lazy. She reveled in death and destruction. Her laugh resembled the snarl of a bloodthirsty beast.

Princess Zena was the most charismatic villain to cross the path of The Shadow. Her sole appearance is in Theodore Tinsley's *Gems of Jeopardy* (September 1, 1941). Zena's flamboyant personality provides the most memorable moments in the novels. The novel's main villain was a forgettable mastermind named Mr. X (1). In fact, Zena spent the vast amount of her time combating Mr. X rather than The Shadow. Mr. X earned Zena's enmity by robbing her of a treasure trove of jewels. Zena's husband was the Colonel, a Fascist leader of the Balkans. His followers, the Green Shirts, had thoroughly looted their country. Due to the intervention of the German army, the Green Shirts had been crushed. The Colonel and Zena fled to the United States with jewels worth ten millions dollars.

Tinsley based the Colonel on an actual person. The Green Shirts were better known as the Iron Guard, the Fascist party in Rumania. In the 1930's, the Guard under the leadership of Corneliu Zelea Codreanu threatened to seize control of Rumania. In order to checkmate the Guard, King Carol II established a dictatorial government in 1938. The leader of the Green Shirts was arrested. Codreanu was "shot while trying to escape." Viewing the Guards as kindred spirits, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis pressured Carol into releasing Codreanu's surviving colleagues in 1940. The Green Shirts regrouped under the leadership of Horia Sima. After Germany forced Carol to comply with the territorial demands of Russia and Hungary, he abdicated in favor of his son Michael. However, real political power rested in the hands of the Premier, General Ion Antonescu. In the hopes of controlling the Green Shirts, Antonescu appointed Sima Vice-Premier. Virulently anti-Semitic, Sima instituted ruthless pogroms against the Jewish residents of Rumania. Sima never gave up his ambition of overthrowing Antonescu. By playing off Antonescu against Sima, the Nazis were able to gain permission to station troops in Rumania. In January 1941, Sima led a violent revolt against Antonescu. With the help of German troops, Antonescu quelled the Iron Guard. Sima vanished, and there was much speculation about his fate. One rumor was that he had fled the country with a vast amount of wealth. At the end of World War II, it was revealed that Sima was held prisoner inside Nazi Germany. Hitler was preserving Sima as a possible replacement for Antonescu if the Rumanian dictator refused to follow the dictates of the Third Reich. When Antonescu was overthrown in 1944 by King Michael, Rumania changed sides. The Nazis released Sima. When World War II ended, Sima eventually made his way to Spain. He died in Madrid in 1993.

Sima had a real-life wife named Elvira, but nothing suggests that she was anything like Princess Zena. Since Sima's history is somewhat different than Tinsley's Colonel, we would have to speculate that Zena's husband was one of Sima's lieutenants in the Green Shirts (2). Princess Zena, her husband, and twelve wooden boxes containing their fortune landed secretly on the New Jersey coast. Zena was probably the best-

dressed villainess in pulp fiction. During her clandestine arrival in America, she wore an expensive cloak worth a small fortune. Under the cloak, Zena wore a gown that had been made especially for her by a world-famous designer. Beneath the gown, a leather sheath containing a sharp knife was attached to her garter on one of Zena's shapely legs. Zena's fingernails could be just as sharp as her knife. She once ripped open the cheek of a servant who had accidentally splashed mud on her cloak.

To Zena's delight, the Colonel ruthlessly covered up their tracks. A bomb killed the crew which brought them to America. Another bomb disposed of the servants who had unloaded the twelve boxes. In spite of these precautions, the enigmatic Mr. X arrived on the scene to steal the jewels.

Mr. X planned to slay both the Colonel and Zena. The Princess remorselessly threw her husband into Mr. X's line of fire and fled. After drilling the Colonel through the heart, Mr. X chased Zena into a swamp. Zena faked her death by wrapping a rock in her cloak and throwing it into a mud hole.

After Mr. X left the scene with the spoils, Zena searched for shelter. Stumbling upon the residence of a lonely housewife, Zena burst into the house. Her knife lost in the swamp, Zena's hands were her only weapons. She brutally strangled the housewife. Stealing the dead woman's clothes, money and car, Zena drove to New York. The Colonel had arranged a secret bank account for her in the name of Mary Carson. Having been taught English in her youth by a British governess, Zena easily posed as an American. A blonde wig hid her black locks. With her new funds, Zena replenished her expensive wardrobe as well as replaced her deadly blade,

Learning that Mr. X had been in contact with a fence named Frankie Keech, Zena located the receiver of stolen goods. She was given Keech's address by another crook named Perry. Zena displayed her gratitude to the informant by stabbing him to death. Persuading Keech to join her against Mr. X, Zena and her new ally attacked the underground base of the master criminal. Keech went the way of Perry, and Zena prepared for a final confrontation with her nemesis. At their final battle, it was Mr. X who now used a hapless associate as a living shield against his opponent's bullets. As Zena's marksmanship claimed the life of Mr. X's underling, the vicious mastermind fired into the exquisite body of the Balkan tigress. Staggering from a fatal wound, Zena futilely attempted to fire further bullets, but her will for vengeance could not delay her inevitable death. Pursuing his own trail to Mr. X, The Shadow arrived to administer justice upon the brutal criminal.

What royal family did princess Zena belong to? She certainly wasn't a member of the contemporary Rumanian dynasty. Theodore Tinsley stated that Zena came from a Balkan country noted for its beautiful women. The author didn't say that Zena's homeland was the same as her husband's

The best solution to Zena's origins could be derived from one of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe mysteries, *Over My Dead Body* (1939). Stout's novel featured the Donevitch clan, a family that claimed the throne of Croatia. The major problem with the Donevitch claim was that their kingdom was then part of Yugoslavia. The head of the family, Prince Peter, was dying. His nephew and heir, Prince Stefan, lived in Zagreb with his sisters. Shortly after World War I. Peter had employed a female British secretary in Zagreb. The secretary may have recommended a fellow countrywoman as the governess for Stefan and her sisters. Zena could be one of Stefan's sisters

The Donevitch family was seeking Nazi support for their claims in Croatia. The negotiations with the Nazis were handled by Stefan's wife, Princess Vladanka. As Vladanka cultivated Hitler's minions, Zena could have sought to advance Donevitch interests by allying herself with the Nazis' counterparts in Rumania. The Donevitchs had good reason to seek the overthrow of Carol II of Rumania. Relations between Yugoslavia and neighboring Rumania were very good because Carol was the uncle of Yugoslavia's young king.

Being an accomplished duelist, Vladanka was lethally efficient with a knife or a sword. If her sister-in-law was Zena, it is understandable that the Colonel's bride was equally proficient with sharp instruments of murder. The vicious Vladanka perished when Nero Wolfe cracked open her skull with a beer bottle. The rampage of the diabolical Donevitch women may not have ended with the deaths of Vladanka and Zena. Prince Stefan had at least one other sister. Her story has yet to be uncovered.

## NOTES

1. The had earlier been a master spy, Monsieur X, who had appeared in *The Case of the Singing Mummies* (September-October, 1936), a novel from the pages of *Dr. Yen Sin* magazine. Monsieur X died in September 1935. Perhaps one the mastermind's henchman took over his organization. The new leader could have assumed the alias of Mr. X, an Americanized version of his late superior's title.
2. The other possibility is that Sima was really the Colonel who died in New Jersey. The Shadow could have kept details of the Colonel's death secret. One of The Shadow's agents assumed the Colonel's identity and returned to Europe in order to spy upon the Nazis. This impersonation continued after World War II in order for the false Colonel to penetrate the ranks of absconding war criminals.