

THE BROTHERS ZAROFF

by Rick Lai

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One of the most memorable villains to confront Doc Savage was featured in *The Fantastic Island* (December 1935) by Ryerson Johnson and Lester Dent (writing under the pseudonym of Kenneth Robeson). This criminal was called Count Alexander Ramadanoff, but this wasn't his real name. His true identity is undisclosed at the novel's conclusion. A certain degree of investigation is required to ascertain his origins.

The alleged Count Ramadanoff was a huge muscular man. From his satin tie to his riding boots, he was garbed entirely in black. His black beard was styled after the last Tsar of Russia. His black eyes gleamed with malevolence.

From a castle composed of volcanic rock, the Count presided over a tyrannical regime on an uncharted island in the Galapagos Archipelago. Through the engineering of shipwrecks by the manipulation of channel lights, the Count recruited slaves to dig in volcanic pits. One of Doc Savage's five aides, Johnny, was enslaved in such a manner while participating in an archaeological expedition. Searching for Johnny, Doc plus his other four assistants and his cousin Pat were all eventually drawn into this hellish domain. In their struggle against the Count, Doc and his crew contended with man-eating crabs, giant iguanas, wild hogs, a seething lava flow and the thumb-hole death.

The last named peril was caused by the emerald rings worn by the Count and his younger brother, the short muscular Boris. The rings were tied to a tiny, almost invisible, thread of great strength. The brothers were able to throw the rings into the faces of their victims and then jerk them back onto their hands. Death seemed to spring from nowhere, and all that the untrained eye could see was a corpse with a small wound about the size of the thumb slightly above the temple.

During the final showdown with Doc, the brothers had a falling out. The Count delivered the thumb-nail death to Boris. Fleeing Doc's assistants, the Count inadvertently ran into the wild hogs of his island and was devoured alive. Before his demise, the Count explained his presence in the Pacific.

He was not the real Count Ramadanoff, but a member of an expedition of artisans and noblemen who had journeyed to this island to escape the turmoil of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Together with his brother, Doc's future combatant had murdered the leader of the exiles, Count Alexander Ramadanoff, in order to gain possession of his fabulous jewels. The treacherous duo had slain the Count before they had learned where the wealth was buried on the island. The brothers forced the rest of their fellow Russians to burrow for the hidden treasure. After the original settlers had perished, the brothers conscripted slaves by luring ships to the dangerous reefs surrounding the island. Since no one knew the Count was deceased, the elder brother assumed the name of the dead aristocrat.

The actual name of the despot of the Galapagos is never revealed. From his cultured mannerisms, it's logical to conclude that he was among the nobleman rather than the artisans from the genuine Ramadanoff's expedition. A clue to the enigma of the bogus Ramadanoff lies in Richard Connell's famous short story, "The Most Dangerous Game" (1925).

The villain of this piece was another demented Russian, General Zaroff. He also controlled a bizarre island and manufactured shipwrecks through the misuse of channel lights. His brutal atrocities transpired in the Caribbean rather than the Pacific. The unfortunates who landed on Zaroff's property, Ship-Trap Island, suffered a far different fate from the captives of

the Ramadanoff impersonator. An accomplished big-game hunter, the General had grown tired of hunting tigers, elephants and lions. Now he stalked human beings.

Sailors stranded on Zaroff's island were presented with the following proposition. The prisoner could earn his freedom by agreeing to be hunted for three days. Zaroff would be armed only with a pistol and a pack of bloodthirsty hounds while his opponent would possess a hunting knife and a small supply of food. If the quarry eluded Zaroff for the given time period, he would be permitted to return to civilization. If the offer was refused, Zaroff's burly henchman, Ivan, would flog the marooned seaman to death.

The General had an unbroken string of victories until Sanger Rainsford was careless enough to fall off a yacht. Rainsford, a famous hunter from New York and the author of a book on the snow leopards of Tibet, bears certain similarities to Lamont Cranston, the globe-trotting millionaire whose identity was frequently assumed by The Shadow in the United States. One wonders if Rainsford was the real Cranston's pen name in the sense that Maxwell Grant was Walter Gibson's.

Not only did Rainsford survive Zaroff's deadline, but he also disposed of Ivan with a Ugandan knife trick. Being a gracious loser, the General congratulated Rainsford on his triumph. Literally a sore winner, Rainsford challenged Zaroff to a sword duel that resulted in the Russian becoming an after-dinner snack for his dogs.

The Ramadanoff pretender physically resembled General Zaroff. Thinner than Doc's enemy, the General was tall and muscular. Although his hair was white, it was once black as his ebony eyebrows and mustache attested. His eyes were also dark as night.

The General gave a brief outline of his background to Rainsford. His father was a very rich man with a quarter of a million acres in the Crimea. Because "it was expected of noblemen's sons," Zaroff enlisted in the Tsar's army even though his only real passion was hunting. His monetary fortune survived when the Bolsheviks seized power due to his heavy investment in American securities. After leaving his turbulent homeland, he continued to hunt animals around the world. There is a suggestion that he had traveled widely in search of rare animals even before the Revolution of 1917. His wanderings ceased when the inspiration to prey on his fellow man overcame him.

Since the General's father was a nobleman, then he must be the son of a count. The overlord of Ship-Trap Island used only his military title and never referred to himself as "Count." Therefore, he must have an older brother who succeeded to the title.

The phony Alexander Ramadanoff and Boris could be General Zaroff's brothers. If the spurious Ramadanoff was the eldest, he would then be Count Zaroff. However, when we compare his physical description with the General's, he appears to be the younger. There is also the issue of why the maniac of the Galapagos would steal a dead man's title if he already had one of his own. The logical conclusion is that there must be a fourth brother, senior to the General and the fraudulent Ramadanoff. To unearth his identity, we must search among the ranks of the formidable criminals who opposed the Man of Bronze.

I am not referring to Doc Savage. The original Man of Bronze in the pulps was Peter Moore, also called Peter the Brazen. The spectacular adventures of this American soldier of fortune were told by in the pages of *Argosy*. In "The Master Magician" (Feb. 25, 1933), we meet the wizard Zarlo. This story was reprinted in *The Compleat Adventures of Peter the Brazen: Volume II* (Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, 2003) by George F. Worts. Dressed in a white robe, Zarlo was a tall lean dark-haired man with burning black eyes and a bony skull. A Caucasian of unknown nationality, Zarlo had studied hypnotism in the Far East and thoroughly mastered the

mysteries of Yoga. Six years prior to “The Master Magician,” Zarlo had mesmerized the queen of the sultanry of Tuzpan in the Philippines (1). Ruling through her, Zarlo ordered the expulsion of all Americans and erected a barbaric religion. Naturally he was the god revered by the new cult. Moore and four Americans with concessions in Tuzpan united to topple Zarlo. After nearly being killed by a mob, Zarlo fled the Philippines. Before his departure, he sent warnings to the five men who had thwarted him.

Eventually Zarlo stumbled upon Skull Island (2). A misanthropic American, Fulton D. Agnor, had constructed a castle there to serve as his refuge from humanity. Due to his expertise in the occult arts, Zarlo gained power over Agnor. Rechristening the financier Ronga (Agnor spelt backwards), Zarlo transformed the harmless hermit into a bestial cannibal subject only to the sorcerer’s commands. The stage was now set for Zarlo to seek vengeance on his five enemies from the Philippines.

By the time he attacked Moore, three of the five had already perished in grisly ways. The first was fed to leopards, the second to sharks, and the third to army ants. In a special trophy room, the skulls of Zarlo’s victims were displayed. This is similar to General Zaroff who mounted the heads of his victims on Ship-Trap Island.

A case was prepared to receive Moore’s skull, but Zarlo’s plan failed. Ronga rebelled against the mage. He hurled Zarlo from the castle’s balcony. Once Zarlo laid crushed and lifeless on the ground below, his spell was broken. Ronga reverted to the meek personality of Fulton D. Agnor.

Zarlo would seem the obvious choice to be General Zaroff’s older brother. Having identified the four Zaroff brothers, a little creative speculation is in order. The names of the quartet were Leo, Nicholas, Alexander and Boris. At the time of their father’s death, the eldest brother, Leo, was vacationing in Western Europe. Upon his return home, he was shocked to learn that his three younger brothers had successfully seized all of their father’s vast estate. Left with only the barren title of Count Zaroff, Leo departed for Central Asia. Among the ancient mystics of that region, he studied mind control. Under the name of Zarlo, Leo gained such notoriety that he was mentioned in the dispatches of Russian agents operating in the area. These reports were eventually communicated to General Nicholas Zaroff. With his other two brothers, Nicholas wondered if Leo would return to wreck vengeance upon them. The General trusted that his marksmanship would prevail over Leo’s occult powers. The other two brothers developed the thumb-hole death with Leo in mind. Before Leo would be able to fully exert his hypnotic gaze against them, Alexander and Boris would send their rings smashing into his eyes. Although the explosive reunion of the Zaroff brothers never materialized, the thumb-hole death was delivered to anyone who opposed the perfidious pair.

Sometime before World War I, Nicholas undertook a hunting trip to the Galapagos to research a rumor that one of them was populated by wild hogs and giant iguanas. He discovered the island that would serve as the later site of Doc Savage’s exploit. Back in Russia, Nicholas informed Alexander and Boris of the details of his trip. The General remarked that a little-known island could be used to perform secret activities without any danger of outside interference. Nicholas also mentioned that his ship was almost wrecked near the Philippines due to the misplacement of a channel light. The American authorities concluded it was an accident, but Nicholas had heard rumors of a man in a white robe seen in the vicinity. Years later, Nicholas would remember these observations when he decided to revolutionize his favorite sport.

Alexander and Boris would be prompted by the General's tale to an entirely different course of action. Unlike Nicholas, they failed to invest in American securities and were left penniless by the Revolution. This was not the case with Count Alexander Ramadanoff, who had a large supply of jewels. The paranoid Ramadanoff was convinced that the world was going to be overrun by communism. The two siblings persuaded Ramadanoff that the island discovered by Nicholas would be the only safe haven from the tide of Marxism. In reality, the brothers wanted to get Ramadanoff into a remote spot where he could be killed and robbed. After their successful murder of Ramadanoff, Alexander and Boris Zaroff were faced with the difficult finding the secret location of the Count's riches. Like Nicholas, they realized how the rearrangement of channel lights could be used to waylay local shipping. Alexander Zaroff needed to recruit criminals from the Asian underworld to act as overseers for his slaves. If he used his own name, his brother Leo might hear of it and launch an attack on the Galapagos. Alexander had to use an alias. The fact that he and Ramadanoff shared the same first name prompted him to pose as the Count.

After being expelled from the Philippines, Leo Zaroff heard the story of his brother's destruction by Rainsford. Intrigued by the description of his brother's base in the Caribbean, he looked for something similar in the Pacific and found Skull Island. It may be more than a coincidence that Zarlo's headquarters makes one think of the natural habitat of King Kong. According to Delos W. Lovelace's novelization of the 1933 movie, the full name of Kong's abode was Skull Mountain Island. Perhaps Zarlo wanted to gain control of the giant ape through hypnotism, and was really searching for Skull Mountain Island. The islands were in the same general vicinity. Kong's home was west of Sumatra. Agnor's retreat was south of Borneo. If Zarlo was really after Kong, he would have been extremely disappointed to find an American recluse instead of a huge gorilla. In order to rectify his disillusionment, Zarlo turned Agnor into an ape-like henchman.

The deaths of Nicholas and Leo left Alexander the eldest surviving brother. The despot of the Galapagos had now succeeded to the title of Count Zaroff. The rationale for the Ramadanoff masquerade had been removed by Leo's demise, but a resumption of his true surname would only confuse Alexander's henchmen and underworld contacts. Alexander continued his impersonation. Thus, the dictator of a Pacific island died under a false name.

NOTES

1. Tuzpan is fictitious. In the Philippines, only the southern archipelago of Sulu had been ruled by a Sultan. He relinquished all governmental power in 1915, but remained a Muslim religious leader until his death in 1936.
2. The native name of Skull Island was Soononga.