

The "Take Two!" Blogathon

Oct. 20-Oct. 22
Hometowns to Hollywood



Many thanks to Dr. Annette Bochenek of [Hometowns to Hollywood](#) for allowing me to participate in The "Take Two!" Blogathon. [A Game of Death \(1945\)](#) was directed by Robert Wise, a man who does not receive as much recognition as he deserves. The following article has been reprinted from my book, *Robert Wise: The Motion Pictures*.

— J.R. Jordan

A Game of Death By J.R. Jordan

“The fascination of shooting as a sport depends almost wholly on whether you are at the right or wrong end of the gun.”

– P.G. Wodehouse, *The Adventures of Sally*

In 1924, *Collier's* magazine published *The Most Dangerous Game*, a short story by Richard Connell. Its simple, yet chilling, plot, laden with twists and turns, captivated the attention of many. In 1932, RKO produced an adaptation of the same name, co-directed by Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack. It starred Joel McCrea and Fay Wray and easily fared well with theatergoers. However, in 1945, and for reasons that are not entirely clear, the studio produced a remake of its earlier version with a different cast and crew. Robert Wise was selected to direct the film, retitled *A Game of Death*, and although he willingly accepted his new assignment, he later commented, “I don’t like to do remakes. Usually, for one reason or another, you have to see the original film. And it always rather bugs you when you find yourself doing a certain scene, and you keep being reminded of what it was like in the first film.”



RKO films traditionally begin with the studio’s logo, which consists of a radio tower atop the Earth emitting beams of light. During Robert Wise’s days as an editor, part of his job was to synchronize the moving dots with the soundtrack’s musical notes.

Don Rainsford (John Loder), an avid hunter and famed author, becomes stranded on a remote island when the yacht on which he travels is mysteriously destroyed. All of his sailing companions perish, if not from the boat's destruction, then at the jaws of bloodthirsty sharks. Shortly after making landfall, Rainsford discovers a single, brooding fortress. Erich Kreiger (Edgar Barrier), the owner, introduces himself to Rainsford as a fellow hunter. In addition, Kreiger proudly reveals that he has read Rainsford's books. Robert Trowbridge (Russell Wade) and his sister, Ellen (Audrey Long), are guests of the fortress. Like Rainsford, they became stranded on the island via shipwreck. Two crewmembers from their boat also survived the wreck but have recently gone missing from the fortress. Kreiger boasts of a new animal he has been hunting, dubbing it "the ideal quarry." Ellen confides in Rainsford, secretly informing him that they are all being held against their will. A "trophy room" of human heads is discovered shortly thereafter. Rainsford, aware that Kreiger may choose to hunt him as prey at any given time, sets traps throughout the island while Trowbridge and Ellen distract their demented host. Pleshke (Gene Stutenroth), a servant, becomes privy to the attempted uprising and informs Kreiger. Trowbridge is subsequently hunted and killed, and Rainsford challenges Kreiger to a "dangerous game" with specific conditions. Should Rainsford survive, he and Ellen will be returned to the mainland on Kreiger's honor. The hunt begins and ultimately extends far into the night. At daybreak, Rainsford surprises Kreiger at the fortress. The latter concedes defeat, but then produces a concealed firearm. A scuffle ensues and Kreiger is shot. Rainsford and Ellen escape the island in a small motor boat. Kreiger, still alive, attempts to fire at the departing duo but is instead mauled to death by his pet canines.

When comparing the short story with the RKO films, several differences become evident. For example, the story is devoid of sharks, and the yacht on which Rainsford travels is not destroyed. Instead, while attempting to position himself on a railing of the vessel, he abruptly loses his balance and plunges into the sea.¹ The yacht continues to sail along its designated course, never to appear again. The 1932 and 1945 adaptations, however, each begin with a disastrous incident that entails a tragic loss of life. In both films, the yacht is destroyed, leaving most of the survivors to be devoured by sharks. From beginning to end, the 1932 version is relatively similar to that of Wise's, but the latter is different regarding the island's history. Furthermore, Wise's antagonist, an individual who harbors a weakness for the opposite sex, is affiliated with Nazi Germany.

Differences between the two films regarding the island's name and history become clear upon further examination. Traces of Portuguese colonization contribute to these disparities. In the 1932 version, just prior to the boat's destruction, references to a place called Branca Island are made. The wreck occurs shortly thereafter and Rainsford subsequently finds himself ashore. He then encounters Zaroff, Kreiger's 1932 counterpart, who boasts of his mighty fortress and

¹ Rainsford climbs onto the yacht's railing because he hears the sound of three gunshots coming from the direction of the island. He figures his elevated position will help him to better ascertain the source of such gunshots.

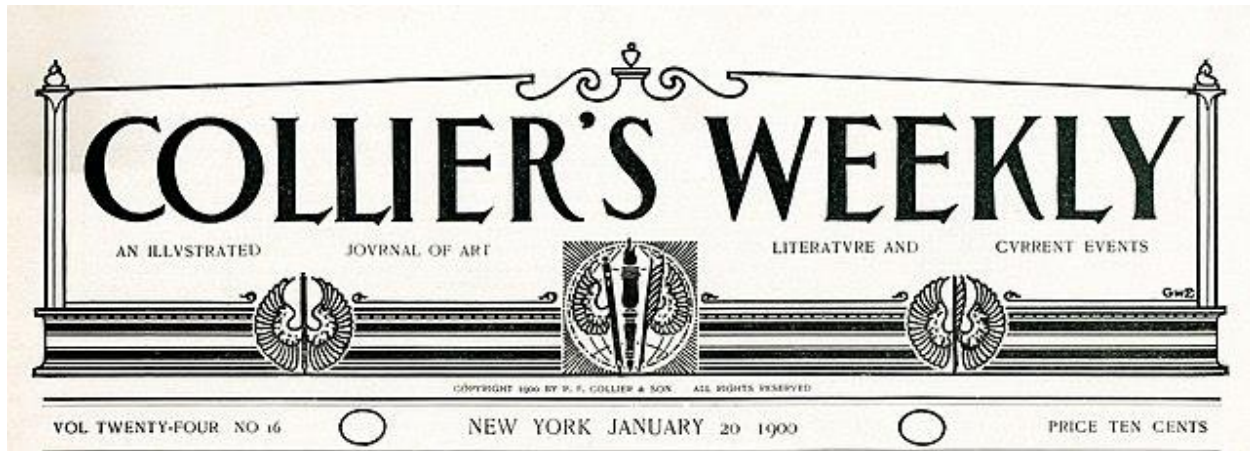
claims it was built centuries earlier by the Portuguese. Further explanation reveals the ruins were restored so that Zaroff could make his residence on the island. In Wise's film, Branca becomes Bran Cara, and Rainsford interprets the name as "Man Trap."² An approximate Portuguese-English translation, however, is "White Man," but regardless of the significance, if any, behind such naming, the island of *A Game of Death* features a different history than that of its counterpart. Instead of Portuguese colonists, the area is said to have been inhabited by "pirates" approximately 100 years prior to Rainsford's arrival. Furthermore, Kreiger's fortress features windows with bars that "were left over in the rebuilding," and all but one are unimportant in regard to the film's plot.

Unlike Zaroff, Kreiger offers his bedchamber, a room devoid of bars on its windows, to Ellen, thus exposing his inherent weakness for the opposite sex. The words of a Ugandan proverb, spoken in the 1932 version and later modified for Wise's film, are indicative of such lust. Zaroff prioritizes his desires as he quotes what might be perceived as a guiding motto, declaring, "First, the hunt. Then, the kill. Then, the woman." Kreiger, too, makes reference to the words of the Ugandan chieftains as he proudly states, "Hunt first the enemy, then the woman." Zaroff remains preoccupied with the hunt and spends very little time pining for his sole female guest. Kreiger, however, covets Ellen. He is willing to give up his bedroom so that she may live in luxury, and upon the conclusion of Kreiger's great hunt, he eagerly anticipates Ellen's submission. His actions, however, ultimately prove beneficial to her and the other captives. Rainsford, by exiting the fortress via Ellen's window, initiates a plan of escape from the island, but in order for such a plan to be successful, it is first imperative for the prisoners to overthrow their atrocious host, an individual who warrants disdain from audiences in more ways than one.

In Wise's film, the short story's original character of General Zaroff, an antagonist with Cossack roots, becomes Erich Kreiger, a product of Nazi Germany.³ *A Game of Death* was produced during the final months of World War II, a time when Adolf Hitler dominated headlines. The film's production transpired from February to early March of 1945, and during such a period, Allied forces had yet to defeat the Nazis. The character of Kreiger, a deranged individual, is relatively comparable to that of Hitler. Similar to the production of *Mademoiselle Fifi* (1944), the executives of RKO perhaps sought a villain who could identify with one of the most despised figures in human history. However, on May 7, 1945, several months before *A Game of Death* was released to the American public, the front page of *Stars and Stripes*, the U. S. Armed Forces newspaper, announced Hitler's death, and only five days later, Germany officially surrendered. Nevertheless, at the time of its world premiere in New York on November 23, 1945, *A Game of Death* was presented to a nation that continued to cope with the aftermath of victory. The war, although over, remained fresh in the minds of Americans, and Wise's film, an entertaining work of fiction in its simplest form, was generally well-received.

² The setting of Richard Connell's short story is Ship-Trap Island.

³ United Artists attempted its own adaptation of Richard Connell's short story with *Run for the Sun* (1956), a thriller starring Richard Widmark and Jane Greer. The antagonist, like that of Robert Wise's film, is a Nazi madman.



The Most Dangerous Game first appeared in *Collier's*, a popular magazine launched in 1888. Its final issue was published in 1957.

Prior to its theatrical release, *A Game of Death* was advertised to the public as a “Nightmarish Romance on a Tropic Paradise of DEATH!” John Loder and Audrey Long, in their portrayals of hero and heroine, were convincing. The same can be said of their 1932 counterparts, Joel McCrea and Fay Wray. To reiterate, both films are similar in some aspects. For example, in the 1932 version, as Zaroff pursues his prey through the jungle, a subjective-objective tracking shot is used to invoke suspense. The audience is essentially afforded the opportunity to see the world through Zaroff’s eyes. Then, we watch as he treads through the undergrowth, directly towards the camera. Wise, too, photographed such action in a similar manner as Kreiger hunts Rainsford during the film’s climax.

Despite his opinion of remakes, Wise respected the original direction of Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack, especially in regard to a specific scene. Wise’s unveiling of the horrendous trophy room, in which multiple human heads appear to seamlessly float in glass jars, is one of the most memorable moments of the picture. Such a sequence of the 1932 version was heavily edited upon faring disastrously with test audiences. Wise therefore sought to enhance the scene for the most avid of theatergoers. Through the years, Connell’s short story has been adapted numerous times for film, radio, and television. When one attempts to produce a remake, a pleasant experience will sometimes follow, but this is not always the case. Sam Raimi, famed director of motion pictures, once said, “If a remake is not good, no one wants to see it.” He also alluded to a theory that an original remains unaffected if an adaptation proves unworthy of critical attention. In regard to Wise, he did not direct another remake following *A Game of Death*. He was nevertheless pleased with its overall reception and set forth to continue his productive, fruitful career in motion pictures.