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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Fangs of Vengeance

By NATHAN HINDIN

An eery story of an animal-trainer in a circus—of nine ravening leopards and a weird black panther that chose its time for vengeance

CAPTAIN ZAROFF was not his real name. But then, of course, it did not happen at Stellar Brothers Circus, either. Both appellations are fictitious, though the facts—more the pity—are all too true. I know, for I was there to see the drama unfold; a drama of death and blood-stained vengeance, set against the glittering background of circus make-believe.

The affair occurred, fortunately, in winter quarters. That is the only reason it was fortunate enough to escape press notice. Despite its sensational aspects, I am very thankful that we were able to hush the whole thing up. It is not good for the common herd to know too much, and there are certain terrible questions in connection with it that are extremely difficult to answer. All that has ever leaked out is that Captain Zaroff met death in the big cage during a rehearsal of his act, and that his animals were shot in a vain effort to save him. Concerning the Ubangis, the press was informed that due to disagreements over salary, they severed their connection with the show.

There was something wrong from the very start that winter. We had had a bad season, and the old man decided that innovations were in order. Culper sent out an agent for the Ubangi troupe—six duck-billed and exceedingly ugly savages, only a year removed from their native jungles. But the old man didn't stop there, either. He decided to go back to wild animal acts—a policy we had discarded some eight years previous. He argued that the public wants excitement

—the cracking of whips, the snarling of sullen cats, the roaring of restless lions.

Now for some unknown reason, the majority of the larger shows have abandoned the cat acts within the last ten years. The result is that good animal-trainers are mighty hard to find. Practically the only ones available are Europeans, and they're scarce enough. So the old man counted himself lucky when a German agency sent him Captain Zaroff.

He arrived early in January. I wasn't there at the time, but he was described as very distant, and very foreign. He had his own quarters, and special cages for the nine leopards in his troupe. He even insisted on keeping his personal assistant to clean the wagons and feed the animals. These affectations of exclusiveness, coupled with his extremely reserved manner, did not win him any friends. He, on his own part, seemed unmindful of the circus people; eating alone, sleeping in his own private wagon on the winter grounds, and devoting all his time and attention to his act.

There were many vague and conflicting rumors floating around concerning the man. For one thing, there were speculations as to his age and nationality. It was said that he was just back from Africa, and that he was breaking in these jungle leopards for the new act. Another version of the story represented him as being driven from the Continent in disgrace, following a scandal over a woman. By the time I returned to headquarters, the whole show was engaged in wild speculation. I disregarded it all.

Then I saw him work. It was the first time, and only the old man and I were present in the barn-like hippodrome which held the great steel cage. Zaroff had promised the old man something distinctively different. He got it.

PICTURE to yourself a vast wooden arena, with white, bare walls that reflect hideously all the glare of a hundred overhead lights. In the center, a steel cage. Two assistants stand beside it, tense and alert. Occasionally, they finger

nervously with their guns—guns that are not loaded with blanks. The boss and I sat on chairs placed near the door, our eyes glued on the runway. The old man chewed viciously on the stub of his cigar. The atmosphere was charged with the static electricity of fearful expectation.

There are no bands playing in the winter quarters, no happy, cheering crowds. No clowns perform their antic drolleries to ease the tension with a laugh. Working with newly broken jungle beasts is by no means the same safe routine as a



"Zaroff, mumbling incoherently, told me of these things."

developed act. The real danger does not strike after the spectacular routine is perfected—it comes before, during the long, slow hours of winter training. It was with this thought in our minds that we waited in that silent, empty barn; waited, and worried.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a moan. From the wooden runway on the other side of the steel cage came the soft and purposeful padding of velvet feet—and the scrape of razored claws. Short, guttural coughs echoed in the air. At the same time our nostrils were filled with a warm, fetid odor of jungle musk—the wild-beast smell that makes the short hairs rise on the nape of one's neck. More coughs—amplified to a menacing roar in the vast silence of that looming atmosphere. They were coming!

Down the runway stalked a tawny shape—the spotted, sinister shape of a giant African leopard; graceful as a serpent and beautiful as death. Green eyes roved restlessly over the arena with an emerald glare. Yellow fangs parted, revealing a long, slavering tongue. The beast slunk stiff-legged around the arena, then turned to us with a roar. I suddenly realized that I was bathed in perspiration.

Another yellow body catapulted into the cage. Like a streak of amber lightning it leapt to the bars and clawed madly at the steel. Suddenly it subsided, and sank to the sawdust in a spasm of insanely hysterical laughter. A third spotted devil entered, suavely. Like an overgrown cat it purred, mincing its way as it made a circuit of the cage. Feline-like, it rolled over on its mottled back, exposing a sleek belly beneath which muscles played like bands of pliable steel. The other two animals growled deeper still. Then, like a golden avalanche, a horde of fanged furies raced down the runway—six snarling demons charged into the arena, and hell broke loose. In a moment

the steel enclosure became a maelstrom of yellow shapes, tearing with frenzied talons at the iron barriers, and howling in fiendish chorus to the skies. There was death in their claws, hatred in their foam-flecked jowls, and blood-lust in their feral eyes. Beasts of the jungle, awaiting the coming of man.

They did not wait for long. Into the hippodrome stalked Captain Zaroff. A tall, thin, commanding figure of a man, his was the walk of a conqueror. Beneath his gorgeously-epauletted red coat I sensed the strength of supple sinews; the resiliency of his walk betrayed a perfection of muscular control. His face was immobile, but his eyes held a faint tinge of amusement. Slightly graying black hair worn in pompadour style, and a tiny waxed mustache—by these signs alone did he betray his foreign birth.

With a brief nod to the old man, he motioned the two assistants to unbar the cage. I gasped. For Zaroff had no chair! All he carried in his hand was a whip—to face nine ravening wild beasts, mad with animal excitement!

Clang. Steel grated on steel. The cage door was open. Quickly, Zaroff stepped inside—into that maelstrom of bared fangs, raking claws, and supple bodies crouched to kill. A roar of animal ferocity greeted his appearance. I gasped. Zaroff, weaponless in that vast cage with a jungle act! Every trainer carries both gun and chair during the breaking in of a new cat routine. With the points of the chair outthrust before him he can ward off the sudden charge of a nervous beast. The animal, confused by the underside of the chair presented before him, usually bruises his nose and paws on the four projecting legs. For many years this protection, slim as it is, has saved dozens of trainers' lives. But Zaroff had no chair. Nor was there a gun at his hip. Alone, he faced them—a

sneer on his face and a whip in his hand; man's eternal defiance of the brute.

For an instant he stood there just inside the cage, while ten feet away jungle eyes roved restlessly, jungle bodies flexed stealthily, jungle throats roared fear-somely. Suddenly, a leopard detached itself from the rest and began, ever so slowly, to edge its way forward on its belly. It was the big cat that had entered first. Zaroff watched it, his face flushed. To all intents and purposes the beast's body appeared relaxed, but it was slinking forward nevertheless, and its yellow tail lashed in fury.

WITHOUT warning, the leopard sprang. Into the air it soared, straight for Zaroff's shoulders; red maw glistening, ferocious claws outspread to rend, and tear, kill and destroy. Swift as the attack was, Zaroff had anticipated it. His hand shot out, loosing the thongs of the whip. The lash hissed like a serpent as it wriggled through the air. The heavy, weighted end curled smoothly around the spotted murderer, imprisoning the tawny neck and jerking the feline's body to the ground, where it lay choking and gasping for several moments. The other cats, meanwhile, had retreated to the other side of the cage. Zaroff, drenched and panting, turned his head to us—and smiled!

Then began the most amazing animal routine in circus history. While the old man and I trembled and the assistants gasped in awe, Zaroff, with only a whip in his hand, put those animals through paces so amazing that they pass the bounds of credibility. The beasts did everything but fly. Balancing, juggling, jumping, group-posing—everything in the regular wild-animal show repertoire was used and improved on. At the sound of Zaroff's whip every cat was in its place. Despite snarls, growls, and obvi-

ous attempts to buffet the trainer from their perches, the creatures obeyed him perfectly. It was a great act—and I sighed with relief when it was finished.

The old man waxed enthusiastic. Surely Captain Zaroff would make show history! How he ever got new cats intelligent enough to build a routine like that was a mystery. Zaroff should be more careful, though. It was a bad business, going into the cage with only a whip.

After we left the hippodrome I went over to the front office for a quiet smoke. Somehow I couldn't agree with the old man. The act was good, no doubt, but there were some queer things to be explained.

To begin with, I know enough about the big cage to realize that no trainer could do what Zaroff had done when his animals hated him. An act is built very slowly, one animal at a time; for the tamer must instill trust and respect into the minds of his performers. Learning the tricks is a task founded on affection for the teacher.

Yet the leopards hated Zaroff—hated and feared him!

Then, too—Zaroff knew that they were dangerous and unfriendly. Even a well-trained leopard is never tame, as a lion or a bear can be. And despite that knowledge, the captain was foolish enough not to use a chair.

Surely there was some mystery here. New African leopards, and a foreign trainer who dislikes strangers. Private cages for the beasts, and a special attendant. A wonderful act, beautifully performed by raw beasts who are openly antagonistic to their trainer.

I recalled some of the rumors floating around the lots concerning Zaroff and his cats. Something about queer adventures in Africa. Oh, well, it was all nonsense—the man was merely a skilful trainer. But even a skilful trainer cannot make

his animals work so *intelligently*. The whole thing was very strange. I decided to keep an eye on the man and wait for something to turn up. I didn't have to wait very long.

THREE days later the Ubangis arrived. They had been signed for the act in New York, and were shipped south under the personal supervision of Culper himself. To me they proved a woeful disappointment. Six small, timid-looking blacks; three male and three female—their only exotic feature was the widely publicized lip deformity that gave them mouths projecting almost a foot from their faces. Even this barbaric feature looked sadly incongruous, since all six wore American clothes. Imagine a Harlem flapper with lips a foot long and eight inches wide and you will get some picture of what I saw.

But the old man was pleased. The Ubangis must have special quarters. Was their interpreter here? He trusted that none of them had suffered overmuch on the journey. He hoped they would find the accommodations sufficiently comfortable. In the face of all this effusiveness, the blacks remained nervously silent. Without a word they suffered themselves to be led off to their sleeping-quarters.

During the next few days the Ubangis kept us busy. Not only did we have our hands full trying to explain their part in the performance through an interpreter, but we also had to contend with a really profound ignorance. They obviously knew the meaning of money—dollars meant francs, and francs meant luxury back on the Ivory Coast. That was why they had signed up. But as to the meaning of their duties, they were completely in the dark. Personally, I was not able to work up any enthusiasm over the whole venture. The poor savages were unhappy, the old man was unhappy, and

the prospects of box-office draw were uncertain. But the old man had to touch off the fireworks.

He decided to stage one of the preliminary rehearsals, and arrange for the Ubangis to attend. There they could actually see a circus, and perhaps their part would be easier to understand thereafter. I was not pleased with the idea, but it was carried out. The six blacks occupied one of the observation booths, and the show went on.

At first everything went smoothly enough. Even the savage can appreciate the instinctive appeal of clown humor, and realize the agility of the aerial performers. They beamed like carefree children and jabbered constantly among themselves.

I was waiting for Zaroff. I knew that for the past few days he had been rehearsing at great length, and was eager to observe the changes or improvements in his act. The rest of the show waited, too. They had never seen him work, and the rumors had only whetted their curiosity.

The act went on. For fifteen minutes all eyes were glued on that steel cage. Zaroff outdid himself that day. His whip for ever cracking, he put the carnivores through their paces in a way to keep everyone's attention riveted to the arena.

At last, when the coughing, snarling leopards had bounded back down the runway into their cages, the boss and I turned to the Ubangis to get their reaction.

It was not slow in coming. The entire troupe were excitedly haranguing one another in their box. At length they approached us, headed by their interpreter.

Hesitatingly, he announced that the troupe would not play in the show; that it resigned. Nor would he give any further explanation, save that the Ubangis

did not care for Captain Zaroff and his act.

The boss fumed, swore, threatened, entreated, and pleaded. It did not avail. The savages left the following day.

But before they departed I went around and had a talk with their interpreter myself. Somehow I sensed a mystery behind their reasons for departure, and I questioned the man very closely. At last he abandoned his reserve and told me the details as he had overheard them.

Briefly, the Ubangis did not like Zaroff's act, but their aversion did not have a natural cause. They were going because they thought Zaroff himself was a witch-doctor; because they had heard him *talk to his animals*.

Naturally I was inclined to scoff at this statement. But then I began to remember certain details. Zaroff lived alone, took care of his animals alone. He had his own cages, his own assistant keeper. He avoided company, and spent most of his time with the beasts. It was quite possible that he did talk to his leopards.

But when I told the interpreter, he laughed. The Ubangis knew of such men, and feared them. Zaroff was a wizard, for they could see that he talked to the animals and they answered him! They had seen Zaroff growl in the cage as if he himself were a beast, and they saw the leopards answer his commands. The man was an evil shaman.

That was the substance of the Ubangis' complaint, as I got it from the interpreter. I left him a puzzled man. There was something hidden away in my brain that was beginning to bother me as it tried to edge into consciousness. Something about leopards.

THE next day brought a train of events which further puzzled me.

I was walking through the menagerie quarters when the affair began. It was

mid-afternoon, and the place was deserted, for the entire troupe was over in the arena for regular rehearsals. I rounded the horseshoe bend where the regular cages stood, and passed by the partitioned section. Here Zaroff's leopards were quartered. Behind the canvas which screened the cages from the rest I caught a glimpse of booted feet. That would be Zaroff himself, feeding the beasts. Low moans and bestial laughter drifted over the canvas walls.

Then all at once I heard a sudden roar, louder than the rest, and a terrible clang of bars. Zaroff's voice rose in an angry curse, and it was answered by a terrible growl. Suddenly a streak of spotted lightning leapt through the side of the canvas, which shredded before saber claws. One of the leopards had escaped.

It landed on its feet and stood crouching there not a dozen feet before me; a great, tawny monster with flaming fury in its evil eyes. Slaver dripped from its wrinkled, furry snout as it glared at me with unmistakable menace. Its back stiffened, and I broke out into a cold sweat as the fanged horror edged toward me, tensing to spring. Quivering with fright I watched it, unable to move, or even breathe. Its feline gaze held me hypnotically rigid; for I knew that I was staring at the face of Death. The leopard gathered itself for a leap.

Crack! The sound of Zaroff's whip broke the tension. The tall figure stepped into view from behind the canvas, blazing fury in his face. At the sound of his master's approach the sullen carnivore turned. With a snarl it gazed up into the captain's face, but its body was still crouched and ready to hurtle in attack.

Then I heard with my own ears that which my mind told me could never be. I heard Zaroff talk to his leopard!

Low barks and growls issued from his throat. The voice of a beast came from

human lips. And the leopard answered! Cringing, it fawningly approached its trainer, growling in return. And its growls and cries held a note that was dreadfully, unmistakably *human!*

It was hideous to hear a beast murmuring like a man and a man roaring like a beast. I trembled afresh as Zaroff, with cries of animal rage, brought his whip down over the leopard's shoulders; brought it down with full force again and again until the poor creature's dappled hide was streaked with crimson stains. And all the while it kept whining, purring, pleading in monstrously human tones, while Zaroff screamed like a great cat.

With never a look or word for me, he drove the leopard to its quarters. From behind the canvas I heard the bars grate into their place once more, and then Zaroff reappeared.

This time he was not alone. There was a woman with him—a beautiful woman.

She was tall and slim, like a Grecian Diana, with a body of ivory and hair like ebony. Jade-green eyes dominated her aquiline face, contrasted oddly with her vivid red-lipped mouth and tiny white teeth. She wore a regal velvet dress which stood out incongruously amidst the sawdust atmosphere surrounding her.

I prided myself on knowing the entire personnel of our show, but I had never seen the woman before.

Zaroff, after apologizing to me for the disturbance, introduced her as his wife, Camille. The woman bowed graciously, but remained silent, eyeing her husband with restrained anger. I was speechless.

I had never known that Zaroff was married. I was just beginning to realize that there were a lot of things about him that I didn't know; a lot of things requiring considerable explanation. The

scene I had just witnessed, for example. He was explaining about that now.

With elaborate ostentation he again apologized for the accident. The beast had escaped as he was feeding it. He was very sorry, and he would see that it did not occur again. He would be extremely pleased if I would refrain from reporting the affair to the management; it would unnecessarily upset people, he explained.

Here the woman broke in.

"He's lying, *M'sieu*. It will happen again, I know. You must report it; it happened in Europe, and a little boy was killed. He did nothing to prevent it, *M'sieu*, even when it began to—feed. You must make him stop beating them—it frightens me. Please, tell them and make them stop him. Please!"

Zaroff's countenance, as he listened to this recital, turned red with rage. He raised his whip—the long, cruel whip, still red from the lashing of the leopard—and brought it down on the woman's back with full force. She screamed, once. Then he seized her, and without a backward glance, bore her behind the canvas.

I stood stunned at the rapidity of events, then stumbled off to my own quarters. I wanted to be alone and think.

Zaroff—a foreigner whom nobody knew; a man who beat his leopards and his wife. Zaroff—the most brilliant trainer I had ever seen; hated and feared by his animals, yet obeyed. Zaroff—the man who talked to his cats like a beast, while they answered with the cries of men; Zaroff, whom the Ubangi savages denounced as a witch-doctor and wizard. Who was this man? What was he? Why was he so furtive and unfriendly? What was he doing to his wife that made her hate and fear him as much as the leopards did?

Before the show opened that year I must find out. And Camille Zaroff, I

decided, was the woman who could and would tell me.

SHOW business occupied my time heavily for the next few days, but the mystery of Zaroff still occupied my thoughts. Somehow, I was beginning to hate the man. I disliked his cruel, unsmiling features, his reticent, almost disdainful manner, and his pompous, arrogant walk. I did not care for the way he treated his feline charges, and I did not wonder that his wife was afraid.

His wife—there was another angle. When I saw her she had been afraid, but I could see that she wanted to speak. Perhaps that was why Zaroff had kept her away from the rest of the show-people. Maybe she was his prisoner, because of what she knew. He had beaten her with the whip. . . .

He beat her often. Several nights later, as I went through the menagerie quarters on my way to the main office, I saw a light behind the canvas partition where Zaroff's tent stood. I am not by nature or inclination an eavesdropper, but no one could ignore the shouts that came from the other side. The voices were audible throughout the deserted menagerie, and I recognized the guttural tones of Zaroff blending with the thrilling, husky speech of his wife, Camille.

"I will tell them all," she was saying. "I can't stand it any longer, do you hear? Knowing what I know, and seeing what I see. Unless you stop this dreadful business, I will tell them all."

A cynical laugh, almost gloating in its sardonic cadence. That would be Zaroff.

"Oh, no you won't, my dear. I have been gentle with you in the past—too gentle. But if you persist in making these—ah—demonstrations, I can take harsher measures."

"I'm not afraid of you any more. Tomorrow I shall go to him who is the

head of this show and tell him the truth. You will no longer keep me caged up here like one of your beasts."

Again that mocking cackle of laughter from the man.

"So—I shall no longer cage you as I do my beasts, eh? We shall see. You know about my leopards, and what happened on the Guinea Coast, eh? Well—how would you like it if I were to——"

The voice trailed off here into a loathsome whisper, then culminated again in peal after peal of demoniacal mirth.

"No!" the woman screamed. "You dare not do that. I will go now—do you hear me?—now! I'll tell them all! Oh!"

There was a low moan, and then the hateful sound of a striking whip. Again and again I heard the hiss of a lash.

Clenching my hands in a frenzy of fury, I bit my lips to keep from crying aloud and rushing into that tent. I wanted to tear the whip from that unnatural monster and flog him. Red anger surged and poured into my brain, but something held me back.

There was more to this than a domestic quarrel. That woman, with her half-heard hints of secret things, was being mistreated for a purpose. It would do no good to accost Zaroff himself for an explanation and it would be worse than useless to precipitate a scene before the entire company. No, diplomacy urged me to wait. Tomorrow I would seek an opportunity to speak to Camille Zaroff alone. She would gladly talk then. Perhaps things could be straightened out.

Meanwhile, the show went into its final rehearsal in two days, and Zaroff was a good animal-trainer. I decided to bide my time, and left the tent. But that night I dreamed of a man, a leopard, and a whip. And the dream was far from pleasant. . . .

The next day brought with it an entirely unexpected surprize. At nine

o'clock a man walked into my office and casually took a seat. Looking up, I gazed into the impassive face of Captain Zaroff.

I was astonished. The man had never come to me before; he habitually kept away from the rest of the company. Concealing both my surprize and distaste, I asked him his business.

"I am bringing in a new animal for my act," he said, calmly.

For a moment I was too startled to speak. The final dress rehearsal only two days away, and he was going to work a new cat! It was unheard of. I told him so. Besides, what did he need a new leopard for?

"Do not worry," he assured. "It is already broken in; I—I had it shipped here this morning. And it is not a leopard—it is a black panther."

A black panther! That *was* a novelty. A trifle mollified, I told him that he would have to take the matter up with the boss.

"I will rehearse tomorrow afternoon," he agreed, suavely. "Would you care to come over and look at the animal?"

TOGETHER we walked across the lot and entered the menagerie. There were ten cages behind the canvas partition now. In nine were the leopards; the other held the new beast. We approached the bars.

There is nothing more beautiful than a black panther. Sleek, sinuous grace is personified in its ebony body, and aristocratic poise blazes forth from its jade eyes. Its nervous pace is regal; it is a picture of dignified beauty even when enraged. Consequently I expected much of Zaroff's acquisition. But I was to be disappointed.

The animal crouched behind the bars, its body limply lolling on the floor of the cage. Its exquisite black coat was disheveled, and on its back I detected the

marks of the whip. Had Zaroff already begun his usual practises? The animal's eyes were lusterless; they gazed on me with a sort of dazed, numb expression in their depths. It whined, piteously, and once again I was shocked at the almost human tones in the throat of a jungle beast. When Zaroff approached closer, the panther cringed, and crawled away from the bars.

"Is it sick?" I inquired.

Zaroff smiled. "No, my friend. Perhaps the journey has tired it—the change, shall we say? It will be all right."

The great black cat whined dolefully. It kept staring at me with those amber eyes—staring and staring, as if it were humanly aware of my presence. With a slight shudder, I turned away. In order to make conversation, I casually asked after the health of Zaroff's wife.

A queer look came into the man's face.

"She—she has gone away," he said. But his stolid features were averted. "She has been nervous and ill of late, so I thought it would be best if she went for a rest instead of going out with the show. We had an argument last night, and she took the train this morning."

The man is lying. Accuse him.

The words ate their way into my brain. *He may have beaten her to death.*

But such thoughts were mad. My eyes searched wildly for something on which to rest; something to divert my thoughts. I looked at the leopard cages. The cats were all curled up somnolently near the bars, as if they had just eaten. As if they were sated with food, rather.

Maybe he fed her to the leopards.

Was I really going insane?

She was going to tell a secret. I heard him threaten her with something, and he spoke of leopards before she screamed.

Why not? No one would ever know.

My mind rocked with chaotic confu-

sion. The woman was gone; as we passed the living-quarters I saw that the tent was empty and I knew he never allowed her to wander free. What had become of her?

Zaroff watched me with an enigmatic smile. Did he suspect?

"I will see you at rehearsal tomorrow," he said. "Good day."

I stumbled out into the menagerie. As I passed the last cage the panther raised its head and moaned.

I OFTEN wonder how I got through the rest of that day. The morbid suspicions that preyed on my mind had come to a harrowing climax. I kept thinking of Zaroff, and the queer rumors I had heard about the man. His leopards were queer, his act was queer, his whole history was shrouded in a cloak of nebulous dread. His wife knew, and she had disappeared. I must find out the truth.

But perhaps I was wrong. Imagination, once unleashed, can distort facts immeasurably. Possibly his wife had left. True, he had beaten her, but they do such things on the Continent. The leopards were queerly trained, but Zaroff was an eccentric man. Was I unduly suspicious?

These two conflicting trains of thought ran riot through my brain. The afternoon was a dream. I performed my routine functions automatically, but I could not forget. I neglected to inform the boss that Captain Zaroff had a new black panther, and I said nothing about the rehearsal on the following day.

That night was the beginning of the end.

What impelled me I cannot say, but I felt that I must learn the truth. So at midnight I rose from my restless cot and staggered off to Zaroff's quarters. The lot was black and deserted, save for the looming shadows that lurked and capered

in the corners beneath a leering yellow moon.

There was a light in Zaroff's tent when I entered. How I meant to excuse myself or what I intended to say I did not know. But Zaroff took the situation into his own hands.

He was quite drunk. There was a bottle on the table before him, and another on the floor. He sat there sprawled back so that he resembled a seated corpse in the dim light, and his face was equally pale. He had discarded his uniform, but the ever-present whip still rested on the ground beside him.

"Sit down, my friend," he mumbled. His foreign accent became more noticeable under the influence of liquor.

I seated myself beside him and haltingly began to talk. But his libations had made him loquacious, and he interrupted.

I cannot say to this day what got him started, or whether he was too drunk to understand, but he told me plenty.

Somehow he launched out on the story of his career during the war. He had, it seems, been an officer in the "Belgische Congo." Later, he had become an animal trader in Senegal, and served as guide to several expeditions on the Sierra Leone coast.

I let him ramble, occasionally prompting him to refill his glass. Sooner or later, I believed, something would slip out. It did.

As the shadows about us deepened, his voice became lower and more confidential. He was speaking of the blacks now—the furtive, sinister blacks of Sierra Leone, who practised voodoo and obeah rites in the hidden swamps. He told me of the witch-doctors who invoked the Crocodile God to the beat of jungle drums; spoke of the snake-gods of secret, inner Africa. And he whispered of the Leopard-men.

I had heard of them before—the human leopards of Sierra Leone, whose cult was dedicated to the beasts of the forest. They were said to be vampires, possessing the power of anthropomorphism; that is, they could, by means of secret spells, become leopards themselves. This they were reputed to do, at certain times. As leopards they lay in wait for their enemies and destroyed them, or else invoked their rites to transform their foes into animals. I had read newspaper stories about the British police and their futile efforts to stamp out the dreaded clan.

Zaroff, mumbling incoherently, told me of these things again; spoke of how he himself had been initiated into the Leopard Cult one night beneath the waning autumn moon that gloats over Africa when the devil drums boom in nighted swamps. He told me of the spells he had learned from the shriveled arch-priests, and of the powers he could invoke by chants and rituals.

"Remember the legend of Circe?" he whispered, and his eyes were alight with unnatural flame. "Man into beast. Man into beast."

Abruptly he recovered himself once more, and changed the subject. By now he was so drunk that his voice slurred unintelligibly as he droned on. All I could catch were occasional phrases, but that was enough.

"I decided to show the fools a real act . . . knew the proper spells . . . rest was easy . . . nobody suspected. . . . Came to Europe with me. . . . Wish to God I'd never met and married that slut . . . spying on me at night . . . found out . . . spoiled the act . . . that damned child. . . . They wanted blood . . . scandal. . . . Looked all right here, but those Ubangis knew . . . her stubbornness . . . had to do it . . . was the only way. . . ."

As his voice droned on, his body slid flaccidly to the floor. I left, but I had not

found the satisfaction I sought. Instead, my heart was filled with a greater and more hideous unease.

The man's drunken tales had disturbed me. Of course all that rot about Leopardmen was childish, but still I felt afraid. There were those who believed it, and some of his furtive hints had smacked of the truth. Funny, what liquor will do to a man. But I could not dismiss the incident so easily. There was a strange and terrible mystery here.

As I stalked off to my quarters I saw the blazing eyes of the black panther staring silently at me in the darkness. A crazy thought assailed me—perhaps it knew the truth! With a shaky smile I turned away.

OF COURSE I should have reported all this to the boss. A drunken trainer who abuses his animals is never to be tolerated in a show. But something held me back. I would at least wait until the final rehearsal the following afternoon. Zaroff would work the new panther then, and there would be a showdown.

There was a showdown, but not the kind I expected.

I can see it now, in my mind's eye—that bare arena, with the great steel cage in the center. The boss and I were sitting in the box, just as we had sat that first day. The clown number had just ended, and now four men took their places about the grim, barred barrier.

Zaroff swaggered into view. Despite his debauchery of the previous evening he was as cool and erect as ever. As he entered the little green-grilled door, his hand clenched tightly about the butt of his whip.

The runway into the arena jerked into place between the bars. The wooden gates opened.

Claws and fangs clicking, growls and coughs rumbling, tongues lolling and

tails lashing, the leopards entered. Tawny bodies and green eyes, red throats and white teeth.

Nine leopards, and then—the panther.

The leopards had raced in, roaring their defiance. The panther sidled down the runway with stealthy tread. It uttered no sound, but entered the arena like a silent black shadow.

Zaroff cracked his whip. But today the leopards did not move. Instead, they held their places, a note of menace rumbling low in their great throats. They gave the curious impression that they were waiting for something. Zaroff cracked his whip again, impatiently.

The black panther padded over to the group of giant cats, then turned and stared at Zaroff.

Captain Zaroff stared back. There was a strange look on his face; he actually appeared to be nervous. He cracked his whip again, and swore. The growling in the leopards' throats rose in a thundering crescendo, but they did not move. The panther lashed its tail and continued to stare hypnotically at the tamer with evil, lambent eyes.

Sweat broke out on Zaroff's brow. I could have sworn that I saw a look of positive hate on that black beast's face as it gazed at the man. The trainers, guns ready, moved closer to the bars outside. They sensed something. Why didn't the man do something?

The leopards roared louder. They were grouped behind the panther now, and the panther, step by step, was slowly inching forward. Its tail shot erect, but it never took its eyes from Zaroff's tormented white face.

Suddenly, with a shriek of almost human fury, the black body of the beast rose in the air and sprang for Zaroff's neck. The leopards closed in, and the man went down beneath the fangs of ten jungle cats. There were shrieks from

crimson-dabbled lips, then all sound was blotted out, as the four trainers shot blindly, pumping lead into that knot of blazing yellow bodies, shooting and shooting and shooting. . . .

THE end came quickly, and only dead bodies remained about the mangled ruins of the thing that had once been Captain Zaroff.

Nobody ever speaks of that scene any more, but the tragedy itself was not the greatest horror. For I found the truth in Zaroff's private papers, and learned those things that had been hidden.

Now I know why Zaroff left Africa, and what he had really learned about the Cult of the Leopard-men. I know now why he boasted that he was going to have the greatest animal act in the world, and why he took such unusual precautions to guard and care for the beasts himself. I know how he was able to train them so well, and why the Ubangis thought he was talking to the creatures.

And I know just how his wife went away, too, and what she would have tried to tell the boss. It's not pleasant knowledge—those things in the papers and diaries of the dead trainer.

But it is infinitely more endurable than the memory of that last terrible sight—that dreadful glimpse of what lay in the arena when Zaroff, the leopards and the panther died. I can never forget that, because it is the final proof of all I dreaded to believe.

Captain Zaroff's chewed and lacerated form lay in a great pool of blood. Around him were the bodies of what the men with the guns had slain—nine bodies, not of leopards, but of negro men. Negro Leopard-men, from Africa.

And the tenth—the dreadful thing that was tearing at Zaroff's throat; the new black panther with the human eyes—*was his wife, Camille!*