"THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME" (Rko Radio, 1932) Directed by Ernest B. Schoedsack and Irving Pichel; Produced by Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper; Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; screenplay by James Ashmore Creelman from the prize-winning short story by Richard Connell; Camera: Henry Gerrard; Music by Max Steiner; With Leslie Banks, Fay Wray, Joel McCrea, Robert Armstrong, Noble Johnson, Steve Clemento, DuBose Hendrix, Wm. B. Davidson, James Flavin, Hale Hamilton

Although Richard Connell was an experienced screen-writer, he never worked on movie adaptations of his own short stories (which ranged from tonight's film to "Brother Orchid") and indeed his originals are clearly written as pithy, punchy tales, models of brevity with no thought of moulding them to possible future movie requirements. His brilliantly written "The Most Dangerous Game" can be read quite comfortably in half-an-hour; there is no romantic interest, an economy of detail and an unadorned climax, in which the entire final sequence takes place off-screen (or off-page) and is disposed of in one line of dialogue! Creelman's screenplay is a brilliantly controlled expansion, translated into thoroughly cinematic terms, making the most of its visual potential, but still retaining the indited concentration on the story itself, so that at six reels it is quite certainly the tautest, tightest little thriller ever made. Produced while Schoedsack and Cooper were also working on "King Kong", it benefits not only from the overlapping of the film but from the collaboration of the same technicians, the use of some of the same sets (the same log from which Kong shakes the hapless sailors is put to good use here), and above all from a stunning Max Steiner score — quite certainly the best score written for any movie to that date (scores were still regarded with suspicion as artificial and unrealistic contrivances) although even it would be eclipsed by Steiner's "Kong" score. The film's script also utilizes the basic construction of "Kong" — a rehearser but unrelenting build-up, and then a release of physical action that is maintained on an almost hysterical level. (Creelman worked on the "Kong" scenario too). Taking its full-blooded melodrama quite seriously, it never shrinks from grim physical detail (the crunching bones in the climactic fight are another happy borrowing from "Kong"), delivers one superbly melodramatic and magnificently theatrical line after another, and scores especially strongly with the outstanding bravura performance of Leslie Banks (possibly even more effective than now, for this was his first film and his face and personality were totally new). I suppose it's "ham" in a way, but it's brilliant ham — the kind of ham that Lugosi should have brought to "Dracula", and never quite managed, bless his heart!

Several times remade (sometimes unofficially, in pirated "B" films like "Kill or Be Killed" which gave no credit to the Connell original) "The Most Dangerous Game" is currently being prepared for another go-round — although fortunately Warren Beatty has just written another "hunter" hunt which is more than flesh and blood could stand. The last version, "Run for the Sun" (with Richard Widmark and Trevor Howard) proved the validity of Connell's story and the first film version by repudiating them; it was twice as long, and the basic story didn't even get under way until the second half! Tonight's excerpts are from the second version, "A Game of Death" (1946), made in those days when you could recognise a Robert Wise film by his style ("The Body Snatchers", "The Set-Up") and not just by the credits (but same name and same music). This second version follows the original faithfully, shot by shot, line by line, for the first third, the only superficial difference being that the villain was no longer a Russian, but had been changed into a German giving to mouting Nazi slogans! (Now it's time for the Red Chinese to get into the act!) But then the apparent necessity to give the film an extra reel's length results in new sub-plots — the hero pretending to play along with the villain for example — neatly dovetailed into the new script, but serving only as delaying tactics and reducing the suspense accordingly. Too, though well directed and edited, this new version had a totally studio look to it (the first one was wholly studio-made, but never showed it), and Edgar Barrier's villain played things much too straight. However, the basic story was still such a darned good one that even a less stylised and more straightforward action-adventure approach still paid off. The climax offers an interesting lesson in editing too, in that many original shots are re-used, and at one point henchman Noble Johnson passes himself in the fog!  --- Wm.K.Everson ---