

The Most Dangerous Game – Richard Connell

Off there to the right—somewhere—is a large island,” said Whitney. “It’s rather a mystery—” “What island is it?” Rainsford asked.

“The old charts call it Ship-Trap Island,” Whitney replied. “Sailors have a curious dread of the place. The place has a reputation—a bad one.”

“Cannibals?” suggested Rainsford.

“Hardly. Even cannibals wouldn’t live in such a Godforsaken place. But it’s gotten into sailor lore, somehow. Didn’t you notice that the crew’s nerves seemed a bit jumpy today? Even Captain Nielsen, that tough-minded old Swede, who’d go up to the devil himself and ask him for a light. Those fishy blue eyes held a look I never saw there before. All I could get out of him was: ‘This place has an evil name among seafaring men, sir.’”

“Pure imagination,” said Rainsford, an expert hunter, who knew no fear. “One superstitious sailor can taint the whole ship’s company with his fear.”

“Anyhow, I’m glad we’re getting out of this zone. Well, I think I’ll turn in now, Rainsford.”

“I’m not sleepy,” said Rainsford. “I’m going to smoke another pipe on the afterdeck. Good night, Whitney.”

Through the soundless night, Rainsford heard three gunshots off to the right. Rainsford sprang up and moved quickly to the rail of the ship, mystified. He strained his eyes in the direction from which the shots had come, but it was like trying to see through a blanket. He leapt upon the rail to get greater elevation but he lost his balance and suddenly he found the blood-warm waters of the Caribbean Sea closing over his head.

He struggled up to the surface and tried to cry out, but the waves from the speeding yacht slapped him in the face and salt water filled his open mouth. Desperately he tried to swim after the **receding** lights of the yacht, but he stopped before he had swum fifty feet. There was little chance that his cries could be heard by someone aboard the yacht. Rainsford remembered the shots. They had come from the right, and he swam in that direction until he heard another sound.

A high screaming sound, the sound of an animal in an extremity of anguish and terror. He did not recognize the animal that made the sound; but swam toward it. He heard it again; then it was cut short by another pistol shot. Finally, Rainsford heard the sound of the sea breaking on a rocky shore. He dragged himself from the swirling waters, flung himself down at the jungle edge and fell into the deepest sleep of his life.

When he opened his eyes, it was already afternoon and he felt a sharp hunger. He looked about almost cheerfully. “Where there are pistol shots, there are men. Where there are men, there is food,” he thought. But what kind of men, he wondered, in so forbidding a place?

He examined the ground closely and found the print of hunting boots. Eagerly he hurried along; night was beginning to settle down on the island. Bleak darkness was blacking out the sea and jungle when Rainsford sighted lights. To his great astonishment, it was not a village, but one enormous building—a lofty structure with pointed towers plunging upward into the gloom.

At first Rainsford thought it could not be real, but the stone steps were real enough, the massive door was real enough, and the creak of the knocker as he lifted it was also real enough. The knocker startled him with its booming loudness. The door opened suddenly and Rainsford was face to face with the largest man he had ever seen. In his hand the man held a long-barreled revolver, and he was pointing it straight at Rainsford's heart.

"Don't be alarmed," said Rainsford, with a smile which he hoped was **disarming**. "I'm no robber. My name is Sanger Rainsford of New York City. I fell off a yacht. I am hungry."

The man's only answer was to raise with his thumb the hammer of his revolver. Then the man's free hand went to his forehead in a military salute, he clicked his heels together and stood at attention. Another man was coming down the broad marble steps. He advanced to Rainsford and held out his hand.

"It is a very great pleasure and honor to welcome you Mr. Sanger Rainsford, the celebrated hunter, to my home."

Automatically Rainsford shook the man's hand.

"I've read your book about hunting snow leopards in Tibet, you see," explained the man. "I am General Zaroff." At this, the giant put away his pistol, saluted, and withdrew.

"Ivan is an incredibly strong fellow," remarked the general, "but he has the misfortune to be deaf and dumb. A simple fellow, but I'm afraid, a bit of a savage. Come, we can talk later. Now you want clothes, food, rest. You shall have them. This is a most restful spot."

Ivan reappeared. Follow Ivan, if you please, Mr. Rainsford," said the general. "I was about to have my dinner, but I'll wait for you."

After changing, Rainsford returned downstairs to a magnificent dining room. About the hall were the mounted heads of many animals—lions, tigers, elephants, moose, bears; larger or more perfect specimens Rainsford had never seen. At the great table the general was sitting, alone.

"Perhaps," said General Zaroff, "you were surprised that I recognized your name. You see, I read all books on hunting. I have but one passion in my life, Mr. Rainsford, and it is the hunt. Here in my preserve on this island," he said in a slow tone, "I hunt more dangerous game."

Rainsford expressed his surprise. "Is there big game on this island?" The general nodded. "The biggest." "Really?"

"Oh, it isn't here naturally, of course. I have to stock the island. I have hunted every kind of game in every land. It would be impossible for me to tell you how many animals I have killed. But when I too easily **surmounted** each new animal I hunted, I had to invent a new animal to hunt," he said.

"A new animal? You're joking."

"Not at all," said the general. "I never joke about hunting. I needed a new animal. I found one. So I bought this island, built this house, and here I do my hunting. The island is perfect for my purposes—there are jungles with a maze of trails in them, hills, swamps—"

"But the animal, General Zaroff?"

“I wanted the ideal animal to hunt,” explained the general. “So I said: ‘What are the attributes of an ideal quarry?’ And the answer was, of course: ‘It must have courage, cunning, and, above all, it must be able to reason.’”

“But no animal can reason,” objected Rainsford.

“My dear fellow,” said the general, “there is one that can.”

“I can’t believe you are serious, General Zaroff,” gasped Rainsford. “This is a grisly joke.”

“Why should I not be serious? I never joke about hunting.”

“Hunting? Good God, General Zaroff, what you speak of is murder. They are men!”

The general laughed with entire good nature and quite **unruffled**. “That is why I use them. It gives me pleasure. They can reason, after a fashion. So they are dangerous.”

The General went on to explain how many ships were dashed on the rocks surrounding the island. “And the survivors, I treat these visitors with every consideration. They get plenty of good food and exercise. It’s a game, you see. I suggest to one of them that we go hunting. I give him a supplies and a three hours’ start. I am to follow, armed only with a pistol of the smallest caliber and range. If my quarry eludes me for three whole days, he wins the game. If I find him”—the general smiled—“he loses.”

“Suppose he refuses to be hunted?”

“Oh,” said the general, “I give him his option, of course. He need not play that game if he doesn’t wish to. If he does not wish to hunt, I turn him over to Ivan, who has his own ideas of sport. **Invariably**, Mr. Rainsford, invariably they choose the hunt.”

“And if they win?” The smile on the general’s face widened. “To date I have not lost.” he said.

“I hope,” said Rainsford, “that you will excuse me tonight, General Zaroff. I’m really not feeling at all well.”

“Ah, indeed?” the general inquired. “Well, I suppose that’s only natural, after your long swim. You need a good, restful night’s sleep. Tomorrow we’ll hunt, eh? I’ve one rather promising prospect—”

Rainsford hurried from the room. Despite the comforts of his bedroom, Rainsford had difficulty sleeping. The next morning, Rainsford expressed his wishes to leave the island at once.

“But, my dear fellow,” the general protested, “you’ve only just come. You’ve had no hunting.”

“I wish to go today,” said Rainsford. He saw the dead black eyes of the general on him, studying him. General Zaroff’s face suddenly brightened.

“Tonight,” said the general, “we will hunt—you and I.” Rainsford shook his head. “No, general,” he said. “I will not hunt.”

The general shrugged his shoulders. “As you wish, my friend,” he said. “Though **imprudent**, the choice

rests entirely with you. But may I not venture to suggest that you will find my idea of sport more **diverting** than Ivan's?"

"You don't mean—" cried Rainsford.

"My dear fellow," said the general, "have I not told you I always mean what I say about hunting? At last, you are a foeman worthy of my steel. Your brain against mine. Your woodcraft against mine. Your strength and stamina against mine."

"And if I win—" began Rainsford huskily.

"I'll cheerfully acknowledge myself defeated if I do not find you by midnight of the third day, and my ship will place you on the mainland near a town. Ivan will supply you with hunting clothes, food, a knife. Avoid the big swamp in the southeast corner of the island; there's quicksand there. You'll want to start immediately. I shall not follow till dusk. Hunting at night is so much more exciting than by day. Au revoir, Mr. Rainsford, au revoir." General Zaroff left to take his afternoon siesta and from another door came Ivan with provisions for Rainsford.

At first, Rainsford just wanted to put distance between himself and General Zaroff, but after two hours, he stopped to assess his situation. "I'll give him a trail to follow," muttered Rainsford. He executed a series of intricate loops; he doubled on his trail again and again. As night fell, he climbed a tree with a thick trunk and outspread branches, taking care to leave not the slightest mark. He stretched out on one of the broad limbs to rest. Toward morning he was awakened by the sound of General Zaroff coming through the brush.

Rainsford's first **impulse** was to hurl himself down like a panther, but he saw the general's right hand held a small pistol. The general's sharp eyes had left the ground and were traveling inch by inch up the tree, but stopped before they reached the limb where Rainsford lay. A smile spread over Zaroff's brown face. He turned his back on the tree and walked carelessly away. Rainsford was at first stunned that the general could follow such a difficult trail at night. But his next thought was worse. Why had the general smiled? Why had he turned back? The general was **prolonging** the hunt! The general was saving him for another day's sport!

Rainsford formulated his first trap. He found a huge dead tree leaned on a smaller living one. Throwing off his sack, Rainsford took his knife from its sheath and began to work. When the job was finished, he threw himself down behind a fallen log a hundred feet away. He did not have to wait long.

Following the trail with the sureness of a bloodhound came General Zaroff. So intent was he on his stalking that he was upon the thing Rainsford had made before he saw it. His foot touched the **protruding** tree limb that was the trigger. As he touched it, the general sensed his danger and leapt back. But he was not quite quick enough; the dead tree, delicately adjusted to rest on the cut living one, crashed down and struck the general a glancing blow on the shoulder as it fell. He staggered, but he did not fall; nor did he drop his revolver.

"Rainsford," called the general, "let me congratulate you. Not many men know how to make a Malay man-catcher. You are proving interesting, Mr. Rainsford. I am going now to have my wound dressed, but I shall be back. I shall be back."

When the general had gone, Rainsford took up his flight again until his foot sank into the ooze. He knew where he was now. Death Swamp and its quicksand. An idea for a second trap came to him. Rainsford

dug a pit and planted saplings sharpened into fine pointed stakes in the bottom of the pit with the points sticking up. He covered the mouth of the pit with a rough carpet of weeds and branches. Then, he hid again to wait for General Zaroff.

He soon heard the padding sound of feet on the soft earth, but could not see the general nor the pit. Rainsford leapt up from his place of concealment when he heard the sharp crackle of the breaking branches as the cover of the pit gave way and the sharp scream of pain as the pointed stakes found their mark. Then he cowered back. Three feet from the pit was General Zaroff.

“You’ve done well, Rainsford,” the general called. “Your Burmese tiger pit claimed one of my best dogs. I’m going home for a rest, but later I’ll see what you can do against my whole pack.”

At daybreak, Rainsford was awakened by the distant baying of a pack of dogs. An idea that held a wild chance came to him, a third trap. From the tree he had climbed, Rainsford saw the giant Ivan holding the pack in leash just ahead of General Zaroff. They would be on him any minute now, so Rainsford prepared a native trick he had learned in Uganda. He slid down the tree. He caught hold of a springy young sapling and to it he fastened his hunting knife, with the blade pointing down the trail; with a bit of wild grapevine he tied back the sapling. Then he ran until the baying of the hounds stopped abruptly. They must have reached the knife.

Rainsford climbed excitedly up a tree and looked back. His pursuers had stopped. But the knife had killed Ivan, not General Zaroff. Rainsford ran again, this time toward the shore of the sea. Across a cove he could see gloomy gray stone of Zaroff’s home. Twenty feet below him the sea rumbled. Rainsford hesitated. He heard the hounds. Then he leapt far out into the sea...

When the general and his pack reached the sea, the general stopped. For some minutes he stood regarding the blue-green expanse of water. Then he shrugged his shoulders and headed home. General Zaroff had an exceedingly good dinner in that evening. Two slight annoyances kept him from perfect enjoyment. One was the thought that it would be difficult to replace Ivan; the other was that his quarry had escaped him; of course the American hadn’t played the game fairly. Later when he locked his bedroom and he switched on the light, he was startled by a man, who had been hiding in the curtains of the bed.

“Rainsford!” screamed the general. “How in God’s name did you get here?”

“Swam,” said Rainsford. “I found it quicker than walking through the jungle.”

The general sucked in his breath and smiled. “I congratulate you,” he said. “You have won.”

Rainsford did not smile. “I am still a beast at bay,” he said, in a low, hoarse voice. “Get ready, General Zaroff.”

The general made one of his deepest bows. “I see,” he said. “Splendid! One of us is to furnish a meal for the hounds. The other will sleep in this very excellent bed. On guard, Rainsford...”

He had never slept in a better bed, Rainsford decided.