The Most Dangerous Game.

by Richard Connell (1893-1949)

"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." A

suggestive name, isn't it? Sailors have a curious dread of the place. I

don't know why. Some superstition--"

"Can't see it," remarked Rainsford, trying to peer through the dank

tropical night that was palpable as it pressed its thick warm blackness

in upon the yacht.

"You've good eyes," said Whitney, with a laugh," and I've seen you pick

off a moose moving in the brown fall bush at four hundred yards, but

even you can't see four miles or so through a moonless Caribbean night."

"Nor four yards," admitted Rainsford. "Ugh! It's like moist black velvet."

"It will be light enough in Rio," promised Whitney. "We should make it

in a few days. I hope the jaguar guns have come from Purdey's. We should

have some good hunting up the Amazon. Great sport, hunting."

"The best sport in the world," agreed Rainsford.

"For the hunter," amended Whitney. "Not for the jaguar."

"Don't talk rot, Whitney," said Rainsford. "You're a big-game hunter,

not a philosopher. Who cares how a jaguar feels?"

"Perhaps the jaguar does," observed Whitney.

"Bah! They've no understanding."

"Even so, I rather think they understand one thing--fear. The fear of

pain and the fear of death."

"Nonsense," laughed Rainsford. "This hot weather is making you soft,

Whitney. Be a realist. The world is made up of two classes--the hunters

and the huntees. Luckily, you and I are hunters. Do you think we've

passed that island yet?"

"I can't tell in the dark. I hope so."

"Why? " asked Rainsford.

"The place has a reputation--a bad one."

"Cannibals?" suggested Rainsford.

"Hardly. Even cannibals wouldn't live in such a God-forsaken place. But

it's gotten into sailor lore, somehow. Didn't you notice that the crew's

nerves seemed a bit jumpy today?"

"They were a bit strange, now you mention it. Even Captain Nielsen--"

"Yes, even 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.' Then he said to me, very gravely, `Don't

you feel anything?'--as if the air about us was actually poisonous. Now,

you mustn't laugh when I tell you this--I did feel something like a

sudden chill.

"There was no breeze. The sea was as flat as a plate-glass window. We

were drawing near the island then. What I felt was a--a mental chill; a

sort of sudden dread."

"Pure imagination," said Rainsford.

"One superstitious sailor can taint the whole ship's company with his fear."

"Maybe. But sometimes I think sailors have an extra sense that tells

them when they are in danger. Sometimes I think evil is a tangible

thing--with wave lengths, just as sound and light have. An evil place

can, so to speak, broadcast vibrations of evil. 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 up on

the afterdeck."

"Good night, then, Rainsford. See you at breakfast."

"Right. Good night, Whitney."

There was no sound in the night as Rainsford sat there but the muffled

throb of the engine that drove the yacht swiftly through the darkness,

and the swish and ripple of the wash of the propeller.

Rainsford, reclining in a steamer chair, indolently puffed on his

favorite brier. The sensuous drowsiness of the night was on him." It's

so dark," he thought, "that I could sleep without closing my eyes; the

night would be my eyelids--"

An abrupt sound startled him. Off to the right he heard it, and his

ears, expert in such matters, could not be mistaken. Again he heard the

sound, and again. Somewhere, off in the blackness, someone had fired a

gun three times.

Rainsford sprang up and moved quickly to the rail, mystified. He

strained his eyes in the direction from which the reports had come, but

it was like trying to see through a blanket. He leaped upon the rail and

balanced himself there, to get greater elevation; his pipe, striking a

rope, was knocked from his mouth. He lunged for it; a short, hoarse cry

came from his lips as he realized he had reached too far and had lost

his balance. The cry was pinched off short as the blood-warm waters of

the Caribbean Sea dosed over his head.

He struggled up to the surface and tried to cry out, but the wash from

the speeding yacht slapped him in the face and the salt water in his

open mouth made him gag and strangle. Desperately he struck out with

strong strokes after the receding lights of the yacht, but he stopped

before he had swum fifty feet. A certain coolheadedness had come to him;

it was not the first time he had been in a tight place. There was a

chance that his cries could be heard by someone aboard the yacht, but

that chance was slender and grew more slender as the yacht raced on. He

wrestled himself out of his clothes and shouted with all his power. The

lights of the yacht became faint and ever-vanishing fireflies; then they

were blotted out entirely by the night.

Rainsford remembered the shots. They had come from the right, and

doggedly he swam in that direction, swimming with slow, deliberate

strokes, conserving his strength. For a seemingly endless time he fought

the sea. He began to count his strokes; he could do possibly a hundred

more and then--

Rainsford heard a sound. It came out of the darkness, 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; he did not try to;

with fresh vitality he swam toward the sound. He heard it again; then it

was cut short by another noise, crisp, staccato.

"Pistol shot," muttered Rainsford, swimming on.

Ten minutes of determined effort brought another sound to his ears--the

most welcome he had ever heard--the muttering and growling of the sea

breaking on a rocky shore. He was almost on the rocks before he saw

them; on a night less calm he would have been shattered against them.

With his remaining strength he dragged himself from the swirling waters.

Jagged crags appeared to jut up into the opaqueness; he forced himself

upward, hand over hand. Gasping, his hands raw, he reached a flat place

at the top. Dense jungle came down to the very edge of the cliffs. What

perils that tangle of trees and underbrush might hold for him did not

concern Rainsford just then. All he knew was that he was safe from his

enemy, the sea, and that utter weariness was on him. He flung himself

down at the jungle edge and tumbled headlong into the deepest sleep of

his life.

When he opened his eyes he knew from the position of the sun that it was

late in the afternoon. Sleep had given him new vigor; a sharp hunger was

picking at him. He looked about him, 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? An unbroken front of snarled and ragged jungle

fringed the shore.

He saw no sign of a trail through the closely knit web of weeds and

trees; it was easier to go along the shore, and Rainsford floundered

along by the water. Not far from where he landed, he stopped.

Some wounded thing--by the evidence, a large animal--had thrashed about

in the underbrush; the jungle weeds were crushed down and the moss was

lacerated; one patch of weeds was stained crimson. A small, glittering

object not far away caught Rainsford's eye and he picked it up. It was

an empty cartridge.

"A twenty-two," he remarked. "That's odd. It must have been a fairly

large animal too. The hunter had his nerve with him to tackle it with a

light gun. It's clear that the brute put up a fight. I suppose the first

three shots I heard was when the hunter flushed his quarry and wounded

it. The last shot was when he trailed it here and finished it."

He examined the ground closely and found what he had hoped to find--the

print of hunting boots. They pointed along the cliff in the direction he

had been going. Eagerly he hurried along, now slipping on a rotten log

or a loose stone, but making headway; night was beginning to settle down

on the island.

Bleak darkness was blacking out the sea and jungle when Rainsford

sighted the lights. He came upon them as he turned a crook in the coast

line; and his first thought was that be had come upon a village, for

there were many lights. But as he forged along he saw to his great

astonishment that all the lights were in one enormous building--a lofty

structure with pointed towers plunging upward into the gloom. His eyes

made out the shadowy outlines of a palatial chateau; it was set on a

high bluff, and on three sides of it cliffs dived down to where the sea

licked greedy lips in the shadows.

"Mirage," thought Rainsford. But it was no mirage, he found, when he

opened the tall spiked iron gate. The stone steps were real enough; the

massive door with a leering gargoyle for a knocker was real enough; yet

above it all hung an air of unreality.

He lifted the knocker, and it creaked up stiffly, as if it had never

before been used. He let it fall, and it startled him with its booming

loudness. He thought he heard steps within; the door remained closed.

Again Rainsford lifted the heavy knocker, and let it fall. The door

opened then--opened as suddenly as if it were on a spring--and Rainsford

stood blinking in the river of glaring gold light that poured out. The

first thing Rainsford's eyes discerned was the largest man Rainsford had

ever seen--a gigantic creature, solidly made and black bearded to the

waist. In his hand the man held a long-barreled revolver, and he was

pointing it straight at Rainsford's heart.

Out of the snarl of beard two small eyes regarded Rainsford.

"Don't be alarmed," said Rainsford, with a smile which he hoped was

disarming. "I'm no robber. I fell off a yacht. My name is Sanger

Rainsford of New York City."

The menacing look in the eyes did not change. The revolver pointing as

rigidly as if the giant were a statue. He gave no sign that he

understood Rainsford's words, or that he had even heard them. He was

dressed in uniform--a black uniform trimmed with gray astrakhan.

"I'm Sanger Rainsford of New York," Rainsford began again. "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 Rainsford saw the man's free hand go to his forehead in a

military salute, and he saw him click his heels together and stand at

attention. Another man was coming down the broad marble steps, an erect,

slender man in evening clothes. He advanced to Rainsford and held out

his hand.

In a cultivated voice marked by a slight accent that gave it added

precision and deliberateness, he said, "It is a very great pleasure and

honor to welcome 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."

Rainsford's first impression was that the man was singularly handsome;

his second was that there was an original, almost bizarre quality about

the general's face. He was a tall man past middle age, for his hair was

a vivid white; but his thick eyebrows and pointed military mustache were

as black as the night from which Rainsford had come. His eyes, too, were

black and very bright. He had high cheekbones, a sharpcut nose, a spare,

dark face--the face of a man used to giving orders, the face of an

aristocrat. Turning to the giant in uniform, the general made a sign.

The giant put away his pistol, saluted, 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,

like all his race, a bit of a savage."

"Is he Russian?"

"He is a Cossack," said the general, and his smile showed red lips and

pointed teeth. "So am I."

"Come," he said, "we shouldn't be chatting here. We can talk later. Now

you want clothes, food, rest. You shall have them. This is a

most-restful spot."

Ivan had reappeared, and the general spoke to him with lips that moved

but gave forth no sound.

"Follow Ivan, if you please, Mr. Rainsford," said the general. "I was

about to have my dinner when you came. I'll wait for you. You'll find

that my clothes will fit you, I think."

It was to a huge, beam-ceilinged bedroom with a canopied bed big enough

for six men that Rainsford followed the silent giant. Ivan laid out an

evening suit, and Rainsford, as he put it on, noticed that it came from

a London tailor who ordinarily cut and sewed for none below the rank of

duke.

The dining room to which Ivan conducted him was in many ways remarkable.

There was a medieval magnificence about it; it suggested a baronial hall

of feudal times with its oaken panels, its high ceiling, its vast

refectory tables where twoscore men could sit down to eat. About the

hall were 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.

"You'll have a cocktail, Mr. Rainsford," he suggested. The cocktail was

surpassingly good; and, Rainsford noted, the table apointments were of

the finest--the linen, the crystal, the silver, the china.

They were eating /borsch/, the rich, red soup with whipped cream so dear

to Russian palates. Half apologetically General Zaroff said, "We do our

best to preserve the amenities of civilization here. Please forgive any

lapses. We are well off the beaten track, you know. Do you think the

champagne has suffered from its long ocean trip?"

"Not in the least," declared Rainsford. He was finding the general a

most thoughtful and affable host, a true cosmopolite. But there was one

small trait of .the general's that made Rainsford uncomfortable.

Whenever he looked up from his plate he found the general studying him,

appraising him narrowly.

"Perhaps," said General Zaroff, "you were surprised that I recognized

your name. You see, I read all books on hunting published in English,

French, and Russian. I have but one passion in my life, Mr. Rains. ford,

and it is the hunt."

"You have some wonderful heads here," said Rainsford as he ate a

particularly well-cooked filet mignon. "That Cape buffalo is the

largest I ever saw."

"Oh, that fellow. Yes, he was a monster."

"Did he charge you?"

"Hurled me against a tree," said the general. "Fractured my skull. But I

got the brute."

"I've always thought," said Rains{ord, "that the Cape buffalo is the

most dangerous of all big game."

For a moment the general did not reply; he was smiling his curious

red-lipped smile. Then he said slowly, "No. You are wrong, sir. The Cape

buffalo is not the most dangerous big game." He sipped his wine. "Here

in my preserve on this island," he said in the same 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."

"What have you imported, general?" Rainsford asked. "Tigers?"

The general smiled. "No," he said. "Hunting tigers ceased to interest me

some years ago. I exhausted their possibilities, you see. No thrill left

in tigers, no real danger. I live for danger, Mr. Rainsford."

The general took from his pocket a gold cigarette case and offered his

guest a long black cigarette with a silver tip; it was perfumed and gave

off a smell like incense.

"We will have some capital hunting, you and I," said the general. "I

shall be most glad to have your society."

"But what game--" began Rainsford.

"I'll tell you," said the general. "You will be amused, I know. I think

I may say, in all modesty, that I have done a rare thing. I have

invented a new sensation. May I pour you another glass of port?"

"Thank you, general."

The general filled both glasses, and said, "God makes some men poets.

Some He makes kings, some beggars. Me He made a hunter. My hand was made

for the trigger, my father said. He was a very rich man with a quarter

of a million acres in the Crimea, and he was an ardent sportsman. When I

was only five years old he gave me a little gun, specially made in

Moscow for me, to shoot sparrows with. When I shot some of his prize

turkeys with it, he did not punish me; he complimented me on my

marksmanship. I killed my first bear in the Caucasus when I was ten. My

whole life has been one prolonged hunt. I went into the army--it was

expected of noblemen's sons--and for a time commanded a division of

Cossack cavalry, but my real interest was always the hunt. 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."

The general puffed at his cigarette.

"After the debacle in Russia I left the country, for it was imprudent

for an officer of the Czar to stay there. Many noble Russians lost

everything. I, luckily, had invested heavily in American securities, so

I shall never have to open a tearoom in Monte Carlo or drive a taxi in

Paris. Naturally, I continued to hunt--grizzliest in your Rockies,

crocodiles in the Ganges, rhinoceroses in East Africa. It was in Africa

that the Cape buffalo hit me and laid me up for six months. As soon as I

recovered I started for the Amazon to hunt jaguars, for I had heard they

were unusually cunning. They weren't." The Cossack sighed. "They were no

match at all for a hunter with his wits about him, and a high-powered

rifle. I was bitterly disappointed. I was lying in my tent with a

splitting headache one night when a terrible thought pushed its way into

my mind. Hunting was beginning to bore me! And hunting, remember, had

been my life. I have heard that in America businessmen often go to

pieces when they give up the business that has been their life."

"Yes, that's so," said Rainsford.

The general smiled. "I had no wish to go to pieces," he said. "I must do

something. Now, mine is an analytical mind, Mr. Rainsford. Doubtless

that is why I enjoy the problems of the chase."

"No doubt, General Zaroff."

"So," continued the general, "I asked myself why the hunt no longer

fascinated me. You are much younger than I am, Mr. Rainsford, and have

not hunted as much, but you perhaps can guess the answer."

"What was it?"

"Simply this: hunting had ceased to be what you call `a sporting

proposition.' It had become too easy. I always got my quarry. Always.

There is no greater bore than perfection."

The general lit a fresh cigarette.

"No animal had a chance with me any more. That is no boast; it is a

mathematical certainty. The animal had nothing but his legs and his

instinct. Instinct is no match for reason. When I thought of this it was

a tragic moment for me, I can tell you."

Rainsford leaned across the table, absorbed in what his host was saying.

"It came to me as an inspiration what I must do," the general went on.

"And that was?"

The general smiled the quiet smile of one who has faced an obstacle and

surmounted it with success. "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 traits in them, hills,

swamps--"

"But the animal, General Zaroff?"

"Oh," said the general, "it supplies me with the most exciting hunting

in the world. No other hunting compares with it for an instant. Every

day I hunt, and I never grow bored now, for I have a quarry with which I

can match my wits."

Rainsford's bewilderment showed in his face.

"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."

"But you can't mean--" gasped Rainsford.

"And why not?"

"I can't believe you are serious, General Zaroff. This is a grisly joke."

"Why should I not be serious? I am speaking of hunting."

"Hunting? Great Guns, General Zaroff, what you speak of is murder."

The general laughed with entire good nature. He regarded Rainsford

quizzically. "I refuse to believe that so modern and civilized a young

man as you seem to be harbors romantic ideas about the value of human

life. Surely your experiences in the war--"

"Did not make me condone cold-blooded murder," finished Rainsford stiffly.

Laughter shook the general. "How extraordinarily droll you are!" he

said. "One does not expect nowadays to find a young man of the educated

class, even in America, with such a naive, and, if I may say so,

mid-Victorian point of view. It's like finding a snuffbox in a

limousine. Ah, well, doubtless you had Puritan ancestors. So many

Americans appear to have had. I'll wager you'll forget your notions when

you go hunting with me. You've a genuine new thrill in store for you,

Mr. Rainsford."

"Thank you, I'm a hunter, not a murderer."

"Dear me," said the general, quite unruffled, "again that unpleasant

word. But I think I can show you that your scruples are quite ill founded."

"Yes?"

"Life is for the strong, to be lived by the strong, and, if needs be,

taken by the strong. The weak of the world were put here to give the

strong pleasure. I am strong. Why should I not use my gift? If I wish to

hunt, why should I not? I hunt the scum of the earth: sailors from tramp

ships--lassars, blacks, Chinese, whites, mongrels--a thoroughbred horse

or hound is worth more than a score of them."

"But they are men," said Rainsford hotly.

"Precisely," said the general. "That is why I use them. It gives me

pleasure. They can reason, after a fashion. So they are dangerous."

"But where do you get them?"

The general's left eyelid fluttered down in a wink. "This island is

called Ship Trap," he answered. "Sometimes an angry god of the high seas

sends them to me. Sometimes, when Providence is not so kind, I help

Providence a bit. Come to the window with me."

Rainsford went to the window and looked out toward the sea.

"Watch! Out there!" exclaimed the general, pointing into the night.

Rainsford's eyes saw only blackness, and then, as the general pressed a

button, far out to sea Rainsford saw the flash of lights.

The general chuckled. "They indicate a channel," he said, "where there's

none; giant rocks with razor edges crouch like a sea monster with

wide-open jaws. They can crush a ship as easily as I crush this nut." He

dropped a walnut on the hardwood floor and brought his heel grinding

down on it. "Oh, yes," he said, casually, as if in answer to a question,

"I have electricity. We try to be civilized here."

"Civilized? And you shoot down men?"

A trace of anger was in the general's black eyes, but it was there for

but a second; and he said, in his most pleasant manner, "Dear me, what a

righteous young man you are! I assure you I do not do the thing you

suggest. That would be barbarous. I treat these visitors with every

consideration. They get plenty of good food and exercise. They get into

splendid physical condition. You shall see for yourself tomorrow."

"What do you mean?"

"We'll visit my training school," smiled the general. "It's in the

cellar. I have about a dozen pupils down there now. They're from the

Spanish bark San Lucar that had the bad luck to go on the rocks out

there. A very inferior lot, I regret to say. Poor specimens and more

accustomed to the deck than to the jungle." He raised his hand, and

Ivan, who served as waiter, brought thick Turkish coffee. Rainsford,

with an effort, held his tongue in check.

"It's a game, you see," pursued the general blandly. "I suggest to one

of them that we go hunting. I give him a supply of food and an excellent

hunting knife. I give him 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. Ivan once had the honor of serving as official

knouter to the Great White Czar, and he 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. Then he added, hastily: "I don't wish you to think me a braggart,

Mr. Rainsford. Many of them afford only the most elementary sort of

problem. Occasionally I strike a tartar. One almost did win. I

eventually had to use the dogs."

"The dogs?"

"This way, please. I'll show you."

The general steered Rainsford to a window. The lights from the windows

sent a flickering illumination that made grotesque patterns on the

courtyard below, and Rainsford could see moving about there a dozen or

so huge black shapes; as they turned toward him, their eyes glittered

greenly.

"A rather good lot, I think," observed the general. "They are let out at

seven every night. If anyone should try to get into my house--or out of

it--something extremely regrettable would occur to him." He hummed a

snatch of song from the /Folies Bergere/.

"And now," said the general, "I want to show you my new collection of

heads. Will you come with me to the library?"

"I hope," said Rainsford, "that you will excuse me tonight, General

Zaroff. I'm really not feeling well."

"Ah, indeed?" the general inquired solicitously. "Well, I suppose that's

only natural, after your long swim. You need a good, restful night's

sleep. Tomorrow you'll feel like a new man, I'll wager. Then we'll hunt,

eh? I've one rather promising prospect--" Rainsford was hurrying from

the room.

"Sorry you can't go with me tonight," called the general. "I expect

rather fair sport--a big, strong, black. He looks resourceful--Well,

good night, Mr. Rainsford; I hope you have a good night's rest."

The bed was good, and the pajamas of the softest silk, and he was tired

in every fiber of his being, but nevertheless Rainsford could not quiet

his brain with the opiate of sleep. He lay, eyes wide open. Once he

thought he heard stealthy steps in the corridor outside his room. He

sought to throw open the door; it would not open. He went to the window

and looked out. His room was high up in one of the towers. The lights of

the chateau were out now, and it was dark and silent; but there was a

fragment of sallow moon, and by its wan light he could see, dimly, the

courtyard. There, weaving in and out in the pattern of shadow, were

black, noiseless forms; the hounds heard him at the window and looked

up, expectantly, with their green eyes. Rainsford went back to the bed

and lay down. By many methods he tried to put himself to sleep. He had

achieved a doze when, just as morning began to come, he heard, far off

in the jungle, the faint report of a pistol.

General Zaroff did not appear until luncheon. He was dressed faultlessly

in the tweeds of a country squire. He was solicitous about the state of

Rainsford's health.

"As for me," sighed the general, "I do not feel so well. I am worried,

Mr. Rainsford. Last night I detected traces of my old complaint."

To Rainsford's questioning glance the general said, "Ennui. Boredom."

Then, taking a second helping of cr�pes Suzette, the general

explained: "The hunting was not good last night. The fellow lost his

head. He made a straight trail that offered no problems at all. That's

the trouble with these sailors; they have dull brains to begin with, and

they do not know how to get about in the woods. They do excessively

stupid and obvious things. It's most annoying. Will you have another

glass of Chablis, Mr. Rainsford?"

"General," said Rainsford firmly, "I wish to leave this island at once."

The general raised his thickets of eyebrows; he seemed hurt. "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.

He filled Rainsford's glass with venerable Chablis from a dusty bottle.

"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 and delicately ate a hothouse grape.

"As you wish, my friend," he said. "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?"

He nodded toward the corner to where the giant stood, scowling, his

thick arms crossed on his hogshead of chest.

"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? This is really an inspiration. I drink to a

foeman worthy of my steel - at last." The general raised his glass, but

Rainsford sat staring at him.

"You'll find this game worth playing," the general said

enthusiastically." Your brain against mine. Your woodcraft against mine.

Your strength and stamina against mine. Outdoor chess! And the stake is

not without value, eh?"

"And if I win -" began Rainsford huskily.

"I'll cheerfully acknowledge myself defeat if I do not find you by

midnight of the third day," said General Zaroff. "My sloop will place

you on the mainland near a town." The general read what Rainsford was

thinking.

"Oh, you can trust me," said the Cossack. "I will give you my word as a

gentleman and a sportsman. Of course you, in turn, must agree to say

nothing of your visit here."

"I'll agree to nothing of the kind," said Rainsford.

"Oh," said the general, "in that case... But why discuss that now? Three

days hence we can discuss it over a bottle of Veuve Cliquot, unless..."

The general sipped his wine.

Then a businesslike air animated him. "Ivan," he said to Rainsford,

"will supply you with hunting clothes, food, a knife. I suggest you wear

moccasins; they leave a poorer trail. I suggest, too, that you avoid the

big swamp in the southeast corner of the island. We call it Death Swamp.

There's quicksand there. One foolish fellow tried it. The deplorable

part of it was that Lazarus followed him. You can imagine my feelings,

Mr. Rainsford. I loved Lazarus; he was the finest hound in my pack.

Well, I must beg you to excuse me now. I always' take a siesta after

lunch. You'll hardly have time for a nap, I fear. You'll want to start,

no doubt. I shall not follow till dusk. Hunting at night is so much more

exciting than by day, don't you think? Au revoir, Mr. Rainsford, au

revoir." General Zaroff, with a deep, courtly bow, strolled from the room.

From another door came Ivan. Under one arm he carried khaki hunting

clothes, a haversack of food, a leather sheath containing a long-bladed

hunting knife; his right hand rested on a cocked revolver thrust in the

crimson sash about his waist.

Rainsford had fought his way through the bush for two hours. "I must

keep my nerve. I must keep my nerve," he said through tight teeth.

He had not been entirely clearheaded when the chateau gates snapped shut

behind him. His whole idea at first was to put distance between himself

and General Zaroff; and, to this end, he had plunged along, spurred on

by the sharp rowers of something very like panic. Now he had got a grip

on himself, had stopped, and was taking stock of himself and the

situation. He saw that straight flight was futile; inevitably it would

bring him face to face with the sea. He was in a picture with a frame of

water, and his operations, clearly, must take place within that frame.

"I'll give him a trail to follow," muttered Rainsford, and he struck off

from the rude path he had been following into the trackless wilderness.

He executed a series of intricate loops; he doubled on his trail again

and again, recalling all the lore of the fox hunt, and all the dodges of

the fox. Night found him leg-weary, with hands and face lashed by the

branches, on a thickly wooded ridge. He knew it would be insane to

blunder on through the dark, even if he had the strength. His need for

rest was imperative and he thought, "I have played the fox, now I must

play the cat of the fable." A big tree with a thick trunk and outspread

branches was near by, and, taking care to leave not the slightest mark,

he climbed up into the crotch, and, stretching out on one of the broad

limbs, after a fashion, rested. Rest brought him new confidence and

almost a feeling of security. Even so zealous a hunter as General Zaroff

could not trace him there, he told himself; only the devil himself could

follow that complicated trail through the jungle after dark. But perhaps

the general was a devil--

An apprehensive night crawled slowly by like a wounded snake and sleep

did not visit Rainsford, although the silence of a dead world was on the

jungle. Toward morning when a dingy gray was varnishing the sky, the cry

of some startled bird focused Rainsford's attention in that direction.

Something was coming through the bush, coming slowly, carefully, coming

by the same winding way Rainsford had come. He flattened himself down on

the limb and, through a screen of leaves almost as thick as tapestry, he

watched. . . . That which was approaching was a man.

It was General Zaroff. He made his way along with his eyes fixed in

utmost concentration on the ground before him. He paused, almost beneath

the tree, dropped to his knees and studied the ground. Rainsford's

impulse was to hurl himself down like a panther, but he saw that the

general's right hand held something metallic--a small automatic pistol.

The hunter shook his head several times, as if he were puzzled. Then he

straightened up and took from his case one of his black cigarettes; its

pungent incenselike smoke floated up to Rainsford's nostrils.

Rainsford held his breath. The general's eyes had left the ground and

were traveling inch by inch up the tree. Rainsford froze there, every

muscle tensed for a spring. But the sharp eyes of the hunter stopped

before they reached the limb where Rainsford lay; a smile spread over

his brown face. Very deliberately he blew a smoke ring into the air;

then he turned his back on the tree and walked carelessly away, back

along the trail he had come. The swish of the underbrush against his

hunting boots grew fainter and fainter.

The pent-up air burst hotly from Rainsford's lungs. His first thought

made him feel sick and numb. The general could follow a trail through

the woods at night; he could follow an extremely difficult trail; he

must have uncanny powers; only by the merest chance had the Cossack

failed to see his quarry.

Rainsford's second thought was even more terrible. It sent a shudder of

cold horror through his whole being. Why had the general smiled? Why had

he turned back?

Rainsford did not want to believe what his reason told him was true, but

the truth was as evident as the sun that had by now pushed through the

morning mists. The general was playing with him! The general was saving

him for another day's sport! The Cossack was the cat; he was the mouse.

Then it was that Rainsford knew the full meaning of terror.

"I will not lose my nerve. I will not."

He slid down from the tree, and struck off again into the woods. His

face was set and he forced the machinery of his mind to function. Three

hundred yards from his hiding place he stopped where a huge dead tree

leaned precariously on a smaller, living one. Throwing off his sack of

food, Rainsford took his knife from its sheath and began to work with

all his energy.

The job was finished at last, and he threw himself down behind a fallen

log a hundred feet away. He did not have to wait long. The cat was

coming again to play with the mouse.

Following the trail with the sureness of a bloodhound came General

Zaroff. Nothing escaped those searching black eyes, no crushed blade of

grass, no bent twig, no mark, no matter how faint, in the moss. So

intent was the Cossack on his stalking that he was upon the thing

Rainsford had made before he saw it. His foot touched the protruding

bough that was the trigger. Even as he touched it, the general sensed

his danger and leaped back with the agility of an ape. 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; but for his alertness, he must have been

smashed beneath it. He staggered, but he did not fall; nor did he drop

his revolver. He stood there, rubbing his injured shoulder, and

Rainsford, with fear again gripping his heart, heard the general's

mocking laugh ring through the jungle.

"Rainsford," called the general, "if you are within sound of my voice,

as I suppose you are, let me congratulate you. Not many men know how to

make a Malay mancatcher. Luckily for me I, too, have hunted in Malacca.

You are proving interesting, Mr. Rainsford. I am going now to have my

wound dressed; it's only a slight one. But I shall be back. I shall be

back."

When the general, nursing his bruised shoulder, had gone, Rainsford took

up his flight again. It was flight now, a desperate, hopeless flight,

that carried him on for some hours. Dusk came, then darkness, and still

he pressed on. The ground grew softer under his moccasins; the

vegetation grew ranker, denser; insects bit him savagely.

Then, as he stepped forward, his foot sank into the ooze. He tried to

wrench it back, but the muck sucked viciously at his foot as if it were

a giant leech. With a violent effort, he tore his feet loose. He knew

where he was now. Death Swamp and its quicksand.

His hands were tight closed as if his nerve were something tangible that

someone in the darkness was trying to tear from his grip. The softness

of the earth had given him an idea. He stepped back from the quicksand a

dozen feet or so and, like some huge prehistoric beaver, he began to dig.

Rainsford had dug himself in in France when a second's delay meant

death. That had been a placid pastime compared to his digging now. The

pit grew deeper; when it was above his shoulders, he climbed out and

from some hard saplings cut stakes and sharpened them to a fine point.

These stakes he planted in the bottom of the pit with the points

sticking up. With flying fingers he wove a rough carpet of weeds and

branches and with it he covered the mouth of the pit. Then, wet with

sweat and aching with tiredness, he crouched behind the stump of a

lightning-charred tree.

He knew his pursuer was coming; he heard the padding sound of feet on

the soft earth, and the night breeze brought him the perfume of the

general's cigarette. It seemed to Rainsford that the general was coming

with unusual swiftness; he was not feeling his way along, foot by foot.

Rainsford, crouching there, could not see the general, nor could he see

the pit. He lived a year in a minute. Then he felt an impulse to cry

aloud with joy, for he heard the sharp crackle of the breaking branches

as the cover of the pit gave way; he heard the sharp scream of pain as

the pointed stakes found their mark. He leaped up from his place of

concealment. Then he cowered back. Three feet from the pit a man was

standing, with an electric torch in his hand.

"You've done well, Rainsford," the voice of the general called. "Your

Burmese tiger pit has claimed one of my best dogs. Again you score. I

think, Mr. Rainsford, Ill see what you can do against my whole pack. I'm

going home for a rest now. Thank you for a most amusing evening."

At daybreak Rainsford, lying near the swamp, was awakened by a sound

that made him know that he had new things to learn about fear. It was a

distant sound, faint and wavering, but he knew it. It was the baying of

a pack of hounds.

Rainsford knew he could do one of two things. He could stay where he was

and wait. That was suicide. He could flee. That was postponing the

inevitable. For a moment he stood there, thinking. An idea that held a

wild chance came to him, and, tightening his belt, he headed away from

the swamp.

The baying of the hounds drew nearer, then still nearer, nearer, ever

nearer. On a ridge Rainsford climbed a tree. Down a watercourse, not a

quarter of a mile away, he could see the bush moving. Straining his

eyes, he saw the lean figure of General Zaroff; just ahead of him

Rainsford made out another figure whose wide shoulders surged through

the tall jungle weeds; it was the giant Ivan, and he seemed pulled

forward by some unseen force; Rainsford knew that Ivan must be holding

the pack in leash.

They would be on him any minute now. His mind worked frantically. He

thought of 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 for his life. The

hounds raised their voices as they hit the fresh scent. Rainsford knew

now how an animal at bay feels.

He had to stop to get his breath. The baying of the hounds stopped

abruptly, and Rainsford's heart stopped too. They must have reached the

knife.

He shinned excitedly up a tree and looked back. His pursuers had

stopped. But the hope that was in Rainsford's brain when he climbed

died, for he saw in the shallow valley that General Zaroff was still on

his feet. But Ivan was not. The knife, driven by the recoil of the

springing tree, had not wholly failed.

Rainsford had hardly tumbled to the ground when the pack took up the cry

again.

"Nerve, nerve, nerve!" he panted, as he dashed along. A blue gap showed

between the trees dead ahead. Ever nearer drew the hounds. Rainsford

forced himself on toward that gap. He reached it. It was the shore of

the sea. Across a cove he could see the gloomy gray stone of the

chateau. Twenty feet below him the sea rumbled and hissed. Rainsford

hesitated. He heard the hounds. Then he leaped far out into the sea. . . .

When the general and his pack reached the place by the sea, the Cossack

stopped. For some minutes he stood regarding the blue-green expanse of

water. He shrugged his shoulders. Then be sat down, took a drink of

brandy from a silver flask, lit a cigarette, and hummed a bit from

/Madame Butterfly/.

General Zaroff had an exceedingly good dinner in his great paneled

dining hall that evening. With it he had a bottle of /Pol Roger/ and

half a bottle of /Chambertin/. 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--so thought the general as he tasted

his after-dinner liqueur. In his library he read, to soothe himself,

from the works of Marcus Aurelius. At ten he went up to his bedroom. He

was deliciously tired, he said to himself, as he locked himself in.

There was a little moonlight, so, before turning on his light, he went

to the window and looked down at the courtyard. He could see the great

hounds, and he called, "Better luck another time," to them. Then he

switched on the light.

A man, who had been hiding in the curtains of the bed, was standing there.

"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 the game."

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 repast 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.