

Who cares about how the animals feel? Rainsford laughed.

The Most Dangerous Game

abridged

By Richard Connell

“This weather is terrible,” Rainsford said. “The fog is so thick I can’t see my hand in front of me.”

“Don’t worry;” Whitney said. “We should have good hunting weather when we get to port.”

“When hunting I forget about the weather.”

“It’s a great sport for the hunter but not for the animal.”

“Who cares about how the animals feel?” Rainsford laughed.

“I’m sure that they feel one thing,” his friend answered. “They must feel fear—fear of pain and fear of death.”

Then Whitney yawned. “I’m going to get some sleep now. Goodnight.”

Rainsford was not tired. He paced the deck wishing that the ship would go faster.

From across the water he heard a strange sound. Somewhere off in the darkness someone had fired a gun three times. He went to the rail and leaned over. At the same moment the boat turned. Rainsford lost his balance and fell into the water.

The ship was speeding out of sight. Nobody knew what had happened to Rainsford. He began to swim in the direction where the shots had come from. Maybe there was an island out there. Where there were guns there were men. Where there were men there would be food and shelter.

It was a good guess. Ten minutes later Rainsford pulled himself over some sharp rocks and onto the shore. He fell fast asleep.

He woke up early the next morning and began to explore the island. Not far away he found an empty rifle shell. There were signs that a large animal had been wounded there. Some leaves nearby were stained red. There were tracks of hunting boots. Rainsford followed them and came to a huge, gloomy mansion. He could hardly believe his good luck.

The door was opened by the biggest man he had ever seen. In his hand the man held a long revolver. It was pointed at Rainsford’s heart.

“I’m not a robber,” Rainsford said. “I fell off a ship. My name is Sam Rainsford. I’m from New York City.” The look in the man’s eyes did not change. He gave no sign he understood what Rainsford said. His only answer was to raise the gun an inch. Then he turned and saluted a man coming toward them.

“It is a great pleasure and honor to welcome Mr. Sam Rainsford, the famous hunter, to my home. My name is General Zaroff. This is my island.” He turned to his servant and said, “Ivan, put away your gun. Come, Mr. Rainsford, we can talk later. Right now you need food and rest.”

The dinner that night was the best that Rainsford had ever tasted. The general showed him every hospitality. “Perhaps,” he said, “you were surprised that I recognize your name. You see, I read all I can about hunting. I have only one interest in life, and this is the hunt.”

“Is there game on this island?”

“Yes,” said the general, “the most dangerous game.”

“Really?” asked Rainsford. “What’s that? Tigers?”

“No,” replied the general. “For me there is no thrill left in hunting tigers. I live for real danger. I have hunted every kind of game in every land. It would be impossible to count how many wild animals I have killed. But hunting had become too easy for me. I always got what I went after. Always. It became boring, until I began to hunt the most dangerous game.”

“And what was that?” asked Rainsford, really interested.

“I needed a new animal.”

“A new one?”

“I found one. Now I hunt almost every day. I never get bored. I hunt an animal that can think,” the general said.

“There is only one animal that can think. You can’t mean... ?”

“And why not?”

“General Zaroff, you’re not speaking of hunting, you’re speaking of murder.”

“Never! With me it’s a fair contest. I bring my guests to the island especially for that reason. I give them food and an excellent ‘hunting knife. I also give them a three hours start. If they escape for two days, they win. If I find them—they lose.”

“This is mad! You hunt men!”

“And tonight I’ll enjoy my greatest hunt,” continued General Zaroff with an evil smile.

“Tonight I’ll hunt a real hunter. You will be my hunted guest tonight.”

“If I refuse?”

“You can’t refuse. My servants won’t let you.”

“What if I win?”

“If you escape for two days I will have a ship of mine take you back to civilization.”

Ivan pushed Sam Rainsford out of the gate at nine that night. For a half hour, Rainsford ran like a frightened animal. His only thought was getting as far away as possible from General Zaroff. But the island was small. He could not go far in any direction before coming to the sea.

“I must think clearly,” he said to himself. “I’ll give him a false trail to follow.” He made a series of circles and doubled back on his trail again and again. Toward dawn he climbed up a tree and stretched but on a limb. No one could follow the trail, he thought. For a while he rested.

Rainsford was wakened by the sound of footsteps coming his way. It was General Zaroff. He was carefully looking at the ground. He shook his head many times, noticing every leaf and twig that was out of place. Rainsford held his breath. ‘The general’s eyes left the ground and traveled inch by inch up the tree. His sharp eyes stopped before they reached the limb where Rainsford rested. A smile spread over his face. Then he turned and walked back along the trail.

Rainsford’s first thought made him feel sick. The general was a really great hunter. He could follow a trail through the woods at night. Only by luck had he missed seeing Rainsford. But Rainsford’s second thought was even more terrible. Why had the general smiled? Why had he turned back? Zaroff was playing with him! The general was saving him for another day’s sport!

“I will not lose my nerve. I will not.” He slid down the tree and went on through the woods. He forced himself to think. Three hundred yards from his hiding place he stopped where a huge dead tree leaned on a smaller living one. Rainsford took out his knife and began to work with all of his strength.

When the job was finished he hid behind a fallen log. He didn’t have to wait long. The cat was coming again to play with the mouse.

Again, nothing escaped Zaroff’s eyes. His gun gleamed in the sunlight. His foot touched the trap that Rainsford had set. The general sensed danger and leaped back as quickly as an acrobat. But he was not quick enough. The dead tree crashed down and struck the general on the shoulder. He stumbled but did not fall.

“Rainsford, if you can hear my voice, let me congratulate you. Not many men could have set a trap for me. I’m going back to take care of my shoulder, but I will be back.”

Rainsford ran away like a madman. It was getting dark again. The ground became soft. He was in a part of the island that was jungle. He took a step forward. His foot sank into the mud. He pulled it out with a great effort. Quicksand!

He had another idea. He stepped back from the quicksand and began to dig. When he had dug a pit he could stand up in, he climbed out, cut some sticks and sharpened each one to a fine

point. He forced them into the mud at the bottom with the points sticking up. He hid the opening under some loose weeds and waited.

This time he heard a new sound--barking and sniffing. General Zaroff was using a dog to find him. He heard the sound of crashing and a yelp of pain. The pointed sticks' went through their target. Then he heard a voice.

“You’ve done well, Rainsford. Your trap has killed one of my best dogs. I’m going home to rest now, but I will be back this afternoon. Let’s see what you can do against a whole pack of my dogs.

Rainsford was desperate. He was out of new ideas. Late that afternoon, as he was running along the cliff above the sea, he heard the barking of the hounds. He waited until he could see them. Forty feet below he could also see the ocean waves crashing against the sharp rocks. There was only one chance. Anything was better than facing the general’s dogs. He turned and leaped far out into the water.

When the general reached the cliff he was disappointed. Rainsford had chosen the coward’s way out. Zaroff was cheated out of his prize. For a few minutes he watched the wild water. No one could live through that. He walked back to the house.

General Zaroff at a good dinner that night. It was a shame that the famous American hunter had not played fair. But there would be other guests and other hunts. “Better luck next time.” At ten he went up to his bedroom.

A shadow by the window moved toward him.

“Rainsford? How did you get here?”

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

The general smiled. “I congratulate you. You have won the game.”

“Do you think I believe that you will really let me escape? Do you think I won’t tell the police about this island and your terrible hunting?”

“I see,” said the general. “The hunted has turned on the hunter. Well, one of us will sleep in this excellent bed tonight. Defend yourself!”

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