

# 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. “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  
10 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,”<sup>1</sup> 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?”

20 “Perhaps the jaguar does,” observed Whitney.

“Bah! They’ve no understanding.” **A**

## ANALYZE VISUALS

What **mood** does the photo stir in you? Decide which details work to evoke this feeling.

## **A** CONFLICT

Reread lines 16–21. What can you conclude about Rainsford from his conflict with Whitney?

1. **Rio:** Rio de Janeiro (rê’ô dâ zhê-nâr’ô), a city on the coast of Brazil.

“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.

30 “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?”

“They were a bit strange, now you mention it. Even Captain Nielsen—”

40 “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. **B**

“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.”

50 “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 wavelengths, 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.

60 Rainsford, reclining in a steamer chair, indolently puffed on his favorite brier.<sup>2</sup> 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—” **C**

**B PREDICT**

Reread lines 30–41. Notice that even a hard-boiled sailor is fearful of the island. What do you predict might happen on the island?

**tangible** (tăn’jə-bəl) *adj.* capable of being touched or felt; having actual form and substance

**C VISUALIZE**

Reread lines 59–62, try to visualize Rainsford. What does the author’s description tell you about Rainsford’s mood?

2. **brier** (brī’ər): a tobacco pipe.

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 closed 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 cool-headedness 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. **D**

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; 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. **E**

**D CONFLICT**

Here the author builds **suspense** by introducing a complication. What do you think will happen next?

**E VISUALIZE**

Reread lines 93–104. Which details in this passage help you visualize the scene?

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  
110 place? An unbroken front of snarled and ragged jungle fringed the shore. **F**

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 had 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  
120 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  
130 the lights. He came upon them as he turned a crook in the coastline, and his first thought was that he 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 about it all  
140 hung an air of unreality. **G**

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

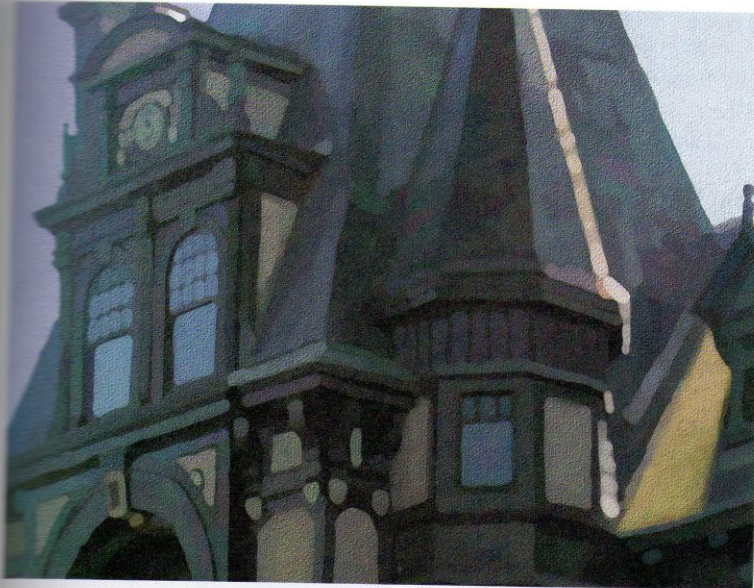
**F PREDICT**

Answer Rainsford’s question. What kind of men do you think Rainsford will encounter on the island?

**quarry** (kwôr’ē) *n.* the object of a hunt; prey

**G VISUALIZE**

Reread lines 129–140. Describe your mental image of the chateau. Does it seem like a warm and welcoming place? Explain.



Castle at Noon, William Low. © William Low.

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 pointed 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.<sup>3</sup>

"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."

**disarming** (dīs-är'mīng)  
*adj.* removing or  
overcoming  
suspicion; inspiring  
confidence

**cultivated** (kūl'tē-vā'tīd)  
*adj.* refined or cultured  
in manner

3. **astrakhan** (äs'trē-kän'): a fur made from the curly, wavy wool of young lambs from Astrakhan (a city of southwest Russia).

Automatically Rainsford shook the man's hand.

170 "I've read your book about hunting snow leopards in Tibet,<sup>4</sup> 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, 180 for his hair was a vivid white; but his thick eyebrows and pointed military moustache were as black as the night from which Rainsford had come. His eyes, too, were black and very bright. He had high cheekbones, a sharp-cut nose, a spare, dark face, the face of a man used to giving orders, the face of an aristocrat. Turning to the giant 190 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?"

200 "He is a Cossack,"<sup>5</sup> 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."



4. **Tibet** (tə-bět'): a region in central Asia.

5. **Cossack** (kōs'āk): a member of a southern Russian people, many of whom served as fierce cavalrymen under the Russian tsars.

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 table where two score men could sit down to eat. 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.

"You'll have a cocktail, Mr. Rainsford," he suggested. The cocktail was surpassingly good; and, Rainsford noted, the table appointments 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.<sup>6</sup> 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. Rainsford, 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 Rainsford, "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."

**amenity** (ə-mĕn'ĭ-tē)  
n. something that adds to one's comfort or convenience

<sup>6</sup> **cosmopolite** (kōz-mōp'ə-līt'): a sophisticated person who can handle any situation well.

“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  
260 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, Mr. Rainsford?”

“Thank you, General.” **H**

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  
270 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<sup>7</sup> 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  
280 an officer of the Tsar<sup>8</sup> 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—grizzlies in your Rockies, crocodiles in the Ganges,<sup>9</sup> 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

**H CONFLICT**

Reread lines 228–265. The conversation between Rainsford and Zaroff hints at further plot **complications**. Use clues to predict future events.

7. **Crimea** (krī-mē’ə) . . . **Caucasus** (kō’ka-səs): regions in the southern part of the former Russian Empire, near the Black Sea.

8. **debacle in Russia** . . . **Tsar** (zār): a reference to the 1917 Russian Revolution, in which the emperor, Tsar Nicholas II, was violently overthrown.

9. **Ganges** (gān’jēz’): a river in northern India.