

Summary “The Most Dangerous Game”

On a yacht bound for Rio de Janeiro, a passenger named Whitney points out Ship-Trap Island in the distance, a place that sailors dread and avoid. He and his friend Rainsford are big-game hunters bound for a hunting trip in the Amazon River basin. As the yacht sails through the darkness, the two men discuss whether their prey actually feels fear. Rainsford believes that the world consists only of predators and prey, although Whitney is not as certain. Noticing the jitteriness of the crew, Whitney wants to sail past the mysterious island as soon as possible. He theorizes that sailors can sense danger and that evil emanates in waves like light and sound.

Whitney then decides to turn in for the night, but Rainsford opts to smoke his pipe on the afterdeck for a while. Suddenly, he hears three gunshots in the distance and moves toward the railing of the deck to investigate. Hoisting himself onto the rail to try and get a better look, Rainsford drops his pipe, loses his balance in an attempt to catch it, and accidentally plunges into the water. His cries for help go unanswered, and the yacht quickly disappears into the night.

Rainsford decides to swim in the gunshots' direction. He hears the screeching sound of an animal in agony and heads straight for it, until the cries end abruptly with a pistol shot. Exhausted, Rainsford reaches the rocky shore and immediately falls into a deep sleep. He wakes the next afternoon and sets off in search of food, forced to skirt the thick growth of the jungle and walk along the shore. He soon comes to a bloody, torn-up patch of vegetation where a large animal had thrashed about. He finds an empty rifle cartridge nearby.

He follows the hunter's footprints in the growing darkness and eventually comes upon a palatial chateau at the edge of a precipice that drops steeply into the rocky ocean below. At first, Rainsford thinks the chateau is a mirage, until he opens the iron gate and knocks on the door. Ivan, a burly man with a gun, answers and refuses to help

Rainsford until another man, General Zaroff, appears from inside the chateau and invites Rainsford inside.

Zaroff greets Rainsford warmly and has Ivan show him to a room where he can dress for dinner. The huge, lavish dining hall features numerous stuffed and mounted heads, trophies that Zaroff has brought back from his many hunting adventures around the world. As the two men eat borscht, a red Russian soup made of beets, Rainsford praises his host's specimens, remarking on how dangerous it can be to hunt Cape buffalo. Zaroff states that he now hunts far more dangerous game on his island. He recounts past hunts, from his childhood in the Crimea to hunting big game around the world, but goes on to describe how the sport eventually became too easy.

Zaroff hints, however, that he has found a new kind of animal to hunt, one with courage, cunning, and reason. Rainsford's initial confusion turns to horror as he slowly realizes that the general now hunts human beings. Zaroff doesn't understand Rainsford's indignation but promises that his outrage will subside once he's begun the hunt. Rainsford declines Zaroff's invitation to join in the hunt that night and goes to bed. After a fitful night of insomnia and light dozing, the sound of a distant pistol shot awakens him in the early morning.

General Zaroff reappears at the chateau at lunchtime, sad that hunting humans no longer satisfies him. He laments that the sailors he lures to the island present less and less of a challenge. Rainsford demands to leave the island at once, but the general refuses and forces Rainsford to be his new prey in the next hunt, hoping that Rainsford, as a renowned big-game hunter, will provide the challenge he seeks. Zaroff promises to set Rainsford free if he lives through the next three days. Rainsford sets off into the jungle after receiving food, clothes, and a knife from Ivan. He cuts a complicated, twisting path through the undergrowth to confuse Zaroff and then climbs a tree to wait as darkness approaches.

Zaroff finds Rainsford easily but lets him escape to prolong the pleasure of the hunt. Unsettled that Zaroff found him so quickly, Rainsford runs to another part of the jungle and makes a booby-trap called a Malayan mancatcher to kill Zaroff. The trap only wounds Zaroff, who returns to the chateau and promises to kill Rainsford the following night.

Rainsford runs for hours until he mistakenly steps into a bed of quicksand. He manages to wrest free, then digs a pit in the soft mud a few feet in front of the quicksand. He lines the bottom of the pit with sharp wooden stakes, covers it with foliage, and then hides in the brush nearby. One of Zaroff's hunting hounds springs the trap and plunges to his death, forcing Zaroff to return to the chateau again. At daybreak, Rainsford hears the baying of the hounds and spots Zaroff and Ivan with a small pack of hunting dogs in the distance. Rainsford fashions another trap by tying his knife to a sapling.

The trap kills Ivan, but the hounds push on, cornering Rainsford at the edge of a cliff. Instead of facing the dogs, Rainsford jumps into the rocky sea below. Stunned and disappointed, Zaroff returns to his chateau. As he turns on his bedroom light, he is shocked to find Rainsford concealed in the curtains of the bed. Before they fight, Zaroff states that the dogs will eat one of them that night while the other will sleep in the comfortable bed. Rainsford later concludes that he has never slept in a more comfortable bed.