

# Death of a General

by VC

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'Ah Elsa my nerves are shattered... shattered.' said Mrs Jones to her best friend, Elsa White. Both ladies were in their late forties and built on the corpulent but genteel lines affected by housekeepers of their time. Mrs Jones was in black.

Elsa leaned forward 'How did he die? There's a peck of speculation in the village I tell you.'

Excitement shone through her mournful tones. Deaths, births and marriages were the chief objects that fuelled the cosy afternoon chats of the two friends. Somehow a good interchange about somebody else's death was the best, because it left you with a comfortable feeling of still being superiorly alive.

'Oh Elsa' said the vast Mrs Jones, continuing in her strain of Tragedy and Deep Mourning. 'The General's death - it near broke my heart. Pathetic it was somehow. And strange'

'Strange?' asked Elsa, her eyes glowing.

'Awful strange' said Mrs Jones ('Mum' and 'Gwen' to family) 'I fair wake up screaming at nights thinking about it.'

'Oh tell me all about it' said Elsa. Mrs Jones needed no further encouragement. She paused only to fill their teacups.

'Wednesday night it was. And one of them ugly rainy nights after an ugly rainy day. The General he was gloomy all day, lying in his bed staring at that rain and grey sky. Once I goes in and he says to me, restless like 'When will the sun shine? I want sunshine.' Well I tried to cheer him up by telling him that it was only a matter of three more months. But he cursed - in that strange language, so I can't be sure, but I *think* a curse it was - and he says 'out there it is always sunshine. Nothing but day after day of sunshine.'

...Well I tell you Elsa, he was already thinking of death, and going to the promised land! When I told him that one day we would all be in sunshine with our maker, he cursed me in plain English and told me to go to the devil.'

Els offered more tea and sympathy. Mrs Jones dampened the militant sparkle that had crept into her eye to a more suitable mourning shine and continued.

'Never let anyone into his room the whole day after that he didn't. Cursed anyone who tried to even step through the door. Just lay there watching the rain like it was never going to stop. Well about eight o'clock in the evening I decided that pagan words or not, it was my Christian Duty to take him a bit of supper. I climbed

the stairs with a tray - bit of hot soup and one of my nice prawn patties - but the door was open and the General was not in his room. Gave me an awful turn I tell you.'

Elsa was so shaken she quickly ate an almond rock. It gave her immense comfort.

'Mortley found him wandering in the garden in the rain. Wet through and through he was, and shaking his fist at the sky, shouting 'Rain rain. Bloody rain.'

Mortley had an awful time of it getting him back into his room. And once we did he sat there on his bed, shivering and shouting 'It's too damn cold! I'm always too damn cold here. Bloody cold and bloody rain.'

Mortley went to work piling the fire till it was roaring and the steam started rising off the General's wet clothes, but nothing was hot enough for the General. He begins to look wild and wander like. 'I'd go back' he says 'but they're waiting for me.' And he goes cursing and damning, and using language that was enough to make a Christian shiver.

Well Mortley he suggests to me, respectful like, that perhaps we should get a priest, or sure as hell the General's soul is going to the devil tonight. / thought the General needed a doctor more than anything else, but Mortley would have a priest, so in the end I sent him for both.

Father MacGuire arrived first on his bicycle. When he hears the curses pouring out of that room, 'Mrs Jones' he says to me, 'You did right sending for me first.'

Father MacGuire found the General hunting around in the corners of the room with a poker. He kept saying that he was going to get them before they got him. Well the priest calmed him down and blessed him and asked him to confess. It started the General off again.

'Confess?' roared the General 'I have nothing to confess. I did my duty and I'm proud of it. I regret nothing. Nothing. I would give the order again. If only the bloody door had been bigger.'

Father MacGuire told him gentle like that he would not be able to make his peace with his maker without confession. 'Peace with my maker?' The general begins to laugh. 'Peace? You do not understand Father. It's a war. Us against them. Fighting with our backs against the wall to hold all that is ours. For our country. For our women and children. For England. I did it for England.'

The more Father MacGuire tries to calm him down, the more upset he gets. 'They won't let me die easy.' he says 'I came here to be safe. But they're searching for me. They'll get me. You don't know them. They never forgive. '

The doorbell rang. 'They're coming to get me!' the General begins screaming 'They're coming for my soul!' Poor Father MacGuire had a difficult time of it, holding him back on the bed.

I ran downstairs, hoping it was the doctor.' She paused and looked significantly at Elsa. 'Dr Jones was busy with a birthing - Emma Broadsley's twins, and her nearly dying before the two of them were born - so he had sent his assistant.'

'You don't mean the new one?' said Elsa, sitting up in pleasureable anticipation.

'Indeed I do. I can tell you there's been quite a scandal in that neighbourhood over that assistant. People refusing to be seen by him and all.'

'Old Mr Pritchard turned him away. Said he'd rather have no doctor than a heathen.' confided Elsa breathlessly.

'Well by the time he came, I was sure the General was dying, and it never crossed my mind to turn him away I tell you. Even when he comes through the door with that funny cloth on his head.

'A turban. They call it a turban. Though it's not quite the same as the Queen wears. What was he like?'

'Very polite.'

'Was he - *dark*?'

'Awfully' said Mrs Jones

'Where is the patient?' asks the Assistant and I showed him up to the room.

The General he was cursing in that foreign tongue, and I saw that Assistant give an awful start when he heard it. He went through the door and I tell you it was terrible. *Terrible.*'

'What? *What?*' cried Elsa scattering almond rocks left and right in her agitation.

'The General took one look at the Assistant as he came through the door - and he began to scream. It was awful to hear him. That Assistant did what he could, with the General screaming and fighting to get away, and the priest and Mortley struggling to hold him. Mid scream the General, he just closed his eyes, and - went.'

'What did he die of?' said Elsa

'That Assistant, *he* didn't know' said Mrs Jones 'He just stood there looking bewildered, and taking the General's pulse and massaging his chest when anybody could have told it was no good.' Mrs Jones crossed herself. 'I tell you Elsa. May I never see a face like the General's again.' She lowered her voice to whisper ' It looked like the devil himself had taken him.'

Elsa quite forgot to eat any more almond rocks.

'That Assistant finally stopped pumping the General's chest and he looked so upset that Father MacGuire left off praying for the General's soul and said a few words of comfort to him.

'My first case I have seen alone' said the Assistant apologetically 'And he has died. It is a tragedy.'

Well my heart went out to him standing there looking as lost as if his own father had died. I took him down to the kitchen and sat him down for a cup of tea - right there where you're sitting Elsa.'

Elsa shifted uneasily in her chair.

'He drinks his tea and then he says to me 'I'll need the name to fill out the death certificate'

'General Arthur Dyer' I tell him wiping the tears from my eyes.

For one moment the Assistant goes white like he's seen a ghost. I never knew that one of them darkies could turn that colour. Then -' her voice rose in indignation '*Then* that darkie with the dishcloth on his head, he begins to larf and larf - and the poor General not even cold in the next room.'