

SHADOWS AT THE WINDOW

by

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from the short story collection

Missives from an Outsider

Old man Schimmer lived quietly in a small, simply decorated home as he had always hoped to do in the twilight of his years. His life had been turbulent, dangerous, and sometimes heroic. He had fought in three major wars across four continents and led his soldiers into countless skirmishes. He had always held the respect of his men even in moments of near annihilation.

General Schimmer had visited many mutilated young men in hospital tents, offering praise for their courage and sympathy for their lost limbs. He cherished the valor of military men, revered the strong and despised the weak. He had seen more dead men, more gore and tragedy than one who might have lived ten centuries in the blood-spattered history of humankind. The general had reluctantly retired since no more battles loomed on the horizon for the time being. His uniform was covered with medals, three presidents had shaken his hand, and victory parades had become a habit.

Memories gleaming with glory and acclaim constantly swarmed in his aging mind along with the cheers of ecstatic crowds, the roar of gunfire, and the power of making history. As far as he was concerned, a man could not have asked for more out of life. Born on a tiny southern farm, educated in a one room schoolhouse, Schimmer had indeed fulfilled the American Dream. It had cost him an arm and left massive scars on his legs and back. He had never had time for a family and was thankful to have been born in an era where great wars succeeded each other with only a few years of peace in between.

How he loved the adrenalin rush which exploded within him when the sky ruptured with napalm and split decisions meant life or death for thousands of boys still in their teen years! The strict discipline, the blind adherence to orders, the readiness to run straight into enemy fire ... Those who survived it all knew that they had witnessed a side of existence which most men only dreamt of while watching their heroes on the silver screen. Life had been a daily drama, and soldiers learned the simple truth of the survival of the fittest. Old man Schimmer had a library crammed with books chronicling the struggles of great men from ancient Greece to the conquest of the West.

Lighting a pipe which nearly always stuck out from the side of his mouth, the general would ease back in his chair and conversed with Caesar and Wellington. Civilians were a race of sheep hardly worth the title of Man. He had never had time for women except for cheap pleasures. Here was a man who had been a valiant pillar of the Free world and had a Homer lived in his age, there would have been legends sung of his deeds. But

he held such contempt for contemporary society that he did not need its admiration. He knew what he had done.

It was raining outside. The general's nephew would not be visiting tonight. So much the better. Old Schimmer was, always had been, a lone wolf. He had no need of companionship and had long ago lost his last friend from West Point days to an AK-47. He took a book from the shelf. A biography of Alexander the Great. Now there was the kind of man the old soldier could appreciate.

In a short while, the general was asleep over pages covered with strategies and blazing victories.

Something knocked against the window. Schimmer awoke with a jolt and looked up to see a denuded branch wavering in the restless wind. He returned to his drowsy thoughts. He had been dreaming about reincarnation. Might he have been there, at Alexander's side, when they scaled the cliffs and destroyed a noble enemy in hand to hand combat? Why not? He knew from earliest youth that he had soldier's blood in his veins. Tales of great warriors had always captivated his imagination more than anything else.

There was another knock at the window. Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he saw a silhouette. Old man Schimmer smiled to himself and opened the desk drawer where lay a huge 357 Magnum. His would be the wrong territory to invade!

Suddenly, the lights went out. The storm was growing stronger but wasn't at the point of tearing down electrical wires. He lit a gas lantern. He heard a trampling sound outside. It sounded like a regiment on the move. Was he dreaming? Something scratched at the window again. General Schimmer whirled around in time to see a shadow vanish in the surrounding blackness. It had left a mark on the glass pane. The old man grabbed the lantern and held it up.

He blinked twice, straining to see. As the mark came into focus, he recognized it as a bloodstained handprint. The general took hold of his big gun and hurried to the window. No question about it, the stain was indeed the imprint of a human hand. The old warrior flung open the window and looked out. A streak of lightning cracked through the dark sky. In the ghostly flash, he saw a figure standing a few feet away, leaning against his fence.

"Evenin', General!" a hoarse voice shouted, booming over the roaring thunder.

"Who's out there? Is that you, Phil?"

The old man waited to hear his nephew's familiar voice. But the silhouette stepped forward in silence.

"Stay back!" he shouted as he cocked his pistol. The shadow moved forward stiffly, as if struggling with every footstep. A shot echoed loudly in the rumble of the storm. The silhouette kept coming. The old man's blood rushed through his hardening arteries as

his heart shuttered and began to pound faster and faster. He shot again, the powerful gun exploding like a great canon. He thought he heard a low, strange laugh. Lightning illuminated the countryside again. In the split second of its pale light, Schimmer saw a blood-soaked dead man staring at him with a smile on his colorless lips.

The general rushed back into the room, and turned up the flame in his gaslamp. His fingers trembled so badly that he thought he would lose all control over them.

"This is not real!" he thought to himself, breathing deeply to slow his thumping heart. He looked at the open book on the table, the smoldering pipe, the window. For the first time in his glorious career, General Schimmer let out a shriek of terror. Framed in the window stood a gruesome cadaver, blood pouring from his eyes and mouth and soaking into a torn infantry uniform which barely covered his oozing innerds.

The pistol went off four times, as fast as the general's finger could pull the trigger. The corpse stood there, staring at him. Then suddenly, it was joined by two other apparitions, each more mutilated than the first. All three began to laugh an eery, unworldly laughter.

Schimmer heard the front door burst open. He ran to the closet and grabbed a shining M-16. He almost shouted an order, but realized that he had no more troops to command. He heard a trampling noise in the hallway. Where were his tanks, where were his lieutenants? "Up two three four! Up two three four!" A gurgling voice led the intruders. The old man ran through the living room, knocking over the precious vase he had brought back from Southeast Asia. The trampling was now in his library. He heard the lamp crash to the floor.

"Company! Left!" The pounding footsteps headed for the living room. Old man Schimmer backed up against the wall. He turned and was about to rush into the kitchen for the back door when he saw a dozen livid faces looking at him through the front windows. He fired his rifle, shattering glass everywhere.

Then he smelled smoke. Flames were rising in his library, escaping from the broken lamp. He hurried into the kitchen for water. He felt his lungs burst with a frenzied yell. A dozen bloody men stood in place and, on a shouted command, moved toward him. He raced up the stairs toward his bedroom. Bolting the door, he sunk to the floor. His legs would not hold him up. General Schimmer had never known this debilitating fear which he so despised in other humans. Cold sweat stung his eyes. He could hear the trampling of a whole regiment marching through his house. It even came from the ceiling. The attic boomed with beating feet.

The old man's body convulsed in shivers of terror. His stomach knotted into a cramp of excruciating pain. He gasped for breath. A fist pounded on the door.

The next day, Phil Schimmer found his famous uncle curled in a corner of his bedroom. A part of his head was missing. He had shot himself.

The local sheriff, wandering through the massive destruction, had discovering the

partially burned book on Alexander the Great. He deduced that this was a sad case of loneliness and unfulfilled dreams.

The great man was given a twenty-one gun salute in a solemn funeral broadcast across the nation, attended by rows of dignitaries, and worthy of this illustrious example of human achievement.