The opening paragraph creates a strong sense of immediacy and introduces a number of mysteries. It is a prelude to a flashback. Its first words, “There it is,” create a dramatic sense of focus on a coffin whose occupant commands attention even in death, but who is not the person everyone assumes him to be: “… surely I am not the only one to know. Yet there has been no protest.” He suggests that the dead man may not deserve the honors accorded him. The statement “Truly, men are as lenient to the dead as they are harsh with the living” should be a springboard for class discussion.

It is a reasonable assumption that General Della Rovere is the man in the coffin, whose story will now be told.

Students should be aware that the resistance movement was comprised of those loyal to the Allies during the Nazi and Mussolini regimes. They fought guerilla campaigns featuring lightning strikes against German and Italian forces in Italy.
“Cavalry officer” was written all over those arched legs, that slight build, and aristocratic profile. Tight-corseted, he wore a monocle* and false teeth, and the thought struck me of how convincing, after all, is our racial destiny. What else could a man like that become if not a general? With steely grace he could give an order and make it sound like a plea, and even now, weeks after his capture, his cheeks were clean-shaven, his trousers miraculously pressed, while one could almost detect on his polished shoes a pair of invisible spurs.*

“Montanelli, I presume?” he said with a slight drawl, polishing his monocle and polishing his shoes a pair of invisible spurs.*

“legs; then, stopping again before me, down the cell flexing his slim, arched legs, that slight build, and aristocratic profile. Tight-corseted, he wore a monocle* and false teeth, and the thought struck me of how convincing, after all, is our racial destiny. What else could a man like that become if not a general? With steely grace he could give an order and make it sound like a plea, and even now, weeks after his capture, his cheeks were clean-shaven, his trousers miraculously pressed, while one could almost detect on his polished shoes a pair of invisible spurs.*

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The statement implies that some people, by virtue of their physical and constitutional endowments, seem to be destined for their positions in life. Responses will vary. This issue will be of particular relevance at the end of the story.

The general increases his prestige in the eyes of both the narrator and the reader through his extensive knowledge of war-related information.

The general refers to his “old friend,” Marshal Kesselring, whom he apparently knew from the early days of the war, when Italy was allied with Germany. He implies that he makes friends in high places wherever he goes.

Students should understand the complicated political/military situation of the time. Part of Italy was still in the hands of Germany at the time of this story, even as the Allies were invading from the South. Thus, while the official government of Italy had surrendered, Germany still had control of part of the country.