Stephen King - The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands
The Man Who Would Not Shake Hands
by Stephen King

Stevens served drinks, and soon after eight o'clock on that bitter winter night, most of us retired with them to the library. For a time no one said anything; the only sounds were the crackle of the fire in the hearth, the dim click of billiard balls, and, from outside, the shriek of the wind. Yet it was warm enough in here, at 249B East 35th.
I remember that David Adley was on my right that night, and Emlyn McCarron, who had once given us a frightening story about a woman who had given birth under unusual circumstances, was on my left. Beyond him was Johanssen, with his Wall Street Journal folded in his lap.
Stevens came in with a small white packet and handed it to George Gregson without so much as a pause. Stevens is the perfect butler in spite of his faint Brooklyn accent (or maybe because of it), but his greatest attribute, so far as I am concerned, is that he always knows to whom the packet must go if no one asks for it.
George took it without protest and sat for a moment in his high wing chair, looking into the fireplace, which is big enough to broil a good-sized ox. I saw his eyes flick momentarily to the inscription chiseled into the keystone: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.
He tore the packet open with his old, trembling fingers and tossed the contents into the fire. For a moment the flames turned into a rainbow, and there were murmured laughter. I turned and saw Stevens standing far back in the shadows by the foyer door. His hands were crossed behind his back. His face was carefully blank.
I suppose we all jumped a little when his scratchy, almost querulous voice broke the silence; I know that I did.
"I once saw a man murdered right in this room," George Gregson said, "although no juror would have convicted the killer. Yet, at the end of the business, he convicted himself -- and served as his own executioner!"
There was a pause while he lit his pipe. Smoke drifted around his seamed face in a blue raft, and he shook the wooden match out with the slow, declamatory gestures of a man whose joints hurt him badly. He threw the stick into the fireplace, where it landed on the ashes remains of the packet. He watched the flames char the wood. His sharp blue eyes brooded beneath their bushy salt-and-pepper brows. His nose was large and hooked, his lips thin and firm, his shoulders hunched almost to the back of his skull.
"Don't tease us, George!" growled Peter Andrews. "Bring it on!"
"No fear. Be patient." And we all had to wait until he had his pipe fired to his complete satisfaction. When a fine bed of coals had been laid in the large briar bowl, George folded his large, slightly palsied hands over one knee and said:
"Very well, then. I'm eighty-five and what I'm going to tell you occurred when I was twenty or thereabouts. It was 1919, at any rate, and I was just back from the Great War. My fiancée had died five months earlier, of influenza. She was only nineteen, and I fear I drank and played cards a great deal more than I should. She had been waiting for two years, you understand, and during that period I received a letter faithfully each week. Perhaps you may understand why I indulged myself so heavily. I had no religious beliefs, finding the general tenets and theories of Christianity rather comic in the trenches, and I had no family to support me. And so I can say with truth that the good friends who saw me through my time of trial rarely left me. There were fifty-three of them (more than most people have!): fifty-two cards and a bottle of Cutty Sark whiskey. I had taken up residence in the very rooms I inhabit now, on Brennan Street. But they were much cheaper then, and there were considerably fewer medicine bottles and pills and nostrums cluttering the shelves. Yet I spent most of my time here, at 249B, for there was almost always a poker game to be found."
David Adley interrupted, and although he was smiling, I don't think he was joking at all. "And was Stevens here back then, George?"
George looked around at the butler. "Was it you, Stevens, or was it your father?"
Stevens allowed himself the merest ghost of a smile. "As 1919 was over sixty-five years ago, sir, it was my grandfather, I must allow."
"Yours is a post that runs in the family, we must take it," Adley mused.
"As you take it, sir," Stevens replied gently.
"Now that I think back on it," George said, "there is a remarkable resemblance
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