

Stephan King

ILUSTRACIONES: NURIA RODRIGUEZ

EL HOMBRE
QUE NO QUERÍA
ESTRECHAR LA MANO



THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT SHAKE HANDS

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 was 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 ashy 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 between you and your ... did you say grandfather, Stevens?”

“Yes, sir, so I said.”

“If you and he were put side by side, I’d be hard put to tell which was which ... but that’s neither here nor there, is it?”

“No, sir.”

“I was in the game room—right through that same little door over there—playing patience the first and only time I met Henry Brower. There were four of us who were ready to sit down and play poker; we only wanted a fifth to make the evening go. When Jason Davidson told me that George Oxley, our usual fifth, had broken his leg and was laid up in bed with a cast at the end of a damned pulley contraption, it seemed that we should have no game that night. I was contemplating the prospect of finishing the evening with nothing to take my mind off my own thoughts but patience and a mind-blotting quantity of whiskey when the fellow across the room said in a calm and pleasant voice, ‘If you gentlemen have been speaking of poker, I would very much enjoy picking up a hand, if you have no particular objections.’

“He had been buried behind a copy of the New York World until then, so that when I looked over I was seeing him for the first time. He was

a young man with an old face, if you take my meaning. Some of the marks I saw on his face I had begun to see stamped on my own since the death of Rosalie. Some—but not all. Although the fellow could have been no older than twenty-eight from his hair and hands and manner of walking, his face seemed marked with experience and his eyes, which were very dark, seemed more than sad; they seemed almost haunted. He was quite good-looking, with a short, clipped mustache and darkish blond hair. He wore a good-looking brown suit and his top collar button had been loosened. ‘My name is Henry Brower,’ he said.

“Davidson immediately rushed across the room to shake hands; in fact, he acted as though he might actually snatch Brower’s hand out of Brower’s lap. An odd thing happened: Brower dropped his paper and held both hands up and out of reach. The expression on his face was one of horror.

“Davidson halted, quite confused, more bewildered than angry. He was only twenty-two himself—God, how young we all were in those days—and a bit of a puppy.

” ‘Excuse me,’ Brower said with complete gravity, ‘but I never shake hands!’

“Davidson blinked. ‘Never?’ he said. ‘How very peculiar. Why in the world not?’ Well, I’ve told you that he was a bit of a puppy. Brower took it in the best possible way, with an open (yet rather troubled) smile.

” ‘I’ve just come back from Bombay,’ he said. ‘It’s a strange, crowded, filthy place, full of disease and pestilence. The vultures strut and preen on the very city walls by the thousands. I was there on a trade mission for two years, and I seem to have picked up a horror of our Western custom of handshaking. I know I’m foolish and impolite, and yet I cannot seem to bring myself to it. So if you would be so very good as to let me off with no hard feelings ...’

” ‘Only on one condition,’ Davidson said with a smile.

” ‘What would that be?’

” ‘Only that you draw up to the table and share a tumbler of George’s whiskey while I go for Baker and French and Jack Wilden.’

“Brower smiled at him, nodded, and put his paper away. Davidson made a brash circled thumb-and-finger, and chased away to get the others. Brower and I drew up to the greenfelted table, and when I offered him a drink he declined with thanks and ordered his own bottle. I suspected it might have something to do with his odd fetish and said nothing. I have known men whose horror of germs and disease stretched that far and even further ... and so may many of you.”

There were nods of agreement.

” ‘It’s good to be here,’ Brower told me reflectively. ‘I’ve shunned any kind of companionship since I returned from my post. It’s not good for a man to be alone, you know. I think that, even for the most self-sufficient of men, being isolated from the flow of humanity must be the worst form of torture!’ He said this with a queer kind of emphasis, and I nodded. I had experienced such loneliness in the trenches, usually at night. I experienced it again, more keenly, after learning of Rosalie’s death. I found myself warming to him in spite of his self-professed eccentricity.

” ‘Bombay must have been a fascinating place,’ I said.

” ‘Fascinating ... and terrible! There are things over there which are undreamed of in our philosophy. Their reaction to motorcars is amusing: the children shrink from them as they go by and then follow them for blocks. They find the airplane terrifying and incomprehensible. Of course, we Americans view these contraptions with complete equanimity—even complacency!—but I assure you that my reaction was exactly the same as theirs when I first observed a street-corner beggar swallow an entire packet of steel needles and then pull them, one by one, from the open sores at the end of his

fingers. Yet here is something that natives of that part of the world take utterly for granted.

” ‘Perhaps,’ he added somberly, ‘the two cultures were never intended to mix, but to keep their separate wonders to themselves. For an American such as you or I to swallow a packet of needles would result in a slow, horrible death. And as for the motorcar ...’ He trailed off, and a bleak, shadowed expression came to his face.

“I was about to speak when Stevens the Elder appeared with Brower’s bottle of Scotch, and directly following him, Davidson and the others.

“Davidson prefaced the introductions by saying, ‘I’ve told them all of your little fetish, Henry, so you needn’t fear for a thing. This is Darrel Baker, the fearsome-looking fellow with the beard is Andrew French, and last but not least, Jack Wilden. George Gregson you already know.’

“Brower smiled and nodded at all of them in lieu of shaking hands. Poker chips and three fresh decks of cards were produced, money was changed for markers, and the game began.

“We played for better than six hours, and I won perhaps two hundred dollars. Darrel Baker, who was not a particularly good player, lost about eight hundred (not that he would ever feel the pinch; his father owned three of the largest shoe factories in New England), and the rest had split Baker’s losses with me about evenly. Davidson was a few dollars up and Brower a few down; yet for Brower to be near even was no mean feat, for he had had astoundingly bad cards for most of the evening. He was adroit at both the traditional five-card draw and the newer seven-card-stud variety of the game, and I thought that several times he had won money on cool bluffs that I myself would have hesitated to try.

“I did notice one thing: although he drank quite heavily—by the time French prepared to deal the last hand, he had polished off almost an entire bottle of Scotch—his speech did not slur at all, his card-

playing skill never faltered, and his odd fixation about the touching of hands never flagged. When he won a pot, he never touched it if someone had markers or change or if someone had 'gone light' and still had chips to contribute. Once, when Davidson placed his glass rather close to his elbow, Brower flinched back abruptly, almost spilling his own drink. Baker looked surprised, but Davidson passed it off with a remark.

"Jack Wilden had commented a few moments earlier that he had a drive to Albany staring him in the face later that morning, and once more around the table would do for him. So the deal came to French, and he called seven-card stud.

"I can remember that final hand as clearly as my own name, although I should be pressed to describe what I had for lunch yesterday or whom I ate it with. The mysteries of age, I suppose, and yet I think that if any of you other fellows had been there you might remember it as well.

"I was dealt two hearts down and one up. I can't speak for Wilden or French, but young Davidson had the ace of hearts and Brower the ten of spades. Davidson bet two dollars—five was our limit—and the cards went round again. I drew a heart to make four, Brower drew a jack of spades to go with his ten. Davidson had caught a trey which did not seem to improve his hand, yet he threw three dollars into the pot. 'Last hand,' he said merrily. 'Drop it in, boys! There's a lady who would like to go out on the town with me tomorrow night!'

"I don't suppose I would have believed a fortune-teller if he had told me how often that remark would come back to haunt me at odd moments, right down to this day.

"French dealt our third round of up cards. I got no help with my flush, but Baker, who was the big loser, paired up something—kings, I think. Brower had gotten a deuce of diamonds that did not seem to help anything. Baker bet the limit on his pair, and Davidson promptly raised him five. Everyone stayed in the game, and our last up card came around the table. I drew the king of hearts to fill up my flush,

Baker drew a third to his pair, and Davidson got a second ace that fairly made his eyes sparkle. Brower got a queen of clubs, and for the life of me I couldn't see why he remained in. His cards looked as bad as any he had folded that night.

"The bettings began to get a little steep. Baker bet five, Davidson raised five, Brower called. Jack Wilden said, 'Somehow I don't think my pair is quite good enough,' and threw in his hand. I called the ten and raised another five. Baker called and raised again.

"Well, I needn't bore you with a raise-by-raise description. I'll only say that there was a three-raise limit per man, and Baker, Davidson, and I each took three raises of five dollars. Brower merely called each bet and raise, being careful to wait until all hands were clear of the pot before throwing his money in. And there was a lot of money in there—slightly better than two hundred dollars—as French dealt us our last card facedown.

"There was a pause as we all looked, although it meant nothing to me; I had my hand, and from what I could see on the table it was good. Baker threw in five, Davidson raised, and we waited to see what Brower would do. His face was slightly flushed with alcohol, he had removed his tie and unbuttoned a second shirt button, but he seemed quite calm. 'I call ... and raise five,' he said.

"I blinked a little, for I had fully expected him to fold. Still, the cards I held told me I must play to win, and so I raised five. We played with no limit to the number of raises a player could make on the last card, and so the pot grew marvelously. I stopped first, being content simply to call in view of the full house I had become more and more sure someone must be holding. Baker stopped next, blinking warily from Davidson's pair of aces to Brower's mystifying junk hand. Baker was not the best of card players, but he was good enough to sense something in the wind.

"Between them, Davidson and Brower raised at least ten more times, perhaps more. Baker and I were carried along, unwilling to cast

away our large investments. The four of us had run out of chips, and greenbacks now lay in a drift over the huge sprawl of markers.

” ‘Well,’ Davidson said, following Brower’s latest raise, ‘I believe I’ll simply call. If you’ve been running a bluff, Henry, it’s been a fine one. But I have you beaten and Jack’s got a long trip ahead of him tomorrow.’ And with that he put a five-dollar bill on top of the pile and said, ‘I call.’

“I don’t know about the others, but I felt a distinct sense of relief that had little to do with the large sum of money I had put into the pot. The game had been becoming cutthroat, and while Baker and I could afford to lose, if it came to that, Jase Davidson could not. He was currently at loose ends, living on a trust fund—not a large one—left him by his aunt. And Brower—how well could he stand the loss? Remember, gentlemen, that by this time there was better than a thousand dollars on the table.”

George paused here. His pipe had gone out.

“Well, what happened?” Adley leaned forward. “Don’t tease us, George. You’ve got us all on the edge of our chairs. Push us off or settle us back in.”

“Be patient,” George said, unperturbed. He produced another match, scratched it on the sole of his shoe, and puffed at his pipe. We waited intently, without speaking. Outside, the wind screeched and hooted around the eaves.

When the pipe was aglow and things seemed set to rights, George continued:

“As you know, the rules of poker state that the man who has been called should show first. But Baker was too anxious to end the tension; he pulled out one of his three down cards and turned it over to show four kings.

” ‘That does me,’ I said. ‘A flush.’

” ‘I have you,’ Davidson said to Baker, and showed two of his down cards. Two aces, to make four. ‘Damn well played.’ And he began to pull in the huge pot.

” ‘Wait!’ Brower said. He did not reach out and touch Davidson’s hand as most would have done, but his voice was enough. Davidson paused to look and his mouth fell—actually fell open as if all the muscles there had turned to water. Brower had turned over all three of his down cards, to reveal a straight flush, from the eight to the queen. ‘I believe this beats your aces?’ Brower said politely.

“Davidson went red, then white. ‘Yes,’ he said slowly, as if discovering the fact for the first time. ‘Yes, it does.’

“I would give a great deal to know Davidson’s motivation for what came next. He knew of Brower’s extreme aversion to being touched; the man had showed it in a hundred different ways that night. It may have been that Davidson simply forgot it in his desire to show Brower (and all of us) that he could cut his losses and take even such a grave reversal in a sportsmanlike way. I’ve told you that he was something of a puppy, and such a gesture would probably have been in his character. But puppies can also nip when they are provoked. They aren’t killers—a puppy won’t go for the throat; but many a man has had his fingers stitched to pay for teasing a little dog too long with a slipper or a rubber bone. That would also be a part of Davidson’s character, as I remember him.

“I would, as I can say, give a great deal to know ... but the results are all that matter, I suppose.

“When Davidson took his hands away from the pot, Brower reached over to rake it in. At that instant, Davidson’s face lit up with a kind of ruddy good fellowship, and he plucked Brower’s hand from the table and wrung it firmly. ‘Brilliant playing, Henry, simply brilliant. I don’t believe I ever—’

“Brower cut him off with a high, womanish scream that was frightful in the deserted silence of the game room, and jerked away. Chips

and currency cascaded every which way as the table tottered and nearly fell over.

“We were all immobilized with the sudden turn of events, and quite unable to move. Brower staggered away from the table, holding his hand out in front of him like a masculine version of Lady Macbeth. He was as white as a corpse, and the stark terror on his face is beyond my powers of description. I felt a bolt of horror go through me such as I had never experienced before or since, not even when they brought me the telegram with the news of Rosalie’s death.

“Then he began to moan. It was a hollow, awful sound, cryptlike. I remember thinking, Why, the man’s quite insane; and then he said the queerest thing: ‘The switch ... I’ve left the switch on in the motorcar ... O God, I am so sorry!’ And he fled up the stairs toward the main lobby.

“I was the first to come out of it. I lurched out of my chair and chased after him, leaving Baker and Wilden and Davidson sitting around the huge pot of money Brower had won. They looked like graven Inca statues guarding a tribal treasure.

“The front door was still swinging to and fro, and when I dashed out into the street I saw Brower at once, standing on the edge of the sidewalk and looking vainly for a taxi. When he saw me he cringed so miserably that I could not help feeling pity intermixed with wonder.

” ‘Here,’ I said, ‘wait! I’m sorry for what Davidson did and I’m sure he didn’t mean it; all the same, if you must go because of it, you must. But you’ve left a great deal of money behind and you shall have it.’

” ‘I should never have come,’ he groaned. ‘But I was so desperate for any kind of human fellowship that I ... I ...’ Without thinking, I reached out to touch him—the most elemental gesture of one human being to another when he is grief-stricken—but Brower shrank away from me and cried, ‘Don’t touch me! Isn’t one enough? O God, why don’t I just die?’

“His eye suddenly lit feverishly on a stray dog with slat-thin sides and mangy, chewed fur that was making its way up the other side of the deserted, early-morning street. The cur’s tongue hung out and it walked with a wary, three-legged limp. It was looking, I suppose, for garbage cans to tip over and forage in.

” ‘That could be me over there,’ he said reflectively, as if to himself. ‘Shunned by everyone, forced to walk alone and venture out only after every other living thing is safe behind locked doors. Pariah dog!’

” ‘Come now,’ I said, a little sternly, for such talk smacked more than a little of the melodramatic. ‘You’ve had some kind of nasty shock and obviously something has happened to put your nerves in a bad state, but in the War I saw a thousand things which—’

” ‘You don’t believe me, do you?’ he asked. ‘You think I’m in the grip of some sort of hysteria, don’t you?’

” ‘Old man, I really don’t know what you might be gripping or what might be gripping you, but I do know that if we continue to stand out here in the damp night air, we’ll both catch the grippe. Now if you’d care to step back inside with me—only as far as the foyer, if you’d like—I’ll ask Stevens to—’

“His eyes were wild enough to make me acutely uneasy. There was no light of sanity left in them, and he reminded me of nothing so much as the battle-fatigued psychotics I had seen carried away in carts from the front lines: husks of men with awful, blank eyes like potholes to hell, mumbling and gibbering.

” ‘Would you care to see how one outcast responds to another?’ he asked me, taking no notice of what I had been saying at all. ‘Watch, then, and see what I’ve learned in strange ports of call!’

“And he suddenly raised his voice and said imperiously, ‘Dog!’

“The dog raised his head, looked at him with wary, rolling eyes (one glittered with rabid wildness; the other was filmed by a cataract), and suddenly changed direction and came limpingly, reluctantly, across the street to where Brower stood.

“It did not want to come; that much was obvious. It whined and growled and tucked its mangy rope of a tail between its legs; but it was drawn to him nonetheless. It came right up to Brower’s feet, and then lay upon its belly, whining and crouching and shuddering. Its emaciated sides went in and out like a bellows, and its good eye rolled horribly in its socket.

“Brower uttered a hideous, despairing laugh that I still hear in my dreams, and squatted by it. ‘There,’ he said. ‘You see? It knows me as one of its kind ... and knows what I bring it!’ He reached for the dog and the cur uttered a snarling, lugubrious howl. It bared its teeth.

” ‘Don’t!’ I cried sharply. ‘He’ll bite!’

“Brower took no notice. In the glow of the streetlight his face was livid, hideous, the eyes black holes burnt in parchment. ‘Nonsense,’ he crooned. ‘Nonsense. I only want to shake hands with him ... as your friend shook with me!’ And suddenly he seized the dog’s paw and shook it. The dog made a horrible howling noise, but made no move to bite him.

“Suddenly Brower stood up. His eyes seemed to have cleared somewhat, and except for his excessive pallor, he might have again been the man who had offered courteously to pick up a hand with us earlier the night before.

” ‘I’m leaving now,’ he said quietly. ‘Please apologize to your friends and tell them I’m sorry to have acted like such a fool. Perhaps I’ll have a chance to ... redeem myself another time.’

” ‘t’s we who owe you the apology,’ I said. ‘And have you forgotten the money? It’s better than a thousand dollars.’

” ‘O yes! The money!’ And his mouth curved in one of the bitterest smiles I have ever seen.

” ‘Never mind coming into the lobby,’ I said. ‘If you will promise to wait right here, I’ll bring it. Will you do that?’

” ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If you wish, I’ll do that.’ And he looked reflectively down at the dog whining at his feet. ‘Perhaps he would like to come to my lodgings with me and have a square meal for once in his miserable life.’ And the bitter smile reappeared.

“I left him then, before he could reconsider, and went downstairs. Someone—probably Jack Wilden; he always had an orderly mind—had changed all the markers for greenbacks and had stacked the money neatly in the center of the green felt. None of them spoke to me as I gathered it up. Baker and Jack Wilden were smoking wordlessly; Jason Davidson was hanging his head and looking at his feet. His face was a picture of misery and shame. I touched him on the shoulder as I went back to the stairs and he looked at me gratefully.

“When I reached the street again, it was utterly deserted. Brower had gone. I stood there with a wad of greenbacks in each hand, looking vainly either way, but nothing moved. I called once, tentatively, in case he should be standing in the shadows someplace near, but there was no response. Then I happened to look down. The stray dog was still there, but his days of foraging in trash cans were over. He was quite dead. The fleas and ticks were leaving his body in marching columns. I stepped back, revolted and yet also filled with a species of odd, dreamy terror. I had a premonition that I was not yet through with Henry Brower, and so I wasn’t; but I never saw him again.”

The fire in the grate had died to guttering flames and cold had begun to creep out of the shadows, but no one moved or spoke while George lit his pipe again. He sighed and recrossed his legs, making the old joints crackle, and resumed.

“Needless to say, the others who had taken part in the game were unanimous in opinion: we must find Brower and give him his money. I suppose some would think we were insane to feel so, but that was a more honorable age. Davidson was in an awful funk when he left; I tried to draw him aside and offer him a good word or two, but he only shook his head and shuffled out. I let him go. Things would look different to him after a night’s sleep, and we could go looking for Brower together. Wilden was going out of town, and Baker had ‘social rounds’ to make. It would be a good way for Davidson to gain back a little self-respect, I thought.

“But when I went round to his apartment the next morning, I found him not yet up. I might have awakened him, but he was a young fellow and I decided to let him sleep the morning away while I spaded up a few elementary facts.

“I called here first, and talked to Stevens’s—” He turned toward Stevens and raised an eyebrow.

“Grandfather, sir,” Stevens said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir, I’m sure.”

“I talked to Stevens’s grandfather. I spoke to him in the very spot where Stevens himself now stands, in fact. He said that Raymond Greer, a fellow I knew slightly, had spoken for Brower. Greer was with the city trade commission, and I immediately went to his office in the Flatiron Building. I found him in, and he spoke to me immediately.

“When I told him what had happened the night before, his face became filled with a confusion of pity, gloom, and fear.

” ‘Poor old Henry!’ he exclaimed. ‘I knew it was coming to this, but I never suspected it would arrive so quickly.’

” ‘What?’ I asked.

” ‘His breakdown,’ Greer said. ‘It stems from his year in Bombay, and I suppose no one but Henry will ever know the whole story. But I’ll tell you what I can.’

“The story that Greer unfolded to me in his office that day increased both my sympathy and understanding. Henry Brower, it appeared, had been unluckily involved in a real tragedy. And, as in all classic tragedies of the stage, it had stemmed from a fatal flaw—in Brower’s case, forgetfulness.

“As a member of the trade-commission group in Bombay, he had enjoyed the use of a motorcar, a relative rarity there. Greer said that Brower took an almost childish pleasure in driving it through the narrow streets and byways of the city, scaring up chickens in great, gabbling flocks and making the women and men fall on their knees to their heathen gods. He drove it everywhere, attracting great attention and huge crowds of ragged children that followed him about but always hung back when he offered them a ride in the marvelous device, which he constantly did. The auto was a Model-A Ford with a truck body, and one of the earliest cars able to start not only by a crank but by the touch of a button. I ask you to remember that.

“One day Brower took the auto far across the city to visit one of the high poobahs of that place concerning possible consignments of jute rope. He attracted his usual notice as the Ford machine growled and backfired through the streets, sounding like an artillery barrage in progress—and, of course, the children followed.

“Brower was to take dinner with the jute manufacturer, an affair of great ceremony and formality, and they were only halfway through the second course, seated on an open-air terrace above the teeming street below, when the familiar racketing, coughing roar of the car began below them, accompanied by screams and shrieks.

“One of the more adventurous boys—and the son of an obscure holy man—had crept into the cab of the auto, convinced that whatever dragon there was under the iron hood could not be roused without the white man behind the wheel. And Brower, intent upon the coming negotiations, had left the switch on and the spark retarded.

“One can imagine the boy growing more daring before the eyes of his peers as he touched the mirror, waggled the wheel, and made mock tooting noises. Each time he thumbed his nose at the dragon under the hood, the awe in the faces of the others must have grown.

“His foot must have been pressed down on the clutch, perhaps for support, when he pushed the starter button. The engine was hot; it caught fire immediately. The boy, in his extreme terror, would have reacted by removing his foot from the clutch immediately, preparatory to jumping out. Had the car been older or in poorer condition, it would have stalled. But Brower cared for it scrupulously, and it leaped forward in a series of bucking, roaring jerks. Brower was just in time to see this as he rushed from the jute manufacturer’s house.

“The boy’s fatal mistake must have been little more than an accident. Perhaps, in his flailings to get out, an elbow accidentally struck the throttle. Perhaps he pulled it with the panicky hope that this was how the white man choked the dragon back into sleep. However it happened ... it happened. The auto gained suicidal speed and charged down the crowded, roiling street, bumping over bundles and bales, crushing the wicker cages of the animal vendor, smashing a flower cart to splinters. It roared straight downhill toward the street’s turning, leaped over the curb, crashed into a stone wall and exploded in a ball of flame.”

George switched his briar from one side of his mouth to the other.

“This was all Greer could tell me, because it was all Brower had told him that made any sense. The rest was a kind of deranged harangue on the folly of two such disparate cultures ever mixing. The dead boy’s father evidently confronted Brower before he was recalled and

flung a slaughtered chicken at him. There was a curse. At this point, Greer gave me a smile which said that we were both men of the world, lit a cigarette, and remarked, 'There's always a curse when a thing of this sort happens. The miserable heathens must keep up appearances at all costs. It's their bread and butter.'

" 'What was the curse?' I wondered.

" 'I should have thought you would have guessed,' said Greer. 'The wallah told him that a man who would practice sorcery on a small child should become a pariah, an outcast. Then he told Brower that any living thing he touched with his hands would die. Forever and forever, amen.' Greer chuckled.

" 'Brower believed it?'

" 'Greer believed he did. 'You must remember that the man had suffered a dreadful shock. And now, from what you tell me, his obsession is worsening rather than curing itself.'

" 'Can you tell me his address?'

" 'Greer hunted through his files, and finally came up with a listing. 'I don't guarantee that you'll find him there,' he said. 'People have been naturally reluctant to hire him, and I understand he hasn't a great deal of money.'

" 'I felt a pang of guilt at this, but said nothing. Greer struck me as a little too pompous, a little too smug, to deserve what little information I had on Henry Brower. But as I rose, something prompted me to say, 'I saw Brower shake hands with a mangy street cur last night. Fifteen minutes later the dog was dead.'

" 'Really? How interesting.' He raised his eyebrows as if the remark had no bearing on anything we had been discussing.

" 'I rose to take my leave and was about to shake Greer's hand when the secretary opened his office door. 'Pardon me, but you are Mr.

Gregson?’

“I told her I was.

” ‘A man named Baker has just called. He’s asked you to come to twenty-three Nineteenth Street immediately.’

“It gave me quite a nasty start, because I had already been there once that day—it was Jason Davidson’s address. When I left Greer’s office, he was just settling back with his pipe and *The Wall Street Journal*. I never saw him again, and don’t count it any great loss. I was filled with a very specific dread—the kind that will nevertheless not quite crystallize into an actual fear with a fixed object, because it is too awful, too unbelievable to actually be considered.”

Here I interrupted his narrative. “Good God, George! You’re not going to tell us he was dead?”

“Quite dead,” George agreed. “I arrived almost simultaneously with the coroner. His death was listed as a coronary thrombosis. He was short of his twenty-third birthday by sixteen days.

“In the days that followed, I tried to tell myself that it was all a nasty coincidence, best forgotten. I did not sleep well, even with the help of my good friend Mr. Cutty Sark. I told myself that the thing to do was divide that night’s last pot between the three of us and forget that Henry Brower had ever stepped into our lives. But I could not. I drew a cashier’s check for the sum instead, and went to the address that Greer had given me, which was in Harlem.

“He was not there. His forwarding address was a place on the East Side, a slightly less-well-off neighborhood of nonetheless respectable brownstones. He had left those lodgings a full month before the poker game, and the new address was in the East Village, an area of ramshackle tenements.

“The building superintendent, a scrawny man with a huge black mastiff snarling at his knee, told me that Brower had moved out on

April third—the day after our game. I asked for a forwarding address and he threw back his head and emitted a screaming gobble that apparently served him in the place of laughter.

” ‘The only forradin’ address they gives when they leave here is Hell, boss. But sometimes they stops in the Bowery on their way there.’

“The Bowery was then what it is only believed to be by out-of-towners now: the home of the homeless, the last stop for the faceless men who only care for another bottle of cheap wine or another shot of the white powder that brings long dreams. I went there. In those days there were dozens of flophouses, a few benevolent missions that took drunks in for the night, and hundreds of alleys where a man might hide an old, louse-ridden mattress. I saw scores of men, all of them little more than shells, eaten by drink and drugs. No names were known or used. When a man has sunk to a final basement level, his liver rotted by wood alcohol, his nose an open, festering sore from the constant sniffing of cocaine and potash, his fingers destroyed by frostbite, his teeth rotted to black stubs—a man no longer has a use for a name. But I described Henry Brower to every man I saw, with no response. Bartenders shook their heads and shrugged. The others just looked at the ground and kept walking.

“I didn’t find him that day, or the next, or the next. Two weeks went by, and then I talked to a man who said a fellow like that had been in Devarney’s Rooms three nights before.

“I walked there; it was only two blocks from the area I had been covering. The man at the desk was a scabrous ancient with a peeling bald skull and rheumy, glittering eyes. Rooms were advertised in the flyspecked window facing the street at a dime a night. I went through my description of Brower, the old fellow nodding all the way through it. When I had finished, he said:

” ‘I know him, young meester. Know him well. But I can’t quite recall ... I think ever s’much better with a dollar in front of me.’

“I produced a dollar and he made it disappear neat as a button, arthritis notwithstanding.

” ‘He was here, young meester, but he’s gone.’

” ‘Do you know where?’

” ‘I can’t quite recall,’ the desk clerk said. ‘I might, howsomever, with a dollar in front of me.’

“I produced a second bill, which he made disappear as neatly as he had the first. At this, something seemed to strike him as being deliciously funny, and a rasping, tubercular cough came out of his chest.

” ‘You’ve had your amusement,’ I said, ‘and been well paid for it as well. Now, do you know where this man is?’

“The old man laughed gleefully again. ‘Yes—Potter’s Field is his new residence; eternity’s the length of his lease; and he’s got the Devil for a roommate. How do you like them apples, young meester? He must’ve died sometime yesterday morning, for when I found him at noon he was still warm and toasty. Sitting bolt upright by the winder, he was. I’d gone up to either have his dime against the dark or show him the door. As it turned out, the city showed him six feet of earth.’ This caused another unpleasant outburst of senile glee.

” ‘Was there anything unusual?’ I asked, not quite daring to examine the import of my own question. ‘Anything out of the ordinary?’

” ‘I seem to recall somethin’ ... Let me see ...’

“I produced a dollar to aid his memory, but this time it did not produce laughter, although it disappeared with the same speed.

” ‘Yes, there was something passin odd about it,’ the old man said. ‘I’ve called the city hack for enough of them to know. Bleedin Jesus, ain’t I! I’ve found ‘em hangin from the hook on the door, found ‘em

dead in bed, found ‘em out on the fire escape in January with a bottle between their knees frozen just as blue as the Atlantic. I even found one fella that drowned in the washstand, although that was over thirty years ago. But this fella—sittin bolt upright in his brown suit, just like some swell from uptown, with his hair all combed. Had hold of his right wrist with his left hand, he did. I’ve seen all kinds, but he’s the only one I ever seen that died shakin his own hand.’

“I left and walked all the way to the docks, and the old man’s last words seemed to play over and over again in my brain like a phonograph record that has gotten stuck in one groove. He’s the only one I ever seen that died shakin his own hand.

“I walked down to the end of one of the piers, out to where the dirty gray water lapped the encrusted pilings. And then I ripped that cashier’s check into a thousand pieces and threw it into the water.”

George Gregson shifted and cleared his throat. The fire had burned down to reluctant embers, and cold was creeping into the deserted game room. The tables and chairs seemed spectral and unreal, like furnishings glimpsed in a dream where past and present merge. The flames rimmed the letters cut into the fireplace keystone with dull orange light: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

“I only saw him once, and once was enough; I’ve never forgotten. But it did serve to bring me out of my own time of mourning, for any man who can walk among his fellows is not wholly alone.

“If you’ll bring me my coat, Stevens, I believe I’ll toddle along home—I’ve stayed far past my usual bedtime.”

And when Stevens had brought it, George smiled and pointed at a small mole just below the left corner of Stevens’s mouth. “The resemblance really is remarkable, you know—your grandfather had a mole in that exact same place.”

Stevens smiled but made no reply. George left, and the rest of us slipped out soon after.