

Thirteen Chairs

Also by Dave Shelton

A Boy and a Bear in a Boat

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Dave Shelton



David Fickling Books

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For Tim, Joanne, Emily, Sam, Noah, and Freya

Jack stands in the dark on the landing of the old house, and looks at his feet. He is outside the last of three doors, the one that is underlined with flickering light. He doesn't move. He stares down at the twin crescents of light reflecting on the toes of his shoes. He looks at the thin highlights along the edges of the bare floorboards and at the pattern of the grain in the wood in the pale puddle of light that leaks under the door. He has been here for minutes, his hand on the door handle, debating whether or not to go in. Common sense insists that he must not, because there is no way of knowing what might be inside. But curiosity insists the opposite, for the same reason.

And Jack is a curious boy.

So he holds a breath, behind clamped lips, turns the handle, and goes in. And there they are, twelve of them, sitting around a big circular wooden table and looking at him as the door creaks loudly to announce his arrival. It takes him a moment to see them properly—the room is only dimly lit by candles, but after the darkness outside it still seems bright—and it takes his eyes some time to adjust. When they do, and the indistinct figures settle into focus, it is the pale man, farthest from Jack, whom he notices first.

He is a small man, soberly dressed in a dark suit that is neatly tailored and primly buttoned, a crisp white shirt with a wing collar, and a plain dark tie. His hair is short and well behaved. His posture is excellent. He is neat and tidy and quiet. There is nothing about him, his slightly old-fashioned clothes aside, to mark him out as extraordinary, and yet he exudes a quiet authority that draws Jack's eye. His face is lit from below by the candle on the table in front of him, giving it that torch-under-the-chin spooky effect, but his measured smile is reassuring.

"You're late," says one of the others, one of the women over to the right, her voice scratchy and irritated.

"We're *all* late," says another.

Jack doesn't understand what she means, but he's grateful that she sounds friendly. Looks it, too, when he turns his head to see. She has an attractive smile, which she must have used a lot judging by the laugh lines on her face, and she watches Jack with wry amusement, her dark eyes glinting in the candlelight, short silver-gray hair shining.

"Come on in, then," she says, raising an arm and beckoning with long fingers, tickling at the air. "No skulking in the dark. Over here where we can see you." Her voice is a soft and lovely thing, round and warm with a sweet tang of teasing laughter. Jack does as he is told and steps three sleepwalking paces into the room as the door creaks shut behind him.

It is a large room, with high ceilings, bare wooden floors, and empty walls. The only light comes from the candles on the table, one for each of those seated there, casting shifting, looming shadows onto the crumbling plaster of the walls. There is one large window, off to Jack's left, with long pale curtains pulled not quite completely closed across it. Jack remembers himself a few minutes ago, outside on the gravel drive, looking up at the thin vertical line of light at the window, and shivering at the small thrill of fear that it gave him.

"You *will* be joining us," says the pale man, and it doesn't sound like a question, though Jack answers anyway.

"Yes."

"We'll need another chair," says the pale man in a soft, calm voice. "Lee, could you, please?"

There are children in the two nearest seats: a boy, a few years older than Jack, and a girl, a little younger. The boy rises from his seat. He is tall, and he'd be taller still if he stood up straight, but he does not. He stoops, as if embarrassed by his own height, and he bows his head shyly, his mop of hair hiding his eyes.

"Sure," he mumbles. "I'll go and, um . . ." He pulls out his own chair and indicates it with a fuzzy gesture of his hand. "Here, have mine and I'll . . ."

"Thanks," says Jack and, almost without thinking, sits down. He hears the door creaking open and then shut behind him once again.

“Welcome,” says the pale man. “You are welcome.”

He is more or less directly across the table from Jack, who stares at him with what he knows must be a ridiculous grin on his face, so tight and tense it threatens to shatter his teeth. The pale man is a full head shorter than either of his neighbors, yet somehow his is the more powerful presence. It’s difficult to know how old he is. He might be thirty or he might be sixty. There are no obvious signs of advancing age: no hair loss, no graying, very few lines or wrinkles. But there is something about him, in his eyes perhaps, that suggests more years lived, more experience, more sadness.

Jack is still working hard on trying to appear relaxed when he hears the door again. He looks around to see the stooping boy, Lee, enter, carrying a chair.

“Excuse . . . can I just . . . ?” Jack shifts his chair a little to the right, and three bearded men seated beyond Lee all shuffle left a little, and Lee apologetically slides the thirteenth chair into place at Jack’s side and folds himself down onto it. “Oh, and . . .” He places a candle on the table in front of Jack and the girl lights it from her own, her grin highlighted in the light of the flame, her eyes thrilled wide.

“Thank you, Lee,” says the pale man. “Thank you, Amelia.” Then he turns his attention back to Jack. “And you are . . . ?”

“Oh! Yes. Sorry. Jack,” says Jack.

“Jack. Good. Welcome.” His eyes are still and dark, each with a twisting worm of reflected candlelight dancing

on its surface. "Let me introduce you." He raises one hand just barely off the other and turns its thin fingers the smallest amount to gesture toward the stooping boy at Jack's left-hand side.

"Lee," says the pale man, and Lee bows his low head even lower in acknowledgement.

"Mr. Blackmore," says the pale man, continuing clockwise around the table. "Piotr, Mr. Harlow." These are the three bearded men in a row, but Jack only really takes in Piotr in the middle. He is enormous. He looks as if he might have been carved from a mountain. From within his extravagant rust-and-ashes beard there appears a wide and welcoming grin of crooked teeth.

"Ha! Jack! Is very good meeting you! Yes!" He raises his impossibly large hands aloft in a gesture of welcome that only just falls short of smacking each of his neighbors in the face.

"Mr. Fowler," says the pale man, and the fellow seated to his right gives a deep, slow nod. If Piotr has been carved from stone then this man's features are etched in wood. He has an angular, bony face that is weathered like ancient timbers: salted and windblown and ragged and worn. He looks as if he has seen more than his share of troubles, but for all that his mouth and eyes are smiling now as he dips his head in Jack's direction.

"Mr. Randolph," says the pale man, and raises the fingers of his left hand now, and the fellow on that side stiffly nods.

“Miss Crane,” says the pale man.

“Frances,” says Miss Crane, the friendly woman with the short gray hair and the laugh lines. “Hello, Jack.” She smiles that warm smile again.

“Professor Cleary, Mrs. Trent, Miss Mulligan.”

“Ms. Mulligan,” says the last, a smartly dressed young woman with a determined haircut.

Frances smiles and mutters, “You tell him, Katy.”

“And Amelia,” says the pale man, ignoring them both.

The young girl to Jack’s right points a curious stare at him that would be disturbingly intense even if it were not magnified by the thick lenses of her spectacles.

“Very pleased to meet you, Jack. Thank you very much,” she says quickly, in a blank tone, as if reciting the words from a script without any understanding of their meaning.

“Hello,” says Jack, leaning away from her continuing stare, and then turning his attention back to the pale man, expecting him at last to introduce himself. But he does not. He stares placidly back at Jack, and once again Jack’s attention is entirely drawn to him, as if the rest of the room has somehow dimmed.

“Very good,” says the pale man, with the tiniest nod of his head, then he places the one hand back on top of the other. “Shall we begin?”

Begin what? wonders Jack.

But he likes not knowing. He's always liked not knowing what will happen next. He really shouldn't be here, for all kinds of reasons. He has no idea who any of these people are, and he's heard the rumors, of course: the things that are meant to happen here. There was a boy who told him all about it ages ago. Amazing stories. He doesn't believe them for a second, but still, he can't help feeling a little scared.

At least he's closest to the door, so if he decides he needs to get out in a hurry then he can. He's a fast runner. Faster than any of this lot anyway, he reckons. So he's nervous, but not too nervous. Not quite so much that it overcomes his curiosity. Not quite so afraid that he'll give up on finding out what happens next.

"Mr. Blackmore," says the pale man, keeping his head perfectly still and turning only his eyes to face the man he is addressing. The man sat next to stooping Lee, the nearest to Jack of the three bearded men, has a shaved head, and is dressed all in black. His beard, a carefully shaped, neat enclosure around his mouth, is black, too. He looks up, turns his head in the pale man's direction.

"Yes."

"Perhaps you might take the first turn?"

"Yes, of course." Mr. Blackmore turns his head back to face front, purses his lips as he gathers himself. His nostrils flare as he takes a deep breath, and another.

Jack wonders what's coming, and tries to look as if he already knows.

Then it turns out that one part of the rumors is true, because what happens next is that Mr. Blackmore tells a story.



Let Me Sleep

It began in the marketplace.

William Cobb liked markets because crowds were very helpful to him. His work was easiest where people were closely gathered together, where a little accidental jostling was perfectly usual, and a clumsy collision could quite distract you from the lightest touch of his nimble, slender fingers relieving you of your purse or your watch. There was a better choice of victims in a crowd, too, and people brought their money with them on market day.

The sturdy, young, fair-haired man in the leather waistcoat, though, was not the type who would usually spark William's interest. He knew what to look for to identify a worthwhile victim, and this young fellow showed very little promise. He looked poor. His simple clothes were clean enough but showing their age: his shirt a little frayed at the cuffs, his trousers at the knees and hems. What is more, he looked alert and strong. So the possible gains from robbing him were slight, but the risk of getting caught, and probably severely beaten for his troubles, was high. And yet for some reason, William did not immediately search for easier pickings. Something about the young man held his attention and provoked in him a strange sense of dislike. The man

was buying flowers. Oh, so he was undoubtedly *in love*, and these were a gift for his sweetheart, no doubt. How sickening.

The young man took a coin from his purse and bought a very modest posy—all he could afford, probably. Then, as the young man accepted his change, William spotted a glint of gold from his left hand. A sly glance as the young lover waved good-bye to the flower girl confirmed this to be a wedding band. The young man strode away, grinning contentedly, and now seemed so unspeakably happy that William felt it virtually a duty to rob him. He would deprive him of his wedding ring at the earliest opportunity. It was, William was sure, the only thing of any real value that he possessed, so taking it would be all the sweeter.

So William followed him, observing the young man with a keen eye, noting anything that might prove useful in his task. He was quite brilliant at picking pockets: a master of the craft, with the sly, quick hands of a conjuror. To take a ring directly from a finger without detection, though, that was a more difficult task. But if he could invent some excuse to shake the young man's hand then it might be managed, he thought, if the ring was not too tight.

The young man's business in the market was swiftly concluded. He bought a spade, after much indecision and a good deal of tiresomely good-natured haggling, and then took himself away by foot along a lane out of the town.

William followed him, some way behind, awaiting the best moment to make his move. The lane itself was too busy, too full of witnesses, but as it took a turn to loop around the base of a hill, the young man left it to set off along a footpath that led up past the woodland at the crown of the hill.

Keeping his distance, William followed the young man as he dawdled uphill, whistling happily as he went. William hated that. He really would have to put a stop to it. He had devised a plan, but for it to work he needed to approach his victim face on. He left the path and ducked off, still unobserved, into the wood and raced through it, at what he hoped was a safe distance from the path, until he judged he must be well ahead of his prey. Then he turned out of the wood, found the path again and, walking slowly now, headed back along it. He soon came to a point where the path turned sharply around the edge of the woodland. He stopped a few paces short of the corner and waited.

Once the approaching whistling grew loud enough that its owner must be about to appear, William set off walking quickly down to meet him. As the young man appeared around the corner, William feigned surprise as he collided with him, knocking him off his feet. The newly acquired spade clanged to the ground as its hapless buyer thudded down on his backside in a patch of wildflowers. William stood over him, offering his left hand to the dazed young man to help him back up.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said William. “I didn’t hear you coming and then, I’m afraid, I must have tripped. Are you all right, my dear sir? What must you think of me?” And by the time he had hauled the fellow upright again, the ring had slipped easily from its owner’s finger into William’s helping hand. It was beautifully done. It was all William could do to stop himself from grinning at the artistry of it. To conceal his glee, he stooped to pick up the fallen spade.

“Oh, no harm done.” The young man’s fall had apparently not knocked any of the innocent joy from him. His boyish grin persisted even as he swatted away a bee that had been disturbed from the flowers. William grinned back at him, at least until the bee came his way. It was flying straight into his face so, his right hand still being gripped around the spade, he raised his left to swipe at the creature with an open palm.

He realized his mistake at once, but there was nothing he could do about it. The ring fell to the ground. It struck a stone with a piercing metallic note that seemed to resonate for an eternity. The young man’s big, open, honest face gazed down at it in bemusement, then up at William full of sad betrayal. Without a thought William swung the spade hard at his head, and the man dropped like a felled oak.

William waited a moment, the spade held ready to strike again, but the young man lay still where he had fallen. There was something unnatural about how his neck was twisted so far around. And his chest was still.

William was sure that the blow had not been enough to kill him, but somehow he had contrived to break his neck as he fell. He was dead. This was very inconsiderate of him. But at least he had provided William with a spade.

He dragged the body away into the wood, and there dug as deep a grave as he could manage, and buried it. He scattered leaves and twigs over the freshly turned earth and then, because it amused him, the flowers from the market. He dropped the spade a good distance from the grave, rejoined the footpath, and walked quickly on. He did not stop until, past dusk, he took a room at the inn in the village he had by then reached, a safe distance from the scene of his crime.

Two days after that he was in the next county; a week later, in Norwich. There was a man there whom he had known for many years, though neither of them knew the other's name, and William sold to him the spoils of his recent endeavors. He kept hold of the ring, though. Even so, he had had a profitable time of it in the previous weeks, and found himself temporarily wealthy as a result of the sale.

For the next few days, William set about the task of lightening the load in his purse. He took a good room at a coaching inn, ate well, drank heavily, gambled, and indulged the company of a great number of friends, some of whom he could not actually recall knowing. But he didn't especially care. He was having a fine time of it, and the recent brief unpleasantness was altogether

forgotten. So much so that, one night, back in his lodgings with a full belly and a light head, he happened to pick up the stolen ring, and it took him a moment to remember where it had come from.

When he did remember, he felt no remorse. He held the ring up in the candlelight and briefly enjoyed the tiny dance of the reflected flame. It was a fine little trinket. He should get a good price for it when he did decide to sell it. Distractedly, he tried it on. It was a good fit. Then he fell asleep in his chair.

When it came it was so quiet it was barely a sound at all, less than a whisper. But William heard the words clearly enough; and thought, as well, that he felt a wisp of breath against his ear.

Give it back.

Terror jolted him awake with a sharp cry that blew out his candle and dropped him into darkness.

“Who’s there?” he cried. He fumbled for matches, spilled most of them, and took three attempts to finally strike one. He held it high, trembling and twitching, as he turned two full circles on the spot, staring into the dimly revealed room. Finding no one there he relit the candle and looked again. Nobody.

He cursed his foolishness, and his dreams, and made his way to bed, singing to himself—quite without thinking—a song from his childhood. He lit a second candle from the first, then climbed into the bed and, shivering at a chill he hadn’t previously noticed, drew the blankets up tight and listened attentively to the

silence. Satisfied that he was most definitely alone, his grip upon the bedclothes gradually loosened and the tension in his body unwound. He closed his eyes, and his thoughts began to dissolve as sleep embraced him.

Give it back.

The voice was just as quiet and as clear. William's eyes snapped open, but he was still alone. He trembled and shook. He knew the voice now. It was the voice of a dead man buried in a wood. He tried to convince himself he had been dreaming, but he knew that he had not.

He took off the ring and shut it away in a drawer, but he did not sleep again that night. He did not hear the voice again, but he did not—could not—sleep.

Sometime before dawn, he rose, dressed, and, without much thought, gathered together his most valuable and most necessary possessions into a satchel, and left the house. The ring, he left in the drawer: he wanted no part of it now. He walked out to the city limits with no idea where he was going, and when buildings gave way to countryside and farmland he still carried on, and on. He walked at a good pace, and without rest or sustenance, through the dawn, through the day, and through village after village until, after dusk, with no idea where he might be, he crept into a barn on some remote farm.

He collapsed to the floor and pulled straw around and over him for a blanket. He didn't even notice the hardness of the ground, felt nothing but gratitude for

the opportunity to rest now. His feet ached, the muscles in his legs burned, and he felt drained and hollow. But he was pleased to be so many miles from his lodgings, away from the ring and the dead man's voice, and exhaustion would surely now send him quickly to sleep. Blissful, beautiful sleep. His eyelids fell shut.

Give it back.

No! How could this be? William screwed his eyes tighter shut and tried to ignore the voice. He wrapped his arms around his head, covering his ears. It made no difference.

Give it back.

Louder now. More insistent.

This was madness. This was imagination. This was the fevered invention of his mind, addled by lack of sleep and desperate exhaustion.

Give it back.

William yelled out. But his voice had been silent for over a day and he was unable to form actual words, his mind too maddened and panicked to form thoughts to demand them, he could only let out a strange animal sound of profound anguish. Then the tears came, and he did not hear the voice anymore, only his own racking sobs, and he lay there, weeping like a child, until morning. And then he staggered to his feet and walked on.

William kept walking for two more days, but all the distance he put between himself and the ring made no difference. He could not escape the whispering voice.

And despite a weariness far beyond any he had ever known before, he still could not rest. The voice, or just the thought of the voice, held him back from the brink of sleep, denying him the thing he most craved.

He was *so* tired, so utterly ragged and broken, that it was now a kind of madness. His thoughts were small, angry things that flitted and lurched and tumbled and fought each other in his head. And though he could not sleep, he began at times to think that he *was* dreaming. All that he saw seemed unreal, distorted, and terrifying.

People were the worst, so he avoided all human contact, but still he was never truly alone. Every step was full of pain, and his muscles seemed to have worn away, and his limbs had grown heavy and clumsy. He felt as if he didn't know how his body worked anymore. And the one thought he could hold on to, the one constant, like a screaming hunger beyond any hunger he had ever known, was his desperate need to rest, to sleep, to stop.

On that third night, hunched up at the foot of a tree, shaking with madness, he pleaded with the dead man, crying out to the night: "Let me sleep! For the love of God, please, let me sleep!"

And the voice replied: *Give it back. Give it back and let me sleep!*

William, blank-faced, gave a weary nod. He rose unsteadily to his feet and began to walk back the way he had come.

*

Standing at the open drawer, William looked down at the ring. He felt nothing. He reached down, picked it up, and placed it on the same finger as before. Then he went out and paid all the money he still had for one further coach journey. It was a long trip and William stared out of the window for all the hours that it took, the chaos in his head fractionally tamed by his new sense of purpose, his glimmer of hope.

In the woods on the hill it took some time to find the spade again, but then he returned to the grave as if led to it. The remains of the flowers confirmed that this was the place; he noticed the sickly sweet smell of their decay as he started to dig.

The ground was mercifully soft. He had no strength left in his weary limbs, but a desperate will still somehow moved them, and slowly he progressed down into the earth. His body ached, but he did not notice. Tears fell from his eyes, but he did not know it. His breath rasped in time with the rhythm of his work.

When he reasoned that he was deep enough, he knelt down at the bottom of the hole and scraped at the earth with his hands. Quite quickly he found cloth: the upper part of a shirtsleeve. He scrabbled at the soil, feverishly scratching earth away to reveal an arm, a hand. He held it for a moment, looked down at his own hands, blackened by the earth, clasped as if strangely praying around the body's cold, dead flesh. When he pulled the ring from his finger, it left a clean pink circle of flesh amid the earth-stained skin.

He lifted the dead man's hand, parted the ring finger from the others, and slid the ring onto it. Then, for a moment, he knelt there, still holding the dead man's hand, and he closed his eyes expectantly and listened to his own breathing. There was no other sound. The silence was beautiful.

William laid the dead man's hand back by the side of his body, then filled his own lungs with the sweet woodland air. He opened his eyes again, as if waking to a new day. He might have smiled if he had had the strength.

It was over.

But when he tried to rise to his feet he found that he could not. And it was not fatigue that prevented him. The dead man's hand was closed around his own, holding him down. He pulled against it wearily but it only pulled back with greater determination. He toppled forward, his face landing against soil beneath which the dead man's face must have lain. He knew he should struggle, but his slow brain was failing to tell his body how. And then he felt the embrace of another bony arm thrown around his back, holding him down with surprising force. Then the other hand released its grip, reached up above him, and began to claw at the earth, bringing down clods of it onto his back.

William made no sound, barely resisted, as the soil piled up over him. After a while, the left arm held him while the right pulled down more earth, and more.

And the weight of it was like bedclothes. And as more fell over his head, there was darkness. There was the smell of earth, and there was darkness. He knew he must not sleep. He knew he must not. But he was so tired.