

A Cruel Hand

By: S. Whittington

A huge present wrapped in newspaper sits on my doorstep as I come home—but it isn't my birthday. Many birthdays have passed, and today is not one of them. I bend down to gaze at the odd gift and read the crude handwriting:

TO YOU, MASTER NEWMAN, FROM LESTER

"Lester?!" I almost shriek.

Ah yes, Mr. Lester was a good man. A good man indeed. Yet he died two months ago with the help of a helping hand. I see that helping hand sometimes, too cowardly to confront him, too afraid to speak to him, for fear of what others might think. Mr. Lester was a good man, and so am I, but all men have secrets to keep from the world's eye. That eye that never blinks.

What could they know that I dare not confront? Can pranksters know, maybe? Could I possibly know this man, this doer of dark deeds? As I ponder, an icy wind's breath distracts my wonder in this night. The maple by the stoop, bare of its foliage, clicks and clacks its branches at me, as if to scold me. The dead leaves of a short-lived autumn scamper on the sidewalk. The leaves' scraping on the concrete jars my soul to attention.

I scarcely knew Lester myself, only a man reaped of his life. He knew things that he should never know, and it cost him, and another is to blame, this cursed helping hand I dare not name.

"Let's...let's get this off of the doorstep," I snarl, "Now!"

Again, I bend down to grasp the crude boon to cast it aside. Pranksters, conspirators, whoever put this here is in danger of my wrath, for it is not from Lester, a good man who meant no harm, but I have yet to end this helping hand, this wicked hand.

I feel of the package, its moist membrane and cool touch curdle my insides. My eyes widen. This in my hands, is it truly what I fear? I immediately drop it onto the stoop in front of my door. The percussion of this wretched thing's impact could make a raven gag in repulse. I peer at my hands to find them crimson with another's blood. What villainy is this? I stare downward at the infernal gift, blood spattered where I dropped it. I gasp holding my hand to my mouth.

"What is this? Come out you troublemakers!" I scream, "Show yourself!"

But none come forward in the darkness of the streets, none visible to my eye.

And then I hear it, a whisper in the dark, "A helping hand...a helping hand..."

Where are my damned keys to this house, this wolf's den? I rummage through my pockets frantically. My to-do list, for my eyes only, falls to the stoop below. The keys chime in frenzy as I search for the right one.

The darkness around me speaks again, louder, "A helping hand...a helping hand..."

"No!" I scream. I fall to the ground as a pain grows in my chest. My heart, it collapses as I succumb to terror's hulking ton. How feeble I am! My ears ring as my sight dulls in the night.

The voice roars at me, "A helping hand! A helping hand!"

I am gone. My spirit wavers unseen over my broken vessel of flesh. My lifeless eyes gaze at Heaven, the place I am now forbidden.

Two men hover over my body. One man, I recognize him, burly and middle-aged cries, “Someone, a helping hand, please! Mr. Newman needs help!”

The other man, unsure of his identity, scrawny and dirty, tells him, “Sir, the man is gone, he’s dead.”

“Oh!” the burly man sobbed, “I should have given him the roast myself. It’s all my fault!”

Roast? This is all? My ghastly self of silence watches as the burly gentlemen took the bloodied remains, that which scorched my life like ice. The burly man unwraps it to reveal the freshly cut meat. My ghost screams unseen. Not one hears me.

The scrawny man said, “I thought this man was being robbed, and I came running to his aid and asking for help. What was wrong with him?”

The burly man sighs deeply, “His logic, unfortunately, was no longer. I left him a roast as a peace offering. I feel I offended him the other day when I disagreed with his opinion of life. I was too frightened to give it to him myself. What were his last words, sir?”

“Something about a murdered man named Lester,” the scrawny man replies.

The burly man freezes, “*My name is Lester.*”

Though nothing more than spirit, I suffocate in shame. The scrawny man points to my to-do list, “What’s this, sir? This note?”

“I’m unsure...” Lester, a good man, tells him.

As Lester opens the list, I feel that I was and will be all for naught in this creation I once called home. Lester peers in pain at my spite on paper.

MASTER EDWARD – PROVE HIS LOGIC WRONG
MASTER HUGH – FIND FAULT WITH HIS “PIETY”
MADAM ERNICE – REVEAL TO HER THE FUTILITY OF SOCIETY

Lester’s face contorts in anguish at the bottom of the list. He sees:

MASTER LESTER – MURDER HIM WITH A HELPING HAND

I am forever distant from your mercy and forgiveness, Lester, my friend.
Damnation awaits me.