

AN UNSEEN HAND || By A. W. WHITE

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THE two men stood alone in a corner of the supper room. "Wish me joy, Phil, old chap, I'm the happiest fool on earth to-night!" There was a triumphant glitter in Frank Newenham's eye as he spoke. The other man became suddenly white. The glass was to his lips, but he set it down untasted.

There was a moment's silence. "Then it is settled?" he asked, wheeling round.

"Quite," nodded Newenham; "but it means weary waiting, of course. Good gracious, Phil, what's amiss?" He had caught sight of the man's haggard face as he went past him into the empty smoking room. Newenham followed and closed the door. "Let me send you a B. and S.," he said.

"Thanks, it's no case for brandy," Brook laughed bitterly, dropping into a chair and taking up a newspaper at random.

His host looked puzzled. "You are not yourself, old chap," he persisted.

"Very much so, worse luck," was the almost savage reply.

Newenham hesitated, made as if to speak, but checked himself and walked out.

Once alone, Philip tossed aside the paper and sprang to his feet. He must pull himself together at all costs.

Who was his partner for the next dance? He stopped and examined his card. The next moment he was steering his way through the crush toward the ballroom.

Penelope Leighton greeted him with a happy smile. "I want you to sit this out," he said, brusquely, as she slid her arm in his. He led her away to the quiet of the winter garden.

"What a jolly dance it has been, Phil," she sighed, leaning back and looking up at him with soft gray eyes.

"Has it?" he said, hoarsely. He was gazing at her spellbound. How beautiful she was! How madly he loved her! Embowered in leaf and blossom, she seemed, in the mysterious light, an ethereal vision—a vision, alas! sent but to mock him.

Even now, though he knew that everything was lost, he yearned to take her in his arms—aye, and compel her to return to him—to be his alone for ever.

He controlled himself with an effort. "Nep, I have something to say to you."

The girl looked down timidly and waited. Was Phil about to claim openly the heart that belonged to him already?

"I am going away, Nep—to Africa."

He spoke hurriedly. There was a pause. In that silence came the hum and the throb of the dance, and the gentle splash of a fountain among the ferns.

"Have you anything to say to me?" he asked at length. "Do you realize that this may be our last dance together?"

There was no reply.

"Can you, then, cast off old friends so easily? I envy you," he said.

He had not noticed her sudden pallor.

"What do you mean, Phil?" she asked, faintly, turning to him with a wistful little smile. "Surely you know I could never do that."

"Then help me, Nep—help me to win back my lost love. Remember, I am no new friend, Nep. Am I to be robbed of my all in life?" he pleaded.

"Phil! are you going crazy, or am I?" she gasped.

"It is useless to attempt to hide matters from me, Nep. Have I not heard to-night from Frank's own lips the wonderful secret? Bah! I am not a fool. Why those everlasting visits to your house? Why that constant air of mystery between you and your sister whenever he was about? Did you imagine I had no eyes?"

The proud white face was turned from him. He leaned forward and gazed wildly at her.

"Have I no cause to speak?" he insisted.

"I begin dimly to understand," she half-whispered at last, drawing away her hand and rising. "Please take me into the house."

As she walked through the rooms Phil's words rang in her ears. Would they ever cease to do so in this world? Wounded beyond expression, she had now to realize that his love had been for her sister. She had given her heart to one who had never asked for it.

IT was the evening following the ball given in honor of the young squire's homecoming. The light from a wood fire danced and flickered on the walls of the rectory study, and a curtain swayed softly against an open window.

Alone in the dreamy gloaming sat Philip Brook.



"Well, Phil, are you determined to run away and leave us?"

His face was set and pale, for a fierce struggle against the unfairness and cruelty of life raged within him.

Outside the rooks were cawing in the distant elms, and the clear note of a robin came from a thicket. Through the trees—a network of golden tracery—showed where the sun had set, and autumn's mellow haze hung in the silent hollows. Philip raised his head wearily. So this was his last night in the old house. Henceforth that peaceful country home would exist for him only as a tender memory.

Would he ever return again? Little did he care, since Nep, the comrade of his happiest hours, had deserted him. Small matter if friends seemed cold, and those he loved best understood him least. Verily, fortune had dealt harshly with him.

From the wall, the portrait of his mother looked tenderly down, as in times gone by. Did she understand and feel for him now? he wondered.

Phil's thoughts traveled back to the days of his childhood, and all unheeded the shadows lengthened and the clock ticked on. How swiftly those early years had flown, yet how vividly could he recall every event of his boyhood! It seemed only yesterday that he was a shy lad of twelve, roaming the fields and lanes, and laughing with his light-hearted little friend, Penelope Leighton. Phil was the rector's only child. He and the girl were alike motherless, and this, perhaps, deepened the bond of sympathy between them.

Ah! those were careless, sunny hours, but all too fleeting. Even at this early date a cloud appeared on the fair horizon. Clearly the scene rose before him now. A hot, sleepy afternoon in July; the rectory garden; Nep hiding in the shrubbery; the arrival of his father with a tall, dark stranger and a handsome boy; an interrupted game of robbers, and an invitation to the hall.

It was all so unexpected and happened so quickly. The stranger was Sir Charles Newenham, the squire, lately returned after long absence from abroad, and the boy was his son Frank.

"The two lads should make good companions," Sir Charles had said; but Phil had no desire for a new playmate; he had been happy enough with Nep. Vaguely he suspected this visit, and he felt troubled and disinclined to continue the game as he watched the figures disappear down the walk that day.

Looking back, how true this presentiment had been. Before long Frank had become a frequent visitor at the rectory, and a disturbing element in Phil's young life.

Henceforward the good times, the days of dreams and make-believe, were ended. Seldom now could he and Nep roam together in their queer little world uninterrupted. The old games were gradually abandoned, and new ones took their place.

Nevertheless, in the end the two boys developed a close friendship, although at times Phil would experience an odd pang when he heard Nep called "Penny Girl" and "Old Chap," and saw how calmly this young autocrat appropriated what he had so long considered his own peculiar property.

Were these the passing troubles of youth, or were they the foreshadowing of a misery that was to change his whole life? It was the old story—two men and a girl. One man to win her, the other man to go to the wall. He was the other man.

Phil realized this clearly enough, and yet time was when this girl's heart might have been wholly his. Perhaps he had taken too much for granted. Unconsciously he may have relied too fondly on an early attachment that meant nothing to her in later life, although lasting enough on his part.

But no; his love had been returned. This he knew, albeit no actual word had been spoken. And now her love had been given to another. Still, could he blame Nep, after all, if she had chosen Frank in preference to himself? How could he, a poor, prosaic city clerk, compare in a young girl's eyes with the handsome young naval officer?

Frank was no longer a boy. After years at sea he had returned a man, and he had found a beautiful woman where he had left a child. Moreover, Frank was rich, a good fellow and an old friend. Aye, there lay the irony of it all. Frank, the chum of his boyish days, had robbed him of all that made life worth living.

Well, he would try to face matters bravely. The step he was about to take might be against his father's advice, but, then, the father knew nothing of his trouble, and nothing could be gained by speaking. It was a grief that he must bear in silence.

How he cursed himself for those rash words on the night of the dance. What a brute he had been! Yet surely she must have understood something of the torment he was enduring. She could not have been always blind to his love—a love of years, hopeless though it now was.

Yes, look at it how he would he could not but feel that Nep had acted heartlessly. She deceived him in the first instance, and then when it was clear that he knew her secret she treated him with indifference.

Frank he could not blame, for he knew nothing of the real situation; moreover, he had been open enough in speaking about his engagement.

The fire had burned low. Mechanically, he began slowly to stir the embers. Presently he heard the rustle of a dress, and the door opened. He glanced quickly round. It was Nep.

Philip rose. "I am alone," he said, awkwardly, noticing her hesitation. "My father is in the village, but he cannot be long now."

The girl winced. "I hoped I might find you alone, Phil," she faltered.

"Then I will ring for lights."

"Please don't trouble, I—I like the half lights; I can think and talk better then I always fancy." She drew a chair to the fire.

"May I not offer you tea?" he stammered.

How he wished his father would appear. It seemed so ridiculous affecting society manners with Nep. The whole situation was false.

"I have just had tea," she was saying—"a huge tea at the hall, where I left May." She stopped suddenly, as though she had said too much, and looked searchingly at him. There was an awkward pause.

"Well, Phil, are you determined to run away and leave us?" she laughed. It was a nervous laugh.

This was almost unbearable. Had she sought him out only to probe the wound she had given?

Philip's eyes were turned inward, or he might have seen the girl's pale, anxious face, and the clasping and unclasping of her hands.

"I have not altered my plans," he replied, dryly.

"But surely they are very sudden?"—she checked herself—"I mean—have you time to make arrangements? I asked Frank whether you had told him about it, and he said no. When are you leaving?"