

THE PARTY OF THE FIRST PART

By Gelett Burgess

AS Merioneth walked up the quiet, deserted road his steps grew slower and slower. The night was warm and full of odors. Overhead the full moon sailed out from behind a mass of clouds into the unfathomable blue of the heavens, changing in a moment the dull obscurity of the suburban scene into strikingly accented masses of light and shade. The estates were large, in this vicinity, and the houses far apart. The trees that lined the road shut the pathway in a deep shadow, but this was a familiar and well-loved part of town, and he had much to think over. At one end of a long, stone wall he paused, then seated himself.

No one was in sight, and all was still about him except for a slight rustling of the trees overhead. He had rested for some time, going over and over in his mind what had happened that day, when, from a church-tower nearby, the bell struck with a clangor that startled him. He counted the strokes—it was midnight. The sound ended in decreasing, tremulous vibrations, and the silence closed in again.

He looked about him irresolutely, undecided whether to continue up the street or to return. At last he stood up and looked about him. His eye, aimlessly questing the scene, fell upon the lawn on the other side of the wall, and rested at last, caught by the reflection upon the polished surface of some small object half-hidden in the grass. He vaulted to the inside of the inclosure without removing his gaze, walked over and picked up what he had seen.

It was a short Japanese knife, with a cheaply carven ivory handle, tied with red cord, the sort that is commonly sold to tourists for paper-cutters. He examined it curiously. Its blade was sharp, and stained with irregular spots of something that had dried upon the steel. They showed almost black in the moonlight, but Merioneth knew that it was blood. He sickened at the horror of it, the suggestion of crime—possibly murder—was so frightful. If blood, it had surely taken a deep and cruel wound to leave such a fearsome stain. He held it for some time, trembling, wondering what to do.

Some little distance away stood a large, three-story brick house partly hidden among the trees. Merioneth walked to it cautiously, even stealthily. No windows were lighted that he could see, but, to assure himself, he passed round to the rear and inspected the place carefully. He saw no sign of life, until, reaching the far wing of the building, he thought he noticed a light in a third-floor window. Even as he looked it went out, so quickly that he was uncertain whether or not he had indeed really seen anything. He returned to the front of the house.

Here he again hesitated, wondering what he should do. He still held the knife in his hand, and it needed but one more shuddering look at it for him to make up his mind. The street was still deserted, so far as he could see, but the moon had withdrawn behind a heavy drift of cloud. The lighted window made him anxious, but he decided to investigate.

He made his way up the front steps and across the veranda with infinite

caution to prevent his footsteps being heard. At the front door he listened attentively for some time, but heard nothing but the quiet ticking of a clock somewhere inside.

Four French windows opened upon the veranda, two upon each side of the front door. He crept noiselessly to the nearest one of those on the right. From the ground it had appeared dark, but now he could see through a narrow slit of the closely drawn curtain that a dim light burned in the room. He could even see part way into the room, and what he saw was enough to make his heart beat still more violently, excited though the investigation had already made him. Near the window was a chair overturned upon the floor; beyond that, the lacy edge of a chiffon skirt, a bit of silk stocking and a woman's delicately shod foot, the rhinestone buckle of its shoe shining like a spark in the gaslight. Its position showed that a woman was lying stretched upon the carpeted floor, but whether alive or not Merioneth could not tell.

There was no other way, now; he must enter the house. This first dreadful glimpse of what he was to see unnerved him, and for some minutes he could not think calmly. Then he summoned his courage, and tried the window. It was fastened securely. He tried the other, with the same result. He tiptoed back to the front door, and, for a moment, laid his hand to the bell, but did not ring. Then it occurred to him to try the handle of the door, and the latch turned easily.

Inside, he again waited for a trembling interval, motionless, but with tense muscles, listening for some sign of life upstairs. There was still no sound save the steady ticking, till with a whirr and a rattle a cuckoo clock cried out with shocking clearness. Merioneth, starting in sudden affright, dropped the knife. The clatter of its fall upon the hardwood floor added to his alarm. Then, recovering his composure with a mighty effort, he turned to the door upon his

right. It was closed, and he silently and carefully moved the handle.

It swung slowly back under his touch, and Merioneth stepped softly into the room. It was a library, furnished with rows of book-shelves that went completely round the walls. In the centre was a huge table, littered with papers and magazines, some of which had fallen to the floor. Merioneth gave one glance at the white-clad figure lying upon its back in front of a leather easy-chair, then walked rapidly to the chandelier and turned on the lights. At first he dared not look steadily at the body. In his horror the thought came to him that he might still escape from the scene before anyone could find him, and leave all as he had found it, for someone else to discover. But he put this craven idea out of his head with a scorn of his weakness.

He stooped and examined the woman upon the floor, to ascertain her condition. She had a dark, handsome, proud face, now pale as death. Her eyelids were closed, but her little red lips were slightly parted, disclosing a row of even, blue-white teeth. Her disordered black hair swept in waves about her head and partially hid the opening of her low-cut gown. Her hands, one of which wore a solitaire diamond ring, were clasped over her breast and were streaked with blood which, escaping from some wound, had flowed over the chiffon and ribbons, collecting in a dark pool beneath her.

Gently sweeping the heavy mass of hair from her breast, Merioneth looked to see if she were still breathing. He thought he detected the slightest and slowest possible rise and fall of her white bosom, and, with the wild hope that she might still be restored to life he drew the little hands aside and cut gently down the front of her dress to lay bare the wound. He found it at last, and at the sight he sickened. It had evidently just escaped her heart—a little lower and it would have killed her instantly. From the gash a sluggish current still oozed; he placed his

handkerchief over the spot, knowing no way to bandage it, at present.

Next, he gently raised the girl's head and placed a sofa-cushion beneath it, not daring to lift her to the couch, lest he should cause the wound to bleed more profusely. There was a siphon and a decanter with glasses in a tray upon the table; he removed the serviette, drenched it with soda-water and with this he dabbled the girl's brow and wrists. He put the decanter to her lips, but could not make her swallow.

His efforts to revive her, so far, seemed hopeless. Yet she was still warm; there must be some way to save her life, if he could but bring her out of her swoon. He worked over her indefatigably for a few minutes, then rested, to await eagerly some sign of returning consciousness. To his delight a faint glow began to suffuse her pale cheeks. Then the motion of her breathing increased in vigor, and her eyelids fluttered.

Suddenly, as he gazed in rapt anxiety, his ear caught the sound of creaking floor-boards. A stair creaked—then another. Merioneth turned a haggard face to the door, too desperately absorbed in his endeavor, now, to fear. No one appeared; he renewed his attentions to the girl who lay before him, fighting for life. Her bosom heaved and her breath came faster, and she moaned softly as she awakened into a consciousness of pain.

Beads of sweat stood out on Merioneth's forehead as he watched her heartrending struggle, as the conflict between life and death was played out on the girl's face. Vaguely, as if from miles away, or as if he were but dreaming, he heard the footsteps descend, pause, and descend again. He knew there was someone lurking behind the door—what did it matter?

He loved the girl now, loved her with a passion and unselfishness that made him care little for his own danger. Her state was so pitiful, her safety now so dear to him, that he did not care what became of himself, if, by any possible exertion or sacrifice, she could

be made to live—if she could be made to come to herself even long enough to gaze into his eyes and read his loving message to her. She must not die before she had looked upon him, and known his heart.

A tremor passed through her body, and her hands moved convulsively. Then, setting his heart to beating with longing, her eyes opened, and she looked at him, questioningly.

Before he had time to speak, a man stepped quickly into the room. He was a man of some fifty years, with white hair and white mustache, and he had evidently been awakened from sleep, for he wore a long bathrobe and slippers upon his bare feet.

"What's the matter?" he cried in a strained, querulous voice. "What are you doing there?" And then, as he saw what was on the floor, "Oh, my God!"

He came over and knelt beside the girl, taking her hand and pushing Merioneth aside.

"What does this mean? What in heaven's name has happened? Alice! Oh, Alice!" His face had gone as white as his hair. His eyes stared in horror, and his mouth had fallen open. He looked ten years older now than at first.

The girl put her hand to her breast with a moan. Then she looked from one to the other of the men in dazed perplexity. But she looked longest at Merioneth, whose gaze had never once left her, who watched her with his soul in his eyes. To his message of love an answer seemed to come at last, as she struggled into a realization of what had happened, and what she now saw before her. She smiled faintly, and then turned to the older man.

"I have been very foolish, father, that's all," she said slowly and with great effort. "I tried to kill myself—but I'm afraid I didn't quite succeed." The exertion of saying these few words weakened her, and she closed her eyes with an expression of pain.

Merioneth reached for the decanter and forced it between the girl's teeth. "Go and telephone for a doctor!" he

exclaimed to the old man. "She's stabbed horribly, but perhaps we can save her! Hurry!"

The old man still stared stupidly at his daughter. "I don't understand—how—why——"

"Quick! A doctor, quick, for God's sake, or she'll bleed to death! I'll attend to her here!" cried Merioneth, and he pulled the father to his feet, pushing him toward the door. Before he came back to the girl the old man's wits had returned, and slippered feet were heard running up the stairs.

Merioneth threw himself again upon the floor beside the girl and, placing his arms tenderly about her, pressed his lips to hers.

"Alice! Oh, Alice!" he moaned. "Can you forgive me? Come back to me and forgive me, dear! I was insane with jealousy—I didn't know what I was doing! It was because I loved you so, Alice! I wish I had died before I struck you so cruelly—how could I have done it? I shall kill myself if you die, dear! I believe in you—I shall trust you forever—I know you are true! Oh, my poor, beautiful girl, can't you forgive me?"

The slippered feet had already pattered down the stairs again. In another moment the old man entered the room—but not before the girl had placed her little hand in Merioneth's, and had smiled lovingly into his eyes.



RESPIRE

DIM breaks the dawn across these highlands fair,
Dark pinnacles of hemlock stirless stand
Watching the rosy-clouded light expand
Through still, frost-sweetened air.

Twin desert palms have not a solitude
More deep than ours; yet where is kin more dear
Than the wild brother-life that round us here
Is waking in the wood?

A little while with Love and Life we stay,
And here God's peace a little while we know
Ere the world claims us, and afar we go
Where leads the thorny way.

In nights to come, close-housed, this mortal frame
Shut from the stars for which we fainting pine,
Shall not the spirit climb to this wild shrine
And light again its flame?

EMMA BELL MILES.



LINGERING HOPE

ASSISTANT—Shall we stop his paper? He's away behind.
RURAL EDITOR—Well, he paid something on account about two years ago.
Sometimes history repeats itself.