



HER FIRST PARTY

BY KATE CHOPIN.

The party dress, a white organdy with touches of delicate pink, was finished, and hung beneath the chandelier in Millie's room.

She had never been to an entertainment of any importance, and was not quite old enough to go to one now. But this was not wholly a grown-up affair—one of the arguments which she and her brother Bob had brought to bear upon their mother. Bob's class was giving it over at College Hall, only a few blocks away. There were to be charades, tableaux and recitations, in all of which Millie was to take a leading rôle.

All her acquaintances were going; everybody that was anybody, between sixteen and twenty, was going. But surely none looked forward to it with such rapture, such blissful anticipation, such expectancy as did Millie. All night she anticipated the event in dreams, and all day she posed or declaimed or danced through the halls and apartments as if possessed by the very spirit of Terpsichore.

If anything were to happen! Millie sickened at the thought. But what could happen, except ruin, perhaps, and the weather prophet was taking care of that. To be sure, her Aunt Mildred, a couple of hundred miles away, was quite sick, and her mother was wearing a saddened face betimes.

Again, the party dress might catch fire and burn up, and there would be no time to make another. She herself might take a tumble in one of those fantastic flights through the house, and sprain an ankle. The thought sobered her for twenty seconds or less.

At breakfast the morning of the party Millie found it difficult to keep up a pretense of interest in anything so prosaic as toast and mutton-chops.

She plied Bob with questions, she worried him with her misgivings. She quitted her seat to embrace her mother violently, then she was off to the kitchen, and dragging Kitty, the maid, up two flights to view the creation in pink and white beneath the chandelier.

A while later the restless Millie stood out upon the front steps, gazing up into the misty October sky in search of weather indications upon which she might base some prognostications of her own. It was then that the postman came along, and with a polite greeting handed her the morning mail—quite a batch of it.

She slowly turned into the house, glancing over the circulars and letters, and in a manner assorting them. There was a letter to her mother from her Aunt Jane,—she knew the stiff, formal handwriting,—mailed from the distant town in which her Aunt Mildred lay sick.

A dread that for the moment made her feel faint took possession of Millie. She crept into the quiet parlor and sat there undisturbed, staring at the outside of her Aunt Jane's letter. Her fingers seemed to feel for the annoyance which that sealed envelope might cover; her eyes seemed to penetrate and unveil the threat against her longed-for and looked-for pleasure.

What difference would a day make? She turned and turned the letter about. What difference *could* a day make? None whatever, as Millie counted days. Yet she could feel her heart thump with guilty excitement as she slipped the letter into her pocket.

She then went on up-stairs and laid the mail in the usual place upon the sitting-room table, glad that her mother was not there at the moment to unmask her shamefaced consciousness.

It was a hateful occurrence, that threw a damper upon her joy. During the school hours the letter concealed in her pocket seemed like a live thing, a reptile, a slimy thing, when her hand accidentally encountered it. She almost made up her mind to deliver it to her mother when she returned at three o'clock.

Oh, but the merry time ahead! What chatter! Like the twittering sparrows among the russet leaves as the girls walked home beneath the trees. What breathless chatter of gowns, of hair ornaments, of slippers and fluttering ribbons! But Millie knew there was nothing that would compare with the pink-and-white cloud floating beneath the chandelier in her room. All her eagerness returned, and nothing marred it, not even the sight of her mother's face, perplexed with an uneasy sadness.

Bob was distinctly proud of his pretty sister when she stood revealed for household inspection that night, but he would have considered it an unpardonable weakness to say so.

"You'll do, Millie. Rub some of the paint off your cheeks." Oh, what a joke! Kitty, the maid, howled at the humor of it.

"You'll be after tellin' her to take the sparkle out of her shinin' eyes next, Misther Bob. Go way wid ye!"

Millie, in an exalted state, turned like a show-window automaton while the gentle mother enveloped her in a fleecy white cape, brought to light for the occasion from the relic trunk.

There have been thousands of parties just

exactly like that one, but no one could have made Millie believe so.

What applause at her recitation! What side-splitting laughter over the charades! What a hush of appreciation over the beautiful tableaux! And then the attentions of

the college boys, the compliments, the mountains of ice-creams, the islands of sponge-cake, the running river of lemonade!

Millie's excitement held her all the way home. Clinging to Bob's arm, her little, nervous steps kept a dancing pace to his unthinking stride. It followed her to her very pillow.

But there, before she closed her eyes, a lull came upon her senses; the joy all melted out of her soul, and the vision of a letter held sway in her dreams all through the night.

There was nothing haphazard in the fact that Millie stationed herself upon the front steps the following morning. She was pale. Something had, as Bob would have said, rubbed the paint off her cheeks, and that same something had taken the sparkle out of her eyes, and left in its stead a dull anxiety.

She was waiting for the postman. When he handed her the scanty mail she augmented it with the letter in her pocket and carried it directly to her mother, who sat at the sitting-room table, bending over some sewing.

Millie did not withdraw, but stood there, watching at a little distance. Somehow she was not startled when the letter trembled in her mother's hand, when the tears gathered and fell upon the fluttering sheets.

"What is it, mother?" asked Millie, in a dry voice that did not sound to her like her own. She darted forward, and with an encircling arm drew her mother's head against her throbbing heart. "What is it, mother, dear? What makes you cry?"

"Your Aunt Mildred cannot recover. The doctors have given her up. I am going—I *must* go to her!" rising with agitation and clasping Millie closely.

"You never had a sister, my sweet child—you cannot know"—between broken sobs—"a favorite sister! We were everything to each other until we married. Jane was not the same; she was older and stern. I must go. Send Kitty," relinquishing the trembling girl. "I must get ready at once. God grant I find her alive."

From the time the train left the station, bearing her mother away, Millie became the prey of a feverish restlessness. It was Saturday, and there was no school. She walked alone far out into the suburbs, walked rapidly, as if her own motion might hasten the flying wheels of the engine. All her thoughts were concentrated in the reiteration:

"She will be there in so and so many hours, and it will be all right."

She had seen her Aunt Mildred but at rare intervals, and her sorrow was not active; it was but the reflection of her mother's.

All her thoughts were for her mother. In the house, going from one room to another, she watched the clocks, almost counting the slow seconds. At luncheon Bob urged her to eat, but she could not. She only poured the tea with cold hands, and her eyes, brooding, cast down upon the white cloth.

In the afternoon a telegram came, directed to her mother. Bob opened it, and they read it together:

Mildred died at one o'clock to-day.—Jane.

Bob could not understand the wild paroxysm of grief that seized upon his sister, that made of her for hours a pitiable object of his solicitude. He has not understood it to this day. For it was not to Bob her confession was made, in abject contrition, a veritable suffering penitent, imploring the forgiveness which was not withheld.

Millie, quite grown up by this time, has been to many a party since then; but none was ever again like that one.

"Do you remember her the night of the party at College Hall, when she recited?" said an amiable chaperon, lifting her lorgnette, one evening not long ago. "How she has changed! What dignity! What quiet poise! But it seems to me she has lost something."

"Do you think so?" from a second amiable chaperon, with clearer eyes that needed no lorgnette. "It seems to me she has gained something."