

The Garden Party

Katherine Mansfield

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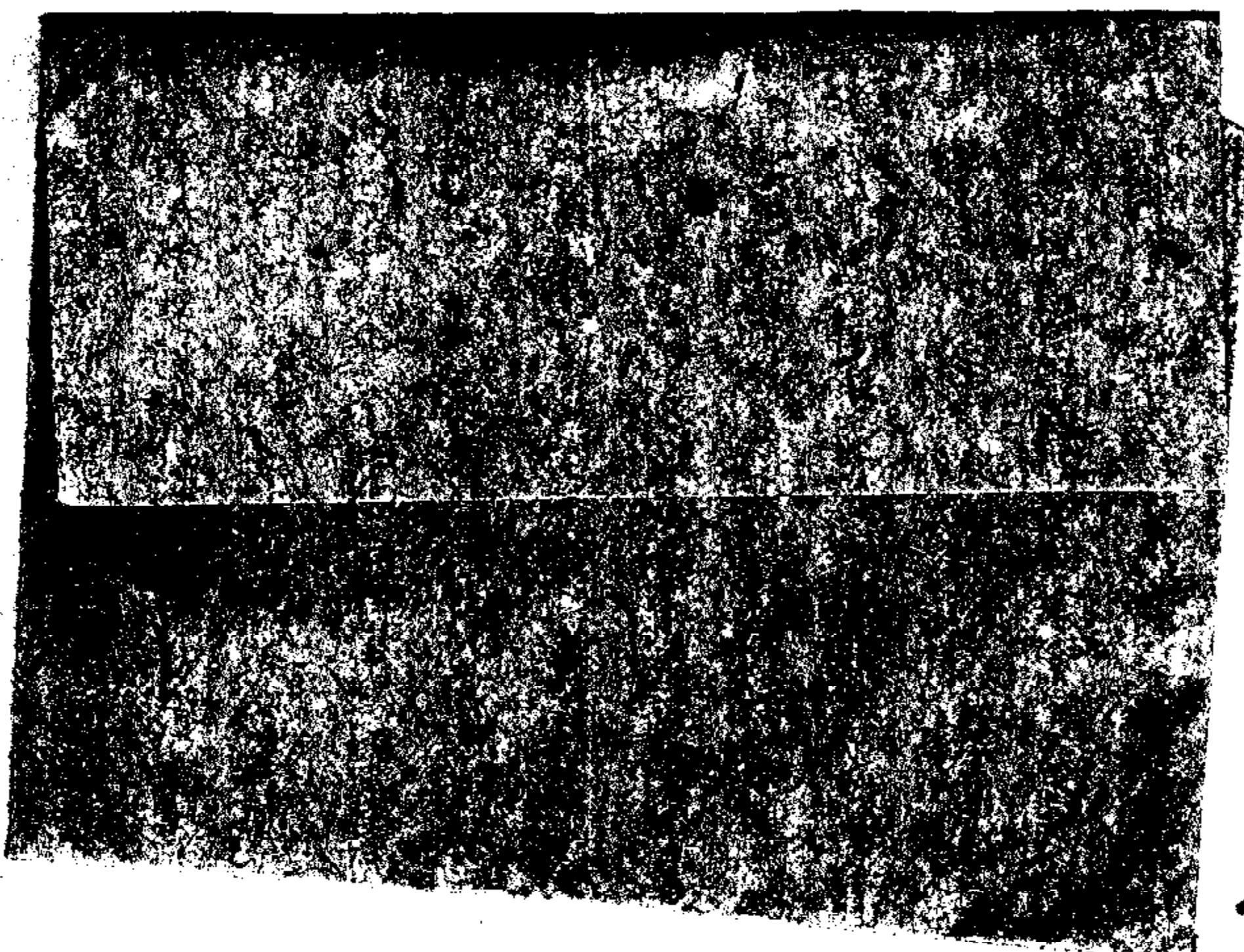
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Note to the reader:

The story in this booklet has been specially prepared for intermediate students of English so that it can be read easily without having to use a dictionary often. You will find that difficult words which are important are marked like this: * and these words are explained in a glossary at the end of the booklet. Other words in the story that you do not know are either not very important or you can guess their meaning quite easily, so you need not stop to use a dictionary.

The story:

Although this story was written over fifty years ago the kind of class structure which it shows is still a feature of many societies today. In the story we are given two contrasting pictures of life at that time. The upper-class Sheridan family lives in a world where money brings many advantages — a beautiful house, new clothes, servants and parties. The lower classes, however, as represented by the workmen and the Scott family, experience poverty, disease and ugliness. Between these two worlds there is little contact, sympathy or understanding.

The author:

Katherine Mansfield was born in New Zealand in 1888 and came to England for the final part of her education in 1903. She specialised in writing short stories and her first collection *In a German Pension* was published in 1911. In 1917 she became ill and after that she travelled and lived in various places for health reasons. Her second book of stories *Bliss* appeared in 1921. *The Garden Party* was published a year later and was the last book to come out in her life-time. She died at Fontainebleau in 1923.

The Garden Party

And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden party if they had ordered it. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. The gardener had been up since dawn cutting the grass and sweeping the lawns* until they shone. The roses seemed to understand that they are the only flowers that impress people at garden parties; the only flowers that everybody knows. Hundreds, yes, hundreds had come out in a single night. The green bushes were weighed down with them.

The men came to put up the marquee* before breakfast was over. 10

‘Where do you want them to put the marquee, mother?’

‘My dear child, it’s no use asking me. I’m determined to leave everything to you children this year. Forget I am your mother. Treat me as a guest.’

But Meg could not possibly go and tell the men what to do. She had washed her hair before breakfast, and she sat drinking her coffee with a scarf over her head, and a dark, wet curl carefully arranged on each cheek.

‘You’ll have to go, Laura; you’re the artistic one.’ 20

Laura ran off, still holding her piece of bread and butter. It was so good to have an excuse for eating outside, and besides, she loved arranging things. She always felt she could do it so much better than anybody else.

Four men stood in a group on the garden path. They carried pieces of wood covered with rolls of canvas, and they had big toolbags on their backs. They looked impressive. Laura wished now that she was not holding that piece of bread and butter, but there was nowhere to put it, and she couldn’t possibly throw it away. She blushed* and tried to look severe as she came up to them. 30

‘Good morning,’ she said, copying her mother’s voice. But that sounded so unnatural that she felt ashamed, and went on nervously like a little girl, ‘Oh — er — have you come — is it about the marquee?’

'That's right, miss,' said the tallest of the men, and he moved his toolbag slightly, knocked back his straw hat and smiled down at her. 'That's it.'

His smile was so easy, so friendly, that Laura recovered. What nice eyes he had, small, but such a dark blue! And now she looked at the others, they were smiling too. 'Cheer up, we won't bite,' their smile seemed to say. How very nice workmen were! And what a beautiful morning! She mustn't mention the morning; she must be business-like. The marquee.

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'Well, what about on the lawn? Would that be suitable?'

And she pointed to the lawn with the hand that didn't hold the bread and butter. They turned, they stared in the direction. A little fat man shook his head, and the tall man looked doubtful.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'It wouldn't stand out* enough. You see, with something like a marquee,' and he turned to Laura in his easy way, 'you want to put it somewhere where it'll hit you in the eye,* if you see what I mean.'

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Because of the way she had been brought up, Laura wondered for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her like that. But she saw what he meant.

'A corner of the tennis-court,' she suggested. 'But the band's going to be in one corner.'

'H'm, you're going to have a band, are you?' said another of the workmen. He looked pale and tired. What was he thinking?

'Only a very small band,' said Laura gently. Perhaps he wouldn't mind so much if the band was quite small. But the tall man interrupted.

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'Look miss, that's the place. Against those trees. Over there. That'll be fine.'

Against the trees. Then they would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, shining leaves, and their yellow fruit. Must they be hidden by a marquee?

Yes, they must. Already the men had picked up their things and were walking towards the place. Only the tall man was left. He bent down to one of the rose-bushes and breathed in the scent. When Laura saw that, she was filled with wonder at him caring for things like that — caring for the smell of a rose. How many men that she knew would

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have done such a thing? Oh, how extraordinarily nice workmen were, she thought. Why couldn't she have workmen for friends rather than the silly boys she danced with, and who came to Sunday night supper? She would get on much better with men like these.

It's all the fault of these stupid class distinctions,* she decided, as the tall man drew a diagram on the back of an old envelope. Well, for her part, she didn't feel them. Not a bit, not at all . . . And now there came the sound of wooden hammers. Someone whistled, someone called out, 'Are you all right there?' It all seemed so friendly, so — so — Just to show the tall man how happy she felt, just to prove that she didn't believe in class distinctions, Laura took a big bite of her bread and butter as she stared at the little drawing. She felt just like a workgirl.

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'Laura, Laura, where are you? Telephone, Laura!' a voice cried from the house.

'I'm coming!' She ran off, over the lawn, up the path, up the steps and into the house. In the hall her father and her brother Laurie were brushing their hats ready to go to the office.

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'Hey, Laura,' said Laurie very fast, 'could you just have a look at my coat before this afternoon, and see if it needs pressing.'

'I will,' she said. Suddenly she couldn't stop herself. She ran to Laurie and put her arms round him. 'Oh, I love parties, don't you?' she said excitedly.

'I do too,' said Laurie's warm voice, and he gave his sister a gentle push. 'Run off to the telephone, dear.'

The telephone. 'Yes, yes; oh yes. Kitty? Hello. Come to lunch? Yes, of course you can. It will only be a very simple meal — just sandwiches and what's left over* from the preparations. Yes, isn't it a perfect morning? Your white dress? Yes, you must wear that. One moment — hold the line. Mother's calling.' And Laura sat back. 'What, mother? I can't hear.'

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Mrs Sheridan's voice floated down the stairs. 'Tell her to wear that sweet hat she had on last Sunday.'

'Mother says you must wear that sweet hat you had on last Sunday. Good. I'll see you at one o'clock then. Bye-bye.'

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Laura put back the receiver, stretched her arms above her head, took a deep breath, and let them fall again.

'Huh,' she sighed, and the moment after the sigh she sat up quickly. She was still, listening. All the doors in the house seemed to be open. The house was alive with soft, quick steps and the sound of voices. The door that led to the kitchen swung open and shut. And then came the sound of the heavy piano being moved. The air was wonderful — warm and alive. Was the air always like this, if you stopped to notice it? There were two tiny spots of sunlight, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame. Lovely little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot. It was quite warm. 10
A warm little silver star. She felt like kissing it.

The front door bell rang and she heard Sadie go and open it. A man's voice said something; Sadie answered, carelessly, 'I'm sure I don't know. Wait. I'll ask Mrs Sheridan.'

'What is it, Sadie?' Laura came into the hall.

'It's the flowers, Miss Laura.'

And so it was. There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies.* No other kind of flowers. Nothing but lilies, big pink flowers wide open, almost frighteningly alive on bright red stems. 20

'O—oh, Sadie!' said Laura. She bent down as if to warm herself at a fire. She felt as if the lilies were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast.

'It's a mistake,' she said faintly. 'Nobody ever ordered so many. Sadie, go and find mother.'

But at that moment Mrs Sheridan joined them.

'It's quite right,' she said calmly. 'Yes, I ordered them. Aren't they lovely?' She pressed Laura's arm. 'I was passing the shop yesterday, and I saw them in the window. 30
And I suddenly thought, for once in my life I shall have enough lilies. The garden party will be a good excuse.'

'But I thought you said you didn't mean to interfere,' said Laura. Sadie had gone. The man from the flower shop was still outside at his van. She put her arm round her mother's neck and gently, very gently, she bit her mother's ear.

'My dear child, you wouldn't like a logical* mother, would you? Don't do that. Here's the man.'

He carried more lilies still, another whole tray. 40

'Put them just inside the door, on both sides of the hall, please,' said Mrs Sheridan. 'Do you agree, Laura?'

'Oh, I do, mother.'

In the sitting-room Meg, Jose and good little Hans had at last succeeded in moving the piano.

'Now if we put this couch* against the wall and move everything out of the room except the chairs, that'll be best, don't you think?'

'Right.'

'Hans, move these tables into the dining-room, and bring a brush to take the dust off the carpet and — one moment, Hans — ' Jose loved giving orders to the servants, and they loved obeying her. She always made them feel that they were taking part in a drama.* 'Tell mother and Miss Laura to come here at once.'

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'Very good, Miss Jose.'

She turned to Meg. 'I want to hear what the piano sounds like, just in case I'm asked to sing this afternoon. Let's practise a song.'

As the first notes of the piano filled the room Jose's face changed. She looked sorrowfully at her mother and Laura as they came in.

'A love that changes,
And then . . . goodbye!'

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But as she sang the word 'goodbye', although the piano sounded more sorrowful than ever, she gave them a brilliant,* totally unsympathetic smile.

'Isn't my voice good today, mummy?' she said.

But now Sadie interrupted them. 'What is it, Sadie?'

'If you please, cook says have you got the flags* for the sandwiches?'

'The flags for the sandwiches, Sadie?' repeated Mrs Sheridan dreamily. And the children knew by her face that she hadn't got them. 'Let me see.' And she said to Sadie firmly, 'Tell cook I'll let her have them in ten minutes.'

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Sadie went.

'Now Laura,' said her mother quickly, 'come with me into the dining-room. I've got the names somewhere on the back of an envelope. You'll have to write them out for me. Meg, go upstairs this minute and take that wet thing off your head. Jose, run and finish dressing at once. Do you hear me, children, or shall I have to tell your father when he comes home tonight? And — and, Jose, be nice to cook if you go into the kitchen, will you? I'm really frightened of her this morning.'

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The envelope was found at last behind the dining-room

clock, although Mrs Sheridan could not imagine how it had got there.

'One of you children must have stolen it out of my bag, because I remember putting it there quite clearly. Cheese and tomato. Have you written that?'

'Yes.'

'Egg and — ' Mrs Sheridan held the envelope away from her. 'It looks like mice. It can't be mice, can it?'

'Olive,* dear,' said Laura looking over her shoulder.

'Yes, of course, olive. What an awful combination it sounds. Egg and olive.'

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The flags were finished at last, and Laura took them off to the kitchen. She found Jose there being nice to cook, who did not look at all frightening.

'I have never seen such wonderful sandwiches before,' said Jose. 'How many kinds did you say there were, cook? Fifteen?'

'Fifteen, Miss Jose.'

'Well, cook, I congratulate you.'

Cook put the flags on the plates of sandwiches and smiled broadly.

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'Godber's man has come,' announced Sadie coming into the kitchen. She had seen the man pass the window.

That meant that the cream cakes had arrived. Godber's the baker's were famous for their cream cakes. Nobody ever made them at home.

'Bring them in and put them on the table, my girl,' ordered cook.

Sadie brought in the cakes and went back to the door. Of course Laura and Jose were far too old to care about such things as cream cakes. However they agreed that the cakes looked very attractive. Very. Cook began arranging them, shaking off the extra sugar.

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'They remind you of all your parties, don't they?' said Laura.

'I suppose so,' said practical Jose, who never liked to be reminded of the past. 'They look beautifully light, I must say.'

'Have one each, my dears,' said cook in her comfortable voice. 'Your mother won't know.'

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Oh, it would be impossible to eat cream cakes so soon after breakfast. No, they really couldn't. However two minutes later Jose and Laura were licking their fingers contentedly.

'Let's go into the garden, out by the back way,' suggested Laura. 'I want to see how the men are getting on with the marquee. They're very nice men.'

But the back door was blocked by cook, Sadie, and Godber's man.

Something had happened.

'Oh dear,' cook stood there, slowly shaking her head from side to side. Sadie had her hand over her mouth as if to stop herself from crying out. Only Godber's man seemed to be enjoying himself; it was his story.

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'What's the matter? What's happened?'

'There's been a terrible accident,' said cook. 'A man has been killed.'

'A man killed! Where? How? When?'

But Godber's man was determined to tell the story himself.

'You know those little cottages just below here, miss? Did she know them? Of course she knew them. 'Well, there's a young fellow living there called Scott. He was thrown off his horse at the corner of Hawke Street this morning. He fell on the back of his head and was killed.'

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'Dead!' Laura stared at Godber's man.

'Dead when they picked him up,' said Godber's man, enjoying the effect his story was having on them. 'They were taking the body home as I came up here.' And he said to cook, 'He's left a wife and five children.'

'Jose, come here.' Laura caught hold of her sister's arm and dragged her through the kitchen and into the hall. There she paused. 'Jose!' she said in a shocked voice, 'however are we going to stop everything?'

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'Stop everything, Laura!' cried Jose in astonishment. 'What do you mean?'

'Stop the garden party, of course.' Why did Jose pretend that she didn't understand?

But Jose was still more surprised. 'Stop the garden party? My dear Laura, don't be so silly. Of course we can't stop it. Nobody expects us to. Don't be so stupid.'

'But we can't possibly have a garden party with a man dead just outside the front gate.'

That really was a stupid thing to say, for the little cottages were in their own street at the bottom of a steep hill that led up to the Sheridans' house. A broad road ran between them. It was true that they were far too near.

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They were terribly ugly and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all. They were poor little houses painted a chocolate brown colour. In the tiny little gardens there was nothing but cabbages, sick hens and empty tins. Even the smoke coming out of their chimneys looked poor. Workmen lived there and there were always crowds of children. When the Sheridans were little they were forbidden to go there in case they caught some awful disease. But since they were older Laura and Laurie sometimes walked through. It was disgusting. But still one must go everywhere; one must see everything. So they went through.

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'And just think how terrible the band would sound to that poor woman,' said Laura.

'Oh, Laura!' Jose began to be seriously annoyed. 'If you're going to stop a band playing every time someone has an accident, you'll lead a very busy life. I'm just as sorry about it as you. I feel just as sympathetic.' Her eyes hardened. She looked at her sister just as she used to when they were little and fighting together. 'You won't bring a drunk workman back to life by stopping the party,' she said softly.

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'Drunk! He wasn't drunk!' Laura turned on* Jose angrily. 'I'm going up to tell mother,' she said, just as they used to say when they were little.

'Yes, you do that,' said Jose sweetly.

'Mother, can I come into your room?' Laura pushed open the big, heavy door.

'Of course, child. Why, what's the matter? What's made you so pale?' And Mrs Sheridan turned round from her dressing-table. She was trying on a new hat.

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'Mother, a man's been killed,' began Laura.

'Not in the garden?' interrupted her mother.

'No, no!'

'Oh, what a fright you gave me!' Mrs Sheridan sighed with relief, and took off the big hat and held it on her knees.

'But listen, mother,' said Laura, and she told the terrible story. 'Of course, we can't have our party, can we?' she begged. 'The band and everybody arriving. They'd hear us, mother. They're nearly neighbours!'

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To Laura's astonishment her mother behaved just like Jose. It was harder to bear because she seemed to be

amused. She refused to take Laura seriously.

'But, my dear child, be sensible. It's only by chance that we've heard about it. If someone had died there normally — and I can't understand how they stay alive in those awful little houses — we would still have our party, wouldn't we?'

Laura had to say 'yes' to that, but she felt that it was all wrong. She sat down on her mother's bed and picked up a hair-brush.

'Mother, isn't it really terribly heartless of us?' she asked.

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'My dear!' Mrs Sheridan got up and came over to her carrying the hat. Before her daughter could stop her, she had put it on Laura's head. 'My child!' said her mother, 'the hat is yours. It's made for you. It's much too young for me. I have never seen you look so charming before. Look at yourself!' And she held up her hand-mirror.

'But, mother,' Laura began again. She couldn't look at herself; she turned away.

This time Mrs Sheridan lost patience just as Jose had done.

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'You are being very stupid Laura,' she said coldly. 'People of that sort don't expect sacrifices from us. And it's not very sympathetic to spoil everybody's enjoyment as you're doing now.'

'I don't understand,' said Laura, and she walked quickly out of the room into her own bedroom. There, quite by chance, the first thing she saw was this charming girl in the mirror, in her black hat with gold flowers on it, and a long black ribbon. She had never imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right. Am I being stupid? Perhaps it was stupid. Just for a moment she imagined once again that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed far away and unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided. And somehow that seemed quite the best plan . . .

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Lunch was over by half past one. By half past two they were all ready for the party. The band had arrived, dressed in green coats and had taken up their positions in a corner of the tennis-court.

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'My dear!' cried Kitty Maitland, 'don't they look just

like frogs? You ought to have arranged them round the pond with the conductor* in the middle on a leaf.'

Laurie arrived and waved to them on his way up to dress. At the sight of him Laura remembered the accident again. She wanted to tell him. If Laurie agreed with the others, then it must be all right. And she followed him into the hall.

'Laurie!'

'Hello!' He was half-way upstairs, but when he turned round and saw Laura he stopped suddenly and stared at her. 'Laura, you look absolutely wonderful,' said Laurie. 'What a beautiful hat!'

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Laura said faintly 'Is it?' and smiled up at Laurie, and didn't tell him about the accident after all.

Soon after that people started to arrive. The band began to play; the hired waiters ran from the house to the marquee. Wherever you looked there were couples walking, bending to the flowers, greeting each other, moving on over the lawn. They were like bright birds that had paused in the Sheridans' garden for this one afternoon, on their way to — where? Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who are all happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes.

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'My dear Laura, how well you look!'

'What a beautiful hat. It suits you child!'

'Laura, you look quite Spanish. I've never seen you look so charming.'

And Laura, smiling, answered softly, 'Have you had tea? Won't you have an ice? They are really rather special.' She ran to her father and begged him. 'Daddy dear, can't the band have something to drink?'

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And, like a flower, the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals* closed.

'The most delightful garden-party . . .'

'The greatest success . . .'

'Quite the most wonderful afternoon . . .'

Laura helped her mother with the goodbyes. They stood side by side at the door until it was all over.

'All over, all over, thank heaven,' said Mrs Sheridan. 'Go and find the others, Laura, and let's have some fresh coffee. I'm so tired. Yes, it was very successful. But oh, these parties! Why must you children give parties!' And they all of them sat down in the empty marquee.

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'Have a sandwich, daddy dear. I wrote the name on the flag.'

'Thanks.' Mr Sheridan took a bite and the sandwich was gone. He took another. 'I suppose you didn't hear about an awful accident that happened today?' he said.

'My dear,' said Mrs Sheridan, holding up her hand, 'we did. It nearly spoiled everything. Laura wanted us to stop the party.'

'Oh, mother!' Laura didn't want them to laugh at her.

'It was a terrible affair though,' said Mr Sheridan. 'The man was married too. He lived just below us in that street of little cottages. He leaves a wife and half a dozen children, so they say.'

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An awkward little silence fell. Mrs Sheridan picked up her cup, feeling uncomfortable. Really, it was very unkind of father to talk about the accident.

Suddenly she looked up. There on the table were all those sandwiches and cakes, all un-eaten, all going to be wasted. She had one of her brilliant ideas.

'I know,' she said. 'Let's take her a basket. Let's send that poor woman some of this perfectly good food. It will be a great treat* for the children, anyway. Don't you agree? And there are sure to be neighbours calling on her and so on. What an advantage to have some food all ready prepared. Laura!' She jumped up. 'Get me the big basket out of the cupboard under the stairs.'

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'But, mother, do you really think it's a good idea?' said Laura.

Again, how strange, she seemed to be different from them all. To take left-overs from their party. Would the poor woman really like that?

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'Of course! What's the matter with you today? An hour or two ago you were telling us to be sympathetic, and now you've changed your mind.'

Oh well! Laura ran for the basket. It was filled, it was heaped by her mother.

'Take it yourself, dear,' she said. 'Run down there now. Don't change your clothes. No, wait, take the lilies too. People of that class are so impressed by lilies.'

'The lilies will ruin her dress,' said practical Jose.

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'Yes, so they will. Only the basket then. Off you go.'

Dusk was falling as Laura shut their garden gates. A big dog ran by like a shadow. The road shone white, and down

below in the hollow the little cottages were in deep shade. It seemed so quiet after the afternoon. Now she was going down the hill to somewhere where a man lay dead, and she couldn't realise it. Why couldn't she? She stopped a minute. And it seemed to her that kisses, voices, music, laughter, the smell of crushed grass were somehow inside her. There was no room for anything else in her. How strange! She looked up at the pale sky, and all she thought was, 'Yes, it was a most successful party.'

Now she had crossed the broad road. The street began smoky and dark. Women in shawls* hurried by. Men stood at the doors; children played in the gardens. The sound of voices came from the little cottages. In some of them there was a light, and a shadow moved across the window. Laura bent her head and hurried on. She wished now that she had put on a coat. Her dress shone. And the big hat with the long ribbon — if only it was a different hat! Were the people looking at her? They must be. It was a mistake to have come; she knew all the time that it was a mistake. Should she go back even now?

No, too late. This was the house. It must be. A small group of people stood outside. Beside the gate an old, old woman sat in a chair, watching. She had her feet on a newspaper. The voices stopped as Laura came near. The group made way for her. It was as though she was expected, as though they had known that she was coming here.

Laura was terribly nervous. She said to a woman standing by, 'Is this Mrs Scott's house?' and the woman, smiling queerly, said, 'It is, my girl.'

Oh, if only she was away from all this! She actually said, 'Help me, God,' as she walked up the tiny path and knocked at the door. To be away from those staring eyes, or to be covered up in anything, even in one of those women's shawls. I'll just leave the basket and go, she decided. I won't even wait for it to be emptied.

Then the door opened. A little woman in black could be seen in the darkness.

Laura said, 'Are you Mrs Scott?' But the woman answered, 'Walk in, please, miss,' and she was shut in the passage.

'No,' said Laura, 'I don't want to come in. I only want to leave this basket. Mother sent —'

The little woman in the dark passage seemed not to have

heard her. 'Come this way, please, miss,' she said in an oily* voice, and Laura followed her.

She found herself in a miserable little low kitchen, lighted by a smoky lamp. There was a woman sitting in front of the fire.

'Em,' said the little woman who had let her in. 'Em! It's a young lady.' She turned to Laura. She said, 'I'm her sister, miss. You'll excuse her, won't you?'

'Oh, but of course!' said Laura. 'Please, please don't disturb her. I — I only want to leave —'

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But at that moment the woman at the fire turned round. Her face, red, with swollen* eyes and swollen lips looked terrible. She seemed as though she couldn't understand why Laura was there. What did it mean? Why was this stranger standing in the kitchen with a basket? What was it all about? And then she began to cry again.

'All right, my dear,' said her sister. 'I'll thank the young lady.'

And again she began, 'You'll excuse her, miss, I'm sure,' and her face, swollen too, tried to give an oily smile.

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Laura only wanted to get out, to get away. She was back in the passage. The door opened. She walked straight through into the bedroom where the dead man was lying.

'You'd like to look at him, wouldn't you?' said Em's sister, and she went past Laura over to the bed. 'Don't be afraid, miss,' and now her voice sounded fond and sly*. Gently she pulled back the sheet, 'He looks lovely. There's nothing to show he's dead. Come along, my dear.'

Laura came.

There lay a young man, fast asleep — sleeping so soundly, so deeply, that he was far, far away from them both. So distant, so peaceful. He was dreaming. His head was sunk in the pillow, his eyes were closed; they were blind under the closed eyelids. He was given up* to his dream. What did garden parties and baskets and pretty dresses matter to him? He was far from all those things. He was wonderful, beautiful. While they were laughing and while the band was playing, this marvel* had come to the little street. Happy . . . happy . . . All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.

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But still you had to cry, and she couldn't go out of the room without saying something to him. Laura gave a loud childish sob*.