

The Garden Party

It was a lovely day for a garden party. The weather was warm, with no wind, and the sky was blue. The garden was ready for the party. The grass was short and very green in the sun. There were hundreds and hundreds of beautiful roses everywhere.



The workmen arrived to put up the marquee¹ while the family were still eating breakfast.

“Where do you want the marquee to go, Mother?” asked Meg.

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Katherine Mansfield

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“My dear child, don’t ask me,” answered Mrs. Sheridan, her mother. “I’m leaving everything to you children this year.”

But Meg’s hair was wet, and Jose was still wearing her nightclothes, so they couldn’t go out to speak to the men.

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“You go, Laura,” Meg said. “You’re the artist in the family. You know about these things.”

Laura ran outside, still holding the piece of bread she was eating. She felt very happy. She liked deciding things.

Four men stood waiting in the garden. They looked strong.

“Why did I bring my bread out with me?” thought Laura, feeling stupid. But there was nowhere to put it, and she couldn’t throw it away.

“Good morning,” she said importantly to the men.

“Oh, dear,” she thought. “I sound just like Mother.” Her face went red. Now she felt like a little girl.

“Oh . . . uh . . . have you come about the marquee?” she said.

“That’s right, Miss,” said one of the men. He was tall and thin, and he smiled at her. “That’s it.”

His smile was so friendly that Laura felt better. What nice eyes he had – small, but such a dark blue! She looked at the others, and they were smiling, too. “Don’t worry – we’re very nice,” Laura thought their smiles were saying to her, and she smiled back. How very nice workmen were! And what a beautiful day! But she mustn’t talk about the day. She had to talk to them about the marquee.

“Well,” she said, “what about putting it on the grass over there?”

The men turned and looked.

“No, I don’t think that’s the right place,” said the tall man.

He turned back to Laura. “You see, with a marquee, you want it to be somewhere you can really see it. What about over there, in front of those trees?”

In front of the karaka trees! Oh dear, they were so lovely

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in the sunlight, with their large leaves and yellow fruit. Did the marquee really have to go there?

But three of the men were already walking over there with the marquee. Only the tall man stayed behind. He was smelling some flowers.



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Laura forgot all about the karaka trees as she watched him.

“That’s wonderful!” she thought. “He likes the smell of flowers! I don’t know any other men like that. Oh, workmen are nice. Why can’t I have workmen for friends? The boys who come to dinner on Sunday nights aren’t interested in smelling flowers!”

The tall man was drawing something on a piece of paper. Laura watched him. People like her weren’t friends with workmen. It was because of class². Some people thought they were better than others, because of their name or because they were rich. Well, she didn’t feel like that!

Over by the karaka trees, the other men were busy putting the marquee up. They called to each other in a friendly way. Laura loved it. And to show how happy she was, to show the tall man she was like them, she ate some of her bread as she looked at his little picture. She felt just like a worker.

“Laura, Laura, where are you? Telephone, Laura!” a voice called from the house.

“Coming!” she answered, and then she ran quickly across the grass and up to the house.

Inside, she found her father and her brother Laurie getting ready to go to work.

“Laura,” said Laurie, “if you have time, can you take a look at my jacket before this afternoon? Can you see if it looks all right?”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Laura, and then she felt so happy she ran to Laurie and put her arms around him.

“Oh, I do love parties,” she said. “Don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Laurie in a warm voice, then he

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pushed her softly away. “Don’t forget your telephone call,” he said.

Her telephone call! Of course. “Hello?” she said into the phone. “Kitty? Oh, hello, good morning, dear. Of course you can come to lunch, dear, but I don’t think it will be anything very special. Yes, isn’t it a beautiful morning? What’s that? You’re going to wear your white dress? Oh, yes.”

Then Laura heard her mother – she was calling from upstairs. “Just a minute,” she said to Kitty, “Mother’s saying something.”

Laura sat back. “What, Mother?” she shouted. “I can’t hear you.”

“Kitty can wear the lovely hat that she wore on Sunday,” Mrs. Sheridan called.

“Mother wants you to wear that lovely hat you wore on Sunday,” Laura said into the phone. “Good. See you at one o’clock then. Bye.”

Laura put the phone down. Then she stood, listening. All the doors in the house were open. The house was full of the sound of people moving and talking. She could feel a soft wind traveling everywhere. The sun was dancing through the open windows. It was all so beautiful! The front doorbell rang.

Laura heard their servant Sadie going to answer it. Then she heard a man talking.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” Sadie said. “Wait. I’ll ask Mrs. Sheridan.”

Laura went into the hall³. “What is it, Sadie?” she asked.

“This man’s brought some flowers, Miss Laura,” Sadie told her.

Laura looked and saw lots and *lots* of pink lily flowers

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by the door. "But there are so many!" Laura said. "It has to be a mistake! Sadie, go and find my mother."

But at that moment, Mrs. Sheridan came down the stairs. "It's all right," she said. "I asked for all these."

She put her hand on Laura's arm. "I was walking past the flower shop yesterday, and I saw these lilies in the window. And I thought, 'For once in my life, I must have enough lilies. I must have them for the garden party.'"

Laura put her arm around her mother. "I thought you were leaving the party to us," she said.

"Darling, it's only a few flowers," her mother replied. "I fell in love with them."

The man brought more lilies. "Put them on both sides of the door, please," Mrs. Sheridan told him. "What do you think, Laura? Do they look nice there?"

"I think they look lovely, Mother," Laura said.

Jose and Meg were in the living room with Hans.

"I think we'll move all the furniture out except for the piano and the chairs," Jose was saying.

"Good idea," agreed Meg.

"Hans, move these tables out and clean this carpet⁴, please," said Jose. "Oh, and can you ask Mother and Miss Laura to come here?"

"Yes, Miss Jose."

Jose turned to Meg. "I want to sing this afternoon. Let's try some songs. What about 'This Life Is Weary'⁵?"

Jose began to play the piano.

"This Life Is Weary" was a sad song. As she began to sing, Jose made her face very sad. Mrs. Sheridan and Laura came into the room and stood to listen.

When the song finished, Jose stopped being sad and

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smiled a big smile. “Do I sound all right, Mother?” she asked.

But before Mrs. Sheridan could answer, Sadie came into the room.

“What is it, Sadie?” Mrs. Sheridan asked.

“Excuse me, Madam. Cook needs the names for the sandwiches.” At parties, they always wrote names for the different plates of sandwiches. People wanted to know what was in them.

When Laura looked at her mother’s face, she thought, “Mother has forgotten to write the names.”

“Tell Cook that she’ll have them in 10 minutes,” Mrs. Sheridan told Sadie.

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“Yes, Mrs. Sheridan,” replied Sadie, and she left.

“Now, Laura,” said Mrs. Sheridan. “Come and help me to write out the names. Meg, go and dry your hair. Jose, go and finish getting dressed. And be nice to Cook if you go into the kitchen. She’s very busy today. You know she can get angry when she’s busy. I must say, I feel a little afraid of her this morning! Come on, Laura.”

Laura and her mother wrote out the names of the sandwiches on pretty pieces of paper, and then Laura took them down to the kitchen. Jose was in there, being nice to Cook.

“Look at all this wonderful food!” she was saying. “How many different sandwiches are there, Cook?”

“Fifteen, Miss Jose,” answered Cook.

“Lovely!” Jose said.

Cook was cleaning some bits of bread off the table. She gave Jose a big smile.

“Godber’s has come with the cakes,” Sadie said, looking out of the window.

“Well, bring them in and put them on the table, my girl,” Cook told her.

Sadie went out to the door. After a moment she came back with the cakes and put them down on the table. Then she went back out to talk to the man from Godber’s.

Laura and Jose looked at the cakes. They were too old to care about such things, of course, but the cakes certainly looked very nice.

“The cakes make me remember our birthday parties when we were children,” Laura told her sister.

“Do they?” said Jose, who didn’t like to think about the past.

“Have one each, my dears,” Cook said. “Your mother won’t know.”