

27 - A Test Case

THE GARDEN PARTY by Katherine Mansfield

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. Only the blue was veiled with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, mowing the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass and the dark flat rosettes where the daisy plants had been seemed to shine. As for the roses, you could not help feeling they understood that roses are the only flowers that impress people at garden-parties; the only flowers that everybody is certain of knowing. Hundreds, yes, literally hundreds, had come out in a single night; the green bushes bowed down as though they had been visited by archangels.

Breakfast was not yet over before the men came to put up the marquee.

“Where do you want the marquee put, 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 an honoured guest.”

But Meg could not possibly go and supervise the men. She had washed her hair before breakfast, and she sat drinking her coffee in a green turban, with a dark wet curl stamped on each cheek. Jose, the butterfly, always came down in a silk petticoat and a kimono jacket.

“You’ll have to go, Laura; you’re the artistic one.”

Away Laura flew, still holding her piece of bread-and-butter. It’s so delicious to have an excuse for eating out of doors, and besides, she loved having to arrange things; she always felt she could do it so much better than anybody else.

Four men in their shirt-sleeves stood grouped together on the garden path. They carried staves covered with rolls of canvas, and they had big tool-bags slung on their backs. They looked impressive. Laura wished now that she had not got the 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 and even a little bit short-sighted as she came up to them.

“Good morning,” she said, copying her mother’s voice. But that sounded so fearfully affected that she was ashamed, and stammered like a little girl, “Oh - er - have you come - is it about the marquee?”

“That’s right, miss,” said the tallest of the men, a lanky, freckled fellow, and he shifted his tool-bag, knocked back his straw hat and smiled down at her. “That’s about 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.

“Well, what about the lily-lawn? Would that do?”

And she pointed to the lily-lawn with the hand that didn't hold the bread-and-butter. They turned, they stared in the direction. A little fat chap thrust out his under-lip, and the tall fellow frowned.

"I don't fancy it," said he. "Not conspicuous enough. You see, with a thing like a marquee," and he turned to Laura in his easy way, "you want to put it somewhere where it'll give you a bang slap in the eye, if you follow me."

Laura's upbringing made her wonder for a moment whether it was quite respectful of a workman to talk to her of bangs slap in the eye. But she did quite follow him.

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

"H'm, going to have a band, are you?" said another of the workmen. He was pale. He had a haggard look as his dark eyes scanned the tennis-court. 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 fellow interrupted.

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

Against the karakas. Then the karaka-trees would be hidden. And they were so lovely, with their broad, gleaming leaves, and their clusters of yellow fruit. They were like trees you imagined growing on a desert island, proud, solitary, lifting their leaves and fruits to the sun in a kind of silent splendour. Must they be hidden by a marquee?

They must. Already the men had shouldered their staves and were making for the place. Only the tall fellow was left. He bent down, pinched a sprig of lavender, put his thumb and forefinger to his nose and snuffed up the smell. When Laura saw that gesture she forgot all about the karakas in her wonder at him caring for things like that - caring for the smell of lavender. How many men that she knew would have done such a thing? Oh, how extraordinarily nice workmen were, she thought. Why couldn't she have workmen for her 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, she decided, as the tall fellow drew something on the back of an envelope, something that was to be looped up or left to hang, of these absurd class distinctions. Well, for her part, she didn't feel them. Not a bit, not an atom...And now there came the chock-chock of wooden hammers. Some one whistled, some one sang out, "Are you right there, matey?" "Matey!" The friendliness of it, the - the - Just to prove how happy she was, just to show the tall fellow how at home she felt, and how she despised stupid conventions, Laura took a big bite of her bread-and-butter as she stared at the little drawing. She felt just like a work-girl.

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

"Coming!" Away she skimmed, over the lawn, up the path, up the steps, across the veranda, and into the porch. In the hall her father and Laurie were brushing their hats ready to go to the office.

"I say, Laura," said Laurie very fast, "you might just give a squiz at my coat before this afternoon. See if it wants pressing."

"I will," said she. Suddenly she couldn't stop herself. She ran at Laurie and gave him a small, quick squeeze. "Oh, I do love parties, don't you?" gasped Laura.

"Ra-ther," said Laurie's warm, boyish voice, and he squeezed his sister too, and gave her a gentle push. "Dash off to the telephone, old girl."

The telephone. "Yes, yes; oh yes. Kitty? Good morning, dear. Come to lunch? Do, dear. Delighted of course. It will only be a very scratch meal - just the sandwich crusts and broken meringue-shells and what's left over. Yes, isn't it a perfect morning? Your white? Oh, I certainly should. One moment - hold the line. Mother's calling." And Laura sat back. "What, mother? Can't hear."

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

"Mother says you're to wear that sweet hat you had on last Sunday. Good. One o'clock. Bye-bye."

Laura put back the receiver, flung her arms over her head, took a deep breath, stretched and let them fall. "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 running voices. The green baize door that led to the kitchen regions swung open and shut with a muffled thud. And now there came a long, chuckling absurd sound. It was the heavy piano being moved on its stiff castors. But the air! If you stopped to notice, was the air always like this? Little faint winds were playing chase, in at the tops of the windows, out at the doors. And there were two tiny spots of sun, one on the inkpot, one on a silver photograph frame, playing too. Darling little spots. Especially the one on the inkpot lid. It was quite warm. A warm little silver star. She could have kissed it.

The front door bell pealed, and there sounded the rustle of Sadie's print skirt on the stairs. A man's voice murmured; Sadie answered, careless, "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 florist, Miss Laura."

It was, indeed. There, just inside the door, stood a wide, shallow tray full of pots of pink lilies. No other kind. Nothing but lilies - canna lilies, big pink flowers, wide open, radiant, almost frighteningly alive on bright crimson stems.

"O-oh, Sadie!" said Laura, and the sound was like a little moan. She crouched down as if to warm herself at that blaze of lilies; she felt they were in her fingers, on her lips, growing in her breast.

"It's some 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. And I suddenly thought for once in my life I shall have enough canna 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 florist's man 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 darling 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.

“Bank them up, just inside the door, on both sides of the porch, please,” said Mrs. Sheridan. “Don’t you agree, Laura?”

“Oh, I do, mother.”

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

“Now, if we put this chesterfield against the wall and move everything out of the room except the chairs, don’t you think?”

“Quite.”

“Hans, move these tables into the smoking-room, and bring a sweeper to take these marks off the carpet and - one moment, Hans - “ Jose loved giving orders to the servants, and they loved obeying her. She always made them feel they were taking part in some drama. “Tell mother and Miss Laura to come here at once.”

“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 try over “~This Life is Weary.””

Pom! Ta-ta-ta Tee-ta! The piano burst out so passionately that Jose’s face changed. She clasped her hands. She looked mournfully and enigmatically at her mother and Laura as they came in.

“This Life is Wee-ary,

A Tear - a Sigh.

A Love that Chan-ges,

This Life is Wee-ary,

A Tear - a Sigh.

A Love that Chan-ges,

And then...Good-bye!”

But at the word “Good-bye,” and although the piano sounded more desperate than ever, her face broke into a brilliant, dreadfully unsympathetic smile.

“Aren’t I in good voice, mummy?” she beamed.

“This Life is Wee-ary,

Hope comes to Die.

A Dream - a Wa-kening."

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

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

"The flags for the sandwiches, Sadie?" echoed 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."

Sadie went.

"Now, Laura," said her mother quickly, "come with me into the smoking-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 this instant. Do you hear me, children, or shall I have to tell your father when he comes home tonight? And - and, Jose, pacify cook if you do go into the kitchen, will you? I'm terrified of her this morning."

The envelope was found at last behind the dining-room clock, though how it had got there Mrs. Sheridan could not imagine.

"One of you children must have stolen it out of my bag, because I remember vividly - cream cheese and lemon-curd. Have you done that?"

"Yes."

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

"Olive, pet," said Laura, looking over her shoulder.

"Yes, of course, olive. What a horrible combination it sounds. Egg and olive."

They were finished at last, and Laura took them off to the kitchen. She found Jose there pacifying the cook, who did not look at all terrifying.

"I have never seen such exquisite sandwiches," said Jose's rapturous voice.

"How many kinds did you say there were, cook? Fifteen?"

"Fifteen, Miss Jose."

"Well, cook, I congratulate you."

Cook swept up crusts with the long sandwich knife, and smiled broadly.

“Godber’s has come,” announced Sadie, issuing out of the pantry. She had seen the man pass the window.

That meant the cream puffs had come. Godber’s were famous for their cream puffs. Nobody ever thought of making them at home.

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

Sadie brought them in and went back to the door. Of course Laura and Jose were far too grown-up to really care about such things. All the same, they couldn’t help agreeing that the puffs looked very attractive. Very. Cook began arranging them, shaking off the extra icing sugar.

“Don’t they carry one back to all one’s parties?” said Laura.

“I suppose they do,” said practical Jose, who never liked to be carried back. “They look beautifully light and feathery, I must say.”

“Have one each, my dears,” said cook in her comfortable voice. “Yer ma won’t know.”

Oh, impossible. Fancy cream puffs so soon after breakfast. The very idea made one shudder. All the same, two minutes later Jose and Laura were licking their fingers with that absorbed inward look that only comes from whipped cream.

“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 such awfully nice men.”

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

Something had happened.

“Tuk-tuk-tuk,” clucked cook like an agitated hen. Sadie had her hand clapped to her cheek as though she had a toothache. Hans’s face was screwed up in the effort to understand. Only Godber’s man seemed to be enjoying himself; it was his story.

“What’s the matter? What’s happened?”

“There’s been a horrible accident,” said cook. “A man killed.”

“A man killed! Where? How? When?”

But Godber’s man wasn’t going to have his story snatched from under his very nose.

“Know those little cottages just below here, miss?” Know them? Of course, she knew them. “Well, there’s a young chap living there, name of Scott, a carter. His horse shied at a traction-engine, corner of Hawke Street this morning, and he was thrown out on the back of his head. Killed.”

“Dead!” Laura stared at Godber’s man.

“Dead when they picked him up,” said Godber’s man with relish. “They were taking the body home as I come up here.” And he said to the cook, “He’s left a wife and five little ones.”

“Jose, come here.” Laura caught hold of her sister’s sleeve and dragged her through the kitchen to the other side of the green baize door. There she paused and leaned against it. “Jose!” she said, horrified, “however are we going to stop everything?”

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

“Stop the garden-party, of course.” Why did Jose pretend?

But Jose was still more amazed. “Stop the garden-party? My dear Laura, don’t be so absurd. Of course we can’t do anything of the kind. Nobody expects us to. Don’t be so extravagant.”

“But we can’t possibly have a garden-party with a man dead just outside the front gate.”

That really was extravagant, for the little cottages were in a lane to themselves at the very bottom of a steep rise that led up to the house. A broad road ran between. True, they were far too near. They were the greatest possible eyesore, and they had no right to be in that neighbourhood at all. They were little mean dwellings painted a chocolate brown. In the garden patches there was nothing but cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans. The very smoke coming out of their chimneys was poverty-stricken. Little rags and shreds of smoke, so unlike the great silvery plumes that uncurled from the Sheridans’ chimneys. Washerwomen lived in the lane and sweeps and a cobbler, and a man whose house-front was studded all over with minute bird-cages. Children swarmed. When the Sheridans were little they were forbidden to set foot there because of the revolting language and of what they might catch. But since they were grown up, Laura and Laurie on their prowls sometimes walked through. It was disgusting and sordid. They came out with a shudder. But still one must go everywhere; one must see everything. So through they went.

“And just think of what the band would sound like 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 some one has an accident, you’ll lead a very strenuous life. I’m every bit 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 drunken workman back to life by being sentimental,” she said softly.

“Drunk! Who said he was drunk?” Laura turned furiously on Jose. She said, just as they had used to say on those occasions, “I’m going straight up to tell mother.”

“Do, dear,” cooed Jose.

“Mother, can I come into your room?” Laura turned the big glass door-knob.

“Of course, child. Why, what’s the matter? What’s given you such a colour?” And Mrs. Sheridan turned round from her dressing-table. She was trying on a new hat.

“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. Breathless, half-choking, she told the dreadful story. “Of course, we can’t have our party, can we?” she pleaded.

“The band and everybody arriving. They’d hear us, mother; they’re nearly neighbours!”

To Laura’s astonishment her mother behaved just like Jose; it was harder to bear because she seemed amused. She refused to take Laura seriously.

“But, my dear child, use your common sense. It’s only by accident we’ve heard of it. If some one had died there normally – and I can’t understand how they keep alive in those poky little holes – we should still be having our party, shouldn’t we?”

Laura had to say “yes” to that, but she felt it was all wrong. She sat down on her mother’s sofa and pinched the cushion frill.

“Mother, isn’t it terribly heartless of us?” she asked.

“Darling!” Mrs. Sheridan got up and came over to her, carrying the hat. Before Laura could stop her she had popped it on. “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 such a picture. Look at yourself!” And she held up her hand-mirror.

“But, mother,” Laura began again. She couldn’t look at herself; she turned aside.

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

“You are being very absurd, Laura,” she said coldly. “People like that 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 trimmed with gold daisies, and a long black velvet ribbon. Never had she imagined she could look like that. Is mother right? she thought. And now she hoped her mother was right. Am I being extravagant? Perhaps it was extravagant. Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, 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...

Lunch was over by half-past one. By half-past two they were all ready for the fray. The green-coated band had arrived and was established in a corner of the tennis-court.

“My dear!” trilled Kitty Maitland, “aren’t they too like frogs for words? You ought to have arranged them round the pond with the conductor in the middle on a leaf.”

Laurie arrived and hailed them on his way 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 was bound to be all right. And she followed him into the hall.

“Laurie!”

“Hallo!” He was half-way upstairs, but when he turned round and saw Laura he suddenly puffed out his cheeks and goggled his eyes at her. “My word, Laura! You do look stunning,” said Laurie. “What an absolutely topping hat!”

Laura said faintly “Is it?” and smiled up at Laurie, and didn’t tell him after all.

Soon after that people began coming in streams. The band struck up; the hired waiters ran from the house to the marquee. Wherever you looked there were couples strolling, bending to the flowers, greeting, moving on over the lawn. They were like bright birds that had alighted in the Sheridans’ garden for this one afternoon, on their way to – where? Ah, what happiness it is to be with people who all are happy, to press hands, press cheeks, smile into eyes.

“Darling Laura, how well you look!”

“What a becoming hat, child!”

“Laura, you look quite Spanish. I’ve never seen you look so striking.”

And Laura, glowing, answered softly, “Have you had tea? Won’t you have an ice? The passion-fruit ices really are rather special.” She ran to her father and begged him. “Daddy darling, can’t the band have something to drink?”

And the perfect afternoon slowly ripened, slowly faded, slowly its petals closed.

“Never a more delightful garden-party...” “The greatest success...” “Quite the most...”

Laura helped her mother with the good-byes. They stood side by side in the porch till it was all over.

“All over, all over, thank heaven,” said Mrs. Sheridan. “Round up the others, Laura. Let’s go and have some fresh coffee. I’m exhausted. Yes, it’s been very successful. But oh, these parties, these parties! Why will you children insist on giving parties!” And they all of them sat down in the deserted marquee.

“Have a sandwich, daddy dear. I wrote the flag.”

“Thanks.” Mr. Sheridan took a bite and the sandwich was gone. He took another. “I suppose you didn’t hear of a beastly accident that happened today?” he said.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Sheridan, holding up her hand, “we did. It nearly ruined the party. Laura insisted we should put it off.”

“Oh, mother!” Laura didn’t want to be teased about it.

“It was a horrible affair all the same,” said Mr. Sheridan. “The chap was married too. Lived just below in the lane, and leaves a wife and half a dozen kiddies, so they say.”

An awkward little silence fell. Mrs. Sheridan fidgeted with her cup. Really, it was very tactless of father...

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

"I know," she said. "Let's make up a basket. Let's send that poor creature some of this perfectly good food. At any rate, it will be the greatest treat for the children. Don't you agree? And she's sure to have neighbours calling in and so on. What a point to have it all ready prepared. Laura!" She jumped up. "Get me the big basket out of the stairs cupboard."

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

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

"Of course! What's the matter with you to-day? An hour or two ago you were insisting on us being sympathetic, and now -"

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

"Take it yourself, darling," said she. "Run down just as you are. No, wait, take the arum lilies too. People of that class are so impressed by arum lilies."

"The stems will ruin her lace frock," said practical Jose.

So they would. Just in time. "Only the basket, then. And, Laura!" - her mother followed her out of the marquee - "don't on any account -"

"What, mother?"

No, better not put such ideas into the child's head! "Nothing! Run along."

It was just growing dusky as Laura shut their garden gates. A big dog ran by like a shadow. The road gleamed white, and down below in the hollow the little cottages were in deep shade. How quiet it seemed after the afternoon. Here she was going down the hill to somewhere where a man lay dead, and she couldn't realize it. Why couldn't she? She stopped a minute. And it seemed to her that kisses, voices, tinkling spoons, laughter, the smell of crushed grass were somehow inside her. She had no room for anything else. How strange! She looked up at the pale sky, and all she thought was, "Yes, it was the most successful party."

Now the broad road was crossed. The lane began, smoky and dark. Women in shawls and men's tweed caps hurried by. Men hung over the palings; the children played in the doorways. A low hum came from the mean little cottages. In some of them there was a flicker of light, and a shadow, crab-like, moved across the window. Laura bent her head and hurried on. She wished now she had put on a coat. How her frock shone! And the big hat with the velvet streamer - if only it was another hat! Were the people looking at her? They must be. It was a mistake to have come; she knew all along it was a mistake. Should she go back even now?

No, too late. This was the house. It must be. A dark knot of people stood outside. Beside the gate an old, old woman with a crutch sat in a chair, watching. She had her feet on a newspaper. The voices stopped as Laura drew near. The group parted. It was as though she was expected, as though they had known she was coming here.

Laura was terribly nervous. Tossing the velvet ribbon over her shoulder, she said to a woman standing by, "Is this Mrs. Scott's house?" and the woman, smiling queerly, said, "It is, my lass."

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

Then the door opened. A little woman in black showed in the gloom.

Laura said, "Are you Mrs. Scott?" But to her horror 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 gloomy passage seemed not to have heard her. "Step this way, please, miss," she said in an oily voice, and Laura followed her.

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

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

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

But at that moment the woman at the fire turned round. Her face, puffed up, 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 the poor face puckered up again.

"All right, my dear," said the other. "I'll think the young lady."

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

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 a look at 'im, wouldn't you?" said Em's sister, and she brushed past Laura over to the bed. "Don't be afraid, my lass," - and now her voice sounded fond and sly, and fondly she drew down the sheet - "he looks a picture. There's nothing to show. 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. Oh, so remote, so peaceful. He was dreaming. Never wake him up again. 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 lace frocks 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 lane. Happy...happy...All is well, said that sleeping face. This is just as it should be. I am content.

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

"Forgive my hat," she said.

And this time she didn't wait for Em's sister. She found her way out of the door, down the path, past all those dark people. At the corner of the lane she met Laurie. He stepped out of the shadow. "Is that you, Laura?"

"Yes."

"Mother was getting anxious. Was it all right?"

"Yes, quite. Oh, Laurie!" She took his arm, she pressed up against him.

"I say, you're not crying, are you?" asked her brother.

Laura shook her head. She was.

Laurie put his arm round her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said in his warm, loving voice. "Was it awful?"

"No," sobbed Laura. "It was simply marvellous. But Laurie - " She stopped, she looked at her brother. "Isn't life," she stammered, "isn't life - " But what life was she couldn't explain. No matter. He quite understood.

"Isn't it, darling?" said Laurie.

What a terrific story! If you have any aspirations to fiction writing, the perfection of this story has to inspire awe and envy. Before the questions, a bit of background. Katherine Mansfield was a writer who came from New Zealand, although she spent her adult years in England. She was married to John Middleton Murry, a writer and critic, was friends with D. H. and Frieda Lawrence (in fact, she was the model, at least in part, for Gudrun in his *Women in Love*), produced a sizable handful of very lovely and accomplished stories, and died young of tuberculosis. Despite her slim output, there are those who would rank her as one of the unquestioned masters of the short story form. The story printed here appeared in 1922, the year before she died. It is not autobiographical in any ways that matter for our purposes. So are you ready for those questions?

First question: what does the story signify? What is Mansfield saying in the story? What do you see it as meaning? Second question: how does it signify? What elements does Mansfield employ to cause the story to signify whatever it signifies? What elements, in other words, cause it to mean the things you take it to mean?

Okay, here are the ground rules:

- 1) Read carefully
- 2) Use any interpretive strategies you've picked up from this book or elsewhere
- 3) Employ no outside sources about the story
- 4) No peeking at the rest of this chapter
- 5) Write down your results, so there's no fudging. Neatness doesn't count, nor spelling, just observations. Give the story careful thought and record your results, then bring them back here and we'll compare notes.

Take as long as you like.

Oh, you're back. That didn't take too long. Not too arduous, I hope? What I've done in the meantime is hand it out to a few college students of my acquaintance, some of them veterans of my classes, some of them close relatives who owe me a favor. I'll give you three different versions and you can see if they sound familiar. The first, a college freshman, said, "I know that story. We read it junior year. It's the one about a rich family that lives up on a hill and has no clue about the working class that's trapped down in the valley." This is pretty much what all my respondents noticed. So far, so good. The beauty of this story is that everybody gets it. You feel what's important in it, see the tensions of family and class.

The second, a history major who has taken several of my courses, expanded on that initial assessment a bit:

To have the party or not, that is the question. An element of indifference is the ultimate overtone. These things happen, how could we not celebrate? For our main character, her guilt is heightened by the fact that these mourners live down the hill. It is brought to extremes when at the end of the party it is suggested that in an act of goodwill and charity, those below should be given the leftovers. What does this signify? The indifference of the dominant class of people to the suffering of others. Our main character is somewhere in between, caught between what is expected of her and how she feels. She faces it. She takes the food, the waste of the party, to the widow in mourning, she faces the horrible reality of humanity. Afterward, she seeks the comfort of the only person who could possibly understand the situation, her brother, and finds no answers because there are no answers, just shared perceptions of reality.

That's pretty good. A number of themes are beginning to emerge. Both of these first two readings have picked up what is most central to the story, namely the growing awareness of the main character to class differentiation and snobbery. Consider the third response. The writer, Diane, is a recent graduate who took several classes from me in both literature and creative writing. Here's what she said:

What does the story signify?

Mansfield's "The Garden Party" shows the clash between the social classes. More specifically, it shows how people insulate themselves from what lies outside their own narrow view of the world – how to put up blinders (be they with velvet ribbons), if you will. How does it signify?

Birds and Flight

Mansfield uses the metaphor of birds and flight as a strategy to show how the Sheridans insulate themselves from the lower classes. Jose is a "butterfly." Mrs. Sheridan's voice "floats" and Laura must "skim over the lawn, up the path, up the steps" to reach her. They are all perched high on an aerie up a "steep rise" from the cottages below. But Laura is a fledgling. Her mother steps back and encourages her to flit around in her preparations for the party, but Laura's wings aren't quite experienced enough - she "flung her arms over her head, took a deep breath, stretched and let them fall," then sighed, so that even a workman "smiled down at her." From her vantage on the ground, Laura still has a foot in their lower-class world. They are her "neighbors." She has not yet separated herself from them. Remote sympathy is fine, but intimate empathy directly conflicts with the Sheridans' manner of living. If Laura is to rise to the level of her family and class, then she is going to need instruction. Like her siblings before her, she learns from her mother. Mrs. Sheridan teaches Laura how to put on a garden party, but more to the point, she teaches the strategy to see the world from a loftier - though somewhat myopic - perspective. Like a mother bird teaching her young to fly, Mrs. Sheridan encourages Laura to go so far on her own until it becomes clear that her inexperience requires intervention. When Laura pleads with her mother to cancel the party because of the carter's death, Mrs. Sheridan diverts her with a gift of a new hat. Though Laura is reluctant to abandon her base instincts, she does manage a compromise: "I'll remember it again after the party's over." She chooses to put a little space between her life on the hill and the outside world. Laura sees her peers, her fellow partygoers, as "birds that had alighted in the Sheridans' garden for this one afternoon, on their way to - where?" The answer is left vague. There is a danger below at the cottages of the lower-classes; when the Sheridan children were young they "were forbidden to set foot there." A man down there has a "house-front...studded all over with minute bird-cages." Those cages represent a threat to the way of life of the high-flying birds of the social elite. As long as they remain aloft, they evade the danger. But it is now time for Laura to try her wings. Mrs. Sheridan pushes her from the nest. She tells her to go down to the cottages to give the widow a sympathy basket of their leftovers. Laura must confront her conflict between the worldview that nags at her and the more slivered view of her advantaged upbringing. She faces her conscience. She goes down from the safety of her home, crosses the "broad road" to the cottages, and becomes caged in the house of the dead man. She becomes self-conscious of her appearance, shiny and streaming, something apart from the people who live here. She sees herself through the eyes of the young widow and is confused that the woman does not know why Laura has come. She begins to recognize that her world does not belong here, and the realization frightens her. She wants to flee, but she must ultimately view the dead man. It is while looking at him that she chooses to see, instead of the reality of the hardship the man's death leaves to his family, an affirmation of her own lifestyle. She reasons that his death has nothing at all to do with "garden-parties and baskets and lace frocks," and she is thereby lifted from moral obligation. The revelation is "marvelous." If Laura cannot explain what life is to her brother, "Isn't life...isn't life - " it is because as Mansfield writes, it is of "no matter." Laura has learned to look at it from a loftier perspective. She needn't pretend to look short-sighted anymore.

Wow. I'd like to say I taught her everything she knows, but that would be a lie. She never got those insights from me. In fact, that's not the primary direction my reading tends, but if it were, I don't believe I could improve upon it. It's neat, carefully observant, fully realized, elegantly expressed, if obviously the product of a much more intense study of the text than I had asked you to undertake. In fact, as a group, the student observations I solicited were on the money. If your response was like any of them, give yourself an A.

If we express the act of reading in scientific or religious terms (since I'm not sure if this will fall into the realm of physics or metaphysics), all these student readings represent, with varying degrees of specificity and depth, almost clinical analysis of the observable phenomena of the story. This is as it should be. Readers need to deal with the obvious - and not so obvious - material of the story before

going anywhere else. The most disastrous readings are those that are wildly inventive and largely independent of the story's factual content, those that go riffing off on a word out of context or a supposed image that is in truth not at all the image presented in the text. What I want to do, on the other hand, is consider the noumenal level of the story, its spiritual or essential level of being. If you don't think such a thing is possible, neither does my spellchecker, but here we go. This is an exercise in feeling my way into the text.

I'll be honest here. I'm about to cheat. I asked you to tell me what the story signifies first, but for my own response, I'm going to hold that for last. It's more dramatic that way.

Way back I mentioned that Joyce's *Ulysses* makes heavy use of Homer's tale of long-suffering Odysseus wending his way home from Troy. You may recall that I also mentioned that, except for the title, there are almost no textual cues to suggest that these Homeric parallels are at work in the novel. That's a pretty big level of signification to hang on one word, even a very prominent one. Well, if you can do that with the title of an immense novel, why not with a little story? "The Garden Party." Now all the student respondents worked with it, too, chiefly with its last word. Me, I like the middle one. I like looking at gardens and thinking about them. For years I've lived next to one of the great agricultural universities, and its campus is a giant garden filled with a number of spectacular smaller gardens. Every one of those gardens, and every garden that's ever been, is on some level an imperfect copy of another garden, the paradise in which our first parents lived. So when I see a garden in a story or poem, the first thing I do is to see how well it fits that Edenic template, and I must admit that in Mansfield's story, the fit is also imperfect. That's okay, though, because the story from Genesis of Adam and Eve is only one version, and on the level of myth, it has many cousins. For now I think I'll reserve judgment for a little bit about what sort of garden this particular one might turn out to be.

What I notice first in the text is that word "ideal" ; how many times have you described your weather as ideal? They couldn't have had a more "perfect" day. Those two words may just be hyperbole, but coming in the first two sentences of the story, they feel suggestive. The sky is without a cloud (just so we can't but expect some sort of cloud is coming), and the gardener has been at work since dawn. Later, this perfect afternoon will "ripen" and then "slowly fade," as a fruit or flower would. By then we will have seen that flowers permeate this story, as befits a garden party. Even the places emptied of daisies are "rosettes." And the real roses themselves have bloomed "in the hundreds" overnight, as if by magic or, since Mansfield mentions a visitation by archangels, by divinity. This first paragraph is bracketed by the ideal and archangels - not a particularly human environment, is it?

When I see an unreal, idealized setting such as this, I generally want to know who's in charge. No mystery here: everyone defers to Mrs. Sheridan. Whose garden is it? Not the gardener's; he's just a servant doing the bidding of the mistress. And what a garden, with its hundreds of roses, lily lawn, karaka trees with broad leaves and bunches of yellow fruit, lavender, plus trays and trays and trays of canna lilies, of which, Mrs. Sheridan believes, one cannot have too many. This excess of canna lilies she describes as "enough" for once in her life. Even the guests become part of her garden realm, seeming to be "bright birds" as they stroll the lawn and stoop to admire the flowers, while her hat, which she passes on to Laura, has "gold daisies." Clearly she is the queen or goddess of this garden world. Food is the other major element of her realm. She is responsible for food for the party, sandwiches (fifteen different kinds including cream-cheese-and-lemon-curd and egg-and-olive) and cream puffs and passion fruit ices (so we know it is New Zealand and not Newcastle). The final component is children, of which she has four. So a queen overseeing her realm of living plants, food, and progeny. Mrs. Sheridan begins to sound suspiciously like a fertility goddess. Since, however, there are lots of kinds of fertility goddesses, we need more information.

I'm not done with that hat. It's a black hat with black velvet ribbon and gold daisies, equally incongruous at the party and at the later visitation, although I'm less impressed by what it is than by whose it is. Mrs. Sheridan has purchased it, but she insists that Laura take it, declaring it "much too young" for herself. Although Laura resists, she does accept the hat and is later captivated by her own "charming" image in the mirror. No doubt she does look charming, but part of that is transferral. When a younger character takes on an older character's talisman, she also assumes some of the elder's power. This is true whether it's a father's coat, a mentor's sword, a teacher's pen, or a mother's hat. Because the hat has come from Mrs. Sheridan, Laura instantly becomes more closely associated than any of her siblings with her mother. This identification is furthered first by Laura's standing beside her mother to help with the good-byes and then by the contents of her charity basket: leftover food from the party and, but for the destruction they would have wrought on her lace frock, arum lilies. This growing identification between Mrs. Sheridan and Laura is significant on a couple of levels, and we'll return to that presently.

First, though, let's look at Laura's trip. The perfect afternoon on the high promontory is ending and "growing dusky as Laura shut[s] their garden gates." From here on her trip grows progressively darker. The cottages down in the hollow are in "deep shade," the lane "smoky and dark." Some of the cottages show a flicker of light, just enough to project shadows on the windows. She wishes she had put on a coat, since her bright frock shines amid the dismal surroundings. Inside the dead man's house itself, she goes down a "gloomy passage" to a kitchen "lighted by a smoky lamp." When her visit ends, she makes her way past "all those dark people" to a spot where her brother, Laurie, "steps out of the shadow."

There are a couple of other odd features here. For one thing, on her way to the lane, Laura is gratuitously accosted by a large dog "running by like a shadow." Upon getting to the bottom, she crosses the "broad road" to go into the dismal lane. Once in the lane, there's an old, old woman with a crutch sitting with her feet on newspaper. On her way in and out Laura passes individuals and small knots of shadowy figures, but they don't speak to her, and the one by the old woman (she alone speaks) parts to make way for her. When the old woman says the house is indeed that of the dead man, she "smiles queerly." Although Laura hasn't wanted to see the dead man, when the sheets are folded back, she finds him "wonderful, beautiful," echoing her admiration in the morning for the workman who stoops to pick and smell the lavender. Laurie, it turns out, has come to wait at the end of the lane - almost as if he can't enter - because "Mother was getting quite anxious."

What just happened here?

For one thing, as my student respondents note, Laura has seen how the other half lives - and dies. One major point of the story is unquestionably the confrontation she has with the lower class and the challenge that meeting throws at her easy class assumptions and prejudices. And then there is the story of a young girl growing up, part of which involves seeing her first dead man. But I think something else is going on here.

I think Laura has just gone to hell. Hades, actually, the classical underworld, the realm of the dead. Not only that, she hasn't gone as Laura Sheridan, but as Persephone. I know what you're thinking: now he's lost his mind. It wouldn't be the first time and probably not the last.

Persephone's mother is Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, fertility, and marriage. Agriculture, fertility, marriage. Food, flowers, children. Does that sound like anyone we know? Remember: the guests admiring the flowers at Mrs. Sheridan's garden party go about in couples, as if she has in some way been responsible for their pairing off, so marriage is in there. Okay, the long version is in Chapter

19, but here's the lightning-round version: fertility-goddess mother, beautiful daughter, kidnap and seduction by god of underworld, permanent winter, pomegranate-seed monkey business, six-month growing season, happy parties all round. What we get here, of course, is the myth explaining the seasons and agricultural fertility, and what sort of culture would it be that didn't have a myth to cover that? Highly remiss, in my book.

But that's not the only thing this myth covers. There's the business of the young woman arriving at adulthood, and this constitutes a huge step, since it involves facing and comprehending death. The myth involves the tasting of the fruit, as with Eve, and the stories share the initiation into adult knowledge. With Eve, too, the knowledge gained is of our mortality, and while that's not quite the point of the Persephone story, it's sort of unavoidable when she marries the CEO of the land of the dead.

So how does that make Laura into Persephone, you ask? First, there's her mother as Demeter. That one is, as I suggested, pretty obvious, once the flowers and food and children and couples are considered. Moreover, we should recall that they live on this Olympian height, towering geographically and in class terms over the ordinary mortals in the hollow below. In this divine world the summer's day is perfect, ideal, as the world was before the loss of her daughter plunged Demeter into mourning and outrage. Then there is the trip down the hill and into a self-contained world full of shadows and smoke and darkness. She crosses the broad road as if it were the River Styx, which one has to cross to enter Hades. No entry is possible without two things: one must pass by Cerberus, the three-headed dog who stands guard, and one must have the admission ticket (Aeneas's Golden Bough). Oh, and a guide wouldn't hurt. Laura has her confrontation with the dog just outside her garden gate, and her Golden Bough turns out to be the gold daisies on her hat. As for guides (and no traveler to the underworld should be without one), Dante in the *Divine Comedy* (1321 A.D.) has the Roman poet Virgil; in Virgil's epic, *The Aeneid* (19 B.C.), Aeneas has the Cumaean Sibyl as his guide. Laura's Sibyl is that very old woman with the queer smile: her manner is no stranger than that of the Cumaean version, and the newspaper under her feet suggests the oracles written on leaves in the Sibyl's cave, where, when the visitor entered, winds whipped the leaves around, scrambling the messages. Aeneas is told to only accept the message from her own lips. As for the knot of unspeaking people who make way for Laura, every visitor to the lower world finds that the shadows pay him or her very little mind, the living having nothing to offer those whose living is done. Admittedly, these elements of the trip to Hades are not native to the Persephone myth, but they have become part and parcel of our understanding of such a trip. Her admiration for the deceased man's form, her identification with the grieving wife, and her audible sob all suggest a symbolic marriage. That world is dangerous, though; her mother has started to warn her before she sets out, as Demeter warns her daughter against eating anything in some versions of the original. Moreover, Mrs. Sheridan sends Laurie, a latter-day Hermes, to escort Laura back from this world of the dead.

Okay, so why all this business from three or four thousand years ago? That's what you're wondering, right? There are a couple of reasons, it seems to me, or perhaps a couple of major ones out of many possibilities. Remember, as many commentators have said about the Persephone myth, it encompasses the youthful female experience, the archetypal acquisition of knowledge of sexuality and of death. Our entry into adulthood, the myth suggests, depends on our understanding of our sexual natures and of our mortality. These modes of knowledge are part of Laura's day in the story. She admires the workmen, comparing them favorably to the young men who come to Sunday supper, presumably as prospective beaux for one or another of the sisters, and later she finds the dead man beautiful - a response encompassing both sex and death. Her inability at the very end of the story to articulate what life is - as caught in the repeated fragment of speech, "Isn't life" - suggests an involvement with death so strong that she cannot at this moment formulate any statement about life. This pattern of entry into adult life, Mansfield intimates, has been a recognizable part of our culture for thousands of

years; of course it has always been there, but the myth embodying the archetype has continued unbroken through Western culture since the very early Greeks. In tapping into this ancient tale of initiation, she invests the story of Laura's initiation with the accumulated power of the prevailing myth. The second reason is perhaps less exalted. When Persephone returns from the underworld, she has in a sense become her mother; in fact, some Greek rituals did not distinguish between mother and daughter. That may be a good thing if your mother is really Demeter, less so if she is Mrs. Sheridan. In wearing her mother's hat and carrying her basket, she also takes on her mother's views. Although Laura struggles against the unconscious arrogance of her family throughout the story, she cannot finally break away from their Olympian attitudes toward the merely mortal who reside below the hill. That she is relieved to be rescued by Laurie, even though she has found the experience "marvelous," suggests that her efforts to become her own person have been only partially successful. We must surely recognize our own incomplete autonomy in hers, for how many of us can deny that there is a great deal of our parents, for good or ill, in us?

What if you don't see all this going on in the story, if you read it simply as a narrative of a young woman making an ill-advised trip on which she learns something about her world, if you don't see Persephone or Eve or any other mythic figures in the imagery? The modernist poet Ezra Pound said that a poem has to work first of all on the level of the reader for whom "a hawk is simply a hawk." The same goes for stories. An understanding of the story in terms of what literally happens, if the story is as good as this one, is a great starting point. From there, if you consider the pattern of images and allusions, you'll begin to see more going on. Your conclusions may not resemble mine or Diane's, but if you're observing carefully and meditating on the possibilities, you'll reach valid conclusions of your own that will enrich and deepen your experience of the story.

So what does the story signify, then? Many things. It offers a critique of the class system, a story of initiation into the adult world of sex and death, an amusing examination of family dynamics, and a touching portrait of a child struggling to establish herself as an independent entity in the face of nearly overwhelming parental influence.

What else could we ask of a simple little story?