The weather was ideal. There could not have been a more perfect day for a garden party. Windless, warm, the sky without a cloud. And the blue was thinly covered with a haze of light gold, as it is sometimes in early summer. The gardener had been up since dawn, cutting the lawns and sweeping them, until the grass 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 angels.

Breakfast was not over before the men came to put up the big tent.

“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 sat drinking her coffee with a green towel round her head, and a dark wet curl stuck onto each cheek. Jose, the butterfly, came down in a silk petticoat and a kimono jacket.

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

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

**THINK**

Try to imagine the garden.
Think of a place outdoors that you like. Describe it.

**Glossary**

- **bowed down**: bent over
- **haze**: light fog when it is hot
- **lawns**: areas of short grass
- **literally**: really; exactly that
- **marquee**: big tent used for parties, etc.
- **petticoat**: light skirt women wear under a skirt or dress
- **sweeping**: brushing
- **windless**: without any wind
Four men wearing shirts stood grouped together on the garden path. They carried poles covered with rolls of canvas and they had big tool bags 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 and even a little bit short-sighted as she came up to them.

“Good morning,” she said, copying her mother’s voice. But it sounded so awful that she was ashamed, and hesitated, like a little girl, “Oh – erm – have you come – is it about the marquee?”

“That’s right, miss,” said the tallest of the men, and he moved his tool bag, pushed 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.

“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 and stared in that direction. A little fat man pushed his lower lip out and the tall one frowned.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “You wouldn’t notice it. 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 will hit you in the eye, if you understand what I mean.”

“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 tired look as his eyes scanned the tennis court. What was he thinking?

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

“Look here, miss, that’s a fine 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 the trees you imagined growing on a desert island – proud, solitary, lifting their leaves and fruit to the sun in a kind of silent splendour. Must they be hidden by a big tent? They must. Already the men had shouldered their poles and were going there. Only the tall man was left. He bent down and pinched some lavender leaves, put his thumb and finger to his nose and sniffed the scent. When Laura saw him do that she forgot all about the karakas in her wonder at him caring for small things like that – caring for the smell of lavender. How many of the 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 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 man drew something on the back of an envelope, of these absurd class distinctions. Well she didn’t feel them. Not a bit, not an atom … And now there came the chock-chock of wooden hammers. Someone whistled, someone called out, “Are you all right there, matey•?” “Matey!” The friendliness of it! Just to prove how happy she was, just to show the tall man how comfortable she felt with them, how she despised• stupid conventions, Laura took a big bite of her bread and butter as she stared at his little drawing. She felt just like a workgirl.

THINK
How does Laura react to the workmen?
What are ‘class distinctions’?
Why does Laura say they are ‘absurd’?

Glossary
• clusters: groups
• despised: hated
• gleaming: shining
• karakas: type of tropical trees
• matey: (colloquial) friend
• pinched: held tightly between his fingers
• shouldered: put on their shoulders
• sniffed: smelled
After Reading

Characters

1. There are four groups of characters in this story. Complete the table below with the missing information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>FACTS ABOUT THEM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Sheridan family and their friends</td>
<td>1. Mr. Sheridan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>The main character in the story</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Works in an office with his father</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Sheridans' servants</td>
<td>8. Sadie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The person who prepares most of the food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. The Gardener</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People who deliver things for the party or who are hired to work at it</td>
<td>12. 4 workmen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. The florist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Tells about Scott’s death</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15.</td>
<td>They wear green uniforms and play the music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16. Hired waiters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in the worker’s cottage</td>
<td>17.</td>
<td>The carter who was killed in an accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18. Em Scott</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19. The other woman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Form groups of four. Each person picks one person from one of the groups above. Introduce yourself, describe your part in the story and say what you notice and think about what is going on. Say whether you think the Sheridans should have cancelled the garden party because of the death.
3 Describe Laura’s reactions
   a) When she meets the workmen who are putting up the marquee.
   b) When she finds out about Scott’s death.
   c) When her mother gives her the hat.
   d) At the end of the party.
   e) When she is walking towards the dead man’s house.
   f) When she goes into the house.
   g) When she is walking home with Laurie.

4 How are the three sisters described? How do you imagine them?

5 What do the following quotes tell us about Mrs. Sheridan?
   a) “My dear child, it’s no use asking me. I’m determined to leave everything to you children this year.” (page 11)
   b) “Not in the garden?” (page 26)
   c) “People like that don’t expect sacrifices from us. And it’s not very sympathetic to spoil everyone’s enjoyment as you’re doing now.” (page 27)
   d) “Let’s fill up a basket. Let’s send that poor woman some of this perfectly good food. At any rate it will be the greatest treat for the children.” (page 32)

6 Find quotes that tell us about Laura’s character. What is your favourite one? Discuss with a partner.

7 Imagine you are Mrs. Sheridan. Write a diary entry for the day of the garden party.