



SEE-SAW (1919)

By Katherine Mansfield

Spring. As the people leave the road for the grass their eyes become fixed and dreamy like the eyes of people wading in the warm sea. There are no daisies yet, but the sweet smell of the grass rises, rises in tiny waves the deeper they go. The trees are in full leaf. As far as one can see there are fans, hoops, tall rich plumes of various green. A light wind shakes them, blowing them together, blowing them free again; in the blue sky floats a cluster of tiny white clouds like a brood of ducklings. The people wander over the grass—the old ones inclined to puff and waddle after their long winter snooze; the young ones suddenly linking hands and making for that screen of trees in the hollow or the shelter of that clump of dark gorse tipped with yellow—walking very fast, almost running, as though they had heard some lovely little creature caught in the thicket crying to them to be saved.

On the top of a small green mound there is a very favourite bench. It has a young chestnut growing beside it, shaped like a mushroom. Below the earth has crumbled, fallen away, leaving three or four clayey hollows—caves—caverns—and in one of them two little people had set up house with a minute pickaxe, an empty match box, a blunted nail and a shovel for furniture. He had red hair cut in a deep fringe, light blue eyes, a faded pink smock and brown button shoes. Her flowery curls were caught up with a yellow ribbon and she wore two dresses—her this week's underneath and her last week's on top. This gave her rather a bulky air.

“If you don't get me no sticks for my fire,” said she, “there won't be no dinner.” She wrinkled her nose and looked at him severely. “You seem to forget I've got a fire to make.” He took it very easy, balancing on his toes—“Well—where's I to find any sticks?”

“Oh,” said she—flinging up her hands— “anywhere of course—” And then she whispered just loud enough for him to hear, “they needn't be real ones—*you* know.”

“Ooh,” he breathed. And then he shouted in a loud distinct tone: “Well I'll just go an' get a few sticks.”

He came back in a moment with an armful.

“Is that a whole pennorth?” said she, holding out her skirts for them.

“Well,” said he, “I don't know, because I had them give to me by a man that was moving.”



“Perhaps they're bits of what was broke,” said she. “When we moved, two of the pictures was broken and my Daddy lit the fire with them, and my Mummy said—she said—” a tiny pause—“soldier's manners!”

“What's that?” said he.

“Good *gracious!*” She made great eyes at him. “Don't you *know?*”

“No,” said he. “What does it mean?”

She screwed up a bit of her skirt, scrunched it, then looked away—“Oh, don't bother me, child,” said she.

He didn't care. He took the pickaxe and hacked a little piece out of the kitchen floor.

“Got a newspaper?”

He plucked one out of the air and handed it to her. *Ziz, ziz, ziz!* She tore it into three pieces—knelt down and laid the sticks over. “Matches, please.” The real box was a triumph, and the blunted nails. But funny—*Zip, zip, zip*, it wouldn't light. They looked at each other in consternation.

“Try the other side,” said she. *Zip*. “Ah! that's better.” There was a great glow—and they sat down on the floor and began to make the pie.

To the bench beside the chestnut came two fat old babies and plumped themselves down. She wore a bonnet trimmed with lilac and tied with lilac velvet strings; a black satin coat and a lace tie—and each of her hands, squeezed into black kid gloves, showed a morsel of purplish flesh. The skin of his swollen old face was tight and glazed—and he sat down clasping his huge soft belly as though careful not to jolt or alarm it.

“Very hot,” said he, and he gave a low, strange trumpeting cry with which she was evidently familiar, for she gave no sign. She looked into the lovely distance and quivered:

“Nellie cut her finger last night.”

“Oh, did she?” said the old snorter. Then—“How did she do that?”

“At dinner,” was the reply, “with a knife.”

They both looked ahead of them—panting—then, “Badly?”

The weak worn old voice, the old voice that reminded one somehow of a piece of faintly smelling dark lace, said, “Not very badly.”

Again he gave that low strange cry. He took off his hat, wiped the rim and put it on again.



The voice beside him said with a spiteful touch: “I think it was carelessness”—and he replied, blowing out his cheeks: “Bound to be!”

But then a little bird flew on to a branch of the young chestnut above them—and shook over the old heads a great jet of song.

He took off his hat, heaved himself up, and beat in its direction in the tree. Away it flew.

“Don't want bird muck falling on us,” said he, lowering his belly carefully—carefully again.

The fire was made.

“Put your hand in the oven,” said she, “an' see if it's hot.”

He put his hand in, but drew it out again with a squeak, and danced up and down. “It's ever so hot,” said he.

This seemed to please her very much. She too got up and went over to him, and touched him with a finger.

“Do you like playing with me?” And he said, in his small solid way, “Yes, I do.” At that she flung away from him and cried, “I'll never be done if you keep on bothering me with these questions.”

As she poked the fire he said: “Our dog's had kittens.”

“Kittens!” She sat back on her heels—“Can a dog have kittens?”

“Of course they can,” said he. “Little ones, you know.”

“But cats have kittens,” cried she. “Dogs don't, dogs have—” she stopped, stared—looked for the word—couldn't find it—it was gone. “They have—”

“*Kittens*,” cried he. “Our dog's been an' had two.”

She stamped her foot at him. She was pink with exasperation. “It's *not* kittens,” she wailed, “it's—”

“It is—it is—it is—” he shouted, waving the shovel.

She threw her top dress over her head, and began to cry. “It's not—it's—it's ...”

Suddenly, without a moment's warning, he lifted his pinafore and made water.

At the sound she emerged.



“Look what you've been an' done,” said she, too appalled to cry any more. “You've put out my fire.”

“Ah, never mind. Let's move. You can take the pickaxe and the match box.”

They moved to the next cave. “It's much nicer here,” said he.

“Off you go,” said she, “and get me some sticks for my fire.”

The two old babies above began to rumble, and obedient to the sign they got up without a word and waddled away.

