The Apple-Tree

By Katherine Mansfield

There were two orchards belonging to the old house. One, that we called the “wild” orchard, lay beyond the vegetable garden; it was planted with bitter cherries and damsons and transparent yellow plums. For some reason it lay under a cloud; we never played there, we did not even trouble to pick up the fallen fruit; and there, every Monday morning, to the round open space in the middle, the servant girl and the washerwoman carried the wet linen – Grandmother’s nightdresses, Father’s striped shirts, the hired man’s cotton trousers and the servant girl’s “dreadfully vulgar” salmon-pink flannelette drawers jigged and slapped in horrid familiarity.

But the other orchard, far away and hidden from the house, lay at the foot of the little hill and stretched right over to the edge of the paddocks – to the clumps of wattles bobbing yellow in the bright sun and the blue gums with their streaming sickle-shaped leaves. There, under the fruit trees, the grass grew so thick and coarse that it tangled and knotted in your shoes as you walked, and even on the hottest day it was damp to the touch when you stopped and parted it this way and that, looking for windfalls – the apples marked with a bird’s beak, the bi bruised pears, the quinces, so good to eat with a pinch of salt, but so delicious that you could not bite for sniffing . . .

One year the orchard had its Forbidden Tree. It was an apple-tree discovered by Father and a friend during an after-dinner prowl on Sunday afternoon.

“Great Scott!” said the friend, lighting upon it with every appearance of admiring astonishment: “Isn’t that a -----?” And a rich, splendid name settled like an unknown bird on the tree.

“Yes, I believe it is,” said Father lightly. He knew nothing whatever about the names of fruit trees.

“Great Scott!” said the friend again. “They’re wonderful apples. Nothing like ‘em – and you’re going to have a tip-top crop. Marvelous apples! You can’t beat ‘em!”

“No, they’re very fine – very fine,” said Father carelessly, but looking at the tree with new and lively interest.

“They’re rare – they’re very rare. Hardly ever see ‘em in England nowadays,” said the visitor and set a seal on Father’s delight. For Father was a self-made mane and the price he had to pay for
everything was so huge and so painful that nothing rang so sweet to him as to hear his purchase praised. He was young and sensitive still. He still wondered whether in the deepest sense he got his money’s worth. He still had hours when he walked up and down in the moonlight half deciding to “chuck his confounded rushing to the office every day – and clear out – clear out once and for all.” And now to discover that he’d a valuable apple-tree thrown in with the orchard – an apple-tree that this Johnny from England positively envied!

“Don’t touch that tree! Do you hear me, children!” said he, bland and firm; and when the guest had gone, with quite another voice and manner:

“If I catch either of you touching those apples you shall not only go to bed – you shall each have a good sound whipping.” Which merely added to its magnificence.

Every Sunday morning after church Father, with Bogey and me tailing after, walked through the flower garden, down the violet path, past the lace-bark tree, past the white rose and syringe bushes, and down the hill to the orchard. The apple-tree – like the Virgin Mary – seemed to have been miraculously warned of its high honour, standing apart from its fellows, bending a little under its rich clusters, fluttering its polished leaves, important and exquisite before Father’s awful eye. His heart swelled to the sight – we knew his heart swelled. He put his hands behind his back and screwed up his eyes in the way he had. There it stood – the accidental thing – the thing that no one had been in aware of when the hard bargain was driven. It hadn’t been counted in, hadn’t in a way been paid for. If the house had been burned to the ground at that time it would have meant less to him than the destruction of his tree. And how we played up to him, Bogey and I, - Bogey with his scratched knees pressed together, his hands behind his back, too, and a round cap on his head with “H.M.S. Thunderbolt” printed across it.

The apples turned from pale green to yellow; then they had deep pink stripes painted on them, and the pink melted all over the yellow, reddened, and spread into a fine clear crimson.

At last the day came when Father took out his waistcoat pocket a little pearl pen-knife. He reached up. Very slowly and very carefully he picked two apples growing on a bough.

“By Jove! They’re warm,” cried Father in amazement. “They’re wonderful apples! Tip-top! Marvelous!” he echoed. He rolled them over in his hands.

“Look at that!” he said. “Not a spot – not a blemish!” And he walked through the orchard with Bogey and me stumbling after, to a tree-stump under the wattles. We sat, one on either side of Father. He laid one apple down, opened the pearl-pen knife and neatly and beautifully cut the other in half.

“By Jove! Look at that!” he exclaimed.

“Father!” we cried, dutiful but really enthusiastic, too. For the lovely red colour had bitten through the white flesh of the apple; it was pink to the shiny black pips lying so justly in their scaly pods. It looked as though the apple had been dipped in wine.
“Never seen *that* before,” said Father. “You won’t find an apple like that in a hurry!” He put it to his nose and pronounced an unfamiliar word. “Bouquet! What a bouquet!” And then he handed to Bogey one half, to me the other.

“Don’t *bolt* it!” said he. It was agony to give even so much away. I knew it, while I took mine humbly and humbly Bogey accepted his.

The he divided the second with the same neat beautiful little cut of the pearl knife.

I kept my eyes on Bogey. Together we took a bite. Our mouths were full of a floury stuff, a hard, faintly bitter skin – a horrible taste of something dry . . .

“Well?” asked Father, very jovial. He had cut his two halves into quarters and was taking out the little pods. “Well?”

Bogey and I stared at each other, chewing desperately. In that second of chewing and swallowing a long silent conversation passed between us – and a strange meaning smile. We swallowed. We edged near Father, just touching him.

“Perfect!” we lied. “Perfect – Father! Simply lovely!”

But it was no use. Father spat his out and never went near the apple-tree again.
Answer the following questions.

Comprehension

1. What makes the apple tree seem valuable to the father?
   a. His children love the tree.
   b. He has never seen a tree like it before
   c. He has always wanted an apple tree.
   d. His friend tells him that it is rare.

2. As the apples on the tree ripen, the father
   a. Becomes more and more proud of owning the apple tree
   b. Begins to lose interest in the apple tree
   c. Worries that his children will somehow harm the apple tree
   d. Knows that the tree is worth more than his house

3. What is the main theme of the story?
   a. If your expectations are too high, you may end up disappointed.
   b. Beautiful trees often produce bitter fruit.
   c. Telling the truth is often the best policy.
   d. When you own something, you must constantly take care of it.

4. How are the ripe apples different from what is expected?
   a. They are small instead of large.
   b. The apples are a pale pink instead of red.
   c. They taste bitter instead of sweet.
   d. The apples smell like flowers instead of fruit.

5. Why do the children lie to their father about how the apple tastes?
   a. They are afraid of being punished.
   b. They don’t want him to be disappointed.
   c. They want to trick him into liking the apples.
   d. They don’t care what he thinks.

6. What does the apple tree symbolizes after the visitor praises it
   a. The father’s power
   b. The children’s obedience
   c. The visitor’s wisdom
   d. The fruit’s sweetness
Written Response

Short Answer

Write three or four sentences to answer the question.

7. Give one reason why the author calls the apple tree the Forbidden Tree. Support your idea about why the author uses this symbol with an example from the text or from your own knowledge.

Extended Response

Write two or three paragraphs to answer the question.

8. Explain why the father believes his friend’s statement that the apples are rare and will be marvelous. Support you answer with three details from the story.