

Cambridge Discovery Readers

Level 2

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Parties and Presents:
three short stories

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Retold by Margaret Johnson



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Her First Ball

Leila was in a taxi with the Sheridan girls, Meg, Jose and Laura, and their brother, Laurie. They were on their way to a ball. Leila was very excited about the evening. 'Who will I meet?' she thought. 'Who will I dance with?'



As the taxi passed by the dancing lights of all the houses, Leila's arm was on the arm of the seat. To Leila, it almost felt like the arm of a young man – of a dance partner.

'You say you haven't been to a ball before, Leila?' cried one of the Sheridan girls. 'I can't believe it!'

'We live in the country,' Leila replied softly. 'It's miles to the nearest town.' She really was *so* excited, but she tried not to show it because the others weren't very excited. They were always going to balls. But for Leila, *everything* was new. Everything made her feel excited ... Meg's flowers, Jose's dress, Laura's little dark head, pushing above her white coat like a flower in the snow.

Her cousin Laurie took some new gloves¹⁰ from some soft paper and threw the paper away. Oh, that paper! Leila wanted to keep it. She wanted to remember everything about this night for the rest of her life!

Laurie put his hand on his sister Laura's knee. 'I can have the third and ninth dances, can't I, Twig?' he said.

'Oh, how wonderful to have a brother!' Leila thought. She was an only child. No one had a special name like Twig for her.

'I've never seen your hair look so lovely, Jose,' Meg said to her sister, and Leila almost wanted to cry. They were so nice to each other!

But there was no time for crying. Here they were, arriving at the ball already! The road was full of moving lights and people.

'Hold on to me, Leila,' said Laura. 'So you don't get lost.'

Leila held onto Laura's soft, white coat, and they hurried inside, pushing past everyone and into the ladies' room.



The little room was full of girls talking – the noise was very loud. Everyone was taking their coats off and putting them down onto two long seats. Then they all wanted to look in the little mirror. Dark girls, blonde girls were looking at their hair and their dresses. And because they were all laughing, Leila thought they were all lovely.

‘Help me with my hair, darling,’ cried someone.

‘My dress!’ cried another. ‘It’s dirty at the bottom!’

Then someone called, ‘Pass them along, pass them along!’ And a little basket of dance programmes went round the room. The thin books were *beautiful*! They were pink and silver¹¹ with pink pencils.

Leila took one from the basket. She opened it excitedly. But there wasn’t time to read the names of all the dances. Meg was calling, ‘Ready, Leila?’

‘Yes,’ answered Leila and they pushed through all the people to get to the ballroom.

It was very loud in the ballroom too. ‘How will we hear the music when we’re dancing?’ Leila thought. She was so happy to be there. She wasn’t afraid any more.

Leila smiled, thinking for a moment of only a few hours ago. ‘I was so afraid I wanted to ask Mother to phone the Sheridans to say I couldn’t come to the ball!’ she remembered to herself. ‘I was thinking about home. I wanted to be back home so badly, back in the quiet country. I wanted to hear the baby owls¹² crying out in the night. But now! Oh, I’m so happy I’m here!’ And she looked around the room again with a big smile on her face.

All the girls were on one side of the room, and all the men were on the other. Their parents were at the end of the room, watching everything.



‘This is my little cousin Leila from the country,’ said Meg to everyone they met. ‘Be nice to her. Find people to dance with her.’

Strange faces smiled and strange voices answered, ‘Of course I will.’

But Leila felt the girls didn’t really see her. They were looking over at the men. Why didn’t the men come over to ask the girls to dance? What were they waiting for? They just smiled and laughed and talked to each other.

But then at last they came, and the girls all smiled, excited. A tall, blonde man came up to Meg, and wrote something in her programme. Meg passed him on to Leila.

‘Could I have a dance?’ he asked, and he wrote something in her programme. Next came a dark man wearing glasses, then cousin Laurie with a friend, and Laura with a short man.

Lastly, a quite old, fat man with very little hair on his head came over. He took her programme and looked at it. It was quite black with names now.

‘Now let me see,’ he said. ‘Let me see ...’ He looked and looked at her programme and then at his.



At last he wrote something and looked at her. 'Do I remember you?' he asked softly. 'Have we met before?'

Before Leila could answer, the music started up, and the fat man left. The music flew around the room, and people began to dance.

Leila watched for a moment, thinking of dancing lessons at school. Miss Eccles' loud voice in the smelly school hall. How very different to this beautiful room with this wonderful music! Oh, where was her first dance partner? She wanted to start dancing with someone soon. She must start dancing soon! Dance now or else fly right out of one of the dark windows!

'My dance, I think,' someone said, smiling at her and holding out his arm.

Oh good! She didn't need to fly away after all! The young man put his hand on her back, and then they danced away together like a flower in fast water.

'Quite a good floor¹³, isn't it?' asked the young man in a quiet voice close to her ear.

'Oh, yes!' said Leila. 'I think it's so nice and slippery¹⁴.'

'Pardon?' said the voice.

'It's so nice and slippery,' said Leila again.

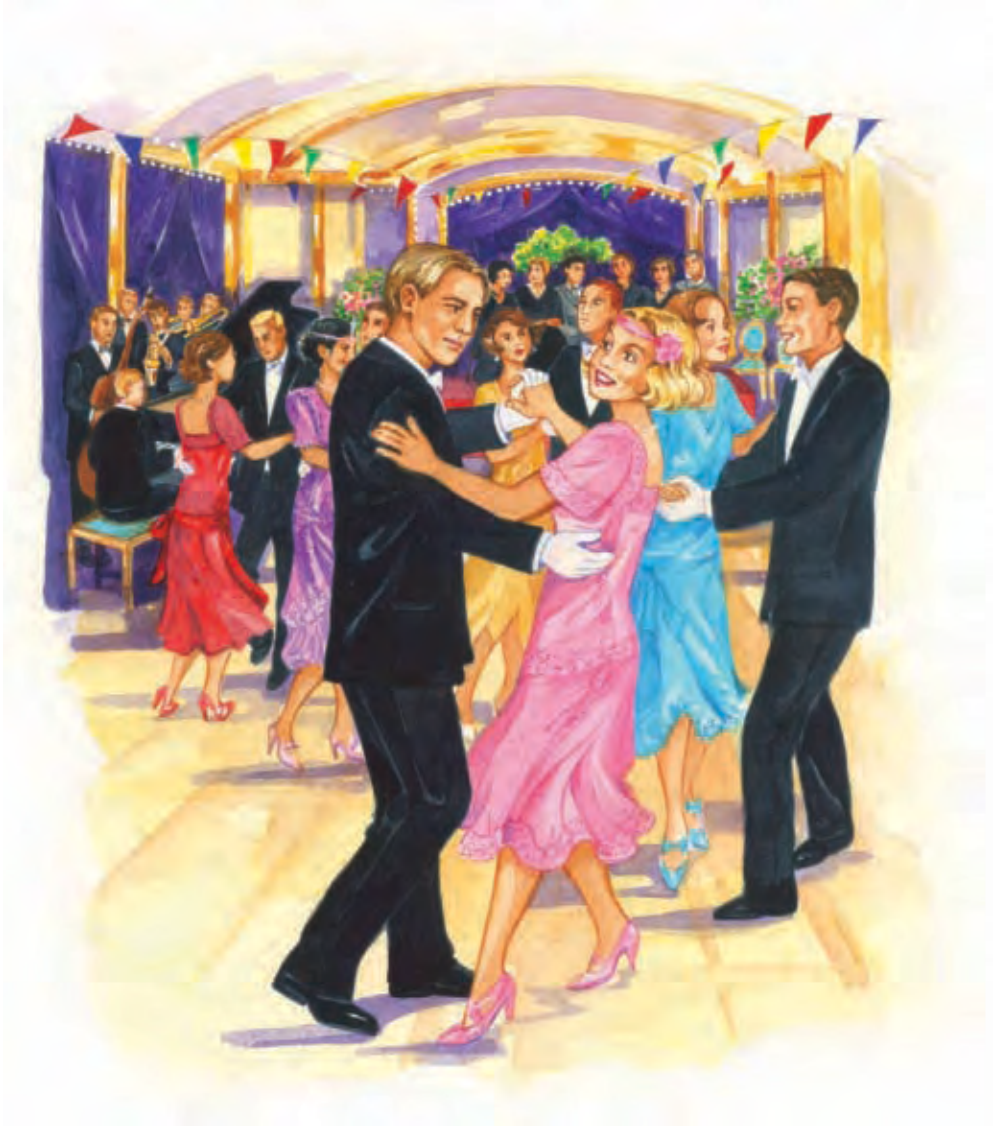
'Oh, yes, quite,' agreed the young man after a moment.

He danced so well. He was so strong, and he knew what he was doing. It was so nice to be dancing with a man and not one of the girls in Miss Eccles' class. Girls always stood on your feet or held you so hard it hurt.

'Were you at the Bell's ball last week?' came the young man's voice again.

'He sounds so tired,' thought Leila. 'Does he want to stop dancing?'

‘No,’ she answered. ‘This is my first dance.’
Her partner laughed. ‘No!’ he said. He couldn’t believe it.
‘Yes,’ Leila said. ‘It really is the first dance I’ve been to.’ It
was so nice to tell somebody about it.
‘You see I’ve always lived in the country until now ...’



At that moment the music stopped and they went to sit on two chairs against the wall. Leila happily watched other men and women going out through the doors.

‘Are you having a nice time, Leila?’ asked Jose.

Then Laura passed and gave her a smile.



Her dance partner did not have much to say to her, but it wasn't important.

The music started up again and her second partner came over.

‘The floor’s not bad,’ he said.

‘Do they always start by talking about the floor?’ thought Leila.

And then, ‘Were you at the Neaves’ on Tuesday?’

Leila told him it was her first ball. He didn’t seem to be very interested – she didn’t know why. Because it was so exciting! Her first ball! She was at the beginning of everything. Night wasn’t just a dark, quiet and beautifully sad thing any more. It was full of light!

‘Do you want an ice?’ asked her partner. And they went out through the doors. Leila’s face was hot, and she was very thirsty.

The ices looked so lovely on little glass plates. And when they came back to the hall, there was the fat man waiting for her by the door.

Leila looked at him. He really *was* old. Why wasn’t he sitting with the fathers and mothers?

‘There you are,’ said the fat man. And he took her in his arms and they began to dance very slowly. Leila thought it was more like walking than dancing.

‘This is your first dance, isn’t it?’ he asked. Not one word about the floor!

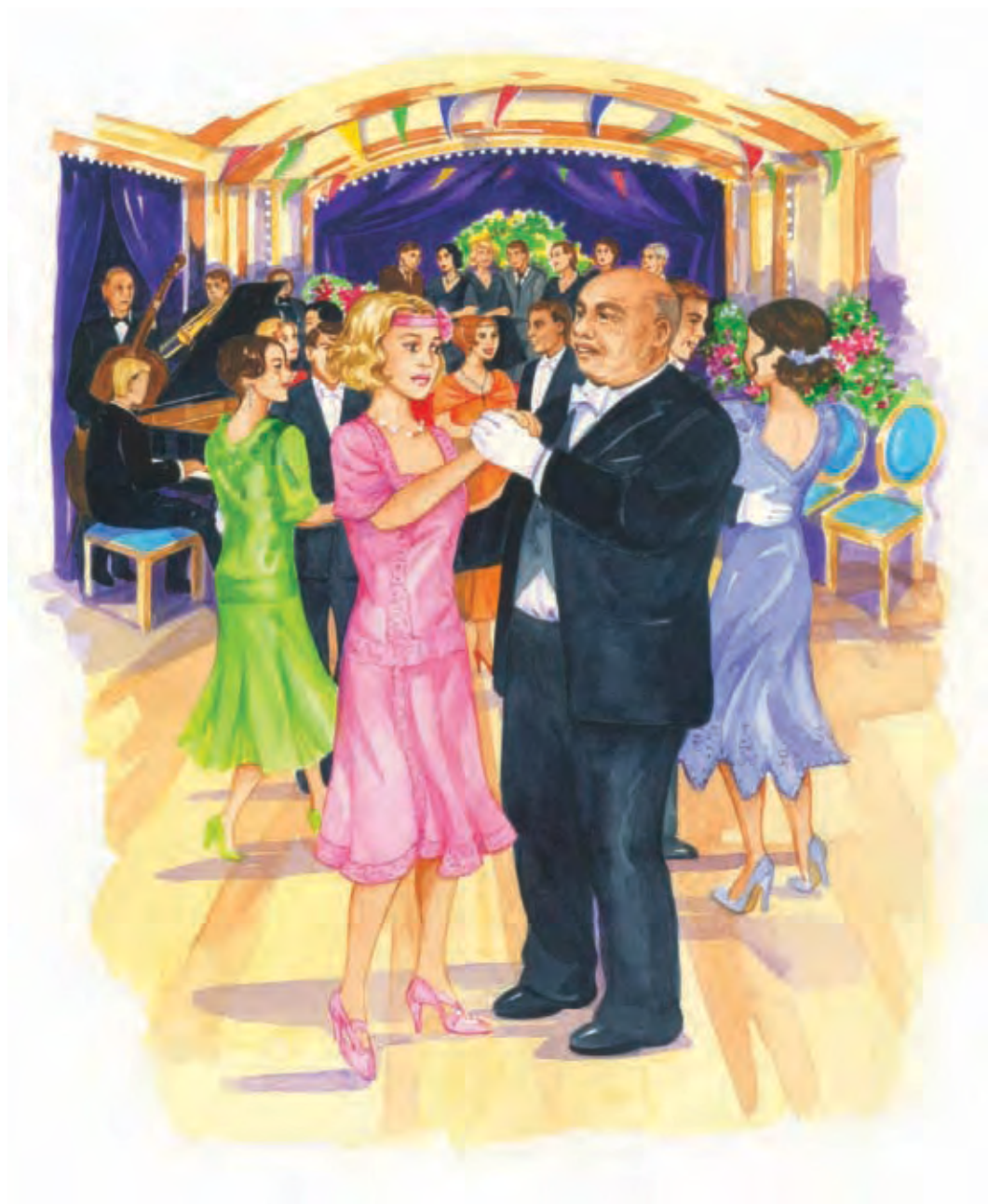
‘How did you know?’ Leila asked.

‘I know because I’m old,’ he said. ‘I know because of thirty years of coming to dances.’

‘Thirty years?’ cried Leila. Twelve years before she was born!

‘Terrible, isn’t it?’ agreed the fat man sadly.

Leila looked at him. She felt quite sorry for him. ‘I think it’s wonderful that you’re still coming to balls,’ she said kindly.



‘That’s very kind of you,’ the fat man said. He sang along softly to the music for awhile, and then he said, ‘Of course you won’t be dancing like this for thirty years. Oh, no. Long before that you’ll be sitting up there with the mothers and fathers in your nice black dress. Those pretty arms of yours will be short fat arms, and you’ll smile like all those poor old women up there. You’ll talk to the old lady next to you about *your* daughter.’

Laura looked at him as he continued. ‘You’ll say some man tried to kiss your daughter at the last ball. And your heart¹⁵ will hurt because no one wants to kiss *you* now. And you’ll say that these floors are so slippery and dangerous to walk on.’

Leila gave a little laugh, but she did not feel like laughing. Was it true? It sounded true. At that moment, the music began to sound sad. Oh, how quickly things changed! Why didn’t happiness last?

‘I want to stop,’ she said in a small voice. The fat man led her to the door.

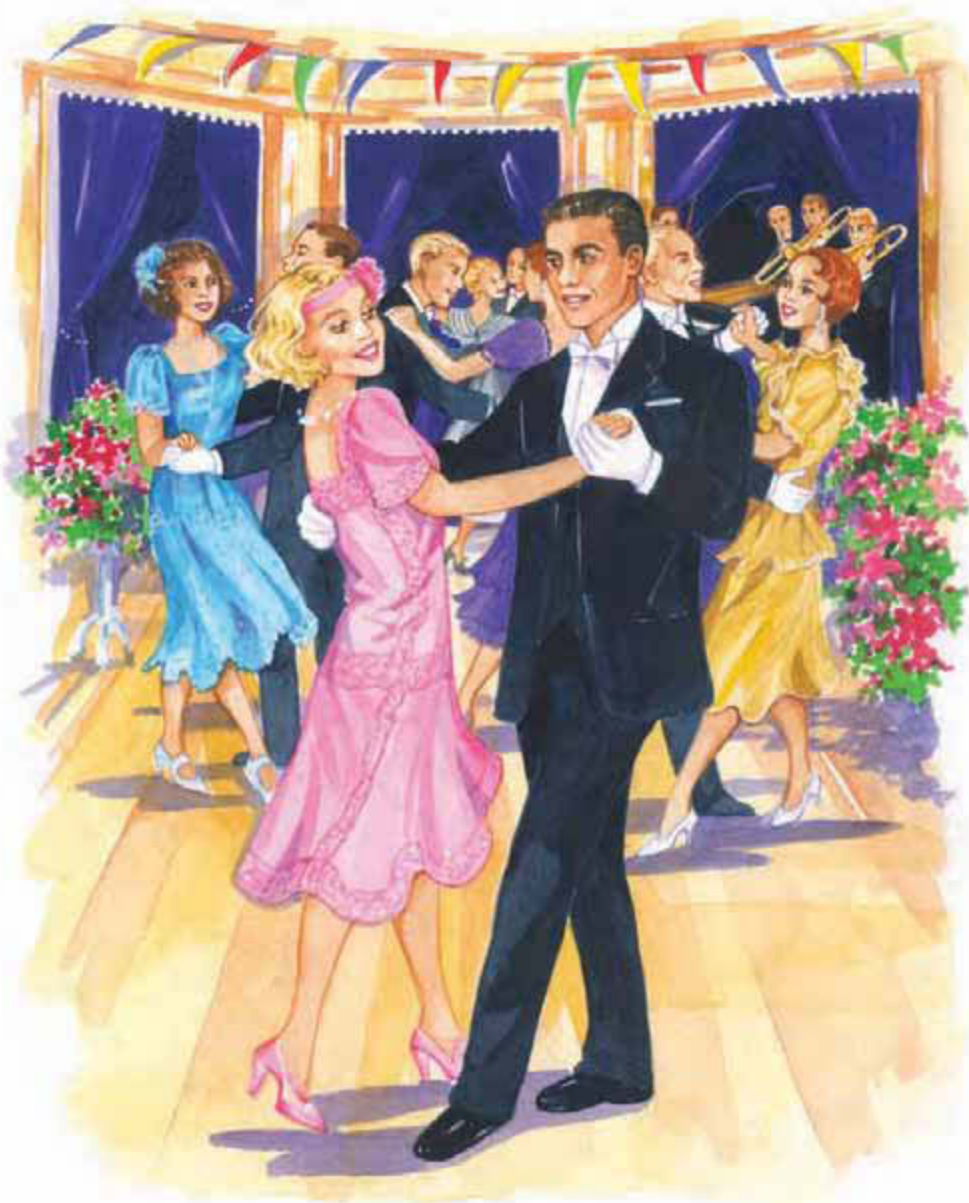
‘No,’ she said, ‘I won’t go outside. I won’t sit down. I’ll just stand here, thank you.’ She stood by the wall, trying to smile. But inside herself she felt like a sad little girl.

‘Why did he have to say those terrible things?’ she thought.

The fat man was looking at her. ‘You know, you mustn’t worry about the things I say,’ he said.

‘Oh, I won’t,’ said Leila, holding her head up.

The music ended. Dancers walked past. The doors opened and closed. Leila didn’t want to dance any more. She wanted to be at home, sitting outside listening to those baby owls.



But then the music started again. It was beautiful music, and a young man came over to her. He smiled. Leila knew she had to dance with him until she could find Meg and tell her she wanted to go. Leila walked to the centre of the floor. She didn't want to be there. She *didn't*.

But then the young man took her into his arms. They began to move around the room. And everything changed. It was like flying. The lights, the flowers, the dresses and the pink faces, all became one beautiful flying wheel. It was wonderful!

Leila was smiling, smiling. And later, when she saw the fat man again, she smiled at him too. She didn't even remember who he was.

ACTIVITIES PAGES 32–38

1 Match the two parts of the sentences.

- 1 Leila has never been to a ball ☒ d
- 2 The Sheridan girls aren't very excited about going to the ball ☐
- 3 Leila wants to read the names of all the dances in the programme ☐
- 4 Leila didn't want to come to the ball ☐
- 5 Leila doesn't answer the fat man's question ☐
 - a because they always go to balls.
 - b because he leaves when the music starts.
 - c but there isn't any time.
 - ~~d~~ because she lives in the country.
 - e but she isn't afraid any more.

2 Underline the correct words in each sentence.

- 1 The Sheridan girls *know* / *don't know* it's Leila's first ball.
- 2 Leila wants to keep the *paper* / *gloves* so she can remember everything about the ball.
- 3 *Laura's* / *Leila's* special name is Twig.
- 4 The Sheridan girls and Leila go into the Ladies room *before* / *after* they go into the ballroom.
- 5 The girls and the men *are* / *aren't* on the same side of the room.
- 6 Meg *tells* / *doesn't tell* people in the ballroom that Leila is from the country.
- 7 Leila's first dance partner is *a young* / *an old fat* man.
- 8 The *young man* / *fat man* asks Leila about the floor.

ACTIVITIES PAGES 39–45

3 Are the sentences true (T) or false (F)?

- 1 Leila tells her first dance partner that she's never been to a ball. ☒
- 2 Leila and her first dance partner talk a lot after the music stops. ☐
- 3 Leila's second dance partner asks her about the floor. ☐
- 4 Leila doesn't tell her second dance partner that it's her first ball. ☐
- 5 Leila dances again with her first partner. ☐
- 6 The fat man doesn't know it's Leila's first ball. ☐
- 7 The fat man says his first dance was thirty years ago. ☐
- 8 Leila feels sad after dancing with the fat man. ☐
- 9 After Leila dances with a young man she feels happy. ☐

4 Answer the questions.

- 1 Who doesn't seem interested in Leila's first ball?
.....
- 2 Who is waiting for Leila when she goes back inside the hall with her second dance partner?
.....
- 3 Who doesn't ask Leila about the floor?
.....
- 4 How does Leila feel at the end of the story?
.....