

The Dinner Party

After Nickolas Monsarrat

Thirty years ago I was fifteen. My uncle Octavian was then (in 1925) a very rich man. He was a charming host whose villa on the Cote d'Azur ¹ was a meeting place of the rich, and he was a very hospitable man — until January 3, 1925.

There was nothing special about that day, in the life of my uncle Octavian, except that it was his fifty-fifth birthday. As usual on such a day, he was giving a dinner-party, a party for twelve people. All of them were old friends; two of them, indeed, were what they called then “old flames” ².

I, myself, aged fifteen, was deeply privileged ³. I was staying with my uncle at his beautiful villa and my uncle allowed me to come down to dinner. It was exciting to me to be in such company, which included besides the two “old flames”, and their husbands, a newspaper proprietor ⁴ and his American wife; a recent prime-minister of France and a well-known statesman of post-war Germany, and a Habsburg prince and princess.

At that age, on holiday from school, you will understand that I was excited. The company was remarkable! But I should also stress that they were all old and close friends of my uncle Octavian.

Towards the end of a wonderful dinner when the servants had left, my uncle leaned forward ⁵ to have a look at a beautiful diamond ring on the princess's hand. She turned her hand gracefully towards my uncle.

Across the table, the newspaper proprietor leant across and said: “May I also have a look, Therese?” She smiled and nodded. Then she took off the ring and held it out to him. “It was my grandmother's,” she said. “I have not worn it for many years. It is said to have once belonged ⁶ to Genghis Khan.”

There were exclamations of surprise. The ring was passed ⁷ from hand to hand. For a moment it was in my hand. Then I passed it on to my next-door neighbour. As I turned away again, I thought I saw her pass it on. At least I was almost sure I saw her.

It was some twenty minutes later when the princess stood up, giving the signal for the ladies to leave the table. She looked round us with a pleasant smile. Then she said: “Before we leave you, may I have my ring back?”

I remember my uncle said, “Ah yes — that wonderful ring!” I remember the newspaper proprietor said: “Of course! Mustn't forget that!” and one of the women laughed.

Then there was a pause, while each of us looked expectantly at his neighbour. Then there was silence.

The princess was still smiling, though less easily. “If I you please,” she said again. “Then we can leave the gentlemen to their port. ⁸”

When no one answered her, and the silence continued, I still thought it could only be a joke, and that one of us — probably the prince himself — would produce the ring with a laugh. But when nothing happened at all, I knew that the rest of the night would be awful.

I am sure you know what followed. There was the awkwardness of the guests — all of them old friends. There was the fact that no one would meet anyone else's eye. The guests overturned the chairs, examined the carpet and then the whole room.

All these things happened, but they did not bring the princess's ring back. It had vanished — a diamond ring worth ⁹ possibly two hundred thousand pounds — in a roomful of twelve people, all old friends.

No servants had entered the room. No one had left it for a moment. The thief was one of us, one of my uncle Octavian's old friends.

I remember it was the French cabinet minister who wanted to be searched, indeed, he had already started turning out his pockets, before my uncle held up his hand and stopped him. Uncle Octavian's face was pale when he said: “There will be no searching. Not in my house. You are all

my friends. The ring can only be lost. If we do not find it” — he bowed towards I the princess — “I will make amends ¹⁰ myself.”

The fruitless search began again.

But there was no ring anywhere, though the guests stayed I nearly till morning — nobody wanted to be the first to leave. My uncle Octavian remained true to his words that no one was to be searched.

I myself went to England, and school, a few days later. I was very glad to leave the place. I could not bear the sight of my uncle’s face and the knowledge of his overturned world. All that he was left with ¹¹, among the ruins of his way of life, was a question mark: which of his friends was the thief?

I do not know how my uncle Octavian “made amends.” I know that, to my family’s surprise, he was rather poor when he died. He died, in fact, a few weeks ago, and that is why I feel I can tell the story.

It would be wrong to say that he died a broken man, but he did die a very sad man who never gave a single lunch or dinner-party for the last thirty years of his life.

Слова:

1. **the Cote d’Azur** (фр.) — Лазурный берег
2. **«old flames»** — прежние увлечения
3. **was deeply privileged** — был удостоен (такой чести)
4. **a newspaper proprietor** — владелец газеты
5. **leaned forward** — наклонился
6. **it is said to have once belonged** — говорят, оно когда-то принадлежало
7. **was passed** — передавалось
8. **leave the gentlemen to their port** — оставить мужчин, пока они пьют
портвейн
9. **worth** — стоимостью
10. **make amends** — компенсировать
11. **he was left with** — с чем он остался