

The Dinner Party

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There are still some rich people in the world. Many of them lead lives of particular pleasure. But rich people do have their problems. They are seldom problems of finance, since most rich people have enough sense to hire other people to take care of their worries. But there are other, more genuine problems. They are the problems of behaviour.

Let me tell you a story which happened to my uncle Octavian a full thirty years ago. At that time I myself was fifteen. My uncle Octavian was then a rich man. He was a charming and accomplished host whose villa was an accepted rendezvous of the great. He was a hospitable and most amiable 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 party, a party for twelve people. All of them were old friends.

I, myself, aged fifteen, was deeply privileged. I was staying with my uncle at his exquisite villa, on holiday from school, and as a special concession on this happy day, I was allowed to come down to dinner. It was exciting for me to be admitted to such company, which included a newspaper proprietor of exceptional intelligence and his fabulous American wife, a recent prime-minister of France and a distinguished German prince and princess.

At that age, you will guess, I was dazzled. Even today, 30 years later, one may fairly admit that the company was distinguished. But I should also stress that they were all old and intimate friends of my uncle Octavian.

Towards the end of a wonderful dinner, when dessert had been brought in and the servants had left my uncle leant forward to admire a magnificent diamond ring on the princess's hand. She was a handsome woman. She turned her hand gracefully towards my uncle. Across the table, the newspaper proprietor leant across and said: "May I also have a look?" She smiled and nodded. Then she took off the ring and held it out to him. "It was my grandmother's – the old empress," she said. "I have not worn it for many years. It is said to have once belonged to Genghis Khan."

There were exclamations of delight and admiration. The ring was passed from hand to hand. For a moment it rested on my own palm, gleaming splendidly. Then I passed it on to my neighbour. As I turned away again, I saw her pass it on.

It was some 20 minutes later when the princess stood up and said: "Before we leave you, may I have my ring back?" ... 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. She was unused to asking for things twice. The silence continued, I still thought that it could only be a practical 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 dreadful.

I am sure that you can guess the sort of scene that followed. There was the embarrassment of the guests – all of them old and valued friends. There was a nervous search of the whole room. But it did not bring the princess's ring back again. It had vanished – an irreplaceable thing, worth possibly two hundred thousand pounds – in a roomful of twelve people, all known to each other. No servants had entered the room. No one had left it for a moment. The thief (for now it could only be theft) was one of us, one of my uncle Octavian's cherished friends.

I remember it was the French cabinet minister who was most insistent on being searched, indeed, in his excitement he had already started to turn out his pockets, before my uncle held up his hand and stopped him. "There will be no search in my house," he commanded. "You are all my friends. The ring can only be lost. If it is not found" – he bowed towards the princess – "I will naturally make amends myself."

The ring was never found, it never appeared, either then or later.

To our family's surprise, uncle Octavian was a comparatively poor man, when he died (which happened, in fact, a few weeks ago). And I should say that he died with the special sadness of a hospitable host who never gave a single lunch or dinner party for the last thirty years of his life.

Give Russian equivalents for the following words and expressions from the text and use them in the sentences of your own:

hire smb, have enough (much, little, no) sense to do smth, be allowed to do smth, admire smth, have a look at, be (un) used to doing smth, to smb's surprise.

Questions on the text:

- 1) How old was the author of the story which happened to his uncle?
- 2) What kind of man was uncle Octavian?
- 3) In what way did he want to celebrate his fifty-fifth birthday?
- 4) Describe the guests.
- 5) Why did the boy consider himself to be deeply privileged?
- 6) What was peculiar about all those people present at the party?
- 7) What did the princess tell the guests about her ring?
- 8) Why did the boy think it was a joke when the ring had disappeared?
- 9) What attempts were made to find the ring?
- 10) Could the servants take the ring?
- 11) Why didn't uncle Octavian allow the guests to be searched?
- 12) Why did he tell the princess he would make amends though it was clear he wasn't the thief?
- 13) What was the reason of uncle Octavian's not giving parties in the last years of his life?

Discuss the following:

- 1) What did the author mean saying that rich people do have their problems?
- 2) "Problems of behaviour" – what are they? Have you ever run across them? What do you know about them? Discuss the situations you find most interesting. In what way are these problems connected with the text?
- 3) Why does the author stress many times that the guests were close, valuable friends?
- 4) Do high moral principles and well-being always go together?
- 5) Why did the author say that his uncle had died with sadness? What kind of sadness was it? Was it more than sadness, perhaps?
- 6) Think of another end of the story.