

**Der 50. Geburtstag  
oder  
Dinner for Five**

*A Dinner for One Story*

for Rebecca

by Rodo

*Meine Damen und Herren, verehrtes Publikum, ich heiÙe Sie hiermit erneut auf dem Landsitz von Miss Sophie willkommen. Da Dinner for One so groÙen Anklang gefunden hat, zeigen wir Ihnen heute, wie sich die eingeschliffene Routine des neunzigsten Geburtstags entwickelt hat, indem wir den Butler James bei seinem ersten Geburtstagsdinner bei Miss Sophie begleiten. Es ist ihr fûnfzigster Geburtstag und noch leben alle von Miss Sophies engsten Freunden. Die Sitzfolge ist altbekannt, ebenso das Menû und auch sonst gibt es nichts, was einer weiteren Erklârung bedarf. Somit verlasse ich Sie an dieser Stelle und wûnsche Ihnen viel SpaÙ bei diesem ebenso ungewôhnlichen Dinner fûr fûnf.*

JAMES WENT OVER everything again. The food was prepared, the dinner table was arranged perfectly ... yes, everything was fine. He had checked the setting thrice, the flowers were exactly as Miss Sophie had specified and the menu was in good hands with the cook. He sighed and straightened his jacket. Miss Sophie's birthday dinner would be perfect, no matter what Mary the maid said. She stood near the other end of the table and crumpled her apron in her hands. James frowned at her and she hastily smoothed out the creases.

The rest of the staff had the day off. Miss Sophie insisted. It was her birthday present to the staff, she had said, who deserved the extra day off. James had only been working for her for almost two months and she was by far the nicest lady he had ever worked for. She was generous, kind, attentive and beautiful. James was sure he wanted to work for her the rest of his life and more than anything he wanted Miss

Sophie to have the perfect birthday. She deserved it. Therefore he had organised everything until it was just right. Really, the only thing that interfered with the solemn atmosphere was Mary's fretting.

The doorbell rang and James went to open the door. The man standing in front of it was a portly gentleman with ruddy cheeks and enormous whiskers. His coat was ... James really didn't know what to think about the monstrosity that once roamed the savannahs in the tropics. Instead he simply put on the coat rack and pretended it was just a normal coat. The man was followed by a harried footman who carried a heavy package and who followed suit when James led the gentleman into the parlour, where aperitifs were served.

"Sir Toby, I presume?" James asked carefully, his eyes subtly following the footman.

Sir Toby nodded and smiled amiably, at everything and nothing in particular.

Miss Sophie beamed when she saw her friend and almost vanished in the crushing hug that followed. James couldn't think of anything but a glass of martini to bribe Sir Toby into letting go of her. He accepted keenly and emptied the glass almost immediately.

"Oh my dear Sir Toby, what have you done now?" Miss Sophie cried when she laid eyes upon the package in the footman's arms. The enthusiastic tone in her voice belied the chiding words she had just spoken.

"Do open it, my dear, do open it."

Miss Sophie did – and squealed. "Oh, you shouldn't have."

"Nonsense!"

They carried on in this manner, but James stopped paying attention. He was aghast at what Sir Toby had brought with him. Miss Sophie's hands kept stroking the pelt of a tiger. It was big, gaudy and the skull was still intact, so that it looked half-alive, in the grotesque ways of the cubists. It was hate on first sight for James.

"James, don't you think this would look marvellous in the dining room?" Miss Sophie asked.

James cocked his head. No, he did not. Not at all, but he settled for a tight-lipped frown instead. "I'm not sure, Miss Sophie."

"Oh, it absolutely will! Bring it over there! Now!" Sir Toby ordered, and the footman obeyed after a moment's hesitation. James was spared having to help him, since the doorbell rang again.

Admiral von Schneider and Mister Pommeroy arrived together. An odd pair, these two, James thought. He couldn't remember ever seeing a more unlikely pair of friends. The admiral was tall and impeccably groomed, as sober as they come and all in all a very serious person. Pommeroy, on the other hand, was small, cheerful and portly. He kept clapping everyone's arms and backs (even those of Miss Sophie, to James' horror) and stood closer to the admiral than could be comfortable, but the austere gentleman barely frowned.

Mister Winterbottom – her very special friend, as Miss Sophie had explained – arrived shortly afterwards and didn't pay attention to James after he eyed him up at the door and obviously came to the conclusion that he didn't like him. Instead he focussed all his attention on Miss Sophie, who was clearly flattered by all the compliments. The dislike was mutual. Winterbottom's behaviour towards Miss Sophie was in no way that of a gentleman.

Shortly afterwards, James led the guests into the dining room. Their happy chatting prevented them from noticing Mary's looks. A well-timed glare by James only made it worse. What was it with that girl?

Everything went fine at first. The five friends were ecstatic to see each other again. And James was too busy serving the soup and keeping everyone's glasses full to notice most of the little touches and whispers between Mister Winterbottom and Miss Sophie. He did however notice that Sir Toby's glass became empty almost as soon as it was filled again.

By the time they reached the third course, everyone was at least comfortably drunk. Except for James and the poor, fussing Mary, that is.

"Sophie – to you – may you have many more years and many more delicious wines," Sir Toby slurred between two gulps. By now his voice was positively booming through the room and Mary flinched. James himself could not suppress a wince. James finally gave in and sent Mary out of the room with the empty plates, lest she should accidentally empty a wine bottle in someone's lap.

The other guests did not notice her hurried departure or the raucous quality of Sir Toby's voice, least of all Mister Winterbottom, who kept twirling a lock of Miss Sophie's hair around his finger. Sir Toby gestured for a refill and James obliged reluctantly. Another bottle of champagne was empty.

He went around the table to fetch another one just in time to pass Admiral von Schneider during his

customary toast – a hearty “Skål” and a clicking of his heels. Only this time he somehow managed to hit one of the chair legs with his foot and cursed loudly.

Miss Sophie and Mister Pommeroy politely suppressed their smiles, Sir Toby was evidently intent on finishing the course before everyone else had started, while Mister Winterbottom launched another one of his droning speeches that praised each and every aspect of Miss Sophie, from her generosity and her good looks to things that even the most scandalous poets would deem inappropriate for company.

When James turned around to fetch the fourth and last course, he rolled his eyes. He wished he could roll his shoulders too; they were far too tense for comfort. The small beads of sweat running down his shirt did not help either. At least, he told himself, it would be over soon. How much worse could it get?

He returned with the fruit plates and was greeted by the sight of Mister Pommeroy’s foot caressing the calves of Admiral von Schneider’s legs. Neither man seemed to think much about what they were doing and who might be witness to it. Mister Pommeroy just smiled wickedly at the Admiral, who at least had the decency to look slightly aroused. But maybe it was just the wine bringing a bit of colour to his cheeks.

James was so mesmerized by this horrifying picture that he completely forgot to watch out for the tiger. The beast was not best pleased and avenged itself by lying on the floor, mouth silently roaring, just when a dazed James couldn’t stop his feet in time, since his head was still busy with thoughts of Sodom. He dimly felt how one of his feet became tangled in the tiger’s mouth, the other didn’t know how to react, he struggled for control and footing, but all was lost – he fell on the floor, his hands stopping his fall on the tiger skin.

A loud clanging reminded him of bigger problems than his fall. The plates were out of his hands. He couldn’t see them on the floor, but then he raised his head and saw: Miss Sophie, with a pear in her carefully groomed hair. Even Mister Winterbottom was speechless. The plates had scattered on the table and the guests were decorated with apples and berries, but none were decorated in so striking a manner as Miss Sophie, with a pear in her hair. James couldn’t remember ever having been this embarrassed and ashamed in his whole life. It was a disaster, he was going to hand in his notice immediately, he –

Miss Sophie laughed. Her guests remained dumbstruck for a moment, but then followed her lead, with the exception of Sir Toby, who hadn’t quite grasped what had happened yet and blinked at the

people around him. Miss Sophie was still softly laughing as she carefully picked the pear out of her hair and put it on her plate.

“Well,” she said good-naturedly, “I think this cuts dinner short a bit. I hope you don’t mind. I think we shall retire then.”

The men nodded in unison. James watched detachedly as Admiral von Schneider took Mister Pomme-roy’s arm as if he was a lady and the two disappeared upstairs while fondling each other. Mister Winterbottom, on the other hand, had Sophie on his arm and looked at her as if she was perfection itself. With one last ironic smirk at James he ushered Miss Sophie to follow him. James couldn’t quite bring himself to care. His cheeks felt as if they were on fire. This must be the worst night of his life, he thought.

“Oh, James,” Miss Sophie said while she was being led upstairs. “Do yourself a favour and drink on my health, will you? You look a bit out of sorts.” That said, she disappeared with a very satisfied Mister Winterbottom.

On trembling legs James grabbed the nearest bottle (port) and sank down on the floor. Very unambiguous laughter rang down from upstairs. He shuddered and really didn’t want to think about it. Sir Toby snored with his head buried in squashed grapes. The tiger mocked him with his empty eyes. “Oh sod it,” James cursed before he emptied the bottle as fast as he could.

*Fin*