The Dinner Party
by Mona Gardner

The country is India. A colonial official and his wife are giving a large dinner party. They are seated with their guests – army officers and government attaches and their wives, and a visiting American naturalist – in their spacious dining room, which has a bare marble floor, open rafters, and wide glass doors opening on to a veranda. A spirited discussion springs up between a young girl who insists that women have outgrown the jumping-on-a-chair-at-the-sight-of-a-mouse era and a colonel who says that they haven’t.

“A woman’s unfailing reaction in any crisis,” the colonel says, “is to scream. And while a man may feel like it, he has that ounce more of nerve control than a woman has. And that last ounce is what counts.”

The American does not join in the argument but watches the other guests. As he looks, he sees a strange expression come over the face of the hostess. She is staring straight ahead, her muscles contracting slightly. With a slight gesture she summons the servant standing behind her chair and whispers to him. The servant’s eyes widen, and he quickly leaves the room.

Of the guests, none except the American notices this or sees the servant place a bowl of milk on the veranda just outside the open doors.

The American comes to with a start. In India, milk in a bowl means only one thing – bait for a snake. He realizes there must be a cobra in the room. He looks up at the rafters – the likeliest place – but they are bare. Three corners of the room are empty, and in the fourth the servants are waiting to serve the next course. There is only one place left – under the table.

His first impulse is to jump back and warn the others, but he knows the commotion would frighten the cobra into striking. He speaks quickly, the tone of his voice so arresting that it sobers everyone.

“I want to know just what control everyone at this table has. I will count three hundred – that’s five minutes – and not one of you is to move a muscle. Those who move will forfeit fifty rupees. Ready!”

The twenty people sit like stone images while he counts. He is saying “...two hundred and eighty...” when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees the cobra emerge and make for the bowl of milk. Screams ring out as he jumps to slam the veranda doors safely shut.

“You were right, Colonel!” the host exclaims. “A man has just shown us an example of perfect control.”

“Just a minute,” the American says, turning to his hostess. “Mrs. Wynnes, how did you know that cobra was in the room?”

A faint smile lights up the woman’s face as she replies: “Because it was crawling across my foot.”
**Telling About The Story.** Complete each of the following statements by putting an x in the box next to the correct answer. Each statement tells something about the story.

1. Mrs. Wynnes knew that a cobra was in the room because she –
   - [ ] saw it in the rafters
   - [ ] noticed it crawl under the table
   - [ ] felt it on her foot

2. The American didn’t warn the guests about the cobra because he–
   - [ ] was too frightened to say anything
   - [ ] wasn’t sure that a cobra was actually in the room
   - [ ] feared that any noise or movement would cause the cobra to strike

3. The colonel believed that, in a crisis, a woman would –
   - [ ] always panic
   - [ ] remain quite calm
   - [ ] show more control than a man

4. The cobra came out because it was–
   - [ ] frightened by the guests
   - [ ] attracted by the milk
   - [ ] awakened by the sound of the American counting

**New Vocabulary Words.** Answer the following vocabulary questions by putting an x in the box next to the correct response.

1. The large dinner party took place in a spacious dining room. What is the meaning of the word *spacious*?
   - [ ] Tiny or small
   - [ ] great or vast
   - [ ] shabby or run-down
   - [ ] fashionable

2. The American’s first impulse was to warn the others. Which of the following best defines the word *impulse*?
   - [ ] Attempt or try
   - [ ] information or knowledge
   - [ ] instinct or urge

3. Anyone who moved would forfeit fifty rupees. The word *forfeit* means–
   - [ ] surrender
   - [ ] earn
   - [ ] borrow
   - [ ] display

At the count of 280, the American saw the cobra emerge. Which phrase best defines the word *emerge*?

   - [ ] suddenly strike
   - [ ] come into view
   - [ ] slip slowly away
   - [ ] blend into its surroundings

**Identifying Story Elements.** Each of the following questions tests your understanding of story elements. Put an x in the box next to each correct answer.

1. What happened last in the *plot* of the story?
   - [ ] A young girl argued with a colonel.
   - [ ] The cobra moved toward the veranda doors.
   - [ ] The American began to count to three hundred.

2. Which sentence best *characterizes* Mrs. Wynnes?
   - [ ] She talked a lot but never listened.
   - [ ] She was calm and courageous.
   - [ ] She was easily frightened.
   - [ ] She was a poor hostess.

3. “The Dinner Party” is *set* in–
   - [ ] England
   - [ ] India
   - [ ] the United States
   - [ ] Ireland

4. Which sentence best expresses the *theme* of the story?
   - [ ] Men are more courageous than women
   - [ ] Women are calmer than men
   - [ ] Your gender has no impact on how courageous you are.
Thinking About The Story. Each of the following questions requires you to think critically about the selection. Put an x in the box next to the correct answer.

1. In “The Dinner Party,” a young girl and a colonel have a difference of opinion. The conclusion of the story suggests that – □ the colonel was right □ the young girl was right □ that both of them were wrong

2. Probably, a “strange expression” came over the face of the hostess because she – □ saw the cobra in the corner of the room □ was unhappy that two of her guests were arguing □ realized there was a cobra under the table

3. We may infer that the American decided to count to three hundred because he – □ wanted to find out which guest had the most control □ thought it would make an amusing party game □ realized it might take five minutes for the cobra to come out

4. Which statement is true of both the American and Mrs. Wynnes? □ They were guests at a dinner party □ They were attacked by a cobra □ They were quick thinking

• Suppose the American had said nothing at all to the guests. How do you think the story would have ended?

• In the story, a colonel and a young girl have a difference of opinion. With whom do you think the author agrees? Explain your position.

• What do you think the young girl might have said to the colonel after it was revealed that the cobra had been crawling across Mrs. Wynnes’ foot? What might the colonel have responded?