

FOURTEEN

Alice Gerstenberg

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CHARACTERS

MRS. HORACE PRINGLE: A woman of fashion.

ELAINE: Her debutante daughter.

DUNHAM: The butler or maid.

[SCENE: The dining-room of a New York residence. A long table running from left to right, with a chair at each end and six chairs on each side, is set elaborately for fourteen. DUNHAM, the butler, is hovering over the table to give it a few finishing touches as MRS. PRINGLE comes in. She is a woman of fashion, handsome, and wears a very lovely evening gown. She is rather excitable in temperament but withal capable and executive, vivacious and humorously charming. She enters in haste carrying a corsage bouquet of flowers and the empty box of paper from which she has unwrapped them.]

MRS. PRINGLE: Dunham, I've just had word from Mr. Harper that he was called away to the bedside of a friend who is very ill. He sent me these flowers – it's a good thing he did. I don't approve of young men refusing dinner invitations at the very last minute.

DUNHAM: [Relieving her.] I'll take the box and paper, Mrs. Pringle.

MRS. PRINGLE: [Looking at the table anxiously and then at her watch.] It's too bad – after you've set it all so beautifully – and it's getting so late – some one might be coming any moment. How's cook?

DUNHAM: Cook's in a temper, as always, madam.

MRS. PRINGLE: I'm glad to hear it. She's like an actress – the better the temper, the better the performance. As long as she serves us a good dinner I don't care how much she swears. The rest of you can just keep out of her way. Where's Gustave?

DUNHAM: I'm sorry to have to say it, madam, but there's such an awful blizzard out he's sweeping off the sidewalk.

MRS. PRINGLE: Oh! Dear me, yes! I should have ordered an awning! But who expected a storm like this.

[She glances out of the window. ELAINE, a young debutante in evening gown comes running in with a bunch of place-cards.]

ELAINE: Here are the place-cards, mother, and the diagram. Shall I put them around?

MRS. PRINGLE: Yes, dear. Elaine, I'm going up to look after your father. He's so helpless about his ties. [She starts to leave the room.] Remove one plate, Dunham.

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DUNHAM: Remove one plate, madam? Oh! Madam! It is a certainty! You wouldn't sit down with thirteen.

MRS. PRINGLE: [Drawing back.] Thirteen! Why, you're right thirteen! We can never sit down with thirteen. That's all due to Mr. Harper's negligence. Sick friend, nothing! He's just one of those careless men who never answer their invitations in time. His flowers, indeed, to make me forgive him now look at the trouble he's put me to thirteen! I wonder whom I could get to come in the last minute. Quick Elaine help me think.

[She rushes to the telephone and looks madly through her list of acquaintances.]

ELAINE: There's always Uncle George.

MRS. PRINGLE: He never opens his head!

DUNHAM: Mr. Morgan, madam, he always tells a joke or two.

MRS. PRINGLE: Why, yes, Dunham that's clever of you! Hello Central Lakeview 5971 at once, please Elaine dear, your hair's much too tight pull it out pull it out come here. [In telephone.] Mr. Morgan's Well, this is Mrs. Pringle speaking from across the street. Yes. When Mr. Morgan comes in, please tell him to call me up right away. I want him to dine with us in about ten minutes you expect him? [She pulls ELAIN'S hair out to make it look fluffier. ELAINE makes faces of pain, but her mother pays no attention.] Have him call me right away. [She hands up the receiver.] Now if he shouldn't get it then what'll I do?

ELAINE: Well, mother, I don't have to be at the table. It's your party, anyway. Everybody's married and older than I am.

MRS. PRINGLE: [Pointing to the table diagram in ELAIN'S hand.] Didn't I put you next to Oliver Farnsworth? Millions! He's worth millions!

ELAINE: Well, he won't be giving me any.

MRS. PRINGLE: Can't he marry you? Aren't you going to try to make a good match for yourself? I fling every eligible man I can at your head. Can't you finish the rest yourself?

ELAINE: It's no use, mother, your trying to marry me off to anyone as important as he is. He frightens me to death. I lose my tongue. I'm as afraid of him as I'd be afraid of the Prince of Wales!

MRS. PRINGLE: The Prince of Wales! Oh! What wouldn't I give to have the Prince of Wales in my house! New York has lost its heart to him. I was just telling Mr. Farnsworth yesterday that I'd give anything to have the Prince here. I would establish my social position for life! And I've such a reputation for being a wonderful hostess. [The telephone rings.] Dear me! the phone Hello Mrs. Sedgwick Yes this is Mrs. Pringle What? No Oh! Caught in a snow drift can't get another car? [She puts her hand over the telephone and speaks delightedly to ELAINE.] Good! The widow can't come that leaves us twelve remove two plates, Dunham. [DUNHAM removes two plates. and ELAINE changes the table-cards. MRS. PRINGLE continues into the telephone.] Oh! That's a shame! I'm heartbroken. Oh! My dear, how can we get along without you! But have you really tried? Oh, I'm reduced to tears. Good-bye, dear. [She hangs up the receiver, and takes it down again.] Well, I'm glad she dropped out Central give me Lakeview 5971 Dunham, with two less, you can save two cocktails and at least four glasses of champagne. [Into the telephone.] Has Mr. Morgan come in yet? Well, don't give him the message I telephoned before about crossing the street to Mrs. Pringle's for dinner. It's too late you understand? [She hangs up the receiver.] Well, anyway, I've invited Clem, returned my indebtedness and saved my champagne besides

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DUNHAM: The liquor is getting low, madam what with prohibition and entertaining so much

ELAINE: *[In dismay.]* But, mother, if you only have twelve people, Father can't sit at the head of the table.

MRS. PRINGLE: But he *has* to sit at the head. It looks too undignified when the man of the house is pused to the side

ELAINE: There's no other way. There must be a woman at each end

MRS. PRINGLE: *[Distraught.]* How absurd! I always forget. Of course twelve is an impossible number *[She goes around the table looking at the place cards.]* I don't want to put any of these women at the head there's Mrs. Darby such a cat I wouldn't give her the honor and Mrs. *[The telephone rings.]* Answer it, Dunham.

DUNHAM: Hello Mrs. Pringle's residence a message? Yes, sir What, sir? Mr. Darby the doctor says your baby has the chicken-pox

MRS. PRINGLE: Chicken-pox! Elaine!

ELAINE: Mother!

DUNHAM: Yes, sir. *[He hangs up the receiver.]* Mr. Darby sends his apologies but owing to the transmutability of the disease, Mr. and Mrs. Darby feel obliged to regret and also their house-guests, Mr. and Mrs. Fleetwood

MRS. PRINGLE: That's four out.

ELAINE: Then you're only eight! Quick, the plates, Dunham

[She begins to remove chairs and gathers up silver and plates feverishly. MRS. PRINGLE getting more and more distraught, helps. With so much unaccustomed help, DUNHAM gets confused and goes through many unnecessary motions; removes plates, breaks them, drops silver, aimlessly trying to hurry, his fingers all thumbs.]

MRS. PRINGLE: Don't we know someone to invite the last minute

ELAINE: The Hatwoods

MRS. PRINGLE: They don't serve drinks when they entertain I can't afford to invite them to drink mine

ELAINE: The Greens

MRS. PRINGLE: She's not interesting enough.

ELAINE: Mr. Conley

MRS. PRINGLE: He never makes a dinner call, even after all the times I have invited him.

ELAINE: Hester Longley

MRS. PRINGLE: *Not* at the same table with *you* and Oliver Farnsworth. She's far too pretty, too clever

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ELAINE: Where's our book? *[She runs her finger down the address book.]* The Toppers?

MRS. PRINGLE: The Toppers! Good Heavens, Elaine, six in the family.

ELAINE: That would get us back to fourteen; then father could sit at the *head* of the table.

MRS. PRINGLE: Well, try them. I'll rush and tell your father to hold up the drawing room *[Exit left.]*

ELAINE: *[At the telephone.]* Ridgeway 9325 This is Elaine Pringle What Tupper am I speaking to? Oh, Ella, hello! I hope you haven't finished your dinner We had a party arranged here and the last moment everybody's been dropping out the blizzard Can't you flock your family around the corner and eat with us? Mother and I thought we knew you well enough to call you like this at the seventh hour. You would? Oh! fine! *[To DUNHAM.]* Six more plates, Dunham. *[In the telephone.]* What? Oh well but *[She hesitates, stutters, looks distressed, muffles the telephone.]* Dunham, get Mother quick. *[In the telephone as DUNHAM hurries out of the room.]* Yes yes of course *[not enthusiastically]*, love it why certainly yes, my dear all right. *[She hangs up the receiver and puts her hand to her head with an ejaculation of dismay.]* Great Caesar, now what have I done?

MRS. PRINGLE: *[Rushes in followed by DUNHAM.]* What's the matter Elaine what is

ELAINE: Now I've done it! I've just done it but I couldn't get out of it I just couldn't you weren't here I always lose my head and bungle things

MRS. PRINGLE: But what don't keep us waiting like this what *is* it?

ELAINE: I invited Ella and the family and she accepted and then she said they had two house-guests and would it be all right and of course I said it would and now we're *sixteen!*

DUNHAM: *[In dismay.]* Sixteen! But, madam, the table's not that long!

MRS. PRINGLE: Elaine! That's just like you no tact no worldly wisdom if I'd been at the phone I'd have politely said that my table

ELAINE: But you weren't at the phone you ought to attend to such messages yourself you know I *always* lose my head

DUNHAM: But the dishes, madam and we only have *fourteen* squabs

ELAINE: I won't eat any

MRS. PRINGLE: But I must not be disgraced we'll have to make the best of it and insert another board *[DUNHAM goes out. MRS. PRINGLE and ELAINE hurriedly remove part of the cloth.]*

ELAINE: But mother, I needn't sit at the table.

MRS. PRINGLE: *[Pointing to the chair authoritatively.]* You're going to sit right next to Oliver Farnsworth! Now I don't wish to hear another word about it.

ELAINE: But can't we squeeze them in without all the work of adding another board? If I move the plates and chairs closer

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MRS. PRINGLE: Have you forgotten that Mr. Tupper weighs something like two hundred and fifty pounds? And Mrs. Conley has no waist line? It can't be done!

DUNHAM: [Entering with table board.] Cook is in a rage, madam she says she has only prepared for fourteen.

MRS. PRINGLE: I can't help it she'll have to prepare for sixteen. Tell her to open cans of soup and vegetables and

DUNHAM: But the ice-cream forms and the gelatine molds

ELAINE: I'll pretend I don't like them.

MRS. PRINGLE: And I'll pretend I'm on a diet

ELAINE: But I really wouldn't have to be at the *table*.

MRS. PRINGLE: Be still! [She starts as the telephone rings.] The telephone! [Her hand to her head.] Now what? Don't answer it! It's driving me mad [She goes herself as ELAINE and DUNHAM do not go.] Hello yes This is Mrs. Pringle Oh! yes Jessica! what! the blizzard your cold too dangerous! [She waves to DUNHAM not to put the board in the table. DUNHAM, ELAINE and MRS. PRINGLE are delighted and relieved but MRS. PRINGLE pretends otherwise over the telephone.] Oh! Jessica you poor dear yes, your husband's right, it would be foolhardy put on a mustard plaster hot toddy go to bed so sorry! [She hangs up the receiver.] There that's wonderful now we are just fourteen

ELAINE: But the cards are all wrong. Only six are coming who were invited originally. You'll have to make another diagram. How do you want them seated?

MRS. PRINGLE: Give it to me. [She remains at the telephone table where there is a pad and a pencil and makes a new diagram.]

ELAINE: Here are some fresh cards. [She tears up the old cards, then goes back to help DUNHAM, who is having a maddening time with the table.]

MRS. PRINGLE: What a mess! I spent hours over that diagram! So much depends upon having guests seated harmoniously! There's the front door-bell, Dunham I told Annie to answer it for you but go, peek into the drawing-room and tell me who it is [As DUNHAM goes out, the telephone rings. MRS. PRINGLE eyes it suspiciously.] You murderous instrument! What have you to say? Now what? Hello! Who! Mr. Farnsworth! Mr. Oliver Farnsworth? No you're his secretary? He's what? Instructed you to make his excuses! He had to leave for Boston at once on very important business Oh! [She hangs up the receiver without completing the conversation and hits the telephone in a temper, then rises and paces back and forth in a rage.] How dare he! How dare he! The last moment like this! No regard for a hostess's feelings! No regard for the efforts she goes to to provide an evening's enjoyment! And such a good dinner I planned and he promised he would come business! I don't believe it! He didn't want to exert himself was afraid of freezing in the blizzard as if he didn't have half a dozen limousines to carry him to the door selfishness downright rudeness and worth millions just a match for you, Elaine and I was bound you should meet him and sit next to him at the table [she tears up his card], and now I don't know when I can give you a chance like that again! I'm perfectly furious I'll never speak to him again! I won't be treated that way

ELAINE: [Timidly.] Perhaps he really did have business and was called away

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MRS. PRINGLE: [Not hearing her.] And I one of the most important hostesses in this city people clamoring to receive my invitations all my affairs are a success. I insist that they shall be I can't bear a failure I won't have a failure he was my most important guest he's such a man's man so important financially every other man considers it an honor to meet him and now not coming! I'm furious! Furious! it's all this damnable blizzard!

ELAINE: Now I *will* have to stay away from the table. His not coming makes us thirteen again.

MRS. PRINGLE: [In a temper.] Go to bed go up to the nursery! I'll send you milk and crackers!

ELAINE: But, mother, it's not *my* fault that he had business out of town.

MRS. PRINGLE: Yes, it is! If you'd perk up a bit and not be so timid and make something of yourself, he would hear about your attractions from other men and be curious to meet you himself Oh! What a family I have! No one to help me with my ambitions! Go to bed! I certainly won't sit down to thirteen go to bed get out of my sight

[DUNHAM enters from left.]

DUNHAM: It was Mr. Morgan, madam

MRS. PRINGLE: Mr. Morgan! But I telephoned his maid to tell him *not* to come.

DUNHAM: He couldn't have received the second message, madam, for I heard him explaining to Mr. Pringle how happy he was to receive your telephone invitation.

ELAINE: That makes you thirteen again unless you don't want me to go to bed

MRS. PRINGLE: Of course I don't want you to go to bed. We're back to where we started fourteen, Dunham.

DUNHAM: I'll get the cocktails ready, madam. Annie told me there were several motors making their way through the snow. It's late now and cook's swearing about the dinner getting too dry [The telephone rings.
ELAINE jumps.]

ELAINE: I won't answer it.

MRS. PRINGLE: I should say not hello what is it? [Sharply.] Yes yes? Mrs. Tupper! Yes! Mrs. Tupper! But now you *must* come we're prepared for you yes for eight of you Your daughter told my daughter about your house-guests and we are delighted to have them but now we're *set* for you but every plate is set but your daughter was quite right it wasn't an imposition at all but you *must* come now of course my daughter had authority to invite the guests of Oh eight isn't at all a big number there is room the table is all set but I beg of you but my dear, you are *not* imposing Oh! but how foolish of you to take that stand! Why my dear, my dear [She hangs up the receiver.] Now, what do you think of that? Mrs. Tupper is perfectly furious at Ella for telling you about the house-guests, and says Ella has no tact; that nothing would induce her to bring eight when we invited six so she's leaving Ella and Henry at home only six are coming. Remove two plates, Dunham we're twelve after all

ELAINE: But if you leave it twelve, father *can't* sit at the *end*

MRS. PRINGLE: [Exhausted, harassed, angry, tempestuous.] I shall go mad! I'll never entertain again never never people ought to know whether they're coming or not but they accept and regret and regret

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and accept they drive me wild. *[DUNHAM goes out.]* This is my last dinner party *my very last* a fiasco an utter fiasco! A haphazard crowd hurried together when I had planned everything so beautifully now how shall I seat them how shall I seat them? If I put Mr. Tupper here and Mrs. Conley there then Mrs. Tupper has to sit next to her husband and if I want Mr. Morgan there Oh! It's impossible I might as well put their names in a hat and draw them out at random never again! I'm through! Through with society with parties with friends I wipe my slate clean they'll miss my entertainments they'll wish they had been more considerate after this, I'm going to live for myself! I'm going to be selfish and hard and unsociable and drink my liquor myself instead of offering it gratis to the whole town! I'm *through* *Through* with men like Oliver Farnsworth! I don't care how rich they are! How influential they are how important they are! They're nothing without courtesy and consideration business off on train nonsense didn't want to come didn't want to meet a sweet, pretty girl didn't want to marry her well, he's not good enough for you! don't you marry him! Don't you dare marry him! I won't let you marry him! Do you hear? If you tried to elope or anything like that, I'd break it off yes, I would *Oliver Farnsworth* will never get recognition from me! He is beneath my notice! I hate Oliver Farnsworth!

[DUNHAM enters with a note on a silver plate.]

DUNHAM: A note from Mr. Farnsworth, madam

MRS. PRINGLE: A note from Mr. Farnsworth! *[She takes and opens it.]*

DUNHAM: Yes, madam, there are two strange gentlemen in the lower hall. They presented this letter. He said he was the secretary. All the other guests are upstairs in the drawing-room, madam, I counted twelve in all, including you and Mr. Pringle and Miss Elaine. But the two gentlemen downstairs, madam, are waiting for your answer the one gentlemen's face looked very familiar, madam, but I just can't place him although I'm sure I've seen his face somewhere

MRS. PRINGLE: *[She has been reading the note and is almost fainting with surprise and joy.] Seen his face somewhere* Oh, my goodness! Elaine It's the Prince of Wales!

DUNHAM: The secretary said you cut off the telephone or central disconnected you. He was about to tell you that Mr. Farnsworth knew that the blizzard had prevented His Highness from keeping an engagement way up town

MRS. PRINGLE: The Prince of Wales sitting in my lower hall waiting for *me* to ask him to dinner

ELAINE: Then we'll be thirteen again

DUNHAM: There's the secretary, Miss, he is his bodyguard

MRS. PRINGLE: *[Rising to the occasion.]* Certainly, the secretary, Elaine. We shall be fourteen at dinner Serve the cocktails, Dunham the guests may sit anywhere they choose. I shall bring the Prince in with *me!*

ELAINE: *[Following.]* But mother, wasn't it nice of Oliver Farnsworth to send a Prince in his place?

MRS. PRINGLE: Didn't I always say that Oliver Farnsworth was the most considerate of men?

ELAINE: I think I shall *like* Mr. Farnsworth.

MRS. PRINGLE: Silly child! It is too late now to like Mr. Farnsworth. It's time now to like the Prince. *[Starting out.]* I always manage somehow to be the most successful of hostesses! Thank God for the blizzard!

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CURTAIN