Luncheon Club

Grace Ferguson

They had changed the hats in the display window of the millinery store. There was one hat in front with a bright red feather; it caught Mr. Phillips' eye as he passed the window on the way into the restaurant. "That," thought Mr. Phillips, "would be a nice hat for a smart girl-about-town. But the little brown one at the back with the green thingamabobs on it—he thought he'd probably like the girl that bought that one better.

He rather liked to look at the hats in the window there, just outside his favorite restaurant; it was about as close as he ever got to women. Of course there was Mrs. McKnight, the boss's wife, who came in about twice a week, fur-laden and spiced with perfume. He felt she was an enemy. She spent too much money. The boss couldn't afford it. Anyway, the cold gleam of her light blue eyes through her rimless glasses dismayed him. He didn't like her much, not nearly so much as he did his landlady, though she was fat and forty or perhaps even fifty, for all Mr. Phillips knew. She was Irish and had too many kids, but she was soft-voiced and had a gentle, kindly way about her that quite won everybody's heart.

He opened the door and walked into the restaurant. "Good morning," said he to Edward, the head waiter. He wondered about this man, poised and self confident in bearing, subservient to the customers; and yet, through it all, there was a shyness and sensitivity that made him akin to Mr. Phillips. Every day Mr. Phillips said "Good morning" to him, and he replied "Good morning, sir," with mutual liking and respect.

Now the question: should he sit by the window where he could watch the passerby, or over by the canary-that-could-whistle-like-a-cardinal? But Edward was leading him to the back by the goldfish. Ah yes, it was Thursday, the day for the luncheon club. Edward knew he liked the luncheon club. That was part of their mutual understanding. Edward liked the luncheon club, too. There were about eight of them, and they had a very large table all to themselves on Thursdays. True, there were other groups that had their days for this table, but these other groups Mr. Phillips did not seek out; rather, he avoided them.

What there was about them that made them different Mr. Phillips did not know. Perhaps it was because they were the brown-hat-with-green-thingamabobs kind. Five of them were women, and the men didn't always come. They were all very anxious to "get on." Sometimes a certain topic for the day's discussion would be chosen and held to. Other times they would lapse into gossip, and Mr. Phillips enjoyed these times even better than the others. The sound of their voices carried peculiarly well to the little corner table to which Edward had taken him. He could usually hear everything that was said, except, of course, when Miss Whimpler or Miss Filmore had the seat on his right, the farthest away; then he couldn't hear what they said, for they both talked too low. He didn't hold it against Miss Filmore so much, because she very seldom said anything; and that way he didn't miss much.

He wanted still to be there when they came, so he dallied over the menu. Mrs. Dowling had promised to bring that suit she'd knitted, and he was curious to know if it was as ill fitting as all the other things that Mrs. Dowling had made herself, and he didn't want to miss seeing it. And Mr. Lowcomb would be back from that trip to Cleveland. Mr. Lowcomb thought himself quite an orator, and so was in the habit of using the slow delivery of the after dinner
speaker. But then, Mr. Phillips had never been to Cleveland.

However, the clock was still going about its business, and he had to be back to work at one, so Mr. Phillips ordered his lunch. The order went to the kitchen, was taken through the restaurant mill, and came back a steaming vegetable plate with two hard rolls and butter. Still no one of the eight appeared, and Mr. Phillips reluctantly began.

He had succeeded in tearing one roll apart with no major casualties, when a familiar figure caught his eye. Miss Filmore was looking at the hats, thinking, no doubt, that she would like to buy the one with the red feather. But Mr. Phillips knew very well she'd never buy a hat with a red feather. She was loitering out there so she wouldn't be first at the table. The Miss Filmores don't like to be first.

He wished some one of the seven would come; but no one came, and Miss Filmore entered. He hadn't looked at her again, but he knew she'd entered by the way the head waiter was industriously counting silver. Edward, for once, felt himself inadequate and ignored the poor creature hesitating there at the door. Then he remembered pressing business in the kitchen and deserted completely. This was unlike the head waiter. Mr. Phillips prayed for them. His prayers were not answered, and, though he ate slowly, Mr. Phillips finished his vegetable plate. Not quite knowing why, he called Edward over to his table. Perhaps to give the timid little woman a chance to order.

"Edward," he said in a rather loud voice, "I'm rather hungry, today. Suppose you bring me some of the half-butter and a roll."

In what a confident way he'd said that! He glowed with pride. She must have heard it. He'd be late sure.

When Edward came back she called him over and ordered her meal. Eating alone at that huge table! It was unbearable. He must do something about it. A great resolve formed in the mind of J. Reynolds Phillips. He would take his coffee with her. The idea terrified him, so he didn't stop to ponder over how he would do it. Miss Fillmore was nibbling hurriedly over her lunch.

"Ah, . . . Pardon me," said Mr. Phillips and wished he were dead, "I . . . ah, . . . Do you mind if I join your luncheon club for today?" Miss Filmore didn't mind; Miss Filmore looked at him with a great deal of astonishment, but not without a degree of pleasure. Mr. Phillips chuckled. He had a very amiable and friendly chuckle, and he knew it. It didn't quite go with his rather lean and drab exterior but it certainly added life to his pale personality. Mr. Phillips was pleased with himself, for he had managed the introductory remarks far better than he had expected.

"My name," he continued, "is J. Reynolds Phillips. That is, my first
name is Jeremiah, but I haven't used it since my mother died. I never cared much for Bible names—too antiquated."

Miss Filmore expressed agreement.

"I lunch here quite a bit," he went on; (every day in the world except Sundays). "And I generally see you and your friends here on Thursdays. You always seem to be having such a gay time; I've always envied you. Eating alone isn't much fun."

"No," said Miss Filmore, who knew it only too well.

He went on to elaborate, and he found that the part about "envying" their "merry group" went over big with Miss Filmore. She'd always liked to think of it like that.

So they lingered over their coffee, and he found himself telling a wide-eyed and impressed Miss Filmore what he said to Johnny Watson the time Johnny was impudent. The admiration-for-superior-strength in Miss Filmore's eyes egged him on to tell about the time he quit his job rather than do an un gallant act, omitting, however, to relate his subsequent change of mind and repossession of his job.

She was telling him about the radio in the room next to hers when he caught Edward's eye—Edward's eye, full of immense approval. But behind Edward was the big clock, telling him he was very late for work.

"Uh," said Mr. Phillips, "dear me, it's late."

"So it is," observed Miss Filmore, with the air of one who did not have to be anywhere in particular at one o'clock.

"Well," he rose, "I've enjoyed this little visit so much." And suddenly his glib manner left him. What to say? How to put it?

"Uh," said J. Reynolds Phillips, "may I call?"

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**East Street**

East Street
Stragglers out beyond the railroad.
For the railroad
Cuts the town in two.
North and South.

On the North
There's sunlight
And flowers
And fine old art
And music
And gay laughter
And lovely ladies
With satin skins and red lips
And sparkling devils in their eyes.
There are suave men
With manicured nails,
Who stride through life
With the flik of a cane,
A twisted grin
And a flippant word.
Broad-shouldered
Powerful,
Challenging,
Triumphant.

But East Street
Has
Drunken shanties
That lean against each other
Like the bleary-eyed loafers
Around the corner drug-store.
The air
Smells thick; dirty yellow.
East Street
Has
Stale whiskey
And sullen hunger
And brawling bums
And thin defiant prostitutes
Around the corner drug-store.
The air
Smells thick; dirty yellow.
East Street
Has
Stale whiskey
And sullen hunger
And brawling bums
And thin defiant prostitutes
Crawling around mud-holes.
Where grass once grew . . .

Isn't it splendid that the railroad
Splits the town so nicely . . .
What would the North Side do
Without
East Street?

—LOUISE DAUNER.