THE LUNCHEON
William Somerset Maugham

I caught sight of her at the play and in answer to her beckoning I went over during the interval and sat down beside her. It was long since I had last seen her and if someone had not mentioned her name I do not think I would have recognized her. She addressed me brightly.

"Well, it's many years since we first met. How time flies! We are not getting any younger. Do you remember the first time I saw you? You asked me to luncheon."

Did I remember?

It was twenty years ago and I was living in Paris. I had a tiny apartment in the Latin Quarter and I was earning barely enough money to keep body and soul together. She had read a book of mine and had written to me about it. I answered, thanking her, and presently I received from her another letter saying that she was passing through Paris and would like to have a chat with me; but her time was limited and the only free moment she had was on the following Thursday. She asked me if I would give her a little luncheon at Foyot's. Foyot's is a restaurant at which the French senators eat and it was so far beyond my means that I had never even thought of going there. But I was flattered and I was too young to say no to a woman. I had eighty francs to live on till the end of the month and a modest luncheon should not cost more than fifteen. If I cut out coffee for the next two weeks I could manage well enough.

I answered that I would meet her at Foyot's on Thursday at half past twelve.

She was not so young as I expected and in appearance imposing rather than attractive. She was in fact a woman of forty, and she gave me the impression of having more teeth, white and large and even, than were necessary for any practical purpose. She was talkative, but since she seemed inclined to talk about me I was prepared to be an attentive listener. I was startled when the menu was brought, for the prices were a great deal higher than I had expected. But she reassured me.

“I never eat anything for luncheon," she said.

"Oh, don't say that!" I answered generously.

"I never eat more than one thing. I think people eat too much nowadays. A little fish, perhaps. I wonder if they have any salmon."

Well, it was early in the year for salmon and it was not on the menu, but I asked the waiter if there was any. Yes, they had a beautiful salmon, it was the first they had had. I ordered it for my guest. The waiter asked her if she would have something while it was being cooked.

"No," she answered, "I never eat more than one thing. Unless you had a little caviar. I never mind caviar."

My heart sank a little. I knew I could not afford caviar, but I could not tell her that. I told the waiter by all means to bring caviar. For myself I chose the cheapest dish on the menu and that was a mutton chop.

"I think you're unwise to eat meat," she said. "I don't know how you can expect to work after eating heavy things like chops. I never overload my stomach."

Then came the question of drink.

"I never drink anything for luncheon," she said.

"Neither do I," I answered promptly.

"Except white wine," she went on as though I had not spoken. "These French white wines are so light. They are wonderful for the digestion."

"What would you like?" I asked her.

"My doctor won't let me drink anything but champagne." I think I turned a little pale. I ordered half a bottle. I mentioned casually that my doctor had absolutely forbidden me to drink champagne.

"What are you going to drink, then?"

"Water."

She ate the caviar and she ate the salmon. She talked gaily of art and literature and music. But I wondered what the bill would come to. When my mutton chop arrived she said:

"I see that you're in the habit of eating a heavy luncheon. I'm sure it's a mistake. Why don't you follow my example and just eat one thing? I'm sure you'd feel much better then."

"I am only going to eat one thing," I said, as the waiter came again with the menu. She waved him aside with a light gesture.

"No, no, I never eat anything for luncheon. Just a bite, I never want more than that. I can't eat anything more unless they had some of those giant asparagus. I should be sorry to leave Paris without having some of them."

My heart sank. I had seen them in the shops and I knew that they were horribly expensive. My mouth had often watered at the sight of them. "Madame wants to know if you have any of those giant asparagus," I asked the waiter.

I hoped he would say no. A happy smile spread over his broad face, and he assured me that they had some so large, so splendid, so tender, that it was a marvel.

"I'm not in the least hungry," my guest sighed, "but if you insist I don't mind having some asparagus."

I ordered them.

"Aren't you going to have any?"

"No, I never eat asparagus."

"I know there are people who don't like them."

We waited for the asparagus to be cooked. Panic seized me. It was not a question now how much money I should have left for the rest of the month, but whether I had enough to pay the bill. It would be terrible to find myself ten francs short and be obliged to borrow from my guest. I could not bring myself to do that. I knew exactly how much money I had and if the bill came to more I made up my mind that I would put my hand in my pocket and with a dramatic cry start up and say my money had been stolen. If she had not money enough to pay the bill then the only thing to do would be to leave my watch and say I would come back and pay later.

The asparagus appeared. They were enormous and appetizing. The smell of the melted butter tickled my nostrils. I watched the woman send them down her throat and in my polite way I talked on the condition of the drama in the Balkans. At last she finished.

"Coffee?" I said.

"Yes, just an ice-cream and coffee," she answered.

It was all the same to me now, so I ordered coffee for myself and an ice-cream and coffee for her.

"You know, there's one thing I thoroughly believe in," she said, as she ate the ice-cream. "One should always get up from a meal feeling one could eat a little more."

"Are you still hungry?" I asked faintly.

"Oh, no, I'm not hungry; you see, I don't eat luncheon. I have a cup of coffee in the morning and then dinner, but I never eat more than one thing for luncheon. I was speaking for you."

"Oh, I see!"

Then a terrible thing happened. While we were waiting for the coffee, the head waiter, with a smile on his false face, came up to us bearing a large basket full of huge peaches. Peaches were not in season then. Lord knew what they cost. I knew too — a little later, for my guest, going on with her conversation, absent-mindedly took one. "You see, you've filled your stomach with a lot of meat and you can't eat any more. But I've just had a snack and I shall enjoy a peach."

The bill came and when I paid it I found that I had only enough for a quite inadequate tip. Her eyes rested for a moment on the three francs I left for the waiter and I knew that she thought me mean. But when I walked out of the restaurant I had the whole month before me and not a penny in my pocket.

"Follow my example," she said as we shook hands, "and never eat more than one thing for luncheon."

"I'll do better than that," I answered. "I'll eat nothing for dinner tonight."

"Humorist!" she cried gaily, jumping into a cab. "You're quite a humorist!"

But I have had my revenge at last. Today she weighs twenty-one stone.'