

“The Luncheon” Jeffrey Archer

She waved at me across a crowded room at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. I waved back, realizing I knew the face but unable to place it. She squeezed past waiters and guests and had reached me before I had the chance to ask anyone who she was. I racked that section of my brain that is meant to store people, but it transmitted no reply. I realized I would have to resort to the old party trick of carefully worded questions until her answers jogged my memory.

“How *are* you, darling?” she cried, and threw her arms around me, an opening that didn’t help, since we were at a Literary Guild cocktail party, and anyone will throw their arms around you on such occasions, even the directors of the Book-of-the-Month Club. From her accent she was clearly American, and she looked to be approaching forty but thanks to the genius of modern make-up may even have overtaken it. She wore a long white cocktail dress and her blonde hair was done up in one of those buns that looks like a brioche. The overall effect made her appear somewhat like a chess queen. Not that the cottage loaf helped, because she might have had dark hair flowing to her shoulders when we last met. I do wish women would realize that when they change their hairstyle they often achieve exactly what they set out to do: look completely different to any unsuspecting male.

“I’m well, thank you,” I said to the white queen. “And you?” I inquired as my opening gambit.

“I’m just fine, darling,” she replied, taking a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

“And how’s the family,” I asked, not sure if she even had one.

“They’re all well,” she replied. No help there. “And how is Louise?” she inquired.

“Blooming,” I said. So she knew my wife. But then, not necessarily, I thought. Most American women are experts at remembering men’s wives. They have to be, when on the New York circuit they change so often it becomes a greater challenge than the *Times* crossword.

“Have you been to London lately?” I roared above the babble. A brave question, as she may never have been to Europe.

“Only once since we had lunch together.” She looked at me quizzically. “You don’t remember who I am, do you?” she asked as she devoured a cocktail sausage.

I smiled.

“Don’t be silly, Susan,” I said. “How could I ever forget?”

She smiled.

I confess that I remembered the white queen’s name in the nick of time. Although I still only had vague recollections of the lady, I certainly would never forget the lunch.

I had just had my first book published, and the critics on both sides of the Atlantic had been complimentary, even if the checks from my publishers were less so. My agent had told me on several occasions that I shouldn’t write if I wanted to make money. This created a dilemma, because I couldn’t see how to make money if I didn’t write.

It was around this time that the lady who was now facing me and chattering on, oblivious to my silence, telephoned from New York to heap lavish praise on my novel.

There is no writer who does enjoy receiving such calls, although I confess to having been less captivated by an eleven-year-old girl who called me collect from California to say she had found a spelling mistake on page 47 and warned that she would call again if she found another. However, this particular lady might have ended her transatlantic congratulations with nothing more than good-bye if she had not dropped her own name. It was one of those names that can, on the spur of the moment, always book a table at a chic restaurant or a seat at the opera, which mere mortals like myself would have found impossible to attain given a months notice. To be fair, it was her husband's name that had achieved the reputation, as one of the world's most distinguished film producers.

"When I'm next in London you must have lunch with me," came crackling down the phone.

"No," said I gallantly, "you must have lunch with *me*."

"How perfectly charming you English always are," she said.

I have often wondered how much American women get away with when they say those few words to an Englishman. Nevertheless, the wife of an Oscar-winning producer does not phone one everyday.

"I promise to call you when I'm next in London," she said.

And indeed she did, for almost six months to the day she telephoned again, this time from the Connaught Hotel, to declare how much she was looking forward to our meeting.

"Where would you like to have lunch?" I said, realizing a second too late, when she replied with the name of one of the most exclusive restaurants in town, that I should have made sure it was I who chose the venue. I was glad she couldn't see my forlorn face as she added airily, "Monday, one o'clock. Leave the booking to me—I'm known there."

On the day in question I donned my one respectable suit, a new shirt I had been saving for a special occasion since Christmas, and the only tie that looked as if it hadn't been previously used to hold up my trousers. I then strolled over to my bank and asked for statement of my current account. The teller handed me a long piece of paper unworthy of its amount. I studied the figure as one who has to make a major financial decision. The bottom stating in black lettering that I was in credit to the sum of thirty-seven pounds and sixty-three pence. I wrote out a check for thirty-seven pounds. I feel that the gentleman should always leave his account in credit, and I might add it was a belief my bank manager shared with me. I then walked up to Mayfair for my luncheon date.

As I entered the restaurant I noticed too many waiters and plush seats for my liking. You can't eat either, but you can be charged for them. At a corner table sat for two sat a woman who, although not young, was elegant. She wore a blouse of powder blue crepe-de-chine, and her blond hair was rolled away from her face in style that reminded me of the war years and had once again become fashionable. It was clearly my transatlantic admirer, and she greeted me in the same "I've known you all my life" as she was to do at the Literary Guild cocktail party years later. Although she had a drink in front of her, I didn't order an aperitif, explaining that I never drank before lunch—and I would have liked to add, "but as soon as your husband makes a film of my novel, I will."

She launched immediately into the latest Hollywood gossip, not so much dropping names as reciting them, while I ate my way through the potato chips from the bowl in front of me. A few minutes later a waiter materialized by the table and presented us with two large embossed leather menus, considerably better bound than my novel. The

place positively reeked of unnecessary expense. I opened the menu and studied the first chapter with horror; it was eminently put-downable. I had no idea that simple food obtained from Covent Garden could cost quite so much by merely being transported to Mayfair. I could have bought her the same dishes for a quarter of the price at my favorite bistro, a mere one hundred yards away, and to add to my discomfort I observed that it was one of those restaurants where the guest menu made no mention of the prices. I settled down to study the long list of French dishes, which only served to remind me that I hadn't eaten well for more than a month, a state of affairs that was about to be prolonged by a further day. I remembered my bank balance morosely reflected that I would probably have to wait until my agent sold the Icelandic rights of my novel before I could afford a square meal again.

"What would you like?" I said gallantly.

"I always enjoy a light lunch," she volunteered. I sighed with premature relief, only to find that "light" did not necessarily mean inexpensive.

She smiled sweetly up at the waiter, who looked as though *he* wouldn't be wondering where his next meal might be coming from, and ordered just a sliver of smoked salmon, followed by two tiny tender lamb cutlets. Then she hesitated, but only for a moment, before adding "and a side salad."

I studied the menu with some caution, running my finger down the prices, not the dishes.

"I also eat light lunch," I said mendaciously. "The chef's salad will be quite enough for me." The waiter was obviously affronted but left peaceably.

She chatted of Coppola and Preminger, of Pacino and Redford, and of Garbo as if she saw her all the time. She was kind enough to stop for a moment and ask what I was working on at present. I would have liked to have replied, "On how I'm going to explain to my wife that I have only sixty-three pence left in the bank," but I actually discussed my ideas for another novel. She seemed impressed but still made no reference to her husband. Should I mention him? No. Mustn't sound pushy, or as though I needed the money.

The food arrived, or that is to say her smoked salmon did, and I sat silently watching her eat my bank account while I nibbled on a roll. I looked up only to discover a wine waiter by my side.

"Would you care for some wine?" said I, recklessly.

"No, I don't think so," she said. I smiled a little too soon: "Well, perhaps a little something white and dry."

The wine waiter handed down a second leather-bound book, this time with golden grapes embossed on the cover. I searched down the pages for half-bottles, explaining to my guest that I never drank at lunch. I chose the cheapest. The wine waiter appeared a moment later with a large silver bucket full of ice in which the half bottle looked drowned, and, like me, completely out of its depth. A junior waiter cleared away the empty plate while another wheeled a large trolley to the side of our table and served the lamb cutlets and the chef's salad. At the same time a third waiter made up an exquisite side salad for my guest that ended up bigger than my complete order. I didn't feel I could ask her to swap.

To be fair, the chef's salad was superb—although I confess it was hard to appreciate such food fully while trying to work out a plot that would be convincing if I found the bill to over thirty-seven pounds.

“How silly of me to ask for white wine with lamb,” she said, having nearly finished the half bottle. I ordered a half bottle of the house red without calling for the wine list.

She finished the white wine and then launched into the theater, music, and other authors. All those who were still alive she seemed to know, and those who were dead she hadn't read. I might have enjoyed the performance if it hadn't been for the fear of wondering if I would be able to afford it when the curtain came down. When the waiter cleared away the empty dishes he asked my guest if she would care for anything else.

“No, thank you,” she said—I nearly applauded. “Unless you have one of your famous apple surprises.”

“I fear the last one may have gone, madam, but I'll go and see.”

“Don't hurry,” I wanted to say, but instead I just smiled as the rope tightened around my neck. A few minutes later the waiter strode back in triumph, weaving between the tables holding the apple surprise in the palm of his hand, high above his head. I prayed to Newton that the apple would obey his law. It didn't.

“The last one, madam”

“Oh, what luck,” she declared.

“Oh, what luck,” I repeated, unable to face the menu and discover the price. I was now attempting some mental arithmetic as I realized it was going to be a close-run thing.

“Anything else, madam?” the ingratiating waiter inquired.

I took a deep breath.

“Just coffee,” she said.

“And for you, sir?”

“No, no, not for me.” He left us. I couldn't think of an explanation for why I didn't drink coffee. Then she produced the large Gucci bag by her side and a copy of my novel, which I signed with a flourish, hoping the head waiter would see, and feel I was the sort of man who should be allowed to sign the bill as well, but he resolutely remained at the far end of the room while I wrote the words “An unforgettable meeting” and appended my signature.

While the dear lady was drinking her coffee I picked at another roll and called for the bill, not because I was in any particular hurry, but like a guilty defendant at the Old Bailey, I preferred to wait no longer than the judge's sentence. A man in a smart green uniform whom I had never seen before appeared carrying a silver tray with a folded piece of paper on it, looking not unlike my bank statement. I pushed back the edge of the bill slowly and read the figure: thirty-six pounds and forty pence. I casually put my hand into my inside pocket and withdrew my life's possessions, then placed the crisp new notes on the silver tray. They were whisked away. The man in the green uniform appeared a few minutes later with my sixty pence change, which I pocketed, since it was the only way I was going to get a bus home. The waiter gave me a look that would have undoubtedly won him a character part in any film produced by the lady's distinguished husband.

My guest rose and walked across the restaurant, waving at, and occasionally kissing, people I had previously seen only in glossy magazines. When she reached the door she stopped to receive her coat, a mink. I helped her on with the fur, again failing to

leave a tip. As we stood on the Curzon Street sidewalk, a dark blue Rolls-Royce drew up beside us and a liveried chauffeur leaped out and opened the door. She climbed in.

“Goodbye, darling,” she said as the electric window slid down. “Thank you for such a lovely lunch.”

“Goodbye,” I said and, summoning up my courage, added: “I do hope when you are next in town I shall have the opportunity of meeting your distinguished husband.”

“Oh, darling, didn’t you know?” she said.

“Know what?”

“We were divorced ages ago.”

“Divorced?” said I.

“Oh, yes,” she said gaily, “I haven’t spoken to him for years.”

I just stood there looking helpless.

“Oh, don’t worry yourself on my account,” she said. “He’s no loss. In any case, I recently married again” —another film producer, I prayed—“in fact, I quite expected to bump into my husband today—you see, he owns the restaurant.”

Without another word the electric window purred up and the Rolls-Royce glided effortlessly out of sight, leaving me to walk to the nearest bus stop.

As I stood surrounded by Literary Guild guests, staring at the white queen with the Brioche bun, I could still see her drifting away in that blue Rolls-Royce. I tried to concentrate on her words.

“I knew you wouldn’t forget me, darling,” she was saying. “After all, I did take you to lunch, didn’t I?”