

The Invitation

By Algernon Blackwood

They bumped into one another by the swinging doors of the little Soho restaurant, and, recoiling sharply, each made a half-hearted pretence of lifting his hat (it was French manners, of course, *inside*). Then, discovering that they were English, and not strangers, they exclaimed, "Sorry!" and laughed.

"Hulloa! It's Smith!" cried the man with the breezy manner; "and when did *you* get back?" It sounded as though "Smith" and "*you*" were different persons. "I haven't seen you for months!" They shook hands cordially.

"Only last Saturday on the *Rollitania*," answered the man with the pince-nez. They were acquaintances of some standing. Neither was aware of anything in the other he disliked. More positive cause for friendship there was none. They met, however, not infrequently.

"Last Saturday! Did you really?" exclaimed the breezy one; and, after an imperceptible pause which suggested nothing more vital, he added, "And had a good time in America, eh?"

"Oh! not bad, thanks—not bad at all." He likewise was conscious of a rather barren pause. "Awful crossing, though," he threw in a few seconds later with a slight grimace.

"Ah! At this time of year, you know—" said Breezy, shaking his head knowingly; "though sometimes, of course, one has better trips in winter than in summer. I crossed once in December when it was like a mill-pond the whole blessed way."

They moved a little to one side to let a group of Frenchmen enter the swinging doors.

"It's a good line," he added, in a voice that settled the reputation of the steamship company for ever. "By Jove, it's a good line."

"Oh! it's a good line, yes," agreed Pince-nez, gratified to find his choice approved. He shifted his glasses modestly. The discovery reflected glory upon his judgment. "*And* such an excellent table!"

Breezy agreed heartily. "I'd never cross now on any other," he declared, as though he meant the table. "You're right."

This happy little agreement about the food pleased them both; it showed their judgment to be sound; also it established a ground of common interest—a link—something that gave point to their little chat, and made it seem worth while to have stopped and spoken. They rose in one another's estimation. The chance meeting ought to lead to something, perhaps. Yet neither found the expected inspiration; for neither an fond had anything to say to the other beyond passing the time of day.

"Well," said Pince-nez, lingeringly but very pleasantly, making a movement towards the doors; "I suppose I must be going in. You—er—you've had lunch, of course?"

"Thanks, yes, I have," Breezy replied with a certain air of disappointment, as though the question had been an invitation. He moved a few steps backwards down the pavement. "But, now you're back," he added more cheerfully, "we must try and see something of one another."

"By all means. Do let's," said Pince-nez. His manner somehow suggested that he too expected an invitation, perhaps. He hesitated a moment, as though about to add something, but in the end said nothing.

"We must lunch together one day," observed Breezy, with his jolly smile. He glanced up at the restaurant.

“By all means—let’s,” agreed the other again, with one foot on the steps. “Any day you like. Next week, perhaps. You let me know.” He nodded cordially, and half turned to enter.

“Lemme see, where are you staying?” called Breezy by way of after-thought.

“Oh! I’m at the X,” mentioning an obscure hostel in the W.C. district.

“Of course; yes, I remember. That’s where you stopped before, isn’t it? Up in Bloomsbury somewhere?”

“Rooms ain’t up to much, but the cooking’s quite decent.”

“Good. Then we’ll lunch one day soon. What sort of time, by the bye, suits you?” The breezy one, for some obscure reason, looked vigorously at his watch.

“Oh! any time; one o’clock onwards, sort of thing, I suppose?” with an air of “just let me know and I’ll be there.”

“Same here, yes,” agreed the other, with slightly less enthusiasm.

“That’s capital, then,” from Pince-nez. He paused a moment, not finding precisely the suitable farewell phrase. Then, to his own undoing, he added carelessly, “There are one or two things—er—I should like to tell you about—”

“And luncheon is the best time,” Breezy suggested at once, “for busy men like us. You might bespeak a table, in fact.” He jerked his head towards the restaurant.

The two acquaintances, one on the pavement, the other on the steps, stood and stared at each other. The onus of invitation had somehow shifted insensibly from Breezy to Pince-nez. The next remark would be vital. Neither thought it worth while to incur the slight expense of a luncheon that involved an hour in each other’s company. Yet it was nothing stronger than a dread of possible boredom that dictated the hesitancy.

“Not a bad idea,” agreed Pince-nez vaguely. “But I doubt if they’ll keep a table after one o’clock, you know.”

“Never mind, then. You’re on the telephone, I suppose, aren’t you?” called Breezy down the pavements still moving slowly backwards.

“Yes, you’ll find it under the name of the hotel,” replied the other, putting his head back round the door-post in the act of going in.

“My number’s not in the book!” Breezy cried back; “but it’s 0457 Westminster. Then you’ll ring me up one day? That’ll be very jolly indeed. *Don’t forget the number!*” This shifting of telephonic responsibility, he felt, was a master-stroke.

“Right-O. I’ll remember. So long, then, for the present,” Pince-nez answered more faintly, disappearing into the restaurant.

“Decent fellow, that. I shall go to lunch if he asks me,” was the thought in the mind of each. It lasted for perhaps half a minute, and then—oblivion.

Ten days later they ran across one another again about luncheon-time in Piccadilly; nodded, smiled, hesitated a second too long—and turned back to shake hands.

“How’s everything?” asked the breezy one with gusto.

“First-rate, thanks. And how are *you*?”

“Jolly weather, isn’t it?” Breezy said, looking about him generally, “this sunshine—by Jove—!”

“Nothing like it,” declared Pince-nez, shifting his glasses to look at the sun, and concealing his lack of something to say by catching at the hearty manner.

“Nothing,” agreed Breezy.

“In the world,” echoed Pince-nez.

Again the topic was a link. The stream of pedestrians jostled them. They moved a few yards up Dover Street. Each was really on his way to luncheon. A pause followed the move.

“Still at—er—that hotel up there?” The name had escaped him. He jerked his head vaguely northwards.

“Yes; I thought you’d be looking in for lunch one day,” a faint memory stirring in his brain.

“Delighted! Or—you’d better come to my Club, eh? Less out of the way, you know,” declared Breezy.

“Very jolly. Thanks; that’d be first-rate.” Both paused a moment. Breezy looked down the street as though expecting someone or something. They ignored that it was luncheon hour.

“You’ll find me in the telephone book,” observed Pince-nez presently.

“Under X— Hotel, I suppose?” from Breezy.” All right.”

“0995 Northern’s the number, yes.”

“And mine, said Breezy, “is 0417 Westminster; or the Club”—with an air of imparting valuable private information—“is 0866 Mayfair. Any day you like. Don’t forget!”

“Rather not. Somewhere about one o’clock, eh?”

“Yes—or one-thirty.” And off they went again—each to his solitary luncheon.

A fortnight passed, and once more they came together—this time in an A.B.C. shop.

“Hulloa! There’s Smith,” thought Breezy.

“By Jove, I’ll ask him to lunch with me.”

“Why, there’s that chap again,” thought Pince-nez. “I’ll invite him, I think.”

They sat down at the same table. “But this capital,” exclaimed both; “you must lunch with me, of course!” And they laughed pleasantly. They talked of food and weather. They compared Soho with A.B.C. Each offered light excuses for being found in the latter.

“I was in a hurry to-day, and looked in by the merest chance for a cup of coffee,” observed Breezy, ordering quite a lot of things at once, absent-mindedly, as it were.

“I like the butter here so awfully,” mentioned Pince-nez later. “It’s *quite* the best in London, and the freshest, I always think.” As this was not the luncheon, they felt that only commonplace things were in order. The special things they had to discuss must wait, of course.

The waitress got their paper checks muddled somehow. “I’ve put a ’alfpenny of yours on ’is,” she explained cryptically to Pince-nez.

“Oh,” laughed Breezy, “that’s nothing. This gentleman is lunching with me, anyhow.”

“You’ll ’ave to make it all right when you get outside, then,” said the girl gravely.

They laughed over her reply. At the pay-desk both made vigorous search for money. Pince-nez, being nimbler, produced a form first. “This is my lunch, of course. I asked you, remember,” he said. Breezy demurred with a good grace.

“You can be host another time, if you insist,” added Pince-nez, pocketing twopence change.

“Rather,” said the other heartily. “You must come to the Club—any day you like, you know.”

“I’ll come to-morrow, then,” said Pince-nez, quick as a flash. “I’ve got the telephone number.”

“Do,” cried Breezy, very, very heartily indeed. “I shall be delighted! One o’clock, remember.”