

A Companion of Fortune

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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ARTHUR CHURCHILL-BROWN, ATTACHÉ at the British Legation in Rome, leaned back in his chair till it rested against the rim of his desk, and squinted disagreeably at an open letter which he held in his hand. This attitude of Arthur's toward his desk was nothing unusual. According to his unformed but practical philosophy, desks were made exactly for that purpose. He found a mild but never failing interest in the almost constant stream of visitors who passed down the narrow hall at the rear; and he thoroughly abhorred the necessity of giving any attention whatever to the papers and documents which were occasionally laid behind him on his desk by the silent-footed attendant, whose back, as he noiselessly returned to the inner rooms of the secretary and the ambassador, seemed to Arthur to suggest an almost intolerable insolence. Someday, he felt sure, he would throw something at it.

On this particular morning the expression of bored annoyance which had come to be Arthur's official countenance had deepened to one of positive displeasure.

„What the deuce do they all come here for, anyway?“ he growled. „Good Lord! And they all go the same route. It’s enough to kill a man.“ He felt behind him on the desk for a packet of cigarettes, lit one and, puffing furiously, reread the offending letter. It ran as follows:

My Dear Son:

I have time for only a line, but I must get this off at once. Miss Carlisle, a *very* wealthy American lady, and her companion are leaving tonight for Rome. I met her last month at Strathmore, and she has been staying with me for a day or two in town. I have promised for you to open some doors for her in Rome, and she will probably call very shortly after you get this. Don’t haul her out to Udini’s or any of the other places across the river.

Hastily,

Your loving Mother.

P.S.—I’ll send you a check on the twentieth.

M. C. B.

Arthur sighed, wheeled his chair around and began to wade through the pile of papers that had accumulated during his absence the day before. „She knows very well,“ he grumbled, „that I’m too busy to run all over the blooming town like a footman.“ Which was very true. Since his promotion—he regarded the term as pure sarcasm—to the Home Desk, he had been forced to spend at least an hour of each day in real work. To a young diplomat who had spent a full year in learning the delicate and subtle methods by which one may remain comfortably balanced between the Black and the White, this was indeed irksome. It necessitated a complete readjustment. More than once the picturesque inventions of a stranded beachcomber, sent down from Naples by an overworked but still credulous consul, had violently disturbed the nice balance of Arthur’s social position in the Eternal City, where the most alluring and entrancing eyes have a disconcerting way of looking in two directions at once.

„Miss Carlisle,“ continued Arthur, still speaking aloud, and emphasizing the title. „Of course, she’s an old maid. Probably forty, possibly fifty, and certainly plain. She’ll want to do the whole blooming round. If anybody had asked me but—“

He was interrupted by the entrance of a servant, who approached his desk and stood waiting for him to speak.

„Well?“ said Arthur, without looking up.

„A lady, sir.“

Arthur’s worst fears were confirmed. As he advanced to meet Miss Carlisle he swore, under his breath. Just in the height of the season, to waste a week on this! She could not be described better than in Arthur’s own words: probably forty, possibly fifty, and certainly plain. Lanky, angular, and yet somehow graceful, she advanced to meet the young diplomat with outstretched hand and a somewhat pleasing smile. Arthur extended his own hand, then stood still, staring with rude frankness over Miss Carlisle’s left shoulder.

„That,“ said the very wealthy American lady, „is just what I expected. I’ve grown used to it in the past three weeks. Miss Moulton,“ turning to the young woman who had been the object of Arthur’s surprised gaze, „this is Mr. Churchill-Brown. Miss Moulton is my companion,“ she explained.

„Oh!“ said the young man. Then, after a moment’s silence, „O—Oh!“ he repeated.

At which foolish remark no one would be surprised who had ever had the good fortune to see Miss Moulton. She was the exact antithesis of Miss Carlisle; and added to the charm of her youth and beauty and loveliness was a certain indefinable air of disdain that chained the young man to the floor and left him speechless. While Miss Carlisle chattered amiably, something about having found him absent when they called the day before, and did he get her card, and wasn’t Rome a wonderful place, and weren’t the hotels the worst in the world, Arthur gazed openly at the companion, who finally found it necessary to turn away and begin an inspection of a portrait of the Duke of Wellington hanging nearby.

„But we don’t want to bother you,“ Miss Carlisle finished breathlessly.

„Bother?“ Arthur waved his hand in derision at the idea. „I have absolutely nothing to do.“ He felt a slight twinge of conscience as he glanced at the untouched pile on his desk; then his eye rested on the back of Miss Moulton, who was still inspecting the portrait. „Absolutely nothing,“ he repeated firmly. „I am only too delighted to be able to be of service to you. There is a luncheon today at the Guidi Palace—I’m sure you’ll find it interesting. Then, this afternoon—“

„Today is full, I’m afraid—for us.“ Miss Moulton had turned to face them and was speaking in a coolly impersonal tone. „We are going to San Lorenzo, San Pietro and the Borghese. Really Mr. Churchill-Brown, there is no need to disturb you. But we are very grateful.“

Arthur glanced at Miss Carlisle. „But I thought—Mother told me—“ then at the amusement depicted on Miss Moulton’s face he stopped short.

„I know,“ said the elder lady. „But what can I do?“ She glanced at her companion and then turned helplessly to Arthur. „She tells me to go somewhere—and I go, whether I want to or not. What can I do?“

„Nothing whatever,“ the young man said gravely. „To tell the truth, I don’t think you should object. When you can be piloted by one who—“ Miss Moulton was regarding him suspiciously—„whose tastes lead to the Borghese—“ Arthur grinned—„you should be more than satisfied. But I shall see you again?“ He glanced appealingly at Miss Moulton who had started to leave. She turned at the door and looked at him for a moment over her shoulder.

„We are to be in Rome only a week,“ she said, hesitating. „Perhaps—we are staying at the Larossa.“ With a nod and a smile she tripped out, followed by Miss Carlisle, and through a window Arthur saw them enter a public brougham and drive away.

Now, there was nothing unusual in that, was there? Is there any more common sight in Europe than a pair of trippers calling at a legation? And do not all old maids have a companion? Are not these companions—especially in stories—always pretty? And yet—

Thirty minutes later Arthur muttered an impatient oath, sprang up from his chair and began walking up and down the room. „I’m a jolly idiot,“ he said firmly.

„What do I care whether she snubbed me or not? Yet she told me her hotel—Well, what if she did? Who is she, anyway? A companion! I wonder—“ he hesitated. „I may call on Miss Carlisle. She’s a very dear lady. Very. Besides, it would please Mother. Mother evidently liked her. Moulton, eh? May be a cousin. May be a niece. I wonder if she—“ he stopped short and stood for some minutes regarding the corner of his desk thoughtfully, then rang a bell, and when a servant appeared, ordered a carriage. Five minutes later he might have been overheard directing the driver, „To the Borghese.“

If Lady Churchill-Brown, who was showing her daughter in as many places as possible during the short London season, had by some supernatural agency been able to survey the movements of her son for the following two weeks, she would have been agreeably surprised and immensely pleased at the evident success of her plan to cure him of certain follies. Her treatment had consisted of an appointment to the diplomatic service. As though a young man who had been willing to misbehave in London would of necessity become an anchorite in Rome! Arthur had acted just as he might have been expected to act; in a very youthful and, maternally speaking, a thoroughly disgraceful manner.

Of this fact Lady Churchill-Brown was not entirely unaware; therefore would she have been highly gratified if she had observed her son’s actions for the two weeks following his meeting with Miss Carlisle—and her companion. He developed an incredible longing for moonlight views of the Colosseum; he visited churches and villas and galleries and ruins, gladly betraying his ignorance and expressing humble gratitude for the instruction and enlightenment kindly furnished by Miss Moulton; he attended Miss Carlisle with unexampled assiduity and devotion; he sat in corners at afternoon teas where they talked in hushed tones of Gabriele d’Annunzio, or talked of him not at all; and for fourteen whole days, never once did he cross the bridge to Udini’s! This last was in itself a miracle.

Behold him then, on the morning following the expiration of the two weeks, seated in a quiet and tastefully furnished private parlor at the Hotel Larossa. In the centre of the room was a pile of trunks and bags; Arthur was sitting on one of the former. In a chair over by a window was Miss Carlisle, wearing a dark blue traveling suit. She was sitting bolt upright, with her hands resting on the arms of her chair, evidently much disturbed by the startling information just imparted to her by Arthur.

„It seems to me,“ she said, hesitating, „that you had better speak to Miss Moulton.“

There was a slight pause, while the young man twirled his hat around in his hands nervously and gazed at the door. Then he looked up at Miss Carlisle with an air of determination. „It’s this way,“ he said. „I may as well be frank with you. I suppose I’ll ask her anyway, but I want to talk with you about it first. The fact is, I can’t afford it; though as far as I’m concerned it doesn’t make the slightest difference. It’s only for her. What I want to know is, who is she, and how long have you known her, and all that sort of thing.“

„Do you love her?“

„Yes.“

„Well, then why don’t you tell her so?“

Arthur was silent.

„Why don't you tell her?“ Miss Carlisle repeated grimly.

„I—I'm afraid to,“ the young man stammered.

„Pooh!“ the lady snorted contemptuously. „I can tell you one thing; you won't get any satisfaction out of me. Of course you're afraid! You're afraid she's poor. You're afraid her great-grandfather was as disrespectable as your own. And more than everything else, you're afraid of your mother!“

„I am not!“ the young man declared hotly, his face very red.

„Yes you are!“ Miss Carlisle almost shouted, rising and waving her arms excitedly. „Don't contradict me! And I can hardly blame you; She's worth a dozen of your kind. She's a thousand times too good for you. If she'd only had sense enough not to fall in love with you!“

„What!“ cried Arthur, turning pale.

Miss Carlisle sank back into her chair. „Now what have I done?“ she said helplessly. „Anyway, it was a lie. I wanted to see what you'd do.“

„Oh!“ said Arthur, doubtfully.

Then the door opened to admit Miss Moulton herself.

Arthur arose awkwardly, and there ensued the uncomfortable silence which always greets the entrance of one who has been the subject of conversation. The young lady looked from Arthur to Miss Carlisle and back again, as if to inquire the cause of their very evident embarrassment. Then the young man pulled two slips of blue paper from his pocket and advanced toward Miss Moulton with an attempt at naturalness that fell quite flat.

„Here are your tickets,“ said he, smiling foolishly. Miss Carlisle arose, muttered something unintelligible, and disappeared in the direction of her bedroom.

„What's the matter?“ asked Miss Moulton coolly.

„Nothing,“ said Arthur, visibly ill at ease. „Nothing whatever. The fact is, I wanted to talk to you.“

„Well?“

„Well—er—I—“ he hesitated stammering.

„Go on,“ Miss Moulton said encouragingly.

Arthur gulped hard. „Haven't you noticed anything funny about me lately?“ he demanded desperately.

„No—o, I think not. Are you ill?“

„Well, you see—“ Arthur looked at her appealingly, „by Jove, I believe I am. The fact is, I—hang it all—I love you!“

„Indeed!“

„Yes, I do,“ he said doggedly, as though she had contradicted him. „Odd, isn't it?“

„Is it?“ this with a rising inflection.

„Well, perhaps not exactly odd.“ He appeared to be considering the matter. „But very curious, you know—wonderful, and all that sort of thing. Er—moonlight rides, and all that sort of thing. I've thought of nothing else since I saw you. I'm a regular blooming idiot.“

„Are you trying to make run of me?“

The young man's face reddened and he straightened himself stiffly. „I am not,“ he declared, with dignity. „I am trying to ask you to marry me.“

„Oh!“ said Miss Moulton weakly. Evidently it was more than she had expected. She advanced a step toward Arthur, then turned aside and sat down in the chair recently vacated by Miss Carlisle. For a few seconds there was silence. Then,

„Of course,“ the girl sighed, „it’s impossible.“

„Oh, I say—“

„No,“ she interrupted firmly, „it is quite impossible. Quite. You know why as well as I do. But I—I really appreciate the honor you do me.“

Arthur considered this for a minute in silence. Then he approached her chair and stood looking down at her uncertainly. „Of course, I didn’t think you loved me,“ he said, his voice trembling. „But I thought there might be a chance—and today you are leaving. It was just possible that you cared for me a little—just enough to make it—I say, you couldn’t?“

Miss Moulton was silent.

„Because,“ Arthur went on, „if you do, nothing else matters. Nothing about—you know what I mean. I know I’m not rich. I know I’m a silly ass. I guess I never did anything worthwhile in my life except fall in love with you. I suppose I was a jolly fool to think you ever could care for me.“

A pause; then,

„I—didn’t—say that.“ The voice was very low.

„Didn’t say what?“

„That I couldn’t—don’t—care—for you.“

Then, as he tried to look into her eyes, and as she resolutely kept them on the floor, „I say!“ he begged, his voice shrill and harsh with the ecstasy of hope, „look at me!“

„I can’t,“ she breathed faintly. „I can’t—even—talk!“

Which was not very surprising, inasmuch as her face was being held tightly against his shoulder with all the strength of a lover’s arms.

As a usual thing, this is where a story ends. The first kiss is the last word. Both writer and reader seem to take it for granted that as soon as a young man holds a girl in his arms and tells her he loves her, that’s all there is to it. You, with your own experience to draw on for illustration, may decide for yourself if the conclusion necessarily follows from so weak a premise.

In the present instance, whether or not Arthur Churchill-Brown would really have married Miss Moulton, companion to the wealthy Miss Carlisle, may be doubted, I think, without any extraordinary amount of skepticism. The fact is, he didn’t.

For to tell the truth, Arthur was by no means a hero. He was simply a very ordinary young Englishman, and despite his indignant denial of Miss Carlisle’s keen accusation, he really was afraid of his mother.

On the evening following the ladies’ departure from Rome, Arthur sat in his rooms on the Pidi, eating iced pineapple and gazing gloomily out of a window at the dimly lighted street. He and Miss Moulton were engaged to be married; there was no doubt that he loved her; and he had arranged to see her the following week at Venice. Yet he was unhappy. For somehow the vision which filled his thoughts was not the laughing, joyous face of his sweetheart, but that of Lady Churchill-Brown, filled with a consuming wrath. He pictured himself announcing calmly, „Mother, I am going to marry Miss Moulton, a young American girl. She is a

traveling companion, and she is very poor, but I love her," and he shuddered, and admitted that such heroism was beyond him. He knew very well that the person whom he honored with the name of Churchill-Brown was expected to be such a one as could—and would—make a substantial addition to the woefully depleted Churchill-Brown coffers; the accomplishment of this purpose had become his mother's prime object in life. He was, indeed, between the devil and the deep sea.

And at that moment, hearing the door of his room open and close, he turned around in his chair.

Arthur sprang to his feet and advanced with outstretched hands. „Mother!“ he cried. „What are you doing here? By Jove! I'm glad to see you.“ And he really was. For now, one way or another, the thing would soon be over.

„Humph!“ grunted Lady Churchill-Brown, glancing around the room and finding a seat on a heavy divan, „I dare say you are. I came to see *you*. How does it happen you're at home?“ she demanded, glaring at him as though his presence in his own rooms needed a thorough explanation.

Arthur's wits were sadly muddled. Energetic as Lady Churchill-Brown was, it was not her custom to make sudden and unexpected journeys from London to Rome. What had happened? Did she suspect something? Had Miss Carlisle written to her? Should he tell her, or not? And it must be admitted that somewhere in the back of his brain the young man had formed a grim resolution to stand by his guns and Miss Moulton to the very last. For whether he is a hero or not, it is always more or less dangerous to drive a man into a corner.

„Why, I—I had no place to go,“ said he. „Lucky, isn't it? Since you came.“

„I don't know whether it's lucky or not. Where's Miss Carlisle?“ his mother asked grimly.

„Gone to Venice. Didn't I write you?“

„Yes, you wrote me. When did she leave?“

„Today. They went on the afternoon express.“

„Oh!“ in a somewhat milder tone. Then, after a slight pause, and with a sigh of relief, „And how are you?“

„I'm all right,“ declared Arthur, with an attempt at lightness. „But why did you come?“

Lady Churchill-Brown considered for a minute. „To tell the truth,“ she said, „I had a shock. Now that the danger is past, it appears silly. In fact, I might have known better. I might have known you wouldn't do anything so ridiculous.“

„Perhaps the danger isn't past.“ The words were out before Arthur realized what he was saying. He stood amazed at his own hardihood.

„What do you mean?“ demanded his mother.

The young man took his courage between his teeth and held onto it firmly. Then he threw back his shoulders and directly faced the enemy. And then, at sight of the grim and aggressive face before him, his courage suddenly slipped down his throat and descended to the Lord knows where.

„I'm going to marry Miss Carlisle,“ he said.

„You are going to marry *who*?“ shrieked his mother.

„Miss Carlisle,“ he repeated weakly. He had failed; at the crisis he had failed!

„Have you asked her?“

„Yes.“

The effect of this announcement on Lady Churchill-Brown was startling. She sank back limply on the divan, clutching wildly at the air, while Arthur stared at her in amazement.

„What’s the matter?“ he demanded. „Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted me to do?“

His mother, by a supreme effort of the will, lifted herself erect on the divan and sat regarding him in horrified silence. „Well, that ends it,“ she said finally. „My boy, you don’t know what you’ve done. I suppose I deserved it. And I must admit it’s not your fault.“

Arthur was silent. Indeed, he hardly heard, being preoccupied with contemplating the hole into which he had just kicked himself.

„It was only yesterday morning I found it out,“ Lady Churchill-Brown went on presently. „Of course, you couldn’t have known. Miss Carlisle isn’t Miss Carlisle at all. She’s Miss Moulton.“

„What!“ cried Arthur, springing to his feet.

„She’s Miss Moulton,“ repeated his mother grimly, „and Miss Moulton is her. They did it because Miss Carlisle—the real Miss Carlisle—didn’t want to be bothered by fortune-hunters. It’s disgraceful. It’s criminal. If I’d only known—“

„Do you mean to tell me“—Arthur was trying to remain calm—„that she—that Miss Moulton—that they—“

For a full minute he stood, allowing the meaning of this amazing information to sink into his befuddled brain.

Then a cherubic smile slowly illumined his face, and, seating himself on the divan, he took Lady Churchill-Brown’s fat hand in his own and patted it rudely. „I say,“ he said happily, and thus started his sweet confession.

