

**A Short Story by Joseph A. Altsheler**

# **Carson's Victory**

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Harry Carson was considered a lucky man at the capital. It was allowed by all that his deserts were large, but it was often said that fortune had given him a more than ample reward for the possession of such virtues. This was because of his young wife, Alice, who combined in herself beauty, talent, and tact. The three are often found separately or even two of them together, but it is rare that one woman has them all. When this does happen the result is destruction to the hearts of men.

Carson was in his second term in the House, as the representative from Warren County, and yet he lacked a year of thirty. It was taken for granted that he had a fine future; not because he ever made any meteoric display, but because he was solid, industrious, and tenacious. Above all, he had character. It never entered into the reckoning of any one that he might do wrong. It is a tribute

to human nature that it always trusts men of this type rather than those who are more brilliant, and also more unsteady.

When Carson returned to Frankfort for his second term he brought his bride with him. The air of the capital was familiar to her, as she had inherited a political tradition extending through three or four generations of her family, which had given to the state one governor, two United States senators, and numerous smaller officials. Hence she looked upon politics as an inseparable part of life, and it was according to nature that she should marry a man who had begun a political career.

Alice's heart thrilled with the twin emotions of pride and pleasure when she and her husband, on the day before the first meeting of the House, walked upon the hills that look over the capital. It was the close of December and winter held the land in a firm grasp, but it was not an ugly cold. The air was flooded with brilliant sunshine, and the roofs of the little city and the surface of the river gave back golden gleams. The distance softened every outline, and blended all into a

harmonious whole until the capital within its circle of sunshiny hills looked like a gem in a golden setting.

“We shall be happy here,” said Alice, her eager face flushing as she looked down at the dome of the capitol.

“We would be happy anywhere now,” said Harry.

“That is true,” she said, putting her hand on his arm, “but we can be happiest of all here, because this is the place for us two.”

The prediction they made that bright winter day came true for both. It was one of those golden seasons that come at least once into the life of most of us, and the days were very full. Carson grew steadily in public esteem, and his good reputation spread to all parts of the state. They were favored members of the social circle that revolved, as was fit, around the governor and his wife, and Alice felt that fortune was most kind to her. No small part of this feeling was due to the knowledge that she was a great help to her husband. Bred to politics, and having a clear,

logical mind, she often advised, though by suggestion and indirection, and Carson was frequently conscious that two heads are better than one; nor was he too small to say so.

She helped him nearly always with his speeches. Carson was a sluggish orator. He could never speak well unless he had his manuscript upon the desk before him, and invariably he depended upon it for his start; after the first page or two he would seldom refer to it, but he needed it as a kind of moral support like a strong swimmer out at sea, who wants a boat close at hand. Then his slow temperament would begin to gather life and movement and he would warm up in a way that was wonderful, showing all the graces and power of oratory. Few in the House could equal him, whether in substance or in manner.

He and Alice held decided opinions upon all public questions, but they were in perfect accord until the great Temperance Bill was introduced. It was a measure of the last importance involving not only the general welfare of the state, but also what many held to be the private rights of the

individual. Carson, at first, was in doubt, but he soon inclined to the side of the bill which would forbid the sale of liquor in all the counties. The measure on the whole appealed to his sober, conservative temperament, although he was not an enthusiast for it, as he was quite able to see the arguments of the other side. But he knew already, although he had not yet committed himself, how he would speak and vote when the time came.

“It may bear down a little hard on some,” he said to Alice one cold afternoon, as they left the state house and walked toward their hotel, “but the general result is bound to be good. I do not intend to declare myself, as I wish to be free to change should I be convinced otherwise, but it seems to me that I’m bound to speak for the bill.”

Alice’s rosy face looked unusually grave. Her family had thrived on a liberal tradition, and she had doubts of the bill; she was afraid that it transgressed the rights of the individual.

“Are you sure, Harry?” she asked. “Might not the harm that it would do be greater than the good?”

Carson smiled. He was proud of his wife's mental powers and of her interest in public questions.

"I'm not wholly sure," he replied, but I shall become so. That sounds like an Irish bull, but it's the way I feel. When the time to speak is at hand I shall be one of this bill's most zealous adherents."

"Think it over," she said gaily, and then turned the talk to another and lighter topic. But it was in Carson's mind throughout their walk. There was a peculiar strain in his temperament that made him like, and ever respect, an honest difference of opinion; it furnished food for mental exercise, and added to the zest of life. It was the first time he had encountered this difference in his wife and the situation had a certain piquancy.

He was curious to know what Alice would say against the bill and that evening in her room he drew her out. She surprised both him and herself by her earnestness and the depth of her feeling on the subject. The burden of her talk was the old phrase, "the rights of man," which she used frequently. She held that no legislature had a

moral right to make such a law; but even if made, and, by a kind of usurpation, enforced, it was bound in the course of time to create a great and harmful revulsion. She spoke with inherited political eloquence and Carson felt a new thrill of pride because of her. But she did not convince him, as his was one of those hardy natures that flourish on opposition.

“Well done,” he said when she finished; “but you must admit, Alice, that while your facts taken separately are correct, they make collectively a false effect, owing to your arrangement.”

She smiled back at him with perfect good nature.

“Well, Mr. Orator,” she replied, “let’s hear your side of the question and see how you arrange your facts in order to create the only true impression.”

Carson recapitulated the heads of the speech that he was already figuring in his mind, and she listened in silence. She admired her husband’s calm, reasoning power, his direct method of going to the heart of things; but she felt at the

very beginning that he was wrong, and as he continued the feeling grew. The burden of his argument was the necessity to sacrifice individual freedom for the public good, but she could not reconcile herself to the idea.

“What do you think of it?” he asked, when he came to the end.

“I think that the charge you made against me applies to you,” she replied boldly.

“Oh, the false arrangement of facts!” he said, and he laughed in a pleased way, as her opposition stimulated his mental powers. “That’s only the difference in the point of view. We’ll have to work this thing out together, as I see that you can supply me with many fallacies to confute.”

She too laughed, but there was a slightly increased color in her cheeks. She had made a mental note, and it was not to supply him with fallacies but with solid reasons why he should change his opinion.

The days passed and the life of the capital

flowed on, just like any other stream, still in the depths and turbulent in the shallows. Social pleasures abounded, but for zealous members the days were full of work. Over all loomed the temperance bill, which was brought up and discussed from time to time, but was not yet near a vote, and the line of divergence between Harry and Alice on this important question grew wider. They often discussed it, and he was bound to admit that she argued well, though he must go his own way.

Alice would not have confessed to herself how deeply her interest was aroused. The question, in some manner, took hold of her and would not let her rest, much to her own wonder, because she was a woman, like other women, delighting in womanly things and usually not bothering much about prosaic laws.

A part of this interest, although she did not realize it then, arose from its bearing upon his husband's career, which was as dear to her as it was to him. She believed that he was making a serious mistake and more than once in a tone of apparent jest she told him so. If this bill passed,

as seemed likely, those most instrumental in making it a law would suffer heavily when the great revulsion came, as it surely must.

The question became an obsession, and looking into the future she saw Harry ruined by it. She also began to hear quietly, but from many sources, that the state was not back of the legislature in this measure. It was likely that the storm would burst before the ink was dry on the governor's signature. She had relatives all over the state, and she heard from them in a manner that could not leave her in doubt. It was easy enough for a legislature, gathered in an isolated capital, to deceive itself, and she was perhaps the only one in the little city who, half by information and half by intuition, knew which way the tide was running.

But deeply as she was concerned, she did not dare to tell Harry what she knew. A threat of future disaster because he intended to speak for what he thought to be the right would merely confirm him in his resolution, and she was proud of him because of it. She must try more delicate methods and, apparently in jest or in irony, she

kept the other side always before him.

Carson, in a way, continued to enjoy the divergence of view. He liked to see his wife so agile mentally, and it stimulated him to greater efforts, of which he now dearly saw the need, as Alice at times made him feel doubts. She was wonderfully cogent, he was bound to admit, and often he had to hunt very hard for material with which to answer her. This difference, it seemed, bound them more closely together than ever; he felt a new cause of respect for her, and she felt that she must help him in a critical time.

Slowly he built up his speech, writing it out with the greatest care, studying every point with all the power of his solid mind and clothing it in strong and lucid words. As he produced it page by page he copied it on his own typewriter in order that he might when he was on the floor catch the connection anywhere, at a glance. And Alice, with a pretty perverse spirit that he thought infinitely alluring, copied her side of the question page by page for his and matched him point for point. They passed many evenings in this manner and as the two speeches grew he knew one as

well as the other.

“Really. Alice, you are not bad for an amateur,” he said with affected patronage. “I’ve seen worse speeches than this one of yours.”

“The day will come, young sir, when you will think this speech of mine is a very good one indeed,” she replied with a pretended haughty air,

“I admit now that it is excellent, but on the wrong side,” said Carson with great heartiness. “I shall take care not to tell any of the opponents of the bill about it, as they might manage to borrow from it.”

The preliminary contests over the bill, the amendments, and the postponements, now came to an end, and the time to begin the set speeches was appointed. On the day before, Harry and Alice walked again on the hills, that circled in such a close embrace about the town. Winter was still king and ice and snow glittered on the horizon.

They talked of the measure, but it was Carson who had the most to say. He seemed both to

himself and to her to be, as it were, in an attitude of defense, and in a challenging voice he pointed out to her many reasons why he should support the measure.

She was silent nearly all the time, and troubled all the time. She had received in the morning letters that attested the swelling, though yet noiseless tide, against the bill throughout the state, and she foresaw great misfortune. She felt intuitively that in this case the popular side was also the right side, and she wished for some way to save her husband. But she could see none.

She looked down despairingly at the snug little city that she loved so well, and she did not wish to leave it forever at the end of the present term. But Harry, because of this measure, would be beaten for re-election, and she saw all the fine edifice that they had built for themselves crumbling to pieces. She had mapped his career: three or four terms in the House, then the speakership, after that the lower house of Congress, and in his middle years the United States Senate. But in the place of that a alluring dream there was now only blank darkness.

Yet she said nothing despite her fears. A consummate tact kept her silent, and in her heart sprang up a little hope that she might yet avoid the danger for him more than herself. She was not selfish; it was his career that she prized rather than her share in it and the reflected glory that it would bring.

They walked a long time on the hills, still talking of the bill, and anticipating the next day with its momentous contest. The windows in the city began to glitter with the fire of the setting sun, and the twilight came, drawing its long dark curtain across the sky. Then they descended the slopes.

“It will be all over in another day or two and we shall win,” said Carson.

“Yes, we shall win,” said Alice, hopefully.

Carson glanced at her and then laughed.

“Was that an echo or the expression of a wish for your side?” he asked.

That evening he read his speech in their room for the last time before delivering it in the House.

“That finishes my part of it.” he said with

satisfaction.

“And now, Sir Member,” she said gaily, “I’ll read you a much better argument; one that demolishes yours complely.”

She picked up her own speech, copied on the same typewriter, and recited it, also for the last time.

“Tt’s a pity that nobody will ever hear your address. Alice,” said Carson with some emphasis. “There are lots of good points in it. I know it as well as I do my own and I can’t help seeing them.”

“But if has to be, it has to be,” she said lightly. “Now we will let it all rest until tomorrow.”

She put the the two manuscripts in the drawer and locked it carefully.

They were slow in starting for the House the next morning. Alice, usually the brightest and briskest of women, seemed dull and she dragged. It was evident that they would be late.

“I’m reluctant to hear you attack my side of the

bill,” she said at last in apology. “Here, take your precious old speech. Just to think that everybody will hear it, while mine will repose in the silence and darkness of a drawer.”

She opened his coat and thrust the speech into an inside pocket, where it would be ready for him when needed. Then she buttoned the coat carefully and smoothed it out with her hand.

“So much trouble for so little good,” she said, looking up into his eyes.

He smiled down fondly at her and put his hand on the dark bronze hair that curled slightly.

“A woman must n’t expect everything, he said, laughing a little, but speaking with great tenderness. ”If she had her way in politics, too, there would n’t be even a little corner of the world left for us men to run.”

“In that respect you must have your way,” she said submissively.

“Now, Sir Member, help me on with my cloak and we will make up lost time.”

They walked swiftly down the street toward the capitol and the cold wind that nipped them

deepened the red in their cheeks. Many other feet tended the same way, as a debate on a big bill always made a field day in the little capital.

Floor, halls, and lobbies were crowded already, but Carson found his young wife a seat in the lower lobby next to the rail where she would not be far away from him, and would hear and see everything.

“I know that you are going to make a great speech, a winning one,” she whispered as he turned away. Carson did not notice it, but her gloved fingers were trembling.

Carson intended to speak first, and he was confident of catching the speaker’s eye in time. Like some others he had kept his position on the bill to himself, believing that by such a course he would be more independent, and now he felt a little glow of satisfaction. He ran his hand once over the breast of his smooth frock coat, and felt the precious speech reposing safely in the inside pocket.

The preliminaries were soon over and Carson, rising quickly, called, “Mr. Speaker.” He was

recognized at once. Then he deliberately drew the speech from his pocket and laid it upon the desk before him. A buzz went through the crowded House; Carson was up and he would be worth hearing.

Carson glanced at his wife. She was deadly pale. Even at the moment he noticed it and wondered why, but he could not wonder long, because his speech claimed him.

The House became intensely still, and the faces of members and spectators alike expressed deep attention. Carson stood erect and silent. The old embarrassment at the beginning of a speech that he could never overcome swept over him, and his thoughts floated from his grasp. Everything became a blank but he glanced down at the first page of the speech lying open on the desk before him.

“Fellow Members,” he said in a deep resounding voice, “I rise to defend the sacred rights of the individual—”

A murmur ran through the crowd and many faces expressed surprise. It had been believed by

nearly everybody that Carson would defend the bill.

Carson paused. His thoughts were still far away, but they were coming back toward him. He glanced down at the manuscript, again and continued:

“Hence I oppose the bill. I admit that it means to do good. I concede the lofty purpose of those who framed it but I hold that they are grievously mistaken. Seeking for the right they inflict the wrong.”

The deep earnest ring of his voice impressed the House, and already the applause began to rise. Alice’s face turned from deadly white to rosy red, but the gloved hands trembled.

Carson went on with the speech, still in his usual preliminary daze, although his mind was beginning to clear now, and in a few more minutes he would have his firm grasp on things. But to the House he seemed from the first a man in intense, burning earnest.

Suddenly the haze about Carson passed wholly away, and the last words that he had said yet

echoed in his ears; with it too came the echo of the applause that those words had drawn. He looked around and saw a vast circle of eager, intent faces all bent upon him. Then for a moment his heart ceased to beat; the echo ringing in his ears was not the echo of the words that he had written, but of his wife's.

White-faced he glanced down at the manuscript that seemed to stare up at him, and he knew it now. Already he was on the third page and he was committed against the bill. Moreover he was making a deep impression, he could see that, his eloquence and argument were carrying the House with him.

Carson was normally a slow man, but in great emergencies he could form great resolutions and carry them out quickly. He went on with the speech. He did not look down again at the manuscript. He knew it by heart, and moreover he had told Alice often that it contained many good points. These points now seemed better than ever to him. The people were astonished and delighted. Good speaker that they knew Carson to be he surpassed the wildest expectations, and all

the while one woman who loved him best was in a quiver half of fear and half of joy.

It was Carson who carried the day: a fact that everybody conceded. When the speaking was over and the vote was taken the bill was beaten by a decisive majority. The member from Warren County and his wife were overwhelmed with congratulations on his splendid speech. But as soon as he could escape from these good friends they went for their favorite walk on the hills.

They did not speak until they were on the crest, and Alice's gloved fingers began to tremble again. At last he looked down at her, but only love and tenderness showed in his eyes.

"What a queer mistake!" he said. "How could you possibly have put the wrong speech in my pocket!"

Her breath came quickly. Here was a way out! But she was too honest to take it.

"It was not a mistake," she said, and her voice was low and trembling, "I did it on purpose."

He was silent for a little while, but Harry Carson was in some vital respects a great man.

“You were in the right after all,” he said, “and through you I have won a victory. But you must n’t do it again.”

“I won’t,” she said, and he bending his head, kissed her.



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