

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

# **How Carroll Came Home**

**Richard M. Woodward, Publisher**

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Tom Carroll did not get off the train until it reached the end of the little branch road at Edgar, a tiny village in a nook of the mountains. But Edgar was more important than it looked. Many narrow but fertile valleys cut their way through the ridges, and in the soft soil along the creeks thrifty farmers raised much good tobacco, for which men in the cities were willing to pay big prices. Otherwise the country was not fertile. The mountains, low but steep, were covered with a second growth of trees, save where the ax of the lumberman had made a ragged gash, or the forest fire had left a bare brown trail. The houses were hidden away in the coves, and to the unseeing eye here was only the wilderness.

But the great pulse in Tom Carroll's throat leaped so hard that it caused him actual physical pain. This was the country in which he was born! Here was home! He knew Edgar, and the cause of

its existence—the hogsheads of tobacco hauled in day after day from the fertile hollows in the hills.

Carroll drew a mighty breath. Nothing was changed. He might have been returning from a day's trip, instead of three years on the other side of the world among the steaming jungles of the Philippines, fighting bandits and head hunters. All the while the feeling that he was coming home was gaining in volume and intensity, and now that he had reached the last station he had a heart full of tenderness for everything.

Carroll still wore his old khaki suit, and when he was discharged he had bought the fine high powered army rifle that he had used in many an obscure and forgotten, but none the less desperate skirmish. It attracted little attention, as many men carried rifles in the mountains. The cartridge belt round his waist might have made comments, but it was hidden by his coat. He wore the belt merely as a convenient way to carry it.

Carroll walked across the track and offered his hand to Thompson, the saturnine agent. Thompson recognized him at once, although he had returned with a face many shades darker.

“Well, you did come back, Tom,” he said. “I always said you would.”

“May I leave my valise in the station?” asked Carroll. “I’ll send for it in a few days.”

“Sure thing,” replied Thompson. “Going to cut across the mountains for home?”

“I reckon I will.”

“You won’t hit your home till nearly midnight; but the nights are light, and the dusk will make travelin’ cooler.”

“That’s so. This hike will be a picnic beside some that I’ve had.”

He nodded to Thompson, and, shouldering his rifle, set out upon his journey. The walk of fifteen miles in the cool air upon the clear mountains was nothing to one who had marched his way for months through the foul mud and miasma of the tropical East.

A tall suntanned, lean young man, he walked briskly on for a long time, keeping to the main

road. He met a farmer riding in for his mail, a boy taking wheat to a mill, and a woman carrying eggs to market. He knew at all three and greeted them warmly. The pulse in his throat insisted on leaping up every time he saw a familiar face. How friendly the mountains looked! Everything was firm, strong, and clean! He was in his own land and among his own people! His happiness would have been complete had it not been for the old pain that stabbed now and then like a needle at his heart.

The sun now hung low over the western mountains, touching their crests and sides with ruddy gold. The light breeze grew cooler on the tanned face of Tom Carroll. Presently he left the road, and followed a little path that led higher among the hills. He could save a mile or two this way. The twilight now faded suddenly, and full night came. Yet it was not dark, merely a sort of luminous dusk in which the world, tinted faintly with silver, seemed very beautiful. He increased his step, and walked on at a swinging easy pace, feeling no weariness whatever. He had learned on the other side of the globe how to march. Often it

had seemed to him that he was destined to spend his whole life in marching.

The night deepened and the moon rode high. The great stars whirled and danced in a sky of silky blue, and Carroll moved swiftly on, a youthful figure, fine and strong, the single human note in this pleasant wilderness. Afterward he saw a light to his right and lower down. Then he remembered. In the cove there lived Widow Blake, a relative of his, old enough to be his mother, who had always been very fond of him. A short curve and not more than a quarter of an hour lost would bring him to her home. He swung into the curve, descended the slope, and passed through the tobacco fields toward the house.

The land was very rich in this little valley. The tobacco grew heavy here. Carroll had seen the plants reaching to his shoulder and with great green leaves as wide as those of palms. Widow Blake had inherited a fine farm from her husband, and she was a good manager. Carroll knew the big barn to the right of the house would be filled with the best quality of tobacco undergoing the process of curing.

He kept straight on toward the light, opened the gate to the yard, and followed the little brick walk to the front door. He could see in the moonlight that nothing had been changed here, either. To the right and to the left were the same flowerbeds, and the walk was bordered on each side by little pines clipped just as they were of old, of which the widow was so proud.

Carroll's footfalls rang firmly on the bricks and again on the portico as he reached the front door; but he heard no stir inside. He knocked once, twice, thrice, without answer, and he wondered. He could see from the portico that the light in the window was still burning, and someone must be at home. He turned the doorknob and pushed. The door came open so easily that he almost fell inside. He was still in the dark; but he heard a strangled cry. Then he straightened himself up quickly, and stood listening. Perhaps it was his old Philippine habit that made his finger stray down to the trigger of his rifle.

“Why have you come into the house?” quavered a frightened voice. “I have done all that you asked, Mr. Haswell. See, the light is at the window!”

Tom Carroll fairly shuddered from head to foot at the name Haswell. A red flash passed before his eyes, and then all was darkness again; but he heard the entreating voice continue.

“I pray you, Jim Haswell, to do no violence in this house! Why do you come here with your rifle?”

It was the voice of the widow—Cousin Mary he had always called her—and as his eyes grew more used to the darkness he saw her standing before him, her hands clasped in entreaty, her eyes full of appeal. He stood there for a few moments motionless, wondering at this singular greeting. He did not know that the broad brim of his slouch hat almost hid his face, and that in height and size he and Jim Haswell were almost a match.

“Why, Cousin Mary,” he exclaimed, “it’s not Jim Haswell! It’s I, Tom Carroll, come back from

the Philippines. I'm on my way home, and, as I was passing I just dropped in a minute to see you."

"Tom! Tom!" she exclaimed incredulously, and then she added with belief, "Why, it is Tom, Tom Carroll and he's come back from the Philippines." Suddenly she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him. Carroll saw that it was partly gladness and partly nervous hysteria.

"It's really you, Tom!" she exclaimed. "Sit down, sit down on the chair there! We thought you were dead. Nobody had heard from you since you left. And to think of your coming back, coming here to this house on this night!"

Carroll stared at her. Clearly it was hysteria. He thought that for some reason she might be afraid of him, and he rose from his chair in order to go nearer and tell her that he was the same old Tom. but she cried in a tone full of anxiety:

"Keep back! Don't get in front of the lighted window! Stay in the dark."

Her voice was so imperative that he stepped back again. Yet his curiosity was aroused to the

highest pitch. Widow Blake was a woman of courage and strong mind; but he felt that he had walked suddenly into something extraordinary. He meant to know what it was.

“Cousin Mary,” he said calmly, knowing the power of the human voice over others, “you are in great fear of somebody or something. What is it? And what about that lighted candle in the window? Why should I keep away from that window?”

“Don’t ask me!” she entreated. “It will be all the worse for you to be involved in it. Go away, Tom, go as soon as you can. Here, slip out at the back door, and you won’t be seen.”

“Perhaps I can help,” said Carroll.

“No: they would be too many for you.”

“Maybe not,” persisted Carroll. “I don’t who ‘they’ are; but I want you to bear in mind, Cousin Mary, that I’ve got here one of the best rifles the United States Government can make. It will kill at a mile and I’ve got seven medals for sharpshooting. I held off twenty head hunters with it once. It was in my hands when I went with

our crowd up the steep side of a mountain and into a crater, where we cleaned out an army of brigands. Cousin Mary, I don't want to brag but I've looked in the face of death so often in the last three years that I don't think much of it any more. Now if I have to do it to help you, I'm going to take another look at that same face. You've got to tell me what it is, because I'm not going out of this house until you do!"

His tone was that of one who had made up his mind, and it was so firm and strong that a current of courage seemed to follow from him to her.

"Come here" she said; "stand against the wall by the side of the window. That is right: they can't see us here."

They were against the wall, and the lighted lamp that stood on a little table was only two feet away. She took a sheet of paper from her dress and handed it to him. He held it toward the light and read:

TO MRS. MARY BLAKE—You have disobeyed our orders. You have failed to join our association. You have sold as you please. We are coming Wednesday night to make you suffer for it. Put a light in an open window as a sign that you have received this, and take heed. Keep your family at home; but let no one else be there. If you disobey in anything, it will be all the worse for you. THE COMMITTEE

“Now what under the sun does this mean?” exclaimed the astonished Carroll.

“You have been away so long that you have not heard,” she said. “It is the tobacco. There is a league, desparate men who forbid us to sell until they give the word. Still, I sold part of mine. I wanted the money. I am a woman, and I did not think they would harm me. But they will come, they will burn and destroy, and I dared not go away or send for help, lest worse happen. It is Jim Haswell who leads them. He wrote this note. I know his writing.”

“Ah!” said Tom Carroll.

“Now go away! You can do no good, and would only get yourself hurt.”

The widow did not see Tom Carroll’s face. It was contracted by an emotion intense and terrible. He had shuddered again from head to foot at the mention of Jim Haswell’s name—a shudder of anger, not of fear.

“I am not going; but you are,” he said.

“No! No!”

“Yes, it’s going to be done that way. Where are the children?”

“Upstairs, asleep. I thought it best not to tell them—yet.”

“Then wake them up, make them dress as quickly as possible, and all of you get out the back way inside of five minutes. Go through the woods to Zack Summers’ house. It’s not more than a mile away. Now don’t say a word; but go! Haven’t I told you this rifle of mine is one of the finest ever made by the United States Government, and that once I held off twenty head hunters with it?”

The woman stared at him. She had known Tom

Carroll all his life, chiefly as a boy, but there was something new about him now. He was fierce, commanding, and she felt instinctively that he must be obeyed.

“Tom,” she said, “I can’t go away and leave you to face Tom Haswell and those men. They are determined and cruel, and they have done merciless things.”

He tapped the high powered rifle significantly. “You’re wasting time, Cousin Mary,” he said.

She started for the stairway, but before she reached it she stopped a moment. She had remembered something. “Tom,” she said, “I—I am very grateful because you help me, but—but is it for that alone that you do it.”

If it had not been for the dark in the room she would have seen a deep flush suffuse through the tan on Carroll’s face, but he merely repeated, “You’re wasting time, Cousin Mary. Hurry!”

The widow and her children were out of the house two minutes later, and were fleeing through the forest to Summers’ home, leaving Carroll alone in the room.

Tom Carroll was happy; but it was a happiness wholly unlike that which he felt a few hours ago. That was peaceful; now his temples throbbed with savage exultation. His hour had come when he least expected



An old and worn letter it—and in such a way! The law was with him. He might do as he chose. His heart hardened and the sooner they came the better he would be pleased. He moved again by the wall to the light and took from the inside of his tunic an old and worn letter. Of course he knew every word of it by heart; but he wished to look at it again, merely in order to see *her* handwriting.

It was the impulsive letter of a young girl, showing all the signs of having been written in haste. There had been a little quarrel between them the day before, a trivial affair, which both might have forgotten quickly, but she said in her letter that their engagement was broken and she

was going to marry Jim Haswell. He had taken the train at Edgar the next morning, and within twenty-four hours was an enlisted soldier on the way to the Philippines. He had not heard from home since. Letters, no doubt, had been sent to him; but they did not reach the private who was forever marching through the tropical jungle.

He thought over it again for the thousandth time, and it seemed to him now that his thoughts were more bitter than ever. How beautiful she had been! Slender and light, always in motion, he had never known anyone more vividly alive. She was like a flash of flame before his eyes. She had not meant to quarrel with him. The pretty, teasing words were natural to her. He was wholly to blame. He uttered a deep sigh as he put the letter back into his tunic. Time could not soften. It must have been some trick of shifty Jim Haswell's. He had come in at the crucial moment and had caught her before her sore spirit could recover. Now she was Haswell's wife, and, having hated Haswell bitterly for more than three years, he hated him at this moment more than ever.

In the veins of Tom Carroll flowed the blood

of ancestors who had fought in savage wars with the Indians, and in feuds of the mountains almost as savage. It was hot and leaping now. What luck to have kept with him that fine, high powered rifle. And it was not for nothing that he had been considered the best sharpshooter in the Philippines. His hand stroked the steel barrel, and it was as smooth and pleasant to his touch as the cheek of a girl. What a comrade!

He opened the door, and, stepping out upon the porch, listened intently. He heard nothing but the wind, so gentle that it was like a sigh among the leaves. The moon still rode high, dropping silver veil as fine mist over the earth. The crests of the distant mountains seemed to glow with a soft light.

Keeping within the shadow of the pines, he left the house and went to the great barn fifty yards away. It was filled with tobacco, heavy and rich, and in a stable nearby a dozen horses and mules were at rest. Truly Widow Blake was an able manager.

Standing by the barn, he looked back at the house. The light in the window burned brightly

and could be seen far. He had no doubt that Haswell and his riders would come soon, and he listened for their hoofbeats. Again he heard nothing; but he knew how to be patient.

Circumstance had suddenly carried Carroll into the past. He was like his ancestors who had fought the savages in the deep forest, and he was ready to practise all their wiles and tricks. Almost midway between the house and the barn was a great beech with boughs drooping low. When he stood against the trunk he was completely concealed and yet could see everything that passed in a wide circle.

He kept his position there, waiting, always waiting with set purpose. He did not move; yet the blood in his veins was still hot and leaping. Nothing escaped his notice. One or two clouds appeared in the blue sky, and he saw them; the wind rose a little, and he was aware of it; and then, far out and faint, came the sound for which he had waited so patiently—the hoofbeats of Haswell and his riders.

It seemed to Carroll that the little pulses in his temples stopped beating, and that his blood all at once grew cold. It had been his great quality as a soldier to be calm in the moment of crisis, and here he was the same that he had been in the jungles of Samar.

The hoofbeats grew louder. The riders must be at least a dozen. It did not matter. The darkness and his skill gave him an advantage that nullified numbers. He was still motionless by the trunk of the tree, save that one hand again stroked lovingly the steel barrel of the rifle. Then he saw them coming up the road, twelve men on horseback, all wearing loose masks of cloth. He laughed softly. Mask or no mask, he would have known anywhere in the world that the leader was Jim Haswell. He recognized the figure perfectly in the moonlight. The hand that had been stroking the rifle barrel moved to the trigger. Yet he restrained himself. Truly his hour had come! Nothing could have been more complete.

The men halted at the yard fence, and then three or four of them, Haswell at their head,

dismounting, entered the house. Carroll again laughed in his soundless way, and waited patiently. In five minutes they came out again, and he heard oaths. Then they remounted and rode to the barn, passing very near him. He heard Haswell say, "She had disobeyed. She has gone. Well, she shall pay for it!"

They halted by the barn, and all dismounted. Then one went back and brought the lamp. The others, meanwhile, heaped dry wood against the side of the barn. They now discarded their masks as useless, and Carroll recognized three or four besides Haswell. He heard their words plainly.

"You can touch the light to it now, Macy," said Haswell, "and the whole place with ten thousand dollars worth of tobacco in it will be gone in an hour."

Macy lowered the lamp, which was without chimney and was burning with a strong flame, but he suddenly straightened up again when a loud voice called, "Drop that lamp."

He stared in astonishment, holding the lamp outstretched; but the next instant it was dashed

from his hands by a rifleshot. The men huddled together in confusion, and sought to tell from what point the shot had come; but the surprise was too great, and none noticed the tall figure standing in the shadow under the boughs of the great beech.

Haswell had plenty of courage, and he ordered his men to rush for the other side of the barn, where they might be sheltered from hidden marksmen, and could yet do the same thing they had come to do. They obeyed willingly enough. Shelter was just what they wanted. The shot from the dark was not only terrifying in itself, but the mystery of it awed them.

Carroll saw them run, and his lips twisted into a smile of bitter scorn. Brave men, indeed. Brave enough to burn a widow's barn, but not brave enough to face a single man and his rifle. They were well armed too. All of them carried rifles or pistols. As they ran he fired two more shots. One kicked up the earth under a man's heels, and a second whistled close to the ear of another. He had not meant them to hit.

Just before they reached the corner of the barn



Taking the shot

he caught a full view of Haswell. He saw the startled face of the trickster and midnight criminal. He remembered the girl who had been so full of vitality and light that she was like a flame

before him, and the rifle sprang again to his shoulder, now with deadly intent.

He had been the best sharpshooter in all the Philippines, and his moment had come! The blood of the old forest fighters was dancing now through the veins, and the muzzle of his rifle bore squarely on Haswell's heart. As he looked down the sights, the girl's face, laughing and so alive, floated again before him. The muzzle of the rifle shifted a little, and he pulled the trigger. Haswell threw up his arms, cried aloud, and fell. The others in mortal fear of their unseen enemy, rushed for their horses, leaped upon them, and galloped away. Carroll listened, as the thud of

hoofs grew fainter and died. Then he heard no sound but the sighing of the wind through the trees like a minor note in music. He was alone with his enemy, lying helpless under his hand.

Slipping fresh cartridges into his rifle, Carroll walked toward Haswell, whom he could see, a dark shape on the earth near the barn. As he approached he heard him groan; but it was not sweet to his ear. For a brief instant he wondered why. Then he stood over his enemy, and, looking down into his face, said:

“Well, Jim, I’ve come back!”

Haswell was wounded in the shoulder, but when he saw the face above him and heard the voice he turned quite white. “Carroll! Tom Carroll!” he exclaimed. “And you’ve come back from the dead to do this!”

“Not exactly from the dead,” replied Carroll, but I’ve come a long way, and it seems that I’ve got here just in time.”

“I’m at your mercy,” said Haswell.

“That’s so. I intended to shoot you through the heart; but something, I think it was Alice’s face, made me shift my aim.”

He stooped, drew a pistol from Haswell’s belt, and threw it away. Then he looked down again and studied the face of the fallen man.

“Well,” said Haswell, “why don’t you do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“It might be better to finish it quickly. If you were to leave me here, I’d bleed to death anyway.”

“That’s so,” repeated Carroll thoughtfully.

“I’m not asking anything of you, Tom, but you and me quarreled about a girl, and I guess men have been quarreling about girls since the world began.”

“That’s so, too.”

Then both were silent. Tom Carroll was in doubt. He returned from that primitive past to the present. He was no longer the forest fighter; the hot blood was not leaping in his veins; instead it flowed in a slow, cool tide. His moment had

come and passed; but he had seized it, and here was his enemy with whom he might do as he chose. He looked up at the high moon and the great stars; but they gave no advice. Then he remembered her face, not laughing now, but appealing. She was Jim Haswell's wife. Well, it had been her right to marry as she pleased.

He took off Haswell's coat, cut it into strips, and tightly bound up the wounded shoulder. Then he lifted the man in his arms, carried him into the house, and put him upon a sofa. He lighted another lamp; but he closed the window. He put a pillow under Haswell's head and brought him some water. The man drank long and eagerly. Then he looked intently at Carroll.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"I don't know," replied Carroll; "but I'd advise you to go to sleep if you can. That wound will trouble you for several weeks; but you'll get well. I've had plenty of experience with such things.

Haswell closed his eyes, and after awhile slept. Carroll sat silently in a chair near the light, and for hours did not move. He was not satisfied. His

moment had come as he repeated so often to himself, but it had been wanting in savor. Haswell was a tricky, cruel man, and he was helpless now, and Carroll was angry with himself because he was beginning to hate him less. He strove to bring back the full tide of wrath and revenge; but it seemed to him that his heart was quite empty of them now, and would not fill again.

He rose at last, and opened the window once more. Over the eastern mountains he saw the first shoot of rosy dawn. How much has happened in the night! In a few hours the whole world had changed. He glanced back at the sofa. Haswell was awake and looking at him. Carroll brought him more water, and he drank thirstily.

“Tom Carroll, why have you done this?” he asked, and again Carroll replied:

“I don’t know.”

Haswell lay silent a little while, then he said, “You got a letter the night before you went away

to be a soldier?”

A shudder again shook Carroll from head to foot; but he replied, “How do you know?”

“I know because I wrote it. That letter was a forgery, Tom. I could imitate her writing perfectly. I knew there had been some words between you, and I sent that note hoping would you do what you did—they were calling for soldiers then—and leave a clear field for me. I loved her with every heart beat. I loved her as much as you did, Tom.”

There was a terrible silence in the room. Carroll trembled all over. Why had he spared this man? He raised the rifle that he had left leaning against the wall; but Haswell lifted a hand slightly and laughed.

“Just wait a little, Jim,” he said. “The trick didn’t do me any good. Alice has never married me; she wouldn’t even see me. She’s married nobody. She’s down there at her home now, waiting for you. She’s the only one who has believed that you would ever come back.”

Carroll staggered and passed a hand before his

eyes. But when his hand came away he saw light, a world full of golden light, and her in the middle of it like a flame before him.

“Jim,” he said, and his voice was very gentle to the conquered, “they’ll be here from the Summers farm in an hour, and I’ll leave you there on the sofa. As for me, I’m going straight down to her house.”

He went out, and walked swiftly along a path between the hills. The world was silvery with dew; but he saw before him only a tender face, full of life and welcome.



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“How Carroll Came Home” was published in the *New York Tribune* newspaper, October 15, 1911.

