

# **CARSON OF RED RIVER**

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# **CARSON OF RED RIVER**

## CHAPTER I

### BLAKE'S PIANO

The evening was calm, and the window at Blake's flat by the river mouth was open. Kit Carson, standing with his back against the curtains, felt the rather shabby room was homelike, and for long he had not known a home. When he got a holiday he went to Netherhall, and after the drawing office, he liked to carry a gun across the moors; but the big house at the dale head had not the charm that marked Blake's cheap flat.

Kit, however, thought the room less shabby than usual. For one thing, Mrs. Blake had got a new rug and the soft green harmonized with the brown stained boards. Then a new cottage piano occupied a corner and a water-color drawing, Kit's present to Mabel Blake, was on the wall. Kit had an eye for line and he thought the drawing was not bad. Perhaps its purchase was something of an extravagance, but Kit was extravagant and Mabel was his pal's wife.

Kit felt the charm that marked the flat was really Mabel's. She was plucky and cheerful, although her fight was hard. Blake was a sober fellow, but when he married her had debts, and his pay, like Kit's, was small. Kit was his groom, and at the wedding had rather thought to lose his friend. Instead, he had got another.

Mrs. Blake, carrying a tray, came in, and when Blake took her load, gave Kit a happy smile.

“The pennies for the meter did not run out, and my birthday feast is served,” she said, and balancing on an arched foot, as if she meant to dance, indicated her dress. “But how do you like my new clothes?”

Kit studied her. Mabel Blake was short and light; her figure was boyish and Kit knew her boyishly alert and happy.

“I can’t judge the material, but the lines are good. One gets a sense of balance and poise, which, I think, is not altogether the dressmaker’s art. Anyhow, you can dance, and if the shipyard company goes broke we’ll try our luck on the road. You will dance for crowded houses and I will play the lute. Tom, perhaps, might be business manager.”

Mabel laughed and Blake grinned, for he knew the others knew his money went.

“Isn’t the lute rather out-of-date?” he inquired.

“Ah,” said Kit, “there’s its attraction! The troubadours used the lute and your wife has got the joy and confidence people knew in the old spacious days.”

“I wonder whether those days were joyous,” said Blake. “All the same, Mabel’s pluck is good. When we married she undertook an awkward job, but she never grumbles. Anyhow, you’re not a troubadour. Your job’s to make drawings for modern machines.”

“There’s sober Tom!” Mabel remarked. “But supper will soon get cold.”

They sat down at the little round table, and Mabel, glancing at Kit, rather thought he ascribed to her qualities that were properly his.

Kit, like her husband, had a post in the drawing office at the shipbuilding yard. He was thin but athletic, and as a rule his eyes twinkled. Kit indulged his whimsical imagination and sometimes one did not know if he joked. Mrs. Blake knew him generous and romantic, but he was a first-class draftsman and made progress at the office. In the meantime, Kit, with frank satisfaction, used his knife and fork. At Netherhall one dined ceremoniously and wore evening clothes, but one did not get food like the suppers Mabel cooked on the gas stove. By and by she indicated the piano.

“Sometimes you’re not very keen, Kit. For example, I was forced to point out I’d got new clothes and ask for a compliment; and now it looks as if you had not noticed all Tom’s extravagance. But perhaps you want to be polite?”

“I saw the piano, and after supper I’ll try it. Just now I’m very happily occupied. All the same, I’m glad to see Tom’s luck has turned.”

“The piano’s not yet ours and we’ll talk about it again,” said Blake. “Until Kit has satisfied his appetite you must leave him alone, Mabel. Although he’s sometimes romantic, he’s frankly flesh and blood.”

“The flesh is not very conspicuous,” Kit rejoined, and gave Mrs. Blake his plate. “One sees why Tom gets fat. If you’d like a sincere compliment may I have some more?”

By and by Blake and Kit carried off the plates, and when they came back Kit turned down the light and signing the others to the window, pulled the curtain along the rod. The flat was at the top of a tall building, the night was fine, and one looked down on rows of houses and the dark river. On the other bank blast-lamps’ flames

tossed, and the trembling illumination touched skeleton ships. Hammers rang with a rhythmic beat; and at the top of the steep slope steelworks engines throbbed. In the background a pillar of fire, intense and white, was reflected by a cloud. The pillar sank and vanished, and by contrast all was dark.

“Janions’ converter,” said Kit. “If they roll us the plates as they agreed, you ought soon to run the *Mariposa* down the launching ways. I don’t know if her boiler will be ready.”

“Then you’re not satisfied about the circulation?” Blake inquired, and Kit thought his interest rather keen.

“We are nearly satisfied. Colvin’s hurrying me, and when Mabel has had enough I must go back to the office: the tube-shop foreman wants some particulars. Anyhow, we mustn’t bore Mabel. I like your window, madam. It commands a moving view.”

“The fires and grime of industry?” said Mabel and laughed. “I begin to doubt if I know you, Mr. Carson. Sometimes you’re the minstrel you talk about, and sometimes a shipbuilder. Which would you really like to be?”

“I don’t know. There’s the trouble. Anyhow, I do like your window. It commands the road to countries not yet modernized—where men beat the monkey-skin drums and play the pipes, make love by primitive rules and kill their rivals. For example——”

A whistle shrieked on a high note and dropped to a harmonious chord; a ruby beam moved across the trembling reflections. Then a funnel and a vague, long hull stole through the shipyard smoke. The beam faded, the hull was foreshortened and the ship went



round a bend. The wave she threw off beat the bank and melted in the dark.

“The *Negapatam*, bound for Singapore and the Malay seas,” said Kit. “But I expect you get cold.”

Blake shut the window and pulled chairs to the small gas fire; and Kit thought his doing so characteristic. Tom was a very good sort, but he was sober and, so to speak, rather soft.

“Why must you go back to the office on my birthday?” Mrs. Blake inquired.

“Well, you see, I get my pay for building ships, and the *Mariposa* will soon be waiting for her fast-steaming, anti-incrustation boiler. Our boiler; the very latest thing of the water-tube type!”

“What is a water-tube boiler? And why are you so keen about the *Mariposa*’s?”

“In an ordinary marine boiler the flame goes through the flues; in the water-tube pattern the water circulates in tubes and the flame is outside. The type has some drawbacks I mustn’t bother you about, but it steams fast and carries a heavy pressure. Well, a foreign government requires four small, swift, shallow boats for tropical rivers and has ordered two; one from us, and one from the opposition yard.”

Mrs. Blake nodded. “The *Mariposa*’s yours; if she beats the other boat, you will build the lot?”

“Colvin hopes we’ll do so. The rivers she’ll navigate are muddy, and in a water-tube boiler mud is awkward. We have been forced to modify our standard pattern, but if we get the results we expect,

we reckon on beating the other boat. The improvements cannot be patented, and in consequence we don't talk about our plans."

"But if the *Mariposa* wins, your competitors may bribe somebody to study her boiler."

"It's possible," Kit agreed. "All the same, the tubes are covered by a casing, and if the opposition did find out something useful, we'd have begun to build the fleet. Now you know all about it and we have done with shipbuilding. Let's try the new piano!"

He went to the piano and began to play. The others knew his talent, but they thought the music strange and melancholy. Yet the air was haunting.

"It is not piano music," Blake remarked.

"I expect it was first written for the guitar; Spanish music's Moorish music. Don't you hear the strings and the wind in the sand? Can't you picture the camel-dung fires in front of the black tents, and smell the curling smoke. But I'll try a song. It's about the King of Spain who lost Gibraltar, but did not lose all the fellow lost who lost his heart. Do you hear the guitars tinkle under the lattice window?"

"I do not," said Blake, smiling. "Still, you see, I'm not a lute player."

"Oh, well, the next lot's blatantly pictorial," said Kit and pushed down the pedal. "Shipyard hammers! You can hear that! Now the *Negapatam*'s whistle calls in the smoke and fog. She steals down river; her screw throbs steadily and stops. The pilot's boat vanishes and the engines beat a quicker rhythm. The dark water heaves and

splashes at the bows. She steers south for sunshine and the islands of pearls and spice.”

He shut the piano and swung the revolving stool. “Well, the instrument’s jolly good and I hope it will soon be yours.”

“The company stipulates for punctual payments,” Blake remarked.

“If you can stand for my bringing my fiddle and Mabel will play, I’ll meet the next installment. I’ve got some fresh music, but my landlady’s restive and I imagine she means to be firm.”

“Practise when you like,” said Mabel. “You have talent, Kit, and I think you know our house is yours.”

“I know you are very kind, and Tom’s a first-class sort. When I joined up at the yard I was raw and trustful, but he saw me through the boiler shop and steered me past some awkward pitfalls. At the yard, he’s old Tom and famous for his staunchness and soberness. Then when he married I got another friend and now your house is home. Well, I hope your birthdays will be happy and numerous. Your faithful servant, ma’am!”

Blake’s look was rather embarrassed, but Mabel’s smile was frank and kind. She trusted her husband and Tom was altogether her lover. Kit admitted he had not used much reserve, but Mabel knew his sincerity, and when he declared he was her servant he did not boast. He owed his friends much and his habit was to pay his debts. Then Mabel turned her head, as if she listened, and got up.

“I haven’t yet given you coffee, and I believe the stove is out. Have you a penny, Tom?”

“Perhaps it’s strange, but I have two shillings, and I don’t know a stove that cooks like yours,” said Kit. “To-night’s a festival. Let’s be generous!”

“You don’t keep house,” Mabel rejoined. “So long as the stove is just, I’m content, but sometimes I doubt.”

She took the penny, and when she went off Blake pulled out his wallet.

“My debt has bothered me, Kit, and to pay is some relief. I’m afraid I forced you to be frugal.”

Kit left the notes alone. When Blake married he was embarrassed for money and Kit urged him to use his.

“You must think for Mabel. I don’t want the sum.”

“Take the notes,” said Blake, and indicated the piano. “My luck has rather obviously begun to turn.”

“I admit I wondered,” Kit remarked.

Blake lighted his pipe and knitted his brows. Kit had recently imagined Tom’s look was careworn.

“You are entitled to inquire. Not long since I took my model to Allinson and he was interested. In fact he was willing to help me experiment.”

“Splendid!” said Kit, for Blake had long experimented on an improvement for the marine oil-engine. “Allinson’s the man to make the thing go.”

“If I’d seen him sooner, it would have helped,” Blake remarked, rather moodily. “Anyhow, he agrees the gear will work, and since he thinks we can get a patent, he gave me a small sum for an option. It accounts for the piano, and my paying my debt. The notes are yours. Thank you, Kit!”

Kit took the notes and soon afterwards Mabel carried in the coffee. They began to talk about Blake’s invention, but by and by she asked: “Are you going to Netherhall for your holidays, Kit?”

“I hope to get off after the *Mariposa*’s trial run.”

Mrs. Blake smiled, a sympathetic smile. “You want to feel you go in triumph? Well, since you made the boiler drawings, if the *Mariposa* steams very fast, it will be something of a triumph.”

“I’d like Evelyn to know I made some progress,” Kit admitted modestly.

“You promised to show me her portrait. Have you got it?”

Kit pulled out his pocket-book and Mabel studied the photograph. Evelyn was obviously young, and Mabel thought her attractive, but she was not altogether satisfied. Evelyn’s mouth was ominously firm, and one got a hint of hardness. The girl was perhaps ambitious; she was not generous....

“She has not yet promised to marry you?”

“Not yet. Our relations know my hopes and I think, on the whole, approve, but Evelyn is not rich and my poverty is notorious. There’s a sort of agreement that if I make good and get a proper post, we may talk about an engagement.”

“But are not your relations rich?”

“My uncle, Alan Carson, was accountable for my premium at the shipyard,” Kit replied in a thoughtful voice. “He’s a very good sort, but he’s justified to stop; then, although Netherhall’s a beautiful old house, the estate is his wife’s. To get me a proper job is my other uncle’s part, but, so far, I haven’t bothered him, and it does not look as if he were very keen. Anyhow, if he does get me a post, it will probably be abroad.”

“Ah,” said Blake, “the power your old, landowning families use is strange! You command our battleships, you rule the Indian Civil Service, and you marry American millionaires. But where do you expect to go?”

Kit smiled. “The Carsons are not landlords, and belong to another lot. We have nothing to do with India and battleships. Our business is to hammer iron, and for the most part our investments are in Canada....”

He stopped and getting up, resumed: “Mabel’s tired; I expect you have had enough, and I must push off for the office.”

Mabel gave him her hand, told him to come back soon, and let him go.

## CHAPTER II

### THE DRAWING-OFFICE

At the top of the steps to the drawing-office Kit stopped and leaned against the rails. The building slips were occupied, and when work was pushed ahead at night he liked to look about the yard. Smoke rolled across the river; the tide ebbed and wet mudbanks reflected the steelworks fires. When the flames got dim, smaller lights trembled on the curving channel. On one side bare, skeletons of ships melted in the gloom, and behind dark walls wheels rolled. Then sparks blew from twinkling forges on a wooden stage and light hammers rattled like a rifle volley.

Kit knew the rivet gang fastened the *Mariposa's* plates, but he must get to work and he pulled out his key. The head draftsman, Blake, and the night watchman had other keys. When Kit opened the door he heard steps and somebody shouted:

"Hello, Mr. Carson!"

Kit turned and saw the boiler-shop foreman in the yard.

"When do you reckon to start us on the *Mariposa's* job?"

"You'll get the drawings in a day or two," Kit replied. "I expect Robbins will take the plans to Colvin in the morning, and if he is satisfied, we'll make the blue prints. You have, no doubt, got your orders?"

"All's ready to shove ahead. Robbins doesn't want the tubes to stand in frame for folks to look at, and as soon as the joints are made we'll put the casing on. Well, I reckon my lot won't talk, and

nobody but myself will handle the plans. The boat's a pretty model and looks as if she'd go, but our job's to drive her, and I expect the opposition would give something for your prints."

"It's possible," Kit agreed. "All the same, I understand their boat's frames are up, and they have, no doubt, begun the boiler. I must get to work at ours. Good-night, Seeley!"

He shut the door, switched on a light, and sat down. The spacious office throbbed and when the hammers crashed the windows rattled, but on the whole the noise was soothing. For the greater part of twelve hours Kit had been strenuously occupied, and now for a few minutes he could relax.

He pictured Blake and Mabel by the gas fire at the little flat, talking about Tom's good luck. Well, Tom deserved his luck; he was a first-class pal, and at the beginning had helped Kit more than he knew. Then Kit imagined for Tom to meet his household bills was hard; his clothes were not very good and he brought his lunch to the office. Tom, however, had Mabel, and Kit thought she justified all the self-denial a man, for her sake, could use.

Kit pictured her shopping where food was cheap, counting the pennies for the meter-stove, and improvising supper for her husband's friends. Yet she was happy. Mabel had a man's pluck, and sometimes when Kit thought about her he was moved. But he was not at all her lover. Mabel was his pal's wife and, when he was rich, he was going to marry Evelyn. To think about it would not help and he must get his drawing-board.

Unlocking a cupboard, he carried the board to a table and put out his drawing instruments. The boiler was the manager's and the head draftsman's job, but they did not draw the plans. They told



Kit their notions, gave him rough sketches, and allowed him to calculate dimensions and work out details. His part was important, and he liked to know the others trusted him. In fact, if the boiler steamed as it ought to steam, he imagined they would frankly acknowledge his help, and their doing so implied his getting a better post. On the whole, he would rather stay at the yard than bother his uncle. So far, it did not look as if his progress interested Jasper Carson.

Kit measured some tubes on the drawing and began to calculate. The calculations were intricate, and by and by he pulled out his watch. His brain was getting dull, and since he did not want to stop until morning, he must brace up. He tried again and found his reckoning accurate. The trouble was, a curved tube was rather small, and the bend was sharp. It might check the water's even flow and one must allow for incrustation.

Now Kit thought about it, he had stated something like that to Colvin, and in the first plans the tube was larger. He was persuaded the first plans would work, but Colvin did not agree. Kit went to the cupboard for the drawings he had made some time since, and stretching the paper on a board, stopped and moved the light. Where he had used the compasses another time he saw two small marks, as if somebody had used a larger radius to sweep the curve. Kit knitted his brows; he did not think he had lengthened the radius, but if he had done so, it would give an easier curve. He had argued that the curve ought to be easier.

He experimented with his compass. Unless he pressed hard, its point did not leave a mark like the other, and he was puzzled. The plans were kept in the cupboard, and he carried the key; and for

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