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The Infidel Stain

Written by M. J. Carter

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The Infidel Stain

M. J. CARTER



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For my mother, Jody Carter

Historical Note

In the first half of the nineteenth century 'infidels' were political radicals with atheist and republican beliefs. They were regarded by the government as dangerous revolutionaries.

Prologue

The still, quiet shop was a blessed shelter from the biting cold. She had risen at four to walk the six miles to Hackney Road and back, and all the way she had held on to that half-hour when she would creep in, fall gratefully into a dark corner, shut her eyes and cast aside her cares. Sometimes she thought it was the place she liked best in the world, not just for the refuge it provided, but also because of the old familiar odours – the smell of ink, of lampblack and linseed oil, the musty dry scent of paper; and the tools – the boxes of type and gravers and burins.

She did not like to come too often, for she did not want him to grow tired of her, and so she had waited and stored up this morning's visit. He never seemed to mind finding her though, not even when at the start she had taken things – not much, but enough to land her a week in the correctional house: a bit of paper, or an empty box, or a piece of type that she would rub between her fingers. He had shown her how to get in so no one could see, and sometimes, when he was opening up, he would send her out to the coffee stall and have her buy one for herself.

The street was quite empty. The coffee seller was still on the Strand, serving the late-nighters and early-morning comers. She made her way past the darkened shopfront, into the alley around the side, behind the outside steps that led to the door of their living quarters. Under these, and out of sight of prying eyes, she cleared the bricks away from the little square door, took the small key tied to a bit of string from out of her skirts, placed it in the rusted lock and turned it.

Squatting down on her haunches, she edged through. She did not crawl as it messed her skirts and her basket and she would be selling today. There was a small cavity between the little door and the print room where they stored boxes and type and, having inched her way through the gap, she came out into the room at last.

It was very dark. She stood and brushed herself down. Dawn would not come for a while. The front was shuttered and the cracked window in the

back had been blacked out – he had taken to doing this recently, claiming that it stopped the cold, but she reckoned he was working on something he wished no one to see. She knew the room well, so she was not concerned, and it was a relief to be out of the wind which whistled outside, looking for ways through the cracks. Arms outstretched, she began to walk towards the far wall, taking care not to disturb any boxes. To the right of her she could just make out the silhouette of the press. In the darkness it seemed to loom even bigger than usual.

Her boot slid from under her and for a moment she lost her balance and thought she would fall. She swore quietly as she righted herself, and clung to her basket. The floor was wet. She lifted her skirt, took another big step and grimaced. It was slippery here too. Perhaps a cat or a rat had knocked over some ink. No. He would not have been so careless to have left any lying around. Maybe one of his old workers had broken in to sleep off the night's excesses and knocked over a bottle, or spewed up, or worse. He was accustomed to working on his own, but once in a while a writer or illustrator or printer came in to help – soakers and topers, the lot of them.

'That you, Seymour?' she said. 'You drunk?' But there was no answer. 'Mr Wedderburn? Nat?'

Standing there in the dark, she began to feel uneasy. She was, she realized, holding her breath. And there was an unfamiliar smell, acrid and sharp; it made her eyes water. Some instinct told her to lay her hands upon something solid and she took a quick step back, feeling for the wall. But she lost her balance and went down, one hand reaching out to break her fall, the other grasping the basket. Her hand was wet, and the stuff was all over her skirt. She cursed again and rubbed her fingers together. Sticky, slightly thick even. Not piss then, nor booze either. She sniffed and pulled herself up quickly, keeping clear of the great piece of machinery in the middle of the room. The sense of foreboding deepened, and the thought came upon her that there was someone else there, in the dark. Fear rose in her. Quickly, quietly – though it was too late for that, she knew – she felt her way around the walls to the back window. The tool bench stood before it. She put her basket upon it and felt for an engraving tool, something sharp. Then she stretched up to pull the piece of old blanket away from the window frame, feeling herself exposed as she did so. The sky was just beginning to lighten and the room was suddenly a good deal brighter. Her fingertips and palms

were stained with something black like ink. But she knew it was not ink. She did not want to turn around, but she forced herself to do so.

The sight imprinted itself upon her eye, like a flash of light.

Blood, terrible and black like ink, everywhere. As if a great, hideous bucket of it had been poured over him. Blood soaking through his trousers and pooling on the floor, where her boots had spread it into the corners. Blood painted over his face, across his arms and on his chest. Blood spewing, along with his guts, from a deep and livid cut in his stomach, as broad and wet as a mouth. And his body, bloodied and draped over the bed of the printing press, head propped against the platen, arms dangling off each side.

PART ONE

Chapter One

The day was cold and bleak as I emerged from the Blackwall railway terminus, and the sooty brick of the city made it seem all the greyer. I had not long returned from India; after years in hot climes I was not yet reaccustomed to the English cold. I pulled my coat more tightly around me and checked my pocket watch for the tenth or twelfth time. I did not wish to be late.

It had been two days of novelties. The morning before I had taken my first ever journey upon a train, riding the Exeter mail-coach to Swindon to catch the Great Western Railway to the Paddington terminus in London. Five years before, I had left England a country traversed by horse and carriage; I had returned to find it in thrall to steam and iron.

I had stepped into the green-and-gold carriage, sat on the wooden pews of second class and watched the air fill with steam, as if we were travelling on a bed of cloud. I had felt the rush of speed and watched the curious effect of the countryside melting into a blur of green as it rushed past the window, or rather as we rushed past it. And, of course, there was the noise: the clank and wheeze of the wheels on the rail, the asthmatic puff of the engine, and those sudden unholy screeches – the wheels braking, or the air forcing its way through the whistle. We had reached the extraordinary speed of thirty miles an hour. It was remarkable, exhilarating, unsettling – not unlike London itself.

I had been in the city less than a day. I had rooms at the Oriental Club in Hanover Square. It was only my second visit to London; my first had been when I was nine years old. I recalled almost nothing of it save that we had seen my rich, scowling great-uncle at his gloomy abode in Golden Square – a place which greatly disappointed me as I had expected it actually to be golden – and I had seen a hurdy-gurdy man with a dancing dog in the street.

This time, I started with a hansom cab to the Strand – where else? It is 'the first street in Europe', at least according to Mr Disraeli. I walked its length from Temple Bar to Charing Cross, past its arcades and grand shops with square-paned windows, and the discreet plaques signalling the offices of various journals and newspapers. At Charing Cross I paused, new Trafalgar Square and the slowly rising girth of the column to Nelson on one side of me, and on the other Old Hungerford market and its rackety steps down to the River Thames. Ahead I could just see part of the fretted bulk of the unfinished Houses of Parliament. On the roadway, the broughams and chaises, drays and goods carts, rattling omnibuses and gilded chariots barely moved.

The noise was constant and deafening.

Apart from Calcutta, I had never been in such a vast multitude of jostling people, from fine ladies and gents peering into the shop windows, to Sir Robert Peel's new police (not so new, I suppose, after ten-odd years, but that was how everyone referred to them) walking their 'beats' in their high-collared blue tunics, to the crossing sweepers, ragged half-starved creatures endlessly and fruitlessly sweeping away great mounds of ordure from the roadway. I strode among them in my paletot coat, my newish beaver hat pushed down over my ears against the wind, a reasonably well-to-do provincial a few months behind the fashion. I had never seen so many top hats in one place: as I looked down the Strand their bobbing throng seemed to me to resemble a moving city panorama all of its own.

The deluge of sensations was overwhelming. On the one hand, for the first time in months I felt free from the constant petty squabbles, the burdens, the boredom, the scrutiny, the disappointments of home. On the other, despite the crowds I had the strange and troubling sensation of being alone in a vast multitude of unsmiling faces; nor was I overfond of the ubiquitous, black grime – an oily, sooty extrusion that bore little relation to country dirt and seemed to coat all – and every once in a while I would taste coal dust in the air. Then there was the vast amount of ordure and dung from the horses, and everywhere glimpses of errant, ownerless children,

vagabonding, street-selling, begging. I had recently finished Mr Dickens's *Old Curiosity Shop*, and the vision of little Nell, the pauper girl, seemed ever before me. It was a relief to return to the quiet, clean haven of Mayfair and Hanover Square.

This morning I had taken my second train, from hard by the Tower of London to the East India Dock on the Blackwall Railway. There was a crowd of gawkers around the gates of the Tower, for only a few days ago a fire had destroyed the Round Tower and almost consumed the Crown jewels. A twist of smoke still wafted upwards from within the battlements. The journey eastwards showed a meaner London: a moving picture of shabby streets, half-finished terraces and dilapidated workshops, then a scrubland of broken fences and overgrown market gardens, and behind all these vast stretches of open dock filled with masts, populated by beetling stevedores.

I walked towards the great stone gateway of the East India Dock, which loomed like the entrance to some vast Hindoo palace. The high walls of the dock were pasted thick with bills, most of them advertising the lower sort of popular papers, the *Ironist*, *Bell's Life in London* and *Woundy's Illustrated Weekly*. In the lee of the walls small sheds and shacks served drink and tobacco to a crowd of wretched-looking sailors. On I went, past a new church and an old timber-framed house to a rickety smoke-blackened edifice that announced itself in large faded letters as 'The Hindoostanee Coffee House and Seamen's Hostel': my destination.

The door was stiff and rattled as I opened it. I found I was almost breathless. I pushed past a thick canvas curtain and entered. Perhaps twenty or thirty men sat at tables, eating. It took me a moment to see that all were Indian natives – Lascars, I guessed, from the docks. Rushing between the tables, two or three more young natives set down bowls and collected plates. The air was thick, warm and slightly fetid, a familiar marriage of perspiration and curry smells that I had not expected to encounter again. No one paid me any mind.

Most of the diners were dressed in the thin calicoes and canvases of the southern oceans, which must have provided little protection

against the bitter cold outside. Some looked quite ragged, and in far from good health. There was a low buzz of talk, but most simply ate with a dedication that bespoke considerable hunger. I looked about again, more carefully. In a fireplace at the far end of the room, a large grate overflowed with glowing embers. To the left of this, in a corner, sat a lone European eating his dinner. He seemed as down-at-heel as the Lascars around him.

It was over three years since we had last met.

He was scooping up stew with pieces of rotee. With a surge of concern and pleasure I pushed my way through the close-set tables towards him.

'Jeremiah!' I said as I reached him, my arms outstretched.

'Captain Avery,' he said. His lips barely moved. His eyes were veiled and wary.

I felt a plunge of dismay. I dropped my arms, embarrassed.

'Sit down,' he said, indicating a chair with his piece of rotee, and returned to his food.

I pulled it out and wedged myself in, looking for somewhere to place my coat and hat, electing at last for my own lap. A plate was set down before me, along with a steaming bowl of curry. Reluctantly, I put a spoonful upon my plate and took a furtive look at him, remembering as I did so that insistently solitary, aloof quality that I had conveniently forgotten. He was frailer and more lined than I remembered, but his features were vividly familiar: the white scar through the eyebrow, the ragged ear, the once-broken nose, the hooded eyes. His left hand, with its two missing fingers, was beneath the table. His rusty, threadbare coat had clearly been through several owners; his waistcoat had lost all but one button, and the collar – closer to yellow than white – was pinned on, no doubt to hide a tattered shirt beneath. Next to him was a small bundle that included a battered hat.

Through the awkwardness of my reception, questions began to surface. What had become of him? How had he learnt I had returned from India? How was he earning his living – was he earning his living at all?

I took a breath. 'What is this place?' I said.

'Hostel for Lascar seamen,' he said. He scooped another mouthful of curry on to his rotee and crammed it into his mouth.

'So,' I said. 'Three years. More.'

Blake chewed and nodded.

'How have you been?'

'Well enough. You were in Afghanistan.'

I had forgotten how he intensely disliked talking about himself. I nodded.

'Decorated for bravery, promoted to Captain, I heard.'

'Yes.' I shifted uneasily.

'Papers say the war's going well.'

'Is it?' I said.

'Isn't it?'

'I do not keep up.'

'You're living in Devon.'

'We have taken a house near my family.'

'You married Miss Larkbridge.'

'Yes.' I did not know how he knew these things, but I was not surprised that he did.

Silence.

Long pauses, I recalled, did not discomfit Jeremiah Blake.

'My wife is with child . . .That is to say, it was one of the reasons we decided to return home,' I blurted to fill the void.

'Must be near her confinement.'

I nodded. I did not wish to speak of my marriage. He leant back and wiped his hands on a handkerchief but so swiftly that I barely glimpsed the two stumps on his left hand, which he immediately returned to his lap. His right hand seemed red and chafed, but it was hard to be sure if this denoted he had fallen on hard times or was simply due to the ravages of the winter.

'Have you,' I said, casting around for another subject, 'visited Mr Haydon's painting at the Egyptian Hall?'

'*The Death of Mountstuart*?' He shook his head.

'I went yesterday. There was an hour's queue.'

'Mmm,' said Blake. He took another bite of rotee.

'I would say it is lively rather than accurate.'

Mr Benjamin Haydon, the history painter, was exhibiting a large canvas purporting to show the now notorious ambush and murder of the poet and adventurer Xavier Mountstuart by a gang of Hindoostanee bandits known as the Thugs. Death had transformed Mountstuart into a saint and martyr, famous and revered across Europe. In the painting he lay in the foreground, cast upon the ground in a laundered white shirt, one arm raised in elegant defiance as a mass of bloodthirsty Thugs attacked him with knives. To the left, in the background, two other Europeans fought off a battalion of savages with pistols. Jeremiah Blake and I were those two Europeans, the only living witnesses to what had actually taken place.

'Mr Haydon wrote to me in India,' I said, 'asking for an account of what happened. He said he wanted "colour" and "detail".'

'Didn't listen to you then.'

'I said that I could not help him. I didn't get the impression he would much have appreciated my version. I find I do not like to talk of it. Did he approach you?'

Blake nodded.

'I don't know much about art,' I said, 'but I should have said it was not a very good painting.'

He met my gaze at last.

'Are you in trouble, Blake? Is that why you wrote to me? Forgive me, but I cannot but notice you seem, well, not exactly flushed with good fortune. Finding you here, among these poor wretches, I . . .' I trailed off, not sure how to proceed. 'If you are in straitened circumstances, please, Jeremiah, let me be of assistance.'

He looked almost amused. 'No,' he said.

'No, you will not accept my help?' I said.

'No, I am perfectly well. I eat here because I like it. It reminds me of Calcutta. I talk to the sailors, keep up my dialects. And Mohammed cooks the best Bengalee food in London.'

'Really?' I said. I glanced doubtfully down at the dark-brown mess on the plate before me. It did not smell too bad. 'I have taken rooms at the Oriental Club. They say it has the finest curry chef in England – you really should let me take you.'

'No,' said Blake.

'No?'

'I'll never set foot in that place.'

'No, of course not,' I said. 'Foolish of me. But, Blake, I have to say, you do not look well. And your clothes are . . .'

'I've had a bout of fever,' he said testily. 'That's all. It returns once in a while. Especially in winter.'

We glared at each other.

'Well, you have managed to mystify me entirely, Blake. You should know that when I received your letter I dropped everything and came at once. I have journeyed seventeen hours to see you. Why we are here, save that you have a taste for the cooking, I have no idea. I suppose I should not be surprised. But I would be grateful if you would oblige me with some explanation.'

'I wrote to you because I have an appointment with someone who wishes to meet you too.'

'Me?' I said, bemused.

'You may decide you don't want to meet him, but since you're here . . .'

'Someone in London who wants to meet me?'

'Viscount Allington.'

'Viscount Allington, the peer? The evangelical? The Factory Act peer? The one who helps the chimney sweeps?' I said, even more puzzled.

Blake nodded.

'Asked for me? For us?'

'He has some particular work – a case. But you are under no obligation. You can leave if you want.'

'But how—'

'Theophilus Collinson knew you'd returned. Recommended you.' He raised his eyebrows for a moment and the white scar through the left one lifted into his forehead.

We had both had dealings with Collinson, the former head of the East India Company's Secret Department. In India, it had been said that he had a finger in every curry. Blake did not trust the man, but when both were returning to England, Collinson had very forcefully offered his patronage. It seemed Blake had accepted it.

He brought out a small envelope and drew from it a leaf of paper of fine quality. He handed it to me. The writing was an elegant, spidery scrawl:

Lord Allington has a fancy to employ both you and William Avery, whom, as you may recall, is now returned from India.

Below was written my address in Devon, and at the end, in a less formal hand:

I think that in this case even you will not be able to question the client's principles.

I was flattered, and at the same time felt a pang of disappointment. It was not Blake who had summoned me at all.