

Carter Beats the Devil

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Extract

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OVERTURE

The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. Whoever does not know it and can no longer wonder, no longer marvel, is as good as dead, and his eyes are dimmed.

- ALBERT EINSTEIN

On Friday, August third, 1923, the morning after President Harding's death, reporters followed the widow, the Vice President, and Charles Carter, the magician. At first, Carter made the pronouncements he thought necessary: 'A fine man, to be sorely missed,' and 'it throws the country into a great crisis from which we shall all pull through together, showing the strong stuff of which we Americans are made.' When pressed, he confirmed some details of his performance the night before, which had been the President's last public appearance, but as per his proviso that details of his third act never be revealed, he made no comment on the show's bizarre finale.

Because the coroner's office could not explain exactly how the President had died, and rumors were already starting, the men from Hearst wanted quite desperately to confirm what happened in the finale, when Carter beat the Devil.

That afternoon, a reporter disguised himself as a delivery man and interrupted Carter's close-up practice; the magician's more sardonic tendencies, unfortunately, came out. 'At the time the President met his maker, I was in a straitjacket, upside-down over a steaming pit of carbolic acid. In response to your as-yet-unasked query, yes, I do have an alibi.'

He was almost immediately to regret his impatience. The next

day over breakfast he saw the headline in the *Examiner*: 'Carter the Great Denies Role in Harding Death.' Below was an article including, for the first time, an eyewitness first-person narrative from an anonymous audience member who all too helpfully described the entire show, *including* the third act. He could not confirm whether, in fact, President Harding had survived until the final curtain. After a breathless account of what Carter had done to the President, the editors reflected on Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theater fifty-eight years beforehand, then made a pallid call for restraint, for letting the wheels of justice prevail.

Carter, a sober man, knew he might be lynched. At once, he ordered his servants to pack his steamer trunks for a six months' voyage. He booked a train from San Francisco to Los Angeles, then transit on the *Hercules*, an ocean liner bound from Los Angeles to Athens. He instructed his press agent to tell all callers that he was seeking inspiration from the priestess at Delphi, and would return at Christmastime.

Carter was chauffeured from his Pacific Heights mansion to the train station downtown, where a crowd of photographers jostled each other to shoot pictures of him. As he boarded the Los Angeles-bound train, he made no comment other than to turn up the collar of his fur-lined coat, which he hardly needed in the August heat.

By the time the train arrived in Los Angeles, Secret Service agents were posted at all exits. They had just received authorization to detain Mr Charles Carter. But this posed an unexpected challenge. Though they saw several pieces of Carter's luggage leaving the train, Carter himself was nowhere to be found. His servants were halted, and his bags opened and searched right on the platform, but law enforcement concluded that Carter had slipped away.

Passengers boarding the *Hercules* were given the professional bug-eye by agents who'd received copies, by teletype transmission, of Carter's publicity photograph. Since these images featured him in a silk floral turban, with devils drawn onto his shoulders, and his face thrown into moodily orchestrated shadows, they also received careful descriptions of what Charles Carter actually looked like: thirty-five years old, black hair, blue eyes, Roman nose, pale, almost delicate skin, and a slender build that allowed,

it was said, exceptionally agile movement. Informants could not say for certain whether Carter was the type of magician who was a master of disguise; San Francisco's law enforcement was of the opinion that he was not. He was, they thought, the type who specialized in dematerialization. This did not set the agents' minds at ease, and when every passenger had been examined, they were no closer to catching their man than they had been on the train. He had not stowed away with the crew, nor with the luggage – both had been examined minutely.

Finally, the agents concluded he had been scared off by the attention. The *Hercules* was allowed to sail, and as soon as it cleared the breakwater, the harbormaster saw through his binoculars the unmistakable form of Charles Carter, in bowler hat and chinchilla coat, sipping champagne and waving adieu from the aft deck.

Authorities on board and at every port along the way were alerted to Carter's presence, but even the most optimistic federal agent suspected the magician would never be found.

This was hardly the Secret Service's first disaster, only the most recent. Morale among all government bodies had plummeted during the twenty-nine months of the Harding administration. As one scandal followed another, it became apparent that in stark contrast to President Wilson, Harding tolerated corruption. In short, the whole government to a man realized that only bastards got ahead.

For Agent Jack Griffin, this philosophy was no adjustment whatsoever.

On the evening of Carter's performance for President Harding, Griffin had been told to report to the Curran Theatre. Though his duties – 'analyze local grounds for all malicious forces' – sounded important, he knew he was superfluous. The Curran was undoubtedly secure: magicians took extraordinary precautions against competitors' stealing their secrets. Furthermore, a follow-up detail would double-check the entrances, exits, and the President's seats. Nonetheless, Griffin would make a thorough report; after a twenty-year cycle of probations and remedial duties, he remained determined to show he couldn't be broken by lame assignments.

The Curran, a monstrous and drafty theatre, had just been

refurbished to accommodate pageants, top-flight entertainments, and prestigious motion pictures. The orchestra pit had been expanded to seat one hundred musicians and a projection room had been added in the back balcony. The old Victorian motifs – a ceiling mural of pre-Raphaelite seraphim, for instance – had been co-joined with Egyptian themes. The walls now rippled with hieroglyphs and the apron of the stage was flanked by huge plaster sphinxes whose eyes glowed in the dark.

Since Harding was coming to San Francisco as a stop on his Voyage of Understanding, an effort to refocus his tired administration, he would likely come onstage during the evening, perhaps even volunteer in one of Carter's illusions. Thus Griffin was to determine which act might be most dignified for the President.

He came to the Curran in the late afternoon, while workmen were testing filaments and maneuvering black draperies into their places. He interviewed Carter's chief effects builder, a stooped old man named Ledocq, a Belgian who wore both a belt and suspenders, and who frequently scratched just above his ear, threatening to dislodge his yarmulke. Griffin wrote in his notes 'Jew.'

Ledocq wouldn't let Griffin examine any of the illusions onstage, but he described the effects in detail: the show opened with 'Metempsychosis,' in which a suit of armor came to life and chased one of Carter's hapless assistants around the stage. (As this seemed like tomfoolery to him, Griffin noted that Harding should probably not participate in this.) 'The Enchanted Cottage' was a series of quick changes, dematerializations, and reappearances culminating in 'A Night in Old China,' an enthralling display of fire-juggling, fire-eating, and fireworks. (Griffin wrote 'sounds dangerous – doubtful' in his notes.) Next, Carter placed a subject, usually an attractive young woman whom he selected from the audience, into an ordinary wooden chair, which rose above the stage without apparent assistance. He asked the subject humorous questions, keeping the audience enthralled while he pulled out a pistol, loaded it, and carefully shot the woman point-blank – the chair fell to the ground, but the subject disappeared into the ether. ('Absolutely not!' Griffin wrote, underlining this notation.)

After the intermission was a levitation, psychical mind reading, and prediction routine with Carter's associate, Madame Zorah.

(‘Possible,’ Griffin wrote, ‘but won’t it hurt Px Harding’s credibility?’) He asked, ‘What else is there?’

Ledocq scratched above his ear and squinted at Griffin. ‘Well, there’s not a lot left then. There’s the Vanishing Elephant trick.’

‘Would the President be in danger from the elephant?’

‘Mmmm. No.’ Ledocq smiled. ‘But I can’t imagine a Republican being happy making an elephant disappear.’

Griffin crossed out the Vanishing Elephant. ‘Isn’t there a third act?’

‘There is. There is. It’s hard to explain.’

‘To tell you the truth,’ Griffin sighed, ‘I don’t really care about every detail of every trick. Should the President be involved?’

Ledocq laughed, a dry cackle. ‘Believe me, you don’t want your boss anywhere near the stage when Carter beats the Devil.’

An hour later, at the Palace Hotel, Griffin produced his full report, typing it on his Remington portable and inking in the places where the keys hadn’t come down hard enough to make duplicates. He went to the Mint to turn it in, and returned to his room. Twice, he picked up the phone and asked the operator if there were any calls for him. There weren’t.

Just before the performance that night, the Bureau Chief met in the lobby with eighteen agents, including Griffin, to pass out programs and set up a duty roster for the evening. The Chief announced that the President would indeed go onstage – as a volunteer in the third act. When Griffin objected, he was told – lectured, actually, for the senior agents all knew about Griffin – that there would be no arguments. The President and Carter had met and concluded that the most effective use of the President’s time would be in a trick called – Griffin mouthed the words as they were announced – ‘Carter Beats the Devil’.

Griffin, still objecting, was dismissed, and was sent to stand at the back of the theatre, where he cursed under his breath until the lights dimmed, when he began to make small, coarse gestures toward the Bureau Chief and the other Kentucky insiders, who sat in the eight-dollar seats.

The curtains opened to a spectacularly cluttered set meant to represent Carter the Great’s study. A lackey bemoaned the audience’s

presence. 'Eight o'clock already, the show is starting, and the master's room isn't ready yet. He'll have my hide for sure.'

The lackey dusted everywhere, with huge clouds choking him when he blew across the top of an ancient book. Most of the audience laughed, but not Griffin. He felt a lot of sympathy for the poor guy onstage. In his haste to clean everything, the lackey knocked over a suit of armor, which fell to the stage in a dozen pieces, empty.

When he put it back together again, and returned to cleaning, the suit of armor snuck up on him and kicked his backside. The audience roared. Griffin looked at them sourly, thinking, *Sophisticates*. What kind of a guy used all his smoke and mirrors to make fun of a poor egg just doing his job?

A sting of violins, then Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance,' and Charles Carter appeared in his white tie, tails, and trademark damask turban, to tremendous applause. The suit of armor froze. Carter lectured his servant about the shabby way his study looked, and asked why the suit of armor was standing in the middle of the floor. Trying to explain that the armor had just attacked him, the lackey gave it a shove. It toppled in pieces, empty, to the stage. No amount of pleading could convince Carter that his servant was anything but unreliable.

Griffin whispered, 'Brother, I believe you.'

Two hours later, the curtain went up on the third act. The *Examiner* of the next morning would say that 'the enthralled audience had already watched in amazement as a dozen illusions, each more magnificent than the last, unfolded before their very eyes. The President himself was heard to say, "the show could finish now and still be a thrilling spectacle."'

Here the initial newspaper account ended, following Carter's request - printed on the programs and on broadsides posted at the theatre entrance - that the third act remain a secret.

The act began on a barren stage. Carter entered and announced that as he had proven himself to be the greatest sorcerer the world had ever known, there was no reason to continue his performance, and he was prepared to send the crowd home unless a greater wizard than he should appear. Then there was a flash of lightning,

a plume of dark smoke, and the infernal reek of pure brimstone: rotten eggs and gunpowder. The Devil himself had arrived onstage.

The Devil, in black tights, red cape, close-fitting mask, and a cowl capped with two sharp horns, issued a challenge to Carter: each of them would perform illusions, and only the greater sorcerer would leave the stage alive. As soon as Carter agreed, the Devil produced a newspaper, and pulled a rabbit from it. Carter responded by hurling into a floating water basin four eggs, which, the moment they hit the water, became ducklings. The Devil caused a woman to levitate; Carter made her disappear. The Devil caused her to reappear as an old hag. With a great magnesium flash, Carter had her consumed by flames.

Then the pair began doing tricks independently of each other, at opposite ends of the stage. While the Devil ushered forth a floating tambourine, a trumpet, and a violin, which played a disembodied but creditable rendition of *Night on Bald Mountain*, Carter cast a rod and reel into the audience, catching live bass from midair. The Devil did him one better, sawing a woman in half and separating her without the casket in place. Carter made hand shadows of animals on the wall that came to life and galloped across the stage.

The Devil drew a pistol, loaded it, and fired it at Carter, who deflected the bullet with a silver tea tray. Carter drew his own pistol, and fired at the Devil, who caught the projectile in his teeth.

They brought out two white-bearded, turbaned 'Hindu yoga men,' each of whom had a hole drilled through his stomach so that a stage light could shine through. The Devil thrust his fist into and all the way through one man, making a fist behind him. Carter bade the other drink a glass of water, and he caught in a wine goblet the flow that came from his stomach, as if from a spigot.

Then cannons rolled onto stage, and Carter and the Devil urged their Hindus into the cannons, each of them aimed skyward so that the projectiles' paths would intersect. Then *BANG* went the cannons, and out flew the yoga men – when they collided over the audience's head, a burst of lilies rained upon the cheering crowd.

Carter cried that this was enough, that the contest had to be settled as if between gentlemen. He proposed a game of poker, high hand declared the winner. When the Devil assented, Carter broke from the program to approach the footlights. He asked if

there were a volunteer, a special volunteer who could be an impartial and upright arbiter of this contest. A spotlight found President Harding, who, with a good-natured wave, acknowledged the audience's demand for him to be the judge.

Griffin's eyes were pinwheeling like he'd been through an artillery barrage. With each volcanic burst of mayhem, he'd assured himself it was just an optical illusion, that the President wouldn't actually be exposed to harm. But there'd been fire, guns, knives, and, he could barely consider it, *cannons*. Harding walked down the aisle, shaking hands along the way, and flashing his shy but winning smile.

Onstage, it was obvious what a big man Harding was, standing several inches taller, and wider, than Carter. He looked genuinely pleased to be of service.

Carter, Harding, and the Devil retired to the poker table, where a deck of oversized cards awaited them. Harding gamely tried to shuffle the huge cards – the deck was the size of a newspaper – until one of Carter's assistants took over the duty. As the game progressed, the Devil cheated outrageously: for instance, a giant mirror floated over Carter's left shoulder until Harding pointed it out, whereupon it vanished.

Carter had been presenting his evening of magic at the Curran for two weeks. Each night had ended the same way: he would present a seemingly unbeatable hand, over which the Devil would then, by cheating, triumph. Carter would stand, knocking over his chair, saying the game between gentlemen was over, and the Devil was no gentleman, sir, and he would wave a scimitar at the Devil. The Devil would ride an uncoiling rope like an elevator cable up to the rafters, out of the audience's sight. A moment later, Carter, scimitar clenched between his teeth, would conjure his own rope and follow. And then, with a chorus of off-stage shrieks and moans, Carter would quite vividly, and bloodily, show the audience what it meant to truly beat the Devil.

Carter's programs advertised the presence of a nurse should anyone in the audience faint while he took his revenge.

This night, as a courtesy, Carter offered that President Harding play a third hand in their contest. Just barely getting hold of his

giant cards, the President joined the game. When it came time to present their hands, Carter had four aces and a ten. The Devil had four kings and a nine. The audience cheered: Carter had beaten the Devil.

'Mister President,' Carter cried, 'pray tell, show us your hand!'

A rather sheepish Harding turned his cards toward the crowd: A royal flush! Further applause from the audience until Carter hushed them.

'Sir, may I ask how you have a royal flush when all four kings and all four aces have already been spoken for?' Before Harding could reply, Carter continued: 'This game between gentlemen is over, and you, sir, are no gentleman!'

Carter and the Devil each drew scimitars, and brought them crashing down on the card table, which collapsed. Harding fell back in his chair, and, uprighting himself, dashed to a rope that was uncoiling toward the rafters. Harding rose with it. Carter and the Devil, on their own ropes, followed.

In the back of the theatre, Griffin frantically looked for fellow agents to confirm what he thought he'd seen. During the past two weeks of the trip, President Harding had been stooped as if carrying a ferryload of baggage. In Portland, he'd canceled his speeches and stayed in bed. The sudden acrobatics - where had a fifty-seven-year-old man found the energy?

The whole audience was just as unsure - the lighting was brilliant in some places, poor in others, causing figures to blur and focus within the same second. It forced the mind to stall as it processed what the eye could have seen. This was a crucial element of what was to come. For though the visual details fringed upon the impressionistic, the acoustics were ruthlessly exact: as the audience clamored for more, there came the sound of scimitars being put to use.

Then, with a thump, the first limb fell to the stage.

The crowd's cheers faded to murmurs, which took a moment to fade away. An unholy silence filled the Curran. Had that been something covered in black wool? Bent at the - the knee? Had that been the hard slap of black rubber heel? A woman's voice finally broke the stillness. 'His leg!' she shrieked. 'The President's leg!'

The one leg was followed by the other, then an arm, part of the

body's trunk, part of the torso; soon the stage was raining body parts hitting the boards in wet clumps. Griffin unholstered his Colt and took careful steps forward, telling himself this was just a magic trick, and not the joke of a madman: to invite the President onstage, and kill him in front of his wife, the Service, newspaper reporters, and an audience of one thousand paying spectators.

Chaos took the audience; some were standing and calling out to their neighbors, others were comforting women about to faint. Just then, the voice of Carter came from somewhere over the stage. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the head of state.' And then, falling from a great height, a vision of grey, matted hair, and a blur of jowls atop a jagged gash, President Harding's head tumbled down to the stage apron, striking it with a muted smack.

Screams filled the air. Some brave audience members rushed past Griffin, toward the stage, but everyone halted in their tracks when a deep, echoing roar filled the theatre, and a lion catapulted from the wings onto the apron, where he gorged himself on the corpse's remains.

'He is all right! I know he must be all right,' an hysterical Mrs Harding wailed above the din.

Suddenly, a single shot rang out. The echo reported across the theatre. Carter strode from the wings to the midpoint of the stage, a pith helmet drawn down over his turban. He carried a rifle. The lion now lay on its side, limbs twitching.

'Ladies and Gentlemen, if I may have your indulgence for one last moment.' Carter spoke with gravitas, utter restraint, as if he were the only calm man in the house. Using a handheld electric saw, he carved up the lion's belly, and pried it open, and out stepped President Harding, who positively radiated good health. Griffin sat down in the aisle, gripping his chest and shaking his head.

As the crowd gradually realized that they had witnessed an illusion, the applause grew in intensity to a solid wave of admiration for Carter's wizardry, and especially Harding's good sportsmanship. It ended in a standing ovation. In the midst of it, Harding stepped to the footlights and called out to his wife, 'I'm fit, Duchess, I'm fit and ready to go fishing!'

Two hours later, he was dead.

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