

# CARTER

## BEATS THE DEVIL



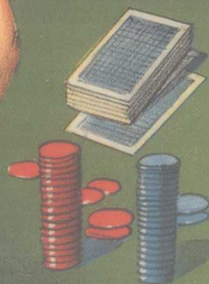
**'Addictive'**  
*Guardian*

**'Electrifying'**  
*Independent*

**'Magnificent'**  
*Charles Palliser*

**'Magical'**  
*Independent on Sunday*

**'Extraordinary'**  
*'Daily Telegraph*



# GLEN DAVID GOLD

CARTER  
BEATS *the* DEVIL

A NOVEL

D



SCEPTRE

Copyright © 2001 by Glen David Gold

All poster art copyright © Nielsen Poster Collection

First published in Great Britain in 2001 by Hodder and Stoughton

First published in paperback in Great Britain in 2002

by Hodder and Stoughton

A division of Hodder Headline

A Sceptre Book

The right of Glen David Gold to be identified as the Author of  
the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any  
means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be  
otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that  
in which it is published and without a similar condition being  
imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Historical characters appear in this publication. All other characters  
are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,  
living or dead, is purely coincidental

A CIP catalogue record for this title is  
available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 340 79499 2

Typeset in Monotype Sabon by  
Palimpsest Book Production Limited,  
Polmont, Stirlingshire  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder and Stoughton  
A division of Hodder Headline  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

## CARTER BEATS THE DEVIL

'Wholly original . . . Gold's real aim is to recapture the lost era of the great illusionists and escapologists . . . and his plot – garish, crude, infernally clever – is precisely honed to the task: it is a triumph of misdirection, a nest of boxes constantly springing fresh surprises. Stage illusions were a popular art; they worked at pace, with drive and rolling drums. Gold's prose has precisely that energy. He creates his own rich, strange world where anything is possible, where characters from fact and fiction mingle . . . he leaves himself with only one resounding problem at the close. After such a debut novel, what does he do for his next trick?' Peter Preston, *Guardian*

'It's a long book, but reads like a novella, such is the pace and action Gold manages to pack into it . . . His role is as much grand illusionist as author, and as he misdirects, misinforms and ultimately reveals his truths, the reader can only applaud. This is a terrific novel of the Jazz Age that entertains, informs and moves. Gold has tackled a difficult subject for his debut and succeeded brilliantly.' Jim Driver, *Time Out*

'I've had the most fun this year with *Carter Beats the Devil* – a first novel full of romance and adventure, with a fantastic smoke-and-mirrors plot. I recommend it to anyone who wants to brighten a murky winter.' Helen Brown, *Daily Telegraph* Books of the Year

'What really sparkles is Carter's introduction to the world of theatrical magic. Live entertainment is now so frequently gazumped by its widescreen, digitally enhanced competition that a depiction of the golden age of variety performance could have appeared twee. Gold avoids this, showing a nation hungry for simple escapism from the restrictions of prohibition and that awful vanishing act where a generation of young men disappeared in the battlefields of France' Christian House, *Independent on Sunday*

'I found myself unable to stop reading. It is a magnificent achievement. The plot is endlessly inventive and surprising and pulls the reader through some very complicated events in the most compelling way.' Charles Palliser

'Glen David Gold's *Carter Beats the Devil* is a big, mischievous, intelligent read – nice to see a bit of magic in fiction again' A.L. Kennedy, *Observer* Books of the Year

'A mischievous, magical debut' Hepzibah Anderson, *Daily Mail* Books of the Year

'The prose breathes the very air of the burlesque house – the mixture of cheap glamour, false bonhomie and the faint hum of sexual tension ... Gold excels at the psychology of working the crowd, and the collective comforts of deceit ... The novel weaves biography and fiction with a seamless ease, history making various cameos and then being made to vanish like a dove into a handkerchief. Writing is thus the ultimate *trompe-l'oeil*: pick up a word, any word, and Gold will tell you what it is ... To make the performance even more mesmerising, the book is also partly a thriller.' Graham Caveney, *Independent*

'[A] remarkable novel, a combination of paranoid conspiracy thriller, period romance and meditation on the nature of art ... Gold is an inventive plotter who does not push the parallels between conjuring and fiction, but clearly loves the thrilling game of sudden revelation common to both ... Part of the art of illusion is misdirection, putting things in plain view, and ensuring that people will not notice them until the right moment. Gold uses this technique with great skill – the triumphs and disasters of his hero come from nowhere only if one has been lulled into failing to pay attention to details' Roz Kaveney, *Times Literary Supplement*

'This is a novel that rescues the ephemera of history, puts them centre stage and shines a bright light on them. It is this spectacular recreation of a lost world that stays in the mind long after the last page is turned and the curtain comes down.' Adam Lively, *Sunday Times*

'History coloured by a wonderfully fertile imagination, it is a wry-humoured whodunit with a dazzling sense of suspense, it is a romantic tribute to a different age and, at its heart, it is a moving testament to the power of love over loneliness ... Awesome ... his timing and touch are immaculate as he creates one of the most diverting reads of the year ... Simply brilliant ... By turns fearful, intriguing, emotional and confounding, but whatever it is, *Carter Beats the Devil* is never less than wonderfully entertaining.' *Irish Times*

'As a portrait of the Golden Age of Magic, it works brilliantly ... Equally good, in a very different vein, are the accounts of Carter's love life ... Gold has captured the high-wire excitement of the age' Julia Flynn, *Sunday Telegraph*

*For my assistant,  
the mysterious Miss Alice*

# CURRAN THEATRE

'THE GOLDEN DOME BY THE GOLDEN GATE'

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Thursday, August 2nd, 1923, at 8 o'clock p.m.

MUST END TONIGHT COME SEE TONIGHT WILL END TONIGHT

## CARTER THE GREAT

— AND HIS FULL COMPANY —

*returning from a triumphant tour  
to the far reaches of the globe*

*in three acts of mayhem,  
magic & mystery*

### TO-NIGHT'S PROGRAMME

#### OVERTURE

#### ACT I: METAMORPHOSIS

A cascade of thrilling illusions:  
Metempsychosis, Fly-to, Gone!, the  
Enchanted Cottage, a Night in Old  
China, and the Sacred Mystery of  
the Elephant.

~interval~

#### ACT II: AN INQUIRY INTO THE SPIRIT WORLD

A baffling séance in which MADAME  
ZORAH KNOWS ALL, SEES ALL, TELLS  
ALL. Telepathy, clairvoyance, spirit  
manifestations, thought transference.  
Before the curtain rises, please submit  
your questions to Madame Zorah in  
writing, including your full name so  
that she may better bring to bear the  
force of her psychic powers.

~interval~

#### ACT III: CARTER BEATS THE DEVIL

The management requests that,  
due to the intensified nature of the  
performance, no patron reveal details  
of Act III, "Carter Beats the Devil".

~curtain~

ORCHESTRA \$8.00/CIRCLE \$6.00/PIT \$5.00/1ST GALLERY \$3.50/2ND GALLERY \$2.50.

NO STANDING ROOM TICKETS. NO REFUNDS. NO SEATING OF LATE ARRIVALS.

*"Puisque toutes les créatures sont au  
font des frères, il faut traiter vos bêtes  
comme vous traitez vos amis."*

Charles Carter, S.A.M. #532,  
is represented by Carter and Company,  
San Francisco.

# Carter Beats the Devil



MICHAEL CHABON

## The Mysteries of Pittsburgh

Art Bechstein steps out of the library into the summer of his graduation year. Not yet ready for respectability, he falls in with the exotic, charming Arthur Lecomte, and ricochets between a homosexual relationship and an intense affair with a strange and beautiful girl called Phlox. Before long, the world of his new friends and the underworld of his father must collide, with consequences that Art cannot control.

‘Mingles wit, sex and fine writing’

*Sunday Telegraph*

‘His style has an enviable suppleness and fluency which offers the perfect vehicle for the moral feints and shifts of the cool crowd he portrays’

*Times Literary Supplement*

‘One of his generation’s most eloquent new voices’  
*New York Times*

‘Hard as it is to write about youth when you’re young, Chabon has done it brilliantly’

*Cosmopolitan*

‘His control over his story, the wonderful use he makes of each description, of Pittsburgh itself, are after astonishing . . . a young writer with a tremendous skill’

*New York Times Book Review*



SCEPTRE

A SELECTION OF OTHER TITLES FROM SCEPTRE

- |  |               |       |                          |
|--|---------------|-------|--------------------------|
| The Mysteries of Pittsburgh – Michael Chabon | o 340 42435 4 | £6.99 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| City of Light – Lauren Belfer                | o 340 76785 5 | £6.99 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| number9dream – David Mitchell                | o 340 74797 8 | £6.99 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Bettany's Book – Thomas Keneally             | o 340 62475 2 | £7.99 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Fred & Edie – Jill Dawson                    | o 340 75167 3 | £6.99 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

*All Hodder & Stoughton books are available at your local bookshop or newsagent, or can be ordered direct from the publisher. Just tick the titles you want and fill in the form below. Prices and availability subject to change without notice.*

Hodder & Stoughton Books, Cash Sales Department, Bookpoint, 39 Milton Park, Abingdon, OXON, OX14 4TD, UK. E-mail address: [order@bookpoint.co.uk](mailto:order@bookpoint.co.uk). If you have a credit card you may order by telephone – (01235) 400414.

Please enclose a cheque or postal order made payable to Bookpoint Ltd to the value of the cover price and allow the following for postage and packing:

UK & BPFO – £1.00 for the first book, 50p for the second book, and 30p for each additional book ordered up to a maximum charge of £3.00.

OVERSEAS & EIRE - £2.00 for the first book, £1.00 for the second book, and 50p for each additional book.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

If you would prefer to pay by credit card, please complete:

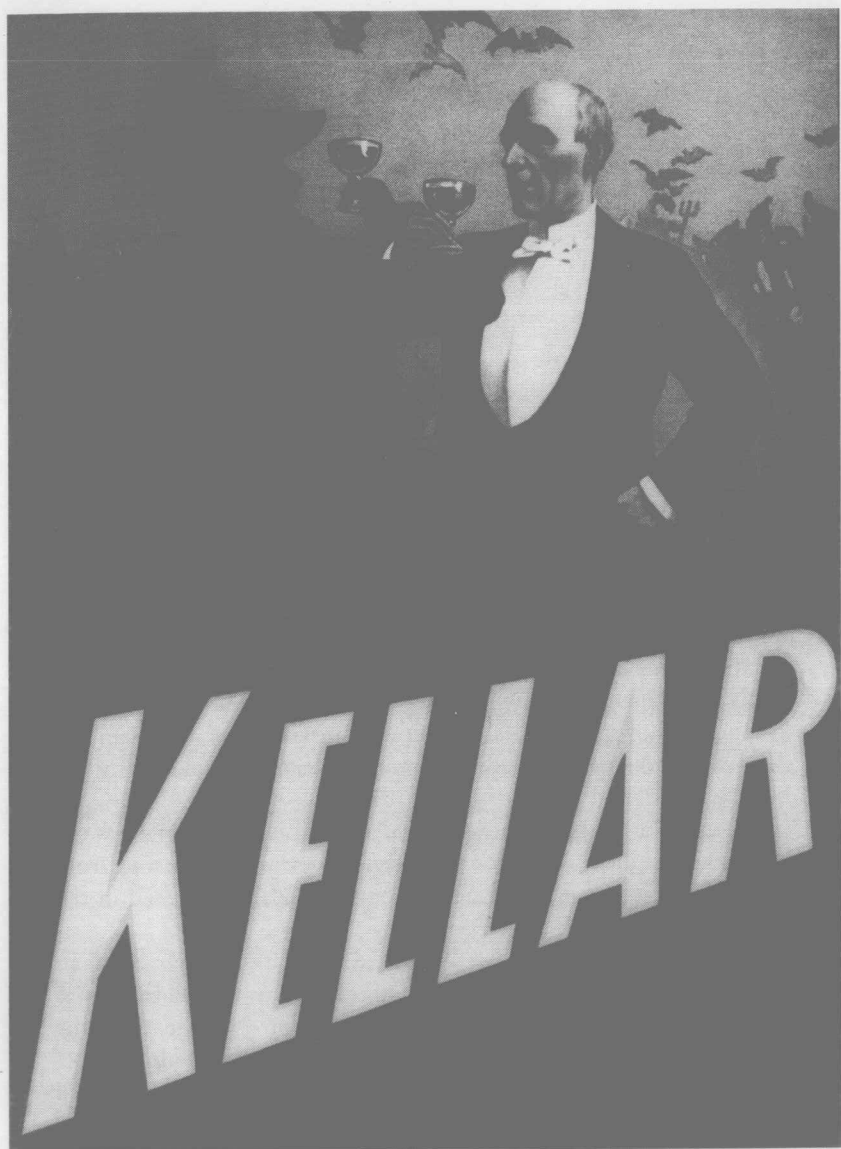
Please debit my Visa/Access/Diner's Card/American Express (delete as applicable) card no:

[illegible]

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Expiry Date \_\_\_\_\_

If you would NOT like to receive further information on our products  
please tick the box ☐



## 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 Hôtel, 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,