

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark brown color, framing the central text.

The Bunch of Violets

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Ernest Bramah

An Episode in the WarTime Activities of Max Carrados

(1917)

WHEN Mr. J. Beringer Hulse, in the course of one of his periodical calls at the War Office, had been introduced to Max Carrados he attached no particular significance to the meeting. His own business there lay with Mr. Flinders, one of the quite inconspicuous departmental powers so lavishly produced by a few years of intensive warfare: business that was more confidential than exacting at that stage, and hitherto carried on a deux. The presence on this occasion of a third, this quiet, suave, personable stranger, was not out of line with Mr. Hulse's open-minded generalities on British methods: "A little singular, perhaps, but not remarkable," would have been the extent of his private comment. He favoured Max with a hard, entirely friendly, American stare, said, "Vurry pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Carrados," as they shook hands, and went on with his own affair.

Of course Hulse was not to know that Carrados had been brought in especially to genialise with him. Most of the blind man's activities during that period came within the "Q-class" order. No one ever heard of them, very often they would have, seemed quite meaningless under description, and generally they were things that he alone could do—or do as effectively at all events. In the obsolete phraseology of the day, they were his "bit."

"There's this man Hulse," Flinders had proceeded, when it came to the business on which Carrados had been asked to call at Whitehall. "Needless to say, he's no fool or Jonathan wouldn't have sent him on the ticket he carries. If anything, he's too keen-wants to see everything, do anything and go everywhere. In the meanwhile he's kicking up his heels here in London with endless time on his hands and the Lord only knows who mayn't have a go, at him."

"You mean for information-or does he carry papers?" asked Carrados.

"Well, at present, information chiefly. He necessarily knows a lot of things that would be priceless to the Huns, and a clever man or woman might find it profitable to nurse him."

“Still, he must be on his guard if, as you say, he is. No one imagines that London in 1917 is a snakeless, Eden or expects that German agents to-day are elderly professors who say, ‘How vos you?’ and ‘Ja, ja!’ “

“My dear fellow,” said Flinders sapiently, “every American who came to London before the war was on his guard against a pleasant-spoken gentleman who would accost him with, ‘Say, stranger, does this happen to be your wallet lying around here, on the sidewalk?’ and yet an ‘unending procession of astute, long-headed citizens met him, exactly as described, year after year, and handed over their five hundred or five thousand pounds on a tale that would have made a common or Michaelmas goose blush to be caught listening to.”

“It’s a curious fact, admitted Carrados thoughtfully. “And this Hulse?”

“Oh, he’s quite an agreeable chap, you’ll find. He may know a trifle more than you and be a little wider awake and see further through a brick wall and so on, but he won’t hurt your feelings about it. Well, will you do it for us?”

“Certainly,” replied Carrados. “What is it, by the way?”

Flinders laughed his apologies and explained more precisely.

“Hulse has been over here a month now, and it may be another month before the details come through which he will take on to Paris. Then he will certainly have documents of very special importance that he must carry about with him. Well, in the meanwhile, of course, he is entertained and may pal up with anyone or get himself into Lord knows what. We can’t keep him here under lock and key or expect him to make a report of every fellow he has a drink with or every girl he meets.”

“Quite so,” nodded the blind man.

“Actually, we have been asked to take precautions. It isn’t quite a case for the C.I.D.-not at this stage, that is to say. So if I introduce him to you and you fix up an evening for him or something of the sort and find out where his tastes lie, and-and, in fact, keep a general shepherding eye upon him-” He broke off abruptly, and Carrados divined that he had reddened furiously and was kicking himself in spirit. The blind man raised a deprecating hand.

“Why should you think that so neat a compliment would pain me, Flinders?” he

asked quietly. "Now if you had questioned the genuineness of some of my favourite tetradrachms I might have had reason to be annoyed. As it is, yes, I will gladly keep a general shepherding ear on J. Beringer as long as may be needful."

"That's curious, " said Flinders looking up quickly. "I didn't think that I had mentioned his front name."

"I don't think that you have," agreed Carrados.

"Then how-? Had you heard of him before?"

"You don't give an amateur conjurer much chance," replied the other whimsically. "When you brought me to this chair I found a table by me, and happening to rest a hand on it my fingers had 'read' a line of writing before I realised it-just as your glance might as unconsciously do," and he held up an envelope addressed to Hulse.

"That is about the limit, exclaimed Flinders with some emphasis. "Do you know, Carrados, if I hadn't always led a very blameless life I should be afraid to have you around the place."

Thus it came about that the introduction was made and in due course the two callers left together.

"You'll see, Mr. Carrados down, won't you?" Flinders had asked, and, slightly puzzled but not disposed to question English ways, Hulse had assented. In the passage Carrados laid a light hand on his companion's arm. Through some subtle perception he read Hulse's mild surprise.

"By the way, I don't think that Flinders mentioned my infirmity," he remarked. "This part of the building is new to me and I happen to be quite blind."

"You astonish me," declared Hulse, and he had to be assured that the statement was literally exact. "You don't seem to miss much by it, Mr. Carrados. Ever happen to hear of Laura Bridgman?"

"Oh, yes," replied Carrados. "She was one of your star cases. But Laura Bridgman's attainments really were wonderful. She was also deaf and dumb, if you remember."

“That is so,” assented Hulse. “My people come from New Hampshire not far from Laura’s home, and my mother had some of her needlework framed as though it was a picture. That’s how I come to know of her, I reckon.”

They had reached the street meanwhile and Carrados heard the door of his waiting car opened to receive him.

“I’m going on to my club now to lunch,” he remarked with his hand still on his companion’s arm. “Of course we only have a wartime menu, but if you would keep me company you would be acting the, Good Samaritan,” and Beringer Hulse, who was out to see as much as possible of England, France and Berlin within the time-perhaps, also, not uninfluenced by the appearance of the rather sumptuous vehicle-did not refuse.

“Vurry kind of you to put it in that way, Mr. Carrados,” he said, in his slightly business-like, easy style. “Why, certainly I will.”

During the following weeks Carrados continued to make himself very useful to the visitor, and Hulse did not find his stay in London any less agreeably varied thereby. He had a few other friends-acquaintances rather-he had occasion now and then to mention, but they, one might infer, were either not quite so expansive in their range of hospitality or so pressing for his company. The only one for whom he had ever to excuse himself was a Mr. Darragh, who appeared to have a house in Densham Gardens (he was a little shrewdly curious as to what might be inferred of the, status of a man who lived in Densham Gardens), and, well, yes, there was Darragh’s sister, Violet. Carrados began to take a private interest in the Darragh household, but there was little to be learned beyond the fact that the house was let furnished to the occupant from month to month. Even during the complexities of war that fact alone could not be regarded as particularly incriminating.

There came an evening when Hulse, having an appointment to dine with Carrados and to escort him to a theatre afterwards, presented himself in a mixed state of elation and remorse. His number had come through at last, he explained, and he was to leave for Paris in the morning. Carrados had been most awfully, most frightfully-Hulse became quite touchingly incoherent in his anxiety to impress upon the blind man the fullness of the gratitude he felt, but, all the same, he had come to ask whether he might cry off for the evening. There was no need to inquire the cause. Carrados raised an accusing finger and pointed to the little

bunch of violets with which the impressionable young man had adorned his button-hole.

“Why, yes, to some extent,” admitted Hulse, with a facile return to his ingenuous, easy way. “I happened to see Miss Darragh down town this afternoon. There’s a man they know whom I’ve been crazy to meet for weeks, a Jap who has the whole ju-jitsu business at his fingerends. Best ju-jitsuist out of Japan, Darragh says. Mighty useful thing, ju-jitsu, nowadays, Carrados.”

“At any time, indeed,” conceded Carrados. “And he will be there to-night?”

“Certain. They’ve tried to fix it up for me half-a-dozen times before, but this Kuromi could never fit it in. Of course this will be the only chance.”

“True!Ó agreed the blind man, rather absentmindedly. “Your last night here.”

“I don’t say that in any case I should not have liked to see Violet-Miss Darragh-again before I went, but I wouldn’t have gone back on an arranged thing for
“Now this ju-jitsu that, continued Hulse virtuously.

I look on more in the light of business.”

“Rather a rough-and-tumble business one would think,” suggested Carrados.
“Nothing likely to drop out of your pockets in the process and get lost?”

Hulse’s face displayed a rather more superior smile than he would have permitted himself had his friend been liable to see it and be snubbed thereby.

“I know what you mean, of course,” he replied, getting up and going to the blind man’s chair, “but don’t you worry about me, Father William. Just put your hand to my breast pocket.”

“Sewn up,” commented CarradoÕs, touching the indicated spot on his guest’s jacket.

“Sewn up: that’s it; and since I’ve had any important papers on me it always has been sewn up, no matter how often I change. No fear of anything dropping out now-or being lifted out, eh? No, sir; if what I carry there chanced to vanish, I guess no excuses would be taken and J. B. H. would automatically drop down to the very bottom of the class. As it is, if it’s missing I shall be missing too, so that

won't trouble me.

"What time do you want to get there?"

"Darragh's? Well, I left that open. Of course I couldn't promise until I had seen you. Anyway, not until after dinner, I said."

"That makes it quite simple, then," declared Carrados. "Stay and have dinner here, and afterwards we will go on to Darragh's together instead of going to the theatre."

"That's most terribly kind of you," replied Hulse. "But won't it be rather a pity-the tickets, I mean, and so forth?"

"There are no, tickets as it happens," said Carrados. "I left that over until to-night. And I have always wanted to meet a ju-jitsu champion. Quite providential, isn't it?"

It was nearly nine o'clock, and seated in the drawingroom of his furnished house in Densham. Gardens, affecting to read an evening paper, Mr. Darragh was plainly ill at ease. The strokes of the hour, sounded by the little gilt clock on the mantelpiece, seemed to mark the limit of his patience. A muttered word escaped him and he looked up with a frown.

"It was nine that Hulse was to be here by, wasn't it, Violet?" he asked.

Miss Darragh, who had been regarding him for some time in furtive anxiety, almost jumped at the simple question.

"Oh, yes, Hugh-about nine, that is. Of course he had to-"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Darragh irritably; "we've heard all that. And Sims," he continued, more for the satisfaction of voicing his annoyance than to engage in conversation, "swore by everything that we should have that coat by eight at the, very latest. My God! what rotten tools one has to depend on!"

"Perhaps-" began Violet timidly, and stopped at his deepening scowl.

"Yes?" said Darragh, with a deadly smoothness in his voice. "Yes, Violet; pray continue. You were about to say-"

“It was really nothing, Hugh,” she pleaded. “Nothing at all.”

“Oh, yes, Violet, I am sure that you have some helpful little suggestion to make,” he went on in the same silky, deliberate way. Even when he was silent his unspoken thoughts seemed to be lashing her with bitterness, and she turned painfully away to pick up the paper he had flung aside. “The situation, Kato,” resumed Darragh, addressing himself to the third occupant of the room, “is bluntly this: If Sims isn’t here with that coat before young Hulse arrives, all our carefully-thought-out plan, a month’s patient work, and about the last both of our cash and credit, simply go to the devil! ... and Violet wants to say that perhaps Mr. Sims forgot to wind his watch last night or poor Mrs. Sims’s cough is worse... . Proceed, Violet; don’t be diffident.”

The man addressed as “Kato” knocked a piece off the chessboard he was studying and stooped to pick it up again before, he replied. Then he looked from one to the other with a face singularly devoid of expression.

“Perhaps. Who says?” he replied in his quaintly-s ordered phrases. “If it is to be, my friend, it will be.”

“Besides, Hugh,” put in Violet, with a faint dash of spirit, “it isn’t really quite so touch-and-go as that. If Sims comes before Hulse has left, Kato can easily slip out and change coats then.”

Darragh was already on his restless way towards the door. Apparently he did not think it worth while to reply to either of the speakers, but his expression, especially when his eyes turned to Violet, was one of active contempt. As the door closed after him, Kato sprang to his feet and his impassive look gave place to one almost of menace. His hands clenched unconsciously and with slow footsteps he seemed to be drawn on in pursuit. A little laugh, mirthless and bitter, from the couch, where Violet had seated herself, recalled him.

“Is it true, Katie,” she asked idly, “that you are really the greatest ju-jitsuist outside Japan?”

“Polite other people say so,” replied the, Japanese, his voice at once gentle and deprecating.

“And yet you cannot keep down even your little temper! Ò

Kato thought this over for a moment; then he crossed to the couch and stood regarding the girl with his usual impenetrable gravity.

“On contrary, I can keep down my temper very well,” he said seriously. “I can keep it so admirably that I, whose ancestors were Samurai and very high nobles, have been able to become thief and swindler and”-his moving hand seemed to beat the air for a phrase-‘land lowdown dog and still to live. What does anything it matter that is connected with me alone? But there are three things that do matter-three that I do not allow myself to be insulted and still to live, my emperor, my country, and-you. And so,” concluded Kato Kuromi, in a somewhat lighter vein, now and then, as you say, my temper gets the better of me slightly.”

“Poor Katie,” said Violet, by no means disconcerted at this delicate avowal. “I really think that I am sorrier for you than I am for Hugh, or even for myself. But it’s no good becoming romantic at this time of day, my dear man.” The lines of her still quite young and attractive face hardened in keeping with her thoughts. “I suppose I’ve had my chance. We’re all of a pattern and I’m as crooked as any of you now.”

“No, no,” protested Kato loyally; “not you of yourself. It is we bad fellows round you. Darragh ought never to have brought you into these things, and then to despise you for your troubles-that is why my temper now and then ju-jitsues me. This time it is the worst of all-the young man Hulse, for whose, benefit you pass yourself as the, sister of your husband. How any mortal man possessing you-”

“Another cigarette, Katie, please,” interrupted Violet, for the monotonous voice had become slightly more penetrating than was prudent. “That’s all in the way of business, my friend. We aren’t a firm of family solicitors. Jack Hulse had to be fascinated and I-well, if there is any hitch I don’t think that it can be called my fault,” and she demonstrated for his benefit the bewitching smile that had so effectually enslaved the ardent Beringer.

“Fascinated!” retorted Kato, fixing on the word jealously, and refusing to be pacified by the bribery of the smile. “Yes, so infatuated has become this very susceptible young man that you lead him about like pet lamb at the end of blue ribbon. Business? Perhaps. But how have you been able to do this, Violet? And you husband-Darragh-to him simply business, very good business-and he forces you to do this full of shame thing and mocks at you for reward.”

“Kato, Kato-” urged Violet, breaking through his scornful laughter.

“I am what your people call yellow man,” continued Kato relentlessly, “and you are the one white woman of my dreams-dreams that I would not lift finger to spoil by trying to make real. But if I should have been Darragh not ten thousand times the ten thousand pounds that Hulse carries would tempt me to lend you to another man’s arms.”

“Oh, Katie, how horrid you can be!”

“Horrid for me to say, but ‘business’ for you to do! How have you discovered so much, Violet-what Hulse carries, where he carries it, the size and shape the packet makes, even the way he so securely keeps it? ‘Business’ eh? Your husband cares not so long as we succeed. But I, Kato Kuromi, care.” He went nearer so that his mere attitude was menacing as he stood over her, and his usually smooth voice changed to a tone she had never heard there before. “How have you learned all this? How, unless you and Hulse-”

“Sssh!” she exclaimed in sharp dismay as her ear caught a sound beyond.

“—oh yes,” continued Kato easily, his voice instantly as soft and unconcerned as ever, it will be there, you mean. The views in the valley of Kedu are considered very fine and the river itself-”

It was Darragh whom Violet had heard approaching, and he entered the room in a much better temper than he had left it. At the door he paused a moment to encourage someone forward—a seedy, diffident man of more than middle age, who carried a brown-paper parcel.

“Come on, Sim; hurry up, man!” urged Darragh impatiently, but without the sting of contempt that had poisoned his speech before. “And, oh, Phillips”—looking back and dropping his voice—“when Mr. Hulse arrives show him into the morning-room at first. Not up here, you understand? Now, Sims.”

After a rather helpless look round for something suitable on which to lay his parcel, the woebegone-looking individual was attempting to untie it on an upraised knee.

“Yes, sir,” he replied, endeavouring to impart a modicum of briskness into his manner. “I’m sorry to be a bit late, sir; I was delayed.”

“Oh, well, never mind that now,” said Darragh magnanimously. “Thing quite all right?”

“Mrs. Sims isn’t worse?” asked Violet kindly.

Mr. Sims managed to get his back to the group before he ventured to reply.

‘No, miss, he said huskily; “she’s better now. She’s dead: died an hour ago. That’s why I wasn’t quite able to get here by eight.”

From each of his hearers this tragedy drew a characteristic response. Violet gave a little moan of sympathy and turned away. Kato regarded Sims, and continued to regard him, with the tranquil incuriosity of the unpitying East. Darragh-Darragh alone spoke, and his tone was almost genial.

“Devilish lucky that you were able to get here by now, in the circumstances, Sims,” he said.

“Well, sir,” replied Sims practically, “you see, I shall need the money just as much now-though not quite for the same purpose as I had planned.” He took the garment from the paper and shook it out before displaying it for Darragh’s approval. “I think you will find that quite satisfactory, sir.”

“Exactly the same as the one your people made for Mr. Hulse a week ago?” asked Darragh, glancing at the jacket and then passing it on to Violet for her verdict.

“To a stitch, sir. A friend of mine up at the shop got the measurements and the cloth is a length from the same piece.”

“But the cut, Sims, ” persisted his patron keenly; “the cut is the most important thing about it. It makes all the difference in the world.”

“Yes, sir,” acquiesced Sims dispassionately; “you can rely on that. I used to be a first-class cutter myself before I took to drink. I am yet, when I’m steady. And I machined both coats myself.”

“That should do then,” said Darragh complacently. “Now you were to have-”

“Ten guineas and the cost of the cloth you promised, sir. Of course it’s a very big

price, and I won't deny that I've been a bit uneasy about it from time to time when I--

"That's all right." Darragh had no wish to keep Mr. Sims in evidence a minute longer than was necessary.

"I shouldn't like to be doing anything wrong, sir," Ó persisted the poor creature; "and when you stipulated that it wasn't to be mentioned--"

"Well, well, man; it's a bet, didn't I tell you? I stand to win a clear hundred if I can fool Hulse over this coat. That's the, long and short of it."

"I'm sure I hope it is, sir. I've never been in trouble for anything yet, and it would break my wife's 'art--" He stopped suddenly and his weak face changed to a recollection of his loss; then without another word he turned and made shakily for the door.

"See him safely away, Katty, and pay him down below," said Darragh. "I'll settle with you later," and the Japanese, with a careless "All right-o," followed.

"Now, Violet, slip into it," continued her husband briskly. "We don't want to keep Hulse waiting when he comes." From a drawer in a cabinet near at hand he took a paper packet, prepared in readiness, and passed it to her. "You have the right cotton?"

"Yes, Hugh," said Violet, opening a little workbasket. She had already satisfied herself that the coat was a replica of the one the young American would wear, and she now transferred the dummy package to the corresponding pocket and with a few deft stitches secured it in the same way as she had already learned that the real contents were safeguarded. "And, Hugh--"

"Well, well?" responded Darragh, with a return of his old impatience.

"I don't wish to know all your plans, Hugh," continued Violet meekly, "but I do want to warn you. You are running a most tremendous risk with Kato."

"Oh, Kato!"

"It is really serious, Hugh. You don't believe in patriotism, I know, but Kato happens to. When he learns that it isn't ten thousand pounds at all, but

confidential war plans, that this scoop consists of, something terrible may happen.”

“It might, Violet. Therefore I haven’t told him, and I am so arranging things that he will never know. Cheer up, my girl, there will be no tragedy. All the same, thanks for the hint. It shows a proper regard for your husband’s welfare.”

“Oh, Hugh, Hugh,” murmured Violet, “if only you were more often-”

Whatever might have been the result-if indeed there was yet hope in an appeal to another and a better nature that he might once have possessed-it came too late. The words were interrupted by the sudden reappearance of Kato, his business with Sims completed. He opened and closed the door quietly but very quickly, and at a glance both the Darraghs saw that something unforeseen had happened.

“Here’s pretty go,” reported the Japanese. “Hulse just come and brought someone with him!Ó

For a moment all the conspirators stood aghast at the unexpected complication. Hugh Darragh was the first to speak.

“Damnation!” he exclaimed, with a terrible look in his wife’s direction; “that may upset everything. What ghastly muddle have you made now?”

“I-I don’t know,” pleaded Violet weakly. “I never dreamt of such a thing. Are you sure?”

“Slow man,” amplified Kato with a nod. “Fellow who walk-” He made a few steps with studied deliberation.

“‘Blind! It’s Max Carrados,” exclaimed Violet, in a flash of enlightenment. “They have been great friends lately and Jack has often spoken of him. He’s most awfully clever in his way, but stone blind. Hugh, Kato, don’t you see? It’s rather unfortunate his being here, but it can’t really make any difference.”

“True, it’ he is quite blind,” admitted Kato.

“I’ll look into it,” said Darragh briskly. “Coat’s all ready for you, Kato.”

“I think no, yet,” soliloquised the Japanese, critically examining it. “Keep door,

‘alf-a-mo’, Violet, if please.” His own contribution to the coat’s appearance was simple but practical—a gentle tension here and there, a general rumple, a dust on the floor and a final shake. “One week wear,” he announced gravely as he changed into it and hid his own away.

“Take your time, Mr. Carrados,” Darragh’s voice was heard insisting on the stairs outside, and the next moment he stood just inside the room, and before Hulse had quite guided Carrados into view, drew Violet’s attention to the necessity of removing the button-hole that the Americans still wore by a significant movement to the lapel of his own coat. It required no great finesse on the girl’s part to effect the transfer of the little bunch of flowers to her own person within five minutes of the guests’ arrival.

“A new friend to see you, Violet—Mr. Carrados,” announced Darragh most graciously. “Mr. Carrados, my sister.”

“Not to see you exactly, Miss Darragh,” qualified Carrados. “But none the less to know you as well as if I did, I hope.”

“I wanted you to meet Max before I went, Miss Darragh,” explained Hulse; “so I took the liberty of bringing him round.”

“You really are going then?” she asked.

“Yes. There seems no doubt about it this time. Twelve hours from now I hope to be in Paris. I should say,” amended the ingenuous young man, “I dread to be in Paris, for it may mean a long absence. That’s where I rely on Carrados to become what is called a ‘connecting file’ between us—to cheer my solitude by letting me know when he has met you, or heard of you, or, well, anything in fact.”

“Take care, Mr. Hulse,” she said. “Gallantry by proxy is a dangerous game.”

“That’s just it,” retorted Hulse. “Max is the only man I shouldn’t be jealous of—because he can’t see you!”

While these amiable exchanges were being carried on between the two young people, with Max Carrados standing benignly by, Darragh found an opportunity to lower his voice for Kato’s benefit.

“It’s all right about him,” he declared. “We, carry on.”

“As we arranged?” asked Kato.

“Yes; exactly. Come across now.” He raised his voice as he led Kato towards the other group. “I don’t think that either of you has met Mr. Kuromi yet-Mr. Hulse, Mr. Carrados.”

“I have, been pining to meet you for weeks, sir,” responded Hulse with enthusiasm. “Mr. Darragh tells me what a wonderful master of ju-jitsu you are.”

“Oh, well; little knack, you know,” replied Kato modestly. “You are interested?”

“Yes, indeed. I regard it as a most useful accomplishment at any time and particularly now. I only wish I’d taken it up when I had the leisure.”

“Let me find you an easy-chair, Mr. Carrados,” said Violet attentively. “I am sure that you won’t be interested in so strenuous a subject as ju-jitsu.”

“Oh, yes, I am, though,” protested the blind man. “I am interested in everything.”

“But surely-”

“I can’t actually see the ju-jitsuing, you would say? Quite true, but do you know, Miss Darragh, that makes a great deal less difference than you might imagine. I have my sense of touch, my sense of taste, my hearing-even my unromantic nose-and you would hardly believe how they have rallied to my assistance since sight went. For instance

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They had reached the chair to which Miss Darragh had piloted him. To guide him into it she had taken both his hands, but now Carrados had gently disengaged himself and was lightly holding her left hand between both of his.

“For instance, Hulse and I were speaking of you the other day-forgive our impertinence-and he! happened to mention that you disliked rings of any sort and had never worn one. His eyes, you see, and perhaps a careless remark on your part. Now I know that until quite recently you continually wore a ring upon

this finger.”

Silence had fallen upon the other men as they followed Carrados’s exposition. Into the moment of embarrassment that succeeded this definite pronouncement Mr. Hulse threw a cheerful note..

“Oh ho, Max, you’ve come a cropper this time,” he exclaimed. “Miss Darragh has never worn a ring. Have you? “

“N-o,” replied Violet, a little uncertain of her ground, as the blind man continued to smile benevolently upon her.

“A smooth and rather broad one, he continued persuasively. “Possibly a wedding ring?”

“Wait a minute, Violet, wait a minute,” interposed Darragh, endeavouring to look judicially wise with head bent to one side. He was doubtful if Violet could carry the point without incurring some suspicion, and he decided to give her a lead out of it. “Didn’t I see you wearing some sort of plain ring a little time ago? You have forgotten, but I really believe Mr. Carrados may be right. Think again.”

“Of course!” responded Violet readily; “how stupid of me! It was my mother’s wedding ring. I found it in an old desk and wore it to keep it safe. That was really how I found out that I could not bear the feel of one and I soon gave it up.”

“What did I say?” claimed Darragh genially. “I thought that we should be right.”

“This is really much interesting,” said Kato. “I very greatly like your system, Mr. Carrados.Ó

“Oh, it’s scarcely a system,” deprecated Max goodnaturedly; “it’s almost second nature with me now. I don’t have to consider, say, ‘Where is the window?’ if I want it. I know with certainty that the window lies over here.” He had not yet taken the chair provided, and suiting the action to the word he now took a few steps towards the wall where the windows were. “Am I not right?” And to assure himself he stretched out a hand and encountered the heavy curtains.

“Yes, yes,” admitted Violet hurriedly, “but, oh, please do be careful, Mr. Carrados. They are most awfully particular about the light here since the last

raid. We go in fear and trembling lest a glimmer should escape.”

Carrados smiled and nodded and withdrew from the dangerous area. He faced the room again.

“Then there is the electric light-heat at a certain height of course.”

“True,” assented Kato, “but why electric light?”

“Because no other is noiseless and entirely without smell; think-gas, oil, candles, all betray their composition yards away. Then”—indicating the fireplace—“I suppose you can only smell soot in damp weather? The mantelpiece”—touching it—“inlaid marble. The wallpaper”—brushing his hand over its surface—“arrangement of pansies on a crisscross background”; lifting one finger to his lips—“colour scheme largely green and gold.”

Possibly Mr. Hulse thought that his friend had demonstrated his qualities quite enough. Possibly-at any rate he now created a diversion:

“Engraving of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, suspended two feet seven inches from the ceiling on a brassheaded nail supplied by a one-legged ironmonger whose Aunt Jane-”

All contributed a sufficiently appreciative laugh-Carrados’s not the least hearty-except Kato, whose Asiatic dignity was proof against the form of jesting.

“You see what contempt familiarity breeds, M’iss Darragh,” remarked the blind man. “I look to you, Mr. Kuromi, to avenge me by putting Hulse in a variety of undignified attitudes on the floor.”

“Oh, I shan’t mind that if at the same time you put me up to a trick or two,” said Hulse, turning to the Japanese.

“You wish?”

“Indeed I do. I’ve seen the use of it. It’s good; it’s scientific. When I was crossing, one of the passengers held up a bully twice his weight in the neatest way possible. It looked quite simple, something like this, if I may?” Kato nodded his grave assent and submitted himself to Mr. Hulse’s vigorous grasp. “‘Now,’ said the man I’m speaking of, ‘struggle and your right arm’s broken.’ But I

expect you know the grip?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Kato, veiling his private amusement, “and therefore foolish to, struggle. Expert does not struggle,; gives way.” He appeared to do so, to be falling helplessly in fact, but the assailant found himself compelled to follow, and the next moment he was lying on his back with Kato politely extending a hand to assist him up again.

“I must remember that,” said Hulse thoughtfully. “Let me see, it goes-do you mind putting me wise on that again, Mr. Kuromi? The motion picture just one iota slower this time, please.”

For the next ten or twenty minutes the demonstration went on in admirable good humour, and could Max Carrados have seen he would certainly have witnessed his revenge. At the end of the lesson both men were warm and dusty-so dusty that Miss Darragh felt called upon to apologise laughingly for the condition of the rug. But if clothes were dusty, hands were positively dirty-there was no other word for it.

“No, really, the, poor mat can’t be so awful as that,” declared the girl. “Wherever have you been, Mr. Kuromi? and, oh, Mr. Hulse you are just as bad.”

“I do not know,” declared Kato, regarding his grimy fingers seriously. “Nowhere of myself. Yes, I think it must be your London atmosphere among the rug after all.Ó

“At all events you can’t-Oh, Hugh, take them to the bathroom, will you? And I’ll try to, entertain Mr. Carrados meanwhile-only he will entertain me instead, I know.”

It was well and simply done throughout-nothing forced, and the sequence of development quite natural. Indeed, it was not until Hulse saw Kuromi take, off his coat in the bathroom that he, even thought of what he carried. “Well, Carrados,” he afterwards pleaded to, his friend, “now could I wash my hands before those fellows like a guy who isn’t used to, washing? It isn’t natural. It isn’t human.” So for those few minutes the two coats hung side by side, and Darragh kindly brushed them. When Hulse put on his own again his hand instinctively felt for the hidden packet; his fingers reassured themselves among the familiar objects of his pockets, and his mind was perfectly at ease.

“You old scoundrel, Max,” he said, when he returned to the drawing room. “You told Kuromi to wipe the floor with me and by crumbs, he did! Have a cigarette all the same.”

Miss Darragh laughed pleasantly and took the opportunity to move away to learn from her accomplices if all had gone well. Carrados was on the point of passing over the proffered olive branch when he changed his mind. He leaned forward and with slow deliberation chose a cigarette from the American’s case. Exactly when the first subtle monition of treachery reached him, by what sense it was conveyed-Hulse never learned, for there were experiences among the finer perceptions that the blind man did not willingly discuss. Not by voice or outward manner in that arresting moment did he betray an inkling of his suspicion, yet by some responsive telephony Hulse at once, though scarcely conscious of it then, grew uneasy and alert.

“Thanks; I’ll take a light from yours,” remarked Carrados, ignoring the lit match, and he rose to avail himself. His back was towards the others, who still had a word of instruction to exchange. With cool precision he handled the cloth on Hulse’s outstretched arm, critically touched the pocket he was already familiar with, and then deliberately drew the lapel to his face.

“You wore some violets?” he said beneath his breath. “Yes,” replied Hulse, “but I-Miss Darragh-” “But there never have been any here! By heavens, Hulse, we’re in it! You had your coat off just now?”

“Yes, for a minute.Ó

“Quietly. Keep your cigarette going. You’ll have to leave this to me. Back me up-discreetly-whatever I do.”

“Can’t we challenge it and insist-”

“Not in this world. They have at least one other man downstairs-in Cairo, a Turk by the way, before I was blind, of course. Not up to Mr. Kuromi, I expect-”

“Cool again?” asked Miss Darragh sociably. It was her approach that had sent Carrados off into irrelevancies. “Was the experience up to anticipation?”

“Yes, I think I may say it was,” admitted Hulse guardedly. “There is certainly a lot to learn here. I expect you’ve seen it all before?Ó

“Oh, no. It is a great honour to get Mr. Kuromi to ‘show it off,’ as he quaintly calls it.”

“Yes, I should say so,” replied the disillusioned young man with deadly simplicity. “I quite feel that.”

“J. B. H. is getting strung up,” thought Carrados. “He may say something unfortunate presently.” So he deftly insinuated himself into the conversation and for a few minutes the commonplaces of the topic were rigidly maintained.

“Care for a hand at auction?” suggested Darragh, joining the group. He had no desire to, keep his guests a minute longer than he need, but at the same time it was his line to behave quite naturally until they left. “Oh, but I forgot-Mr. Carrados-”

“I am well content to sit and listen,” Carrados assured him. “Consider how often I have to do that without the entertainment of a game to listen to! And you are four without me.”

“It really hardly seems-” began Violet.

“I’m sure Max will feel it if he thinks that he is depriving us,” put in Hulse, loyally, so with some more polite protestation it was arranged and the game began, Carrados remaining where he was. In the circumstances a very high standard of bridge could not be looked for; the calling was a little wild; the play more than a little loose; the laughter rather shrill or rather flat; the conversation between the hands forced and spasmodic. All were playing for time in their several interpretations of it; the blind man alone was thinking beyond the immediate moment.

Presently there was a more genuine burst of laughter than any hitherto. Kato had revoked, and, confronted with it, had made a nave excuse. Carrados rose with the intention of going nearer when a distressing thing occurred. Half-way across the room he seemed to slip, plunged forward helplessly, and came to the floor, involved in a light table as he fell. All the players were on their feet in an instant. Darragh assisted his guest to rise-Violet took an arm; Kato looked about the floor curiously, and Hulse—Hulse stared hard at Max and wondered what the thunder this portended.

“Clumsy, clumsy,” murmured Carrados beneath his breath. “Forgive me, Miss

Darragh.”

“Oh, Mr. Carrados!” she exclaimed in genuine distress. “Aren’t you really hurt?”

“Not a bit of it,” he declared lightly. “Or at all events,” he amended, bearing rather more heavily upon her support as he took a step, “nothing to speak of.”

“Here is pencil,” said Kuromi, picking one up from the polished floor. “You must have slipped on this.”

“Stepping on a pencil is like that,” contributed Hulse wisely. “It acts as a kind of roller-skate.”

“Please don’t interrupt the game any more,” pleaded the victim. “At the most, at the very worst, it is only-oh!-a negligible strain.”

“I don’t know that any strain, especially of the ankle, is negligible, Mr. Carrados,” said Darragh with cunning foresight. “I think it perhaps ought to be seen to.”

“A compress when I get back will be all that is required,” maintained Carrados. “I should hate to break up the evening.”

“Don’t consider that for a moment,” urged the host hospitably. “If you re-ally think that it would be wiser in the end-”

“Well, perhaps-” assented the other, weakening in his resolution.

“Shall I ‘Phone up a taxi?” asked Violet.

“Thank you, if you would be so kind-or, no; perhaps my own car would be rather easier in the circumstances. My man will be about, so that it will take very little longer.”

“I’ll get through for you,” volunteered Darragh. “What’s your number?”

The telephone was in a corner of the room. The connection was soon obtained and Darragh turned to his guest for the message.

“I’d better speak,” said Carrados,—he had limped across on Hulse’s arm-taking

over the receiver. "Excellent fellow, but he'd probably conclude that I'd been killed... . That you, Parkinson? ... Yes, at 3155 Densham Gardens. I'm held up here by a slight accident... . No, no, nothing serious, but I might have some difficulty in getting back without assistance. Tell

Harris I shall need him after all, as soon as he can get here-the car that's handiest. That's-oh, and, Parkinson, bring along a couple of substantial walking-sticks with you. Any time now. That's all... . Yes ... yes." He put up the receiver with a thrill of satisfaction that he had got his message safely through. "Held up"-a phrase at once harmless and significant-was the arranged shift-key into code. It was easy for a blind man to receive some hurt that held him up. Once or twice Carrados's investigations had got him into tight places, but in one way or another he had invariably got out again.

"How far is your place away?" someone asked, and out of the reply a time-marking conversation on the subject of getting about London's darkened streets and locomotion in general arose. Under cover of this Kato drew Darragh aside to the deserted card-table.

"Not your pencil, Darragh?" he said quietly, displaying the one he had picked up.

"No; why?"

"I not altogether like this, is why, " replied the Japanese. "I think it Carrados own pencil. That man have too many ways of doing things, Darragh. It was mistake to let him 'Phone."

"Oh, nonsense; you heard what he said. Don't get jumpy, man. The thing has gone like clockwork."

"So far, yes. But I think I better go now and come back in one hour or so, safer for all much."

Darragh, for very good reasons, had the strongest objections to allowing his accomplice an opportunity of examining the spoil alone. "Look here, Katty," he said with decision, I must have you in case there does come a scrimmage. I'll tell Phillips to fasten the front door well, and then we can see that it's all right before anyone comes in. If it is, there's no need for you to run away; if there's the least doubt we can knock these two out and have plenty of time to clear by the back

way we've got." Without giving Kato any chance of raising further objection he turned to his guests again.

"I think I remember your tastes, Hulse," he said suavely. "I hope that you have no objection to Scotch whisky, Mr. Carrados? We still have a few bottles left. Or perhaps you prefer champagne?"

Carrados, had very little intention of drinking anything in that house, nor did he think that with ordinary procrastination it would be necessary.

"You are very kind," he replied tentatively. "Should you permit the invalid either, Miss Darragh?"

"Oh, yes, in moderation," she smiled. "I think I hear your car," she added, and stepping to the window ventured to peep out.

It was true. Mr. Darragh had run it a shade too fine for once. For a moment he hesitated which course to take-to see who was arriving or to convey a warning to his henchman down below. He had turned towards the door when Violet's startled voice recalled him to the window.

"Hugh!" she called sharply. "Here, Hugh; " and as he reached her, in a breathless whisper, "There are men inside the car-two more at least."

Darragh had to decide very quickly this time. His choice was not without its element of fineness. "Go down and see about it, Katty," he said, looking Kato straight in the eyes. "And tell Phillips about the whisky."

"Door locked," said the Japanese tersely. "Key other side."

"The key was on this side," exclaimed Darragh fiercely. "Hulse

"Hell!" retorted Beringer expressively. "That jacket doesn't go out of the room without me this journey."

Darragh had him covered before he had finished speaking.

"Quick," he rapped out. "I'll give you up to three, and if the key isn't out then, by God, I'll plug you, Hulse! One, two--"

The little “ping!” that followed was not the automatic speaking, but the release of the electric light switch as Carrados, unmarked among this climax, pressed it up. In the absolute blackness that followed Darragh spun round to face the direction of this new opponent.

“Shoot by all means, Mr. Darragh, if you are used to firing in the dark,” said Carrados’s imperturbable voice. “But in any case remember that I am. As I am a dead shot by sound, perhaps everyone had better remain exactly where he-or she, I regret to have to add, Miss Darragh-now is.”

“You dog!” spat out Darragh.

“I should not even talk,” advised the blind man. “I am listening for my friends and I might easily mistake your motive among the hum of conversation.”

He had not long to wait. In all innocence Phillips had opened the door to Parkinson, and immeasurably to his surprise two formidable-looking men of official type had followed in from somewhere. By a sort of instinct-or possibly a momentary ray of light had been their guide they came direct to the locked door.

“Parkinson,” called Carrados.

“Yes, sir, replied that model attendant.

“We are all in here; Mr. Hulse and myself, and three -I am afraid that I can make no exception-three unfriendlies. At the moment the, electric light is out of action, the key of the locked door has been mislaid, and firearms are being promiscuously flourished in the dark. That is the position. Now if you have the key, Hulse-”

“I have,” replied Hulse grimly, “but for a fact I dropped it down my neck out of harm’s way and where the plague it’s got to

As it happened the key was not required. The heavier of the officers outside, believing in the element of surprise, stood upon one foot and shot the other forward with the force and action of an engine piston-rod. The shattered door swung inward and the three men rushed into the room.

Darragh had made up his mind, and as the door crashed he raised his hand to fire into the thick. But at that moment the light flashed on again and almost instantly

was gone. Before his dazzled eyes and startled mind could adjust themselves to this he was borne down. When he rose again his hands were manacled.

“So,” he breathed laboriously, bending a vindictive eye upon his outwitted.
“When next we meet it will be my turn, I think.”

“We shall never meet again,” replied Carrados impassively. “There is no other turn for you, Darragh.”

“But where the blazes has Kuromi got to?” demanded Hulse with sharp concern.
“He can’t have quit?”

One of the policemen walked to a table in the farthest corner of the room, looked down beyond it, and silently raised a beckoning hand. They joined him there.

“Rum way these foreigners have of doing things, remarked the other disapprovingly. “Now who the Hanover would ever think of a job like that?”

“I suppose,” mused the blind man, as he waited for the official arrangements to go through, “that presently I shall have to live up to Hulse’s overwhelming bewonderment. And yet if I pointed out to him that the button-hole of the coat he is now wearing still has a stitch in it to keep it in shape and could not by any possibility ... Well, well, perhaps better not. It is a mistake for the conjurer to explain.”

Preston Beach, 1917.