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**ERNEST BRAMAH'S
THE TRAGEDY AT BROOKBEND COTTAGE:
AN UNPUBLISHED DETECTIVE PLAY**

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INTRODUCTION

If Ernest Bramah (1868-1942), English short-story writer and novelist, is remembered in literary history, it will probably be for his six books centered upon the Chinese story-teller and pseudo-philosopher Kai Lung: *The Wallet of Kai Lung* (1900), *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922), *Kai Lung Unrolls His Mat* (1928), *The Moon of Much Gladness* (1932), *Kai Lung Beneath the Mulberry-Tree* (1940), and *Kai Lung: Six* (1974). He is listed in *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* and other such reference works, and editions of his Chinese stories are still in print (in England); but he has received little critical attention except in my forty-odd articles, beginning with "Ernest Bramah: A First Checklist" [*BB*, 22 (May-August 1958), 127-131]. (The most recent appears in the current issue of *The Bluegrass Literary Review*, Midway College, Midway, Kentucky.)

But the most popular of Bramah's writings — certainly in this country — have to do with a blind detective, Max Carrados, whose remarkable exploits are revealed in three collections of short stories and a novel: *Max Carrados* (1914), *The Eyes of Max Carrados* (1923), *Max Carrados Mysteries* (1927), and *The Bravo of London* (1934). Evidence of this American interest is seen in the recent publication of the *Best Max Carrados Detective Stories* [Selected with an Introduction by E. F. Bleiler] (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1972); *Max Carrados* (Westport, Conn.; Hyperion Press, Inc., 1975); and *Max Carrados* [with a Preface by Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor] (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976), in the Garland Series, *Fifty Classics of Crime Fiction 1900-1950*.

In addition to his eighteen books, Bramah — who was born Ernest Bramah Smith — wrote countless sketches (for such magazines as *Punch*, *Land & Water*, *The Storyteller*, and *The London Mercury*) and at least a dozen plays, all unpublished, in manuscript, in the Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, which holds the largest collection of Bramah papers.

Some of these plays we know now have been performed, for in an

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unpublished autobiographical MS. Bramah says: "Two [of my] one-act plays (one in collaboration) adapted from 'Max Carrados' stories [are] frequently performed at different London variety theatres and frequently broadcast." The collaborator was Gilbert Heron, who wrote "In the Dark" with Bramah, adapted from the short story, "The Game Played in the Dark," first published in *Max Carrados* (1914); it was staged in several variety houses in and around London in 1917 and 1918. Of another adaptation for the theatre we read in a memoir of Ernest Bramah's publisher, Grant Richards, *Author Hunting* [(London: Hamish Hamilton; New York: Coward-McCann, 1934), p. 274]: "There is one thing that I think few Bramah admirers know. On 21 February 1931 at 2:30 the Men Students of the Old Vic Shakespeare Company presented *Kai Lung's Golden Hours*, 'a Chinese Comedy, adapted for the stage by Allan D. Mainds, A. R. S. A.'" Richards, who saw the play, adds: "But I prefer my Kai Lung within the pages of a book."

Another adaptation, for broadcasting, was written by Bramah from his *Max Carrados* with the same title in the collection, "The Tragedy in Brookbend Cottage." This short story is Bramah's most popular; it first appeared in *The News of the World* [(London), 7 and 14 September 1913]; was collected in *Max Carrados* [(London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1914), pp. 66-98]; appeared in *Argosy* [1 (March 1927), 76-86]; in *Ellery Queen's Magazine* [18 (August 1951), 65-80]; was included in eight anthologies between 1926 and 1974, as well as in Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian anthologies (in translation); and out of twenty-six Max Carrados stories, it was one of the ten selected by E. F. Bleiler for the *Best Max Carrados Detective Stories* [pp. 172-191]. How often it was broadcast I do not know, but I have seen a record of its being aired in Malaya on the Singapore Broadcasting Company on 14 December 1955.

The first publication of the radio adaptation, as far as I am aware, is made possible here with the kind permission of the Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, and the holder of the Ernest Bramah copyright, the Trustees of the late W. P. Watt.

THE TRAGEDY AT BROOKBEND COTTAGE
SPECIALLY ADAPTED FOR BROADCASTING
BY
ERNEST BRAMAH
FROM HIS STORY OF THE SAME NAME IN
“MAX CARRADOS”

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance):

Millicent (Mrs. Creake)

Mrs. Wicks

Lieutenant Philip Hollyer

Max Carrados

Louis Carlyle

Inspector Beedel (of Scotland Yard)

Austin Creake

Although it is only indicated where essential, thunder, in its various aspects, is to be introduced throughout the play. The best periods for this should develop in practice. Thunder, though dramatically one of the most effective noises, is a two-edged weapon, and over-stressed it may become bathetic. But it is necessary to keep the actuality of a terrific thunderstorm crashing around the house persistently before the listener. The other storm effects of slashing rain and the various wind sounds are to be also used. It has not been thought necessary always to indicate other sounds that arise naturally out of the described action.

This episode in the experience of Max Carrados, the blind amateur criminologist, takes place at an isolated, old-fashioned cottage situated in one of the semi-rural districts of outer London.

The episode begins in the sitting-room of Brookbend Cottage, where Millicent (Mrs. Creake) is seated at the piano, idly and not very skilfully playing the latter part of a melancholy ballad. After a few bars there is heard a distant roll of thunder.

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MILLICENT: (*nervously startled*) Oh!

She drops the cover of the piano almost with a bang and crossing the room closes the window and sharply draws the blind. Fumbling on the mantelpiece for a matchbox she knocks over a small china ornament which falls down upon the hearth-stone with a smash. This elicits another nervous half-checked cry. She finds the box and strikes a match. As she is about to light the lamp a door (off) rattles.

MILLICENT: (*alarmed but with a defiant front*) Who's there? What are you doing —

Steps are heard approaching along the passage. The door, which was not closed, is pushed further open. Enter Mrs. Wicks.

MRS. WICKS: (*soothingly*) There, there, m'm, it's only me. Did I give you a start? I don't wonder neither — sitting here all alone in the dark. Let me light the lamp for you and it'll make things look a bit brighter. (*She strikes a match and lights table lamp.*) More cheerfuller isn't it, m'm?

MILLICENT: (*with a nervous laugh*) Thank you, Mrs. Wicks, but I wasn't really afraid, only I didn't know that there was anyone else in the house. I thought that you had left more than an hour ago.

MRS. WICKS: So I had — why it must be near on ten o'clock now — but I knew that you was out of eggs for tomorrow breakfast, so I just looked in with half-a-dozen on my way back from the shops. And I'll be round towards eleven in the morning and we'll give this room a regular good old turn-out. Doesn't half need it, I should say.

MILLICENT: Oh, thank you. I quite forgot about the — (*The crackle of nearer thunder*) Ah-h!

MRS. WICKS: Dear, dear; what a state you're in to be sure. It's nothing to be afraid of: just a bit of thunder. But you're all a bundle of nerves, as I've seen since I first come here. Mr. Creak had'n't never ought to have taken a lonely, tumble-down old place like this for you to mope about in. You want livening up.

MILLICENT: Lonely, Mrs. Wicks! Why, it's on the electric car

line. I can lie awake until two o'clock in the morning and hear them passing along the high-road.

MRS. WICKS: No doubt you can. But if you're relying awake a tram car isn't much company to my way of thinking. Especially if you're lying awake expecting someone who doesn't come by it. And talking about husbands —

MILLICENT: Well, we won't do that, Mrs. Wicks.

MRS. WICKS: No; there isn't much to be said for the general run of them. I often tell Wicks — (*Thunder*)

MILLICENT: You really must get on home before the storm breaks, Mrs. Wicks. It's coming nearer and nearer and soon there'll be an awful deluge. When I looked out just now the sky was as black as ink and you have quite a way to go.

MRS. WICKS: I suppose I must. But I don't like leaving you here all alone and that's a fact Excuse me, won't you, m'm, but is there any chance of Mr. Creak getting back tonight?

MILLICENT: I don't know. He — he couldn't say. But it doesn't matter. It's really absurd to talk about me being all alone. I'm — surely I'm used to that by now.

MRS. WICKS: I can't help it. It's — a feeling. I was just the same the night before Wicks broke his leg through not seeing a cellar trap-door that was there — at least he didn't see the one that *was* there. And again when my second eldest — Maudie — went off with the Italian hokey-pokey man I felt it too. I suppose it's a sort of gift I have. (*A great crash of thunder near. Millicent calls out and even Mrs. Wicks gasps*) Oh the lord chief justice! That broke the silence, didn't it? Well, I may just as well be getting on if there's nothing you'll let me do.

MILLICENT: There's nothing to be done, thank you, Mrs. Wicks; and tomorrow — (*a knock on a door, off*) What was that?

MRS. WICKS: Sounds like someone at the front door. I'll see.

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MILLICENT: Who ever can it be at this hour? I'm not expecting anything.

MRS. WICKS: (*as she goes out*) Nothing much, I'll wager.

MILLICENT: (*apostrophising her exit in a dull monotone*) You good-hearted old chatterbox — I'm even thankful for you!

MRS. WICKS: (*returning joyfully*) Well I never! If it isn't your brother, m'm. I *am* glad. He's hanging up his things. Now it'll be all right.

MILLICENT: (*going towards door*) Phil! Really?

HOLLYER: (*entering*) Yes, Millicent, actually! (*They kiss*)

MRS. WICKS: You'll stay the night, sir, won't you? (*Hollyer laughs*) There! that's me all over. I'm sure I beg your pardon, m'm, for letting my tongue run on, but I've been that anxious —

HOLLYER: Thank you, Mrs. Wicks. Perhaps I may.

MILLICENT: Of course he'll stay. The idea of going back on a night like this! Here, take off your wet boots, Phil. There are some old slippers in the cupboard, I think. (*She crosses the room and opens a cupboard door*)

MRS. WICKS: (*Speaking in a confidential whisper as she passes*) She's all of a edge with the storm and what not, sir. I do hope you'll manage to stay.

HOLLYER: (*in the same tone*) Righto.

MRS. WICKS: Now I really will be going. Good night, m'm. Good night, sir.

MILLICENT: Good night, Mrs. Wicks. And tomorrow morning; you won't forget?

MRS. WICKS: Tomorrow morning — as sure as death (*Exit, closing door*)

HOLLYER: Don't trouble about those slippers, Millicent. My boots aren't really wet.

MILLICENT: You're sure? How did you come — by the car?

HOLLYER: Yes — by car. Why?

MILLICENT: Oh, only that I generally hear one stop and start — just by the gate, you know — and I didn't.

The outer door is heard to close as it is pulled to smartly.

HOLLYER: No, you probably wouldn't.

MILLICENT: And I thought that your boat was to sail last Tuesday — you certainly did say so.

HOLLYER: Yes, I think I did. Well, as a matter of fact, my boat — the "Martian" — has sailed but I haven't sailed with her. At the eleventh hour I managed to transfer The truth is, my dear, I've been very uneasy about you lately.

MILLICENT: Oh — Mrs. Wicks again!

HOLLYER: Oh no; not Mrs. Wicks. What you told me yourself, and what I've since found out.

MILLICENT: (*fencing*) What have I told you?

HOLLYER: You've told me in a hundred ways that you're unhappy, and those few days that I stayed here showed me that you and your husband are living on terms of — well, I can call it nothing else but polite hatred. It's killing you, Millicent. But even that process — killing by inches — may be too slow for someone else ... Look here, my girl, you and Creake are hopelessly unsuited. Do the best thing that there is in the circumstances: leave him while you still have some of your money safe. There are no children to consider and you will both be the happier apart.

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MILLICENT: I know — I know. I tell myself so day after day but it always comes back to the same thing: I can't leave him. He may leave me —

HOLLYER: Not while you have any of the money left that he finds so useful.

MILLICENT: — but I am hopelessly in his power. I suppose that I still love him in some unhappy way. I've told you all this before: why do you bring it up again now, Phil? It can do no good.

HOLLYER: You hadn't told me then what you told me on that last day I was here — about the changed bottles put out for your supper.

MILLICENT: Oh that was all a mistake, Phil. I was overwrought and I — I imagined things.

HOLLYER: (*doggedly*) It was not a mistake, Millicent; it was far too circumstantial and exact for that and it fits in all too plausibly with what I noticed myself while I was here and what I have learned since It was so ingeniously arranged that your husband was a hundred miles away when you sat down to supper and if you had taken one drink of that substituted stuff nothing could have saved you and everything on earth would have pointed to you having made a mistake with the bottles in the dark. That comes of having a husband who is a clever all-round scientist.

MILLICENT: (*crying quietly*) Forget it, Phil.

HOLLYER: How can I forget it? It would be rank treachery You and I are the only ones who are left, Millicent, and I promised our mother, literally on her death-bed, that I would look after you.

MILLICENT: You have, Phil. You have been a dear. For years you gave up your own prospects to make things comfortable for me.

HOLLYER: (*cutting into her speech*) Oh nonsense!

MILLICENT: (*without any pause*) You did. I ought never to have

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let you do so much, but I didn't really know at the time what you were sacrificing. Now I'm off your hands.

HOLLYER: You can never be that, my dear, so long as I have hands. When you married, five years ago, I thought certainly that then you would have someone better able to protect you. I never pretended that I took overmuch to Creak — a silent, moody inventor, nearly twice your age, struck me as rather a queer mate for my light-hearted little sister — but he seemed to be your choice.

MILLICENT: Not so light-hearted now-a-days, Phil. You see, I can adapt myself to my surroundings.

HOLLYER: Yes? And I suppose a butterfly adapts itself to its surroundings when it gets a pin stuck through its back: it doesn't fly about much, you may notice. Well, if you are willing to be sacrificed now that you begin to be in the way, I'm not willing to let you.

MILLICENT: I really don't think that I care very much about anything now, Phil. And you would only make it worse by interfering.

HOLLYER: We'll see about that.

MILLICENT: Phil, let me warn you — for my own sake if you like. If he's crossed Austin can be — oh, well, never mind; only please don't.

HOLLYER: I know it's no good having a row with him or making charges that he could laugh at — you needn't tell me that. But I was determined to see this through and so I've taken other measures.

MILLICENT: Phil, what do you mean? What have you done?

HOLLYER: I've had him watched for one thing. For weeks now your husband has been shadowed.

MILLICENT: Do you mean that you have employed someone — a private detective? Oh, Phil, had it to come to this!

HOLLYER: What else was I to do? I'm no good at anything clever. This inquiry agent fellow — Carlyle — was recommended to me and he

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is a very decent sort, let me tell you. He earns his fees, too Do you know anything about Hettie M.?

MILLICENT: Hettie M.? Oh, you mean Miss Marsh. She is Austin's typist.

HOLLYER: Yes, she is Austin's — typist. His confidential clerk. His companion — in fact his travelling companion. Why, you poor simple soul, there isn't a week-end that they don't go off together while you are left moping here.

MILLICENT: Of course I knew that there must be someone There always has been someone, almost from the very first. You needn't have wasted your money finding that out, Phil.

HOLLYER: Perhaps this one is rather more serious than the others. She wants Austin to marry her — in fact she's become rather pressing. And he is more than willing.

MILLICENT: More fool she. He can't while I'm alive.

HOLLYER: No, Millicent, he can't — while — you — are — alive.

MILLICENT: I don't think that you need fear, Phil. Whatever else he is, Austin is not an absolute idiot and having once tried and failed — if, as you say, he has done — he daren't put his neck into a noose by doing anything so obvious again in a hurry. I'm, as it were, immune. I've been vaccinated against murder.

HOLLYER: Against that sort of murder; yes, Millicent. But the next time it will be something far more cunning. It won't be poison again — so Mr. Carrados warns me.

MILLICENT: Carrados — you said Carlyle just now. What's this, Phil?

HOLLYER: I am going to tell you. I must tell you everything now: so far I've only been preparing you for something This Max Carrados is a friend of my inquiry agent Carlyle, and his queer taste is to take up any kind of baffling crime that promises mystery or unusual

excitement. For weeks I've been acting under his instructions. That's why you — and Austin of course — thought that I would have sailed by now in the "Martian." That's why I pressed you — for Austin's benefit — to be prepared to pay me my share of our legacy when I got back again. It's all part of a plan.

MILLICENT: Rather a curious way of helping me, wasn't it, Phil? If anything would drive Austin to extremities it would be the knowledge that we must find that money.

HOLLYER: That's exactly what we aim at — to drive Austin to extremities.

MILLICENT: I don't understand.

HOLLYER: "We can protect your sister for a few weeks or even for a few months," Carrados said to me, "but we can't go on protecting her for ever." (You have been protected, Millicent, although you know nothing of it.) "So let us give Mr. Creake every encouragement to act at once," he said. Well, we have. He thinks the coast is clear; he thinks his time is short; and now there comes this thunderstorm.

MILLICENT: You are trying to frighten me into something, Phil. What has this dreadful storm got to do with it?

HOLLYER: Do you really think that of me, Millie? Have I ever —

MILLICENT: No, no, Phil dear. But I — I don't know what —

HOLLYER: What the storm's got to do with it I know very little more than you do — I don't think even Max Carrados has got to the bottom of it exactly. But I know that everything depends upon it and we have been waiting for it all along. When the Meteorological Office predicted a thunderstorm approaching Carrados phoned through to me to meet him at once and to bring them down here to be ready.

MILLICENT: Bring them down here? Who? Do you mean that people are —

HOLLYER: Yes — Max Carrados, Mr. Carlyle and a Scotland

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Yard inspector. At this moment they are outside, waiting. He gave me five minutes to prepare you in. This is your opportunity, Millicent. If nothing happens you have been right and we may have misjudged Austin. If it does —

MILLICENT: Very well; it is a challenge. Do whatever you intended.

HOLLYER: Then I will tell them now. But — one word, Millicent — Max Carrados is blind. Be considerate with him, won't you?

MILLICENT: Blind? Blind, you say! Then can he be — Oh, just a minute, Phil. Is he rather a tall, artistic-looking man, who always seems to have a sort of half smile though it isn't really a smile when you look again?

HOLLYER: Yes. Very cool and self-possessed. You might never know that he was blind. Why?

MILLICENT: Then he came only a few days ago! He had a card and I thought that he came from the estate agents. I showed him all over the house myself — every room — and the garden too.

HOLLYER: I'm not surprised. He can carry anything off.

MILLICENT: But what an unholy fraud he was! And I thought him absolutely charming.

CARRADOS: (entering quietly) What a foolish saying that is about listeners, Mrs. Creak! — of course I only heard the last part! Forgive my intrusion but your time is more than up, Hollyer, and we must make a quick decision. Our first report has come in and we know that Mr. Creak has cancelled an appointment and is coming here as fast as wheels can bring him. Well, what is it to be?

HOLLYER: I've warned her, Mr. Carrados, and she will not leave him. She puts it to us to prove it.

CARRADOS: So be it. I thought that the other way would be the simpler — possibly the safer — for her, but this may be the more

effective. Will you bring the others in here, please?

HOLLYER: Very well, sir. (Exit Hollyer)

MILLICENT: Mr. Carrados. I think that you are the sort of man who always gets what he wants and invariably proves to have been right in the end —

CARRADOS: A most unpleasant type of creature, Mrs. Creak. I've known that sort of man.

MILLICENT: — but there is one thing that you may have overlooked.

CARRADOS: And that is?

MILLICENT: If I told you what, you mightn't overlook it.

CARRADOS: My dear lady! Are we adversaries sparring for an opening? I am here to —

MILLICENT: To take over for the night. You are in command, Mr. Carrados. What is my role to be — what are your orders? They will be scrupulously obeyed.

CARRADOS: I shall hope to convince you yet. Now there is an empty bedroom, isn't there — any upstairs room except your own will do.

MILLICENT: There are several. You saw — I mean, you explored them all the other day. Am I to go there now?

CARRADOS: If you please. Any will do. Just wait there. But no light —not the faintest glimmer for a single instant or we are done. And, of course, don't approach the window.

MILLICENT: Quite easy. Just wait! (Exit Millicent)

A prolonged crackle of very near thunder. Reenter Hollyer bringing in Mr. Carlyle and Inspector Beedel.

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HOLLYER: Here are Mr. Carlyle and Inspector Beedel, sir.

BEEDEL: Another message just come through, sir. The party in question has dismissed his taxi at Bolt Corner and he's making his way in this direction by Cobblers Lane.

CARRADOS: Ah, thank you, Inspector. That should give us — ?

BEEDEL: In this weather it must take him the matter of eight or ten minutes to get here. I'm holding the call-box by the cross-roads and we should get one more message.

CARRADOS: Eight minutes! Then we will move to the scene of action. Hollyer, I want you first to go up to your sister's room and draw the blind. We will follow.

HOLLYER: Aye, aye, sir. (*Exit Hollyer*)

CARLYLE: But do we know which room it is, Max?

CARRADOS: I have already been over the ground, Louis. I won't mislead you Your men quite understand, Inspector, that once Creake is sighted from the cross-roads they are to lie close and not show as much as a finger, or to enter the grounds here FOR ANY CAUSE WHATSOEVER — whether the final message has come through or not?

BEEDEL: They have full instructions, sir, and I think that we can trust them absolutely.

CARRADOS: Then come on up. You carry the lamp, Inspector. We leave the lower part of the house deserted and wrapped in darkness.

Exeunt all. The door is closed by the last man and their steps are heard departing. They mount the stairs and in Mrs. Creake's bedroom the footsteps of three are heard approaching. The door is opened and Carrados, Carlyle and Beedel enter.

CARRADOS: Close the door, please. The lamp on the little table,

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Inspector. This is Mrs. Creake's bedroom and the external indication is that she is now retiring for the night. May I suggest, Louis, that the shadow of a palpably ample gentleman, silhouetted on the blind, is indelicate in the circumstances?

CARLYLE: Tch, tch! Yes, by Gad, we must be careful about that. Still, the fellow isn't anywhere near yet.

BEEDEL: (in a whisper) It's a living marvel to me, Mr. Hollyer, though I've had to do with Mr. Carrados going on pretty nearly twelve years now, how he *knows* things like that. He doesn't guess or make a lucky shot, mind you; he simply *knows* it.

HOLLYER: (in the same tone) You're right, Inspector.

BEEDEL: (as before) Look at the way he's going about, sir, as though he was in his own room at home. Once he's been over ground he knows every inch of it: never forgets a blessed detail. Now he's going up to the window and you watch how he keeps the light always in a safe direction. It's a lucky thing, I say, that he happened to take up crime as a hobby and not as a profession. If he had —

CARLYLE: (breaking in) H'm, h'm. It's always a privilege, my dear Max, to be associated with you in an investigation, but I do wish that in the present case you would give us a little more of your confidence.

CARRADOS: (absently) Confidence? You have it fully, Louis; fully.

CARLYLE: But what is going to happen? What is our — er — line of action? I should hesitate to describe myself as an impressionable subject (*rain, wind, thunder*) but what with the atmospheric conditions outside, the knowledge that an intending murderer is due to make his appearance within about — er — six-and-a-half minutes, and the undoubted fact that our presence here is extremely ambiguous from a legal standpoint —

CARRADOS: Quite so, Louis. I feel the same awkwardness myself. After all, if Creake is perfectly innocent in his intentions, it

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may be rather embarrassing to find an explanation why three absolute strangers should be discovered in his wife's bedroom at the dead of night.

CARLYLE: Tch, tch! Really, Max, I sometimes wish that you would take things a little more — er —

CARRADOS: Seriously, Louis? (*Sighs*) Yes, yes; my old failing. Suppose it should turn out that I've brought you three here on a wild goose chase after all! What should you say about it?

CARLYLE: Well! Upon my word, Max —

HOLLYER: Surely, Mr. Carrados, you don't mean —

BEEDEL: In that case I should say that we shall probably get that wild goose before long, sir.

CARRADOS: Confidence, you see, Louis. The Inspector still believes in me. And it's quite on the cards that he may be right. (*His voice changes to a practical incision. He is speaking from the window.*) This plate of metal, nailed down by the window. There was nothing of the sort when I was last here. Hollyer, find out from your sister about it.

HOLLYER: Very well, sir. (*Exit Hollyer, but he puts his head in again almost as soon as he has gone.*) I think there's another message for you, Inspector.

CARRADOS: Look into it, Beedel.

BEEDEL: I will, sir. (*Exit Beedel*)

CARLYLE: Seriously, Max, if you have any doubt about the situation would it not be better for us to withdraw in good order while we still have the chance?

CARRADOS: I am short of two essential links in an otherwise absolutely unassailable chain of logical deduction, and I have four minutes left to supply them in You were remarking, Louis?

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CARLYLE: Um, well, I don't want to embarrass you, Max —

CARRADOS: You don't, Louis. You invariably stimulate my sluggish imagination I said two links. Only one remains. The catch of the French window here has recently been carefully filed to ensure perfect metallic contact when it is opened. And when that happens —

HOLLYER: (returning) My sister tells me that Creake nailed some tin there a few days ago, Mr. Carrados. He said the floor was dangerously rotten, and as Millicent often uses the balcony —

CARRADOS: He thinks of everything! Yes, Inspector?

BEEDEL: (Reentering) The party has left the lane but he isn't coming by the high-road. He's making for a field path that will bring him into the garden at the back. It's a bit further round but he's safe not to be seen.

CARLYLE: On a night like this! H'm, that certainly looks as if he

BEEDEL: My men have all got out now according to instructions And, if you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Carrados, I wouldn't stand too near that window. I've just been told that a tree in the road has been struck by lightning and it may be a bit risky.

CARRADOS: Not to me, Inspector, but to Mrs. Creake it would be absolutely fatal That is the painless end for her that an affectionate husband has been contriving.

HOLLYER: Struck by lightning! He's been a practical electrician I know, but how on earth is he to direct a flash of lightning? You mean that, don't you?

CARRADOS: Yes, Hollyer, but he only wants to direct it into the minds of the doctor who would make the post mortem and the coroner and jury who hold the inquest. A force as powerful as lightning and far more tractable is flowing past the gate here at this moment, ready to be tapped.

18 *THE TRAGEDY AT BROOKBEND COTTAGE*

BEEDEL: The electric tram cable! Ah.

CARLYLE: By Gad, that's a bold idea. Can it be done, Max?

CARRADOS: If we weren't here, five minutes from now would have settled that point Out there in the garden a derelict kite hangs from a convenient tree and its broken cord brushes across the tram wires. That kite masks a length of insulated wire, running underground to a point beneath this window. From the window another piece innocently supports a rose-bush. In a jiffy our practical electrician can make his connection and then when Mrs. Creake stands where I am standing and moves the window catch — now become a switch — she is electrocuted as effectually as if she sat in the condemned chair in Sing Sing prison.

HOLLYER: The cold-blooded scoundrel!

CARLYLE: And then, Max?

CARRADOS: Then Mr. Creake will remove his simple apparatus and when his wife is discovered by the charwoman tomorrow morning it will be obvious by every physiological test and commonsense inference that she has unfortunately been struck by lightning while standing at this window during the great storm of the night.

CARLYLE: Tch, tch! Poor lady!

HOLLYER: But what are we to do, sir? He'll — he'll swear it's only a scientific experiment or something of the sort now.

CARRADOS: That is the one weak link remaining. Why here? How — how is Creake to know with absolute assurance that he can rely on his wife opening that window within the next two hours?

HOLLYER: Oh, I think I can suggest that, sir. It happened once when I stayed here and she told me in the morning. Millicent is too nervous to leave the front door unlocked and there's only one key. So if he comes back after she's gone to bed he throws a stone up against the window and she drops the key down for him to get in by. It's an arrangement.

William White

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CARRADOS: The final detail. Our chain is complete in every link now, and there's three-quarters of a minute still to go, Louis! Quite a lot can be done in three-quarters of a minute. Have you ever taken your watch out, Louis, and realised how long it seems for three-quarters of a minute —

CARLYLE: But we have arranged nothing, Max! That stone may come at any moment. How are we to —

CARRADOS: True, true, Louis. You are quite right not to let me wander. But Creak mustn't be allowed to put our wind up either. He may possibly be here in — say twenty-five seconds now, but I don't imagine that he will give his little love-call until he is satisfied that his victim is well in bed. Bare feet are admirable for his purpose. So as long as we keep the lamp in, we control the situation After all, there is a sort of grim humour in the idea of keeping him standing out there in the downpour — probably picturing what he imagines is going on in here — while we comfortably arrange the details.

HOLLYER: I don't find it so, sir. It's not amusing to me I can assure you.

CARRADOS: No; you probably wouldn't. You are a sailor — a man of action.

HOLLYER: I am her brother.

CARRADOS: And certainly the least unlike her of any of us here. You are now going to play the chief part in the dénouement. You are to be Millicent in what follows. Off with your boots and socks and pull your trousers well above your knees. Coat as well. Bundle them out of sight — yes, under the bed will do. Now slip this white night-dress on. Rumples your hair up. Get right into the bed — if he has a flash-light he must see that it has been occupied Here is a rubber glove; no danger so long as you only use that hand.

HOLLYER: And my instructions?

CARRADOS: When he gives the signal get up just as she would.

20 **THE TRAGEDY AT BROOKBEND COTTAGE**

Put on this dressing-gown. Go to the window. Release the blind. Unlatch the window. There will be a spark — probably a flash. Drop immediately and draw up your limbs and head — contorted — under the dressing-gown. Leave the window open to rattle in the wind. I'll — see that you are properly covered. Then wait, dead.

HOLLYER: I understand, sir.

CARRADOS: Inspector, you stand among the dresses behind that hanging wardrobe — you'll be convenient to get his right arm there.

BEEDEL: Carries a little gun, I suppose, sir?

CARRADOS: Almost certain to. Louis, your place is down in the angle behind the chest of drawers, with the arm-chair drawn up before you.

CARLYLE: Rather crampy, Max, for a man of my — er, figure. Never mind. But where are *you* to be?

CARRADOS: Don't trouble about me, my friend. I shall be all right in my own element — in the dark you know. Now, all ready? I'm going to put out the light.

He turns the lamp down and blows it out. Dead silence.

CARLYLE: (*in a tense whisper*) Max, by Gad! The key won't be thrown down this time, remember. How the dickins is Creake going to get in then?

CARRADOS: (*speaking in a deliberate low tone, but not a whisper*) He knows that the key won't be thrown down. Leave it to him; he will have made his arrangements, Louis.

Silence. Rain. Wind. One terrific crackle of near thunder. Silence. Then the rattle of a pebble against the window. The bed creaks as Hollyer springs to his feet.

CARRADOS: (*in a low firm voice*) Steady, steady. Your sister

would have no occasion to hurry. Let him give another knock first.

HOLLYER: (in a rather excited whisper) Right, sir.

Silence. Then a handful of gravel against the window, with some vigour.

CARRADOS: Now.

Hollyer pads across the room. The blind springs up. The metal of the window catch clicks, followed immediately by the crack of an electric spark and the sound as of an electric lamp bulb exploding. Something of an arrested cry and a thud as Hollyer falls to the ground. The window begins to bang backwards and forwards and the wind and rain are heard more obtrusively. A low roll of distant thunder.

CARRADOS: (in a whisper now) You are perfectly covered, Hollyer. Hold it. You are our piece of cheese. Now will the cunning rat enter?

Wind and rain. Silence. A new sound of wind rushing in the house. Distant sounds from the lower floor. Slow steps approaching along the passage. The door opens. A pause. Then a spluttering match is struck.

CREAKE: You fool! You sulky, wilful, sickly little fool! So you wouldn't, would you? At last I'm rid of you for ever!

A scrape as of a chair being pushed and a sharp "What's that!" from Creake. The sound of a struggle in the dark. The ripping of cloth and furniture going over. The crash of glass and china on a marble slab. Confused smothered ejaculations and the stamping of feet throughout, and then in a comparatively quiet moment a cry from Carlyle: "Look out! He's trying to draw!" Another short bout and in a silence only broken by pants and deep breathing, two distinct metallic snaps are heard as of a pair of handcuffs closing.

22 **THE TRAGEDY AT BROOKBEND COTTAGE**

BEEDEL: Can we have something in the way of a light now, Mr. Carrados?

A match is struck and the lamp relighted.

BEEDEL: I am Inspector Beedel of the C.I.D. and you, Austin Creake, are under arrest and will presently be charged with the attempted murder of your wife Millicent.

CREAKE: Murder! You're mad, mad, mad, I say. She — my poor wife there — has been struck by lightning.

HOLLYER: (*jumping to his feet*) Oh no, you black scoundrel, she hasn't! This time you have been too clever. Would you like to see her again? You shall! (*Exit Hollyer*)

BEEDEL: (*continuing impassively*) And I have further to warn you that anything you may say will be taken down and used as evidence against you.

HOLLYER: (*outside the door*). Mr. Carrados! Oh, oh, please come quickly!

Exit Carrados. He and Hollyer stand in the passage.

HOLLYER: (*with a sob in his voice*) There — there in the next room. Dead, Mr. Carrados — dead on the floor with this bottle lying beside her. Dead, just when she would have been free of that brute for ever!

Carrados moves quietly into the next room and stands apparently looking down, with Hollyer following and standing beside him.

William White

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CARRADOS: Yes. That, Hollyer, strange to say, does not always appeal to the woman — to be free of a brute for ever. (*In a lower tone*)
She was right: I overlooked it!

THE END