

# Four Just Men



Edgar Wallace

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These are stories of the Four Just Men, Edgar Wallace's famous characters known to the wider public principally as a result of the early television series of the same name. The source material is, of course, far removed from its celluloid derivative. Far from being set in the world post WW2, the original stories take place in the colourful period immediately following the Great War. The principal characters remain a refreshing antidote to stereotypical heroes for they are group of ruthless and dedicated vigilantes, disillusioned with a world where the wicked and the abusers of power perpetually go unpunished. The Just Men set about to rectify matters according to their own standards and retribution is dispensed on swift and deadly wings.

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## PROLOGUE. THERY'S TRADE

If you leave the Plaza del Mina, go down the narrow street, where, from ten till four, the big flag of the United States Consulate hangs lazily; through the square on which the Hotel de la France fronts, round by the Church of Our Lady, and along the clean, narrow thoroughfare that is the High Street of Cadiz, you will come to the Cafe of the Nations.

At five o'clock there will be few people in the broad, pillared saloon, and usually the little round tables that obstruct the sidewalk before its doors are untenanted.

In the late summer (in the year of the famine) four men sat about one table and talked business.

Leon Gonzalez was one, Poiccart was another, George Manfred was a notable third, and one, Thery, or Saimont, was the fourth. Of this quartet, only Thery requires no introduction to the student of contemporary history. In the Bureau of Public Affairs you will find his record. As Thery, alias Saimont, he is registered.

You may, if you are inquisitive, and have the necessary permission, inspect his photograph taken in eighteen positions—with his hands across his broad chest, full faced, with a three-days' growth of beard, profile, with—but why enumerate the whole eighteen?

There are also photographs of his ears—and very ugly, bat-shaped ears they are—and a long and comprehensive story of his life.

Signor Paolo Mantegazza, Director of the National Museum of Anthropology, Florence, has done Thery the honour of including him in his admirable work (see chapter on 'Intellectual Value of a Face'); hence I say that to all students of criminology and physiognomy, Thery must need no introduction.

He sat at a little table, this man, obviously ill at ease, pinching his fat cheeks, smoothing his shaggy eyebrows, fingering the white scar on his unshaven chin, doing all the things that the lower classes do when they suddenly find themselves placed on terms of equality with their betters.

For although Gonzalez, with the light blue eyes and the restless hands, and Poiccart, heavy, saturnine, and suspicious, and George Manfred, with his grey-shot beard and single eyeglass, were less famous in the criminal world, each was a great man, as you shall learn.

Manfred laid down the *Heraldo di Madrid*, removed his eyeglass, rubbed it with a spotless handkerchief, and laughed quietly.

"These Russians are droll," he commented.

Poiccart frowned and reached for the newspaper. "Who is it—this time?"

"A governor of one of the Southern Provinces."

"Killed?"

Manfred's moustache curled in scornful derision.

"Bah! Who ever killed a man with a bomb! Yes, yes; I know it has been done—but so clumsy, so primitive, so very much like undermining a city wall that it may fall and slay—amongst others—your enemy."

Poiccart was reading the telegram deliberately and without haste, after his fashion.

"The Prince was severely injured and the would-be assassin lost an arm," he read, and pursed his lips disapprovingly. The hands of Gonzalez, never still, opened and shut nervously, which was Leon's sign of perturbation.

"Our friend here"—Manfred jerked his head in the direction of Gonzalez and laughed—"our friend has a conscience and—"

"Only once," interrupted Leon quickly, "and not by my wish you remember, Manfred; you remember, Poiccart"—he did not address Thery—"I advised against it. You remember?" He seemed anxious to exculpate himself from the unspoken charge. "It was a miserable little thing, and I was in Madrid," he went on breathlessly, "and they came to me, some men from a factory at Barcelona. They said what they were going to do, and I was horror-stricken at their ignorance of the elements of the laws of chemistry. I wrote down the ingredients and the proportions, and begged them, yes, almost on my knees, to use some other method. 'My children,' I said, 'you are playing with something that even chemists are afraid to handle. If the owner of the factory is a bad man, by all means exterminate him, shoot him, wait on him after he has dined and is slow and dull, and present a petition with the right hand and—with the left hand—so!'" Leon twisted his knuckles down and struck forward and upward at an imaginary oppressor. "But they would listen to nothing I had to say."

Manfred stirred the glass of creamy liquid that stood at his elbow and nodded his head with an amused twinkle in his grey eyes.

"I remember—several people died, and the principal witness at the trial of the expert in explosives was the man for whom the bomb was intended."

Thery cleared his throat as if to speak, and the three looked at him curiously. There was some resentment in Thery's voice.

"I do not profess to be a great man like you, senors. Half the time I don't understand what you are talking about—you speak of governments and kings and constitutions and causes. If a man does *me* an injury I smash his head"—he hesitated—"I do not know how to say it... but I mean... well, you kill people without hating them, men who have not hurt you. Now, that is not my way..." He hesitated again, tried to collect his thoughts, looked intently at the middle of the roadway, shook his head, and relapsed into silence.

The others looked at him, then at one another, and each man smiled. Manfred took a bulky case from his pocket, extracted an untidy

cigarette, re-rolled it deftly and struck a government match on the sole of his boot.

"Your-way-my-dear-Thery"—he puffed—"is a fool's way. You kill for benefit; we kill for justice, which lifts us out of the ruck of professional slayers. When we see an unjust man oppressing his fellows; when we see an evil thing done against the good God"—Thery crossed him self—"and against man—and know that by the laws of man this evildoer may escape punishment—we punish."

"Listen," interrupted the taciturn Poiccart: "once there was a girl, young and beautiful, up there"—he waved his hand northward with unerring instinct—"and a priest—a priest, you understand—and the parents winked at it because it is often done... but the girl was filled with loathing and shame, and would not go a second time, so he trapped her and kept her in a house, and then when the bloom was off turned her out, and I found her. She was nothing to me, but I said, 'Here is a wrong that the law cannot adequately right.' So one night I called on the priest with my hat over my eyes and said that I wanted him to come to a dying traveller. He would not have come then, but I told him that the dying man was rich and was a great person. He mounted the horse I had brought, and we rode to a little house on the mountain... I locked the door and he turned round—so! Trapped, and he knew it. 'What are you going to do?' he said with a gasping noise. 'I am going to kill you, senor,' I said, and he believed me. I told him the story of the girl... He screamed when I moved towards him, but he might as well have saved his breath. 'Let me see a priest,' he begged; and I handed him—a mirror."

Poiccart stopped to sip his coffee.

"They found him on the road next day without a mark to show how he died," he said simply.

"How?" Thery bent forward eagerly, but Poiccart permitted himself to smile grimly, and made no response.

Thery bent his brows and looked suspiciously from one to the other.

"Government, and there are men whom the Government have never heard of. You remember one Garcia, Manuel Garcia, leader in the Carlist movement; he is in England; it is the only country where he is safe; from England he directs the movement here, the great movement. You know of what I speak?"

Thery nodded.

"This year as well as last there has been a famine, men have been dying about the church doors, starving in the public squares; they have watched corrupt Government succeed corrupt Government; they have seen millions flow from the public treasury into the pockets of politicians. This year something will happen; the old regime must go. The Government know this; they know where the danger lies, they know their salvation can only come if Garcia is delivered into their hands before the organisation for revolt is complete. But Garcia is safe for the

present and would be safe for all time were it not for a member of the English Government, who is about to introduce and pass into law a Bill. When that is passed, Garcia is as good as dead. You must help us to prevent that from ever becoming law; that is why we have sent for you."

Thery looked bewildered. "But how?" he stammered.

Manfred drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to Thery. "This, I think," he said, speaking deliberately, "is an exact copy of the police description of yourself." Thery nodded. Manfred leant over and, pointing to a word that occurred half way down the sheet, "Is that your trade?" he asked.

Thery looked puzzled. "Yes," he replied.

"Do you really know anything about that trade?" asked Manfred earnestly; and the other two men leant forward to catch the reply.

"I know," said Thery slowly, "everything there is to be known: had it not been for a—mistake I might have earned great money."

Manfred heaved a sigh of relief and nodded to his two companions.

"Then," said he briskly, "the English Minister is a dead man."

# Chapter

## 1 A NEWSPAPER STORY

On the fourteenth day of August, 19—, a tiny paragraph appeared at the foot of an unimportant page in London's most sober journal to the effect that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs had been much annoyed by the receipt of a number of threatening letters, and was prepared to pay a reward of fifty pounds to any person who would give such information as would lead to the apprehension and conviction of the person or persons, etc. The few people who read London's most sober journal thought, in their ponderous Athenaeum Club way, that it was a remarkable thing that a Minister of State should be annoyed at anything; more remarkable that he should advertise his annoyance, and most remarkable of all that he could imagine for one minute that the offer of a reward would put a stop to the annoyance.

News editors of less sober but larger circulated newspapers, wearily scanning the dull columns of *Old Sobriety*, read the paragraph with a newly acquired interest.

"Hullo, what's this?" asked Smiles of the *Comet*, and cut out the paragraph with huge shears, pasted it upon a sheet of copy-paper and headed it:

*Who is Sir Philip's Correspondent?*

As an afterthought—the *Comet* being in Opposition—he prefixed an introductory paragraph, humorously suggesting that the letters were from an intelligent electorate grown tired of the shilly-shallying methods of the Government.

The news editor of the *Evening World*—a white-haired gentleman of deliberate movement—read the paragraph twice, cut it out carefully, read it again and, placing it under a paperweight, very soon forgot all about it.

The news editor of the *Megaphone*, which is a very bright newspaper indeed, cut the paragraph as he read it, rang a bell, called a reporter, all in a breath, so to speak, and issued a few terse instructions.

"Go down to Portland Place, try to see Sir Philip Ramon, secure the story of that paragraph—why he is threatened, what he is threatened with; get a copy of one of the letters if you can. If you cannot see Ramon, get hold of a secretary."

And the obedient reporter went forth.

He returned in an hour in that state of mysterious agitation peculiar to the reporter who has got a 'beat'. The news editor duly reported to the Editor-in-Chief, and that great man said, "That's very good, that's very good indeed"—which was praise of the highest order.



What was 'very good indeed' about the reporter's story may be gathered from the half-column that appeared in the *Megaphone* on the following day:

CABINET MINISTER IN DANGER  
THREATS TO MURDER THE FOREIGN SECRETARY  
'THE FOUR JUST MEN'  
PLOT TO ARREST THE PASSAGE OF THE  
ALIENS EXTRADITION BILL—  
EXTRAORDINARY REVELATIONS

Considerable comment was excited by the appearance in the news columns of yesterday's *National Journal* of the following paragraph:

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Sir Philip Ramon) has during the past few weeks been the recipient of threatening letters, all apparently emanating from one source and written by one person. These letters are of such a character that they cannot be ignored by his Majesty's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, who hereby offers a reward of Fifty pounds (£50) to any person or persons, other than the actual writer, who will lay such information as will lead to the apprehension and conviction of the author of these anonymous letters.

So unusual was such an announcement, remembering that anonymous and threatening letters are usually to be found daily in the letter-bags of every statesman and diplomat, that the *Daily Megaphone* immediately instituted inquiries as to the cause for this unusual departure.

A representative of this newspaper called at the residence of Sir Philip Ramon, who very courteously consented to be seen.

"It is quite an unusual step to take," said the great Foreign Secretary, in answer to our representative's question, "but it has been taken with the full concurrence of my colleagues of the Cabinet. We have reasons to believe there is something behind the threats, and I might say that the matter has been in the hands of the police for some weeks past.

"Here is one of the letters," and Sir Philip produced a sheet of foreign notepaper from a portfolio, and was good enough to allow our representative to make a copy.

It was undated, and beyond the fact that the handwriting was of the flourishing effeminate variety that is characteristic of the Latin races, it was written in good English.

It ran: *Your Excellency,—*

The Bill that you are about to pass into law is an unjust one... It is calculated to hand over to a corrupt and vengeful Government men who now in England find an asylum from the persecutions of despots and tyrants. We know that in England opinion is divided upon the merits of your Bill, and that upon your strength, and your strength alone, depends the passing into law of the Aliens Political Offences Bill.

Therefore it grieves us to warn you that unless your Government withdraws this Bill, it will be necessary to remove you, and not alone