



# THE FOUR JUST MEN

By Edgar Wallace

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*S* *The Megaphone* once said, in its most pessimistic and wondering mood, recording rather than condemning the strangeness of the time:

Even *The Four Just Men* have become a respectable institution. Not more than fifteen years ago we spoke of them as "a criminal organization"; rewards were offered for their arrest. Today you may turn into Curzon Street and find a silver triangle affixed to the sedate door which marks their professional headquarters. The hunted and reviled have become a most exclusive detective agency. We can only hope that their somewhat drastic methods of other times have been considerably modified.

It is sometimes a dangerous thing to watch a possible watcher.

"What is Mr. Lewis Lethersohn afraid of?" asked Manfred, as he cracked an egg at breakfast. His handsome, clean-shaven face was tanned a teak-brown, for he was newly back from the sun and snows of Switzerland.

Leon Gonsalez sat opposite, absorbed in a newspaper; at the end of the table was Raymond Poiccart, heavy-featured and saturnine. Other pens than mine have described his qualities and his passion for growing vegetables.

He raised his eyes to Gonsalez.

"Is he the gentleman who has had this house watched for the past month?" he asked.

A smile quivered on the delicate lips of Leon as

he folded the newspaper neatly.

"He is the gentleman. I am interviewing him this morning," he said. "In the meantime the sleuth hounds have been withdrawn; they were employed by the Ottis Detective Agency."

"If he is watching us he has a bad conscience," said Poiccart, nodding slowly. "I shall be interested to hear all about this."

Mr. Lewis Lethersohn lived in Lower Berkeley Street—a very large and expensive house. The footman who opened the door to Leon was arrayed in a uniform common enough in musical comedy but rather out of the picture in Lower Berkeley Street. Mulberry and gold and knee breeches! Leon gazed at him with awe.

"Mr. Lethersohn will see you in the library," said the servant; he seemed, thought Leon, rather self-conscious of his own magnificence.

A gorgeous house this, with costly furnishings and lavish decorations. As he mounted the wide stairs he had a glimpse of a beautiful woman passing across the landing. One disdainful glance she threw in his direction and passed, leaving behind her the faint fragrance of some exotic perfume.

The room into which he was shown might have been mistaken for a boudoir, with its bric-a-brac and its beauty of appointments.

Mr. Lethersohn arose from behind the empire

writing table and offered a white hand. He was thin, rather bald, and there was a suggestion of the scholar in his lined face.

"Mr. Gonzalez?" His voice was thin and not particularly pleasant. "Won't you sit down? I had your inquiry—there seems to be some mistake."

He had resumed his own seat. Though he might endeavor to cover up his uneasiness by this cold attitude of his, he could not quite hide his perturbation.

"I know you, of course, but it is ridiculous that I should set men to watch your house. Why?"

Gonzalez was absorbing him with those eager eyes of his.

"That is what I have come to learn," he said, "and I think it would be fairest to tell you that there is no question that you are watching us. We know the agency you employed—we know the fees you have paid and the instructions you have given. The only question is, why?"

Mr. Lethersohn moved uncomfortably and smiled.

"Really, I suppose there is no wisdom in denying that I *did* employ detectives. The truth is, The Four Just Men is rather a formidable organization—and—er—well, I am a rich man."

He was at a loss how to go on.

The interview ended lamely with polite assurance on either side, Leon Gonzalez went back to Curzon Street a very thoughtful man.

"He's afraid of somebody consulting us, and the detective people have been employed to head off that somebody. Now who?"

The next evening brought the answer.

It was a gray April night, chill and moist. The woman who walked slowly down Curzon Street, examining the numbers on the doors, was an object of suspicion to the policeman standing on Claridge's corner. She was in the region of thirty, rather slim, under the worn and sodden coat. Her face was faded and a little pinched. "Pretty once," mused Leon Gonzalez, observing her from behind the gauze curtain that covered the window. "A working woman without a thought beyond keeping body and soul together."

He had time enough to observe her, since she stood for a long time by the curb, looking up and down the street hopelessly.

"Notice the absence of any kind of luring finery, and this is the hour when even the poorest find a fichu or a pair of gloves."

Manfred rose from the table where he had been taking his frugal meal and joined the keen-faced observer.

"Provincial, I think," said Leon thoughtfully. "Obviously a stranger to the West End! She's coming here!"

As he was speaking, the woman had turned, made a brief scrutiny of the front door; they heard the bell ring.

"I was mistaken, she hadn't lost her way: she was plucking up courage to ring; and if she isn't Lethersohn's *bete noir* I am a Dutchman!"

He heard Poiccart's heavy tread in the passage—Poiccart played butler quite naturally. Presently he came in and closed the door behind him.

"You will be surprised," he said in his grave way. That was peculiarly Poiccart—to say mysterious things gravely.

"About the lady? I refuse to be surprised." Leon was vehement. "She has lost something—a husband, a watch, something. She has the 'lost' look; an atmosphere of vague helplessness surrounds her. The symptoms are unmistakable!"

"Ask her to come in," said Manfred, and Poiccart retired.

A second later Alma Stamford was ushered into the room.

That was her name. She came from Edgware and she was a widow. Long before she came to the end of the preliminaries Poiccart's promised surprise had been sprung, for this woman wearing clothes that a charwoman might have despised, was a lady: her voice was soft and educated, her vocabulary extensive. She spoke of conditions which could only be familiar to one who had lived in the surroundings of refinement.

She was the widow of a man who—they gathered—had not been in his lifetime the best of husbands. Rich beyond the ordinary meaning of the term, with estates in Yorkshire and Somerset, a fearless rider to hounds, he had met his death in the hunting field.

"My husband had a peculiar upbringing," she said. "His parents died at an early age, and he was brought up by his uncle. He was a terrible old man who drank heavily, was coarse to the last degree, and was jealous of outside interference. Practically, Mark saw nobody until, in the last year of the old man's life, he brought in a Mr. Lethersohn, a young man a little older than Mark, to act as tutor—for

Mark's education was terribly backward. My husband was twenty-one when his uncle died, but he retained a gentleman to act for him as companion and secretary."

"Mr. Lewis Lethersohn," said Leon promptly, and she gasped.

"I can't guess how you know, but that is the name. Although we weren't particularly happy," she went on, "my husband's death was a terrible shock. But almost as great was his will. In this he left one half of his fortune to Lethersohn, the other half to me at the expiration of five years from his death, provided that I carried out the conditions of the will. I was not to marry during that period, I was to live at a house in Harlow and never to leave the Harlow district. Mr. Lethersohn was given absolute power as sole executor to dispose of property for my benefit. I have lived in Harlow until this morning."

"Mr. Lethersohn is, of course, married?" said Leon, his bright eyes fixed on the lady.

"Yes; you know him?"

Leon shook his head.

"I only know that he is married and very much in love with his wife."

She was astounded at this.

"You must know him. Yes, he married just before Mark was killed. A very beautiful Hungarian girl! He is half-Hungarian, and I believe he adores her. I heard that she was very extravagant. I only saw her once."

"What has happened at Harlow?" It was the silent, watchful Poiccart who asked the question.

He saw the woman's lips tremble.

"It has been a nightmare," she said with a break in her voice. "The house was a beautiful little place—miles from Harlow really, and off the main road. There I have been for two years practically a prisoner. My letters have been opened; I have been locked in my room every night by one of the two women Mr. Lethersohn sent to look after me, and men have been patrolling the grounds day and night."

"The suggestion is that you are not quite right in your head?" asked Manfred.

She looked startled at this.

"You don't think so?" she asked quickly, and, when he shook his head: "Thank heaven for that! Yes, that was the story they told. I wasn't supposed to see newspapers, though I had all the books I wanted. One day I found a scrap of paper with the

account of a bank fraud which you gentlemen had detected, and there was a brief account of your past. I treasured that because it had your address in the paragraph. To escape seemed impossible. I had no money, it was impossible to leave the grounds. But they had a woman come to do the rough work twice a week. I think she came from the village. I managed to enlist her sympathy, and yesterday she brought me these clothes. Early this morning I changed, dropped out of my bedroom window and passed the guard."

She put her hand into the pocket of her wet coat and took out a small package. This she unwrapped.

"My husband was taken to the cottage hospital after his accident; he died early the next morning. He must have recovered consciousness unknown to the nurses, for the top of the sheet was covered with little drawings that he had made with an indelible pencil attached to his temperature chart hanging above his head. He must have reached up for it and broken it off."

She spread out the square of soiled linen on the table.

"Poor Mark was very fond of drawing the figures that children and idle people who have no real knowledge of art love to scribble."

"How did you get this?" asked Leon.

"The matron cut it off for me."

Manfred frowned.

"The sort of things a man might draw in his delirium," he said.

"On the contrary," said Leon coolly, "it is as clear as daylight to me. Where were you married?"

"At the Westminster Registry Office."

Leon nodded.

"Take your mind back: Was there anything remarkable about the marriage? Did your husband have a private interview with the registrar?"

She opened her big blue eyes at this.

"Yes, Mr. Lethersohn and my husband interviewed him in his private office."

Leon chuckled, but was serious again instantly.

"One more question. Who drew up the will? A lawyer?"

She shook her head.

"My husband. It was written in his own hand from start to finish. He wrote rather a nice hand, very easily distinguishable from any other."

"Were there any other conditions imposed upon you in your husband's will?"

She hesitated, and the watchers saw a dark flush

pass over her face.

"Yes, it was so insulting that I did not tell you. It was this—and this was the main condition—that I should not at any time attempt to establish the fact that I was legally married to Mark. That was to me inexplicable. I can't believe that he was ever married before, but his early life was so remarkable that anything may have happened."

Leon was smiling delightedly. In such moments he was as a child who had received a new and entrancing toy.

"I can relieve your mind," he said, to her amazement. "Your husband was never married before!"

Poiccart was studying the drawings.

"Can you get the plans of your husband's estates?" he asked.

"That man knows everything, George!" he exclaimed. "Poiccart, *mon vieux*, you are superb!"

He turned to Mrs. Stamford.

"Madam, you need rest, a change of clothing, and protection. The first and the last are in this house, if you dare be our guest. The second I will procure for you in an hour—together with a temporary maid."

She looked at him, a little bewildered. Five minutes later, an embarrassed Poiccart was showing her to her room, and a nurse of Leon's acquaintance was hurrying to Curzon Street with a bulging suitcase. Leon had a weakness for nurses, and knew at least a hundred by name.

Late as was the hour, he made several calls—one as far as Strawberry Hill, where a certain assistant registrar of marriages lived.

It was eleven o'clock that night when he rang the bell at the handsome house in Lower Berkeley Street. Another footman admitted him.

"Are you Mr. Gonzalez? Mr. Lethersohn has not returned from the theater, but he telephoned asking you to wait in the library."

"Thank you," said Leon gratefully, though there was no need for gratitude, for he it was who had telephoned.

He was bowed into the ornate sanctum and left alone.

The footman had hardly left the room before Leon was at the empire desk, turning over the papers rapidly. But he found what he sought on the blotting pad, face downward.

It was a letter addressed to a firm of wine merchants complaining of some deficiency in a

consignment of champagne. He read this through rapidly—it was only half finished—folded the paper and put it into his pocket.

Carefully and rapidly he examined the drawers of the table: two were locked—the middle drawer was, however, without fastening. What he found interested him and gave him some little occupation. He had hardly finished before he heard a car stop before the house and, looking through the curtains, saw a man and woman alight.

Dark as it was, he recognized his host, and he was sitting demurely on the edge of a chair when Lethersohn burst into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "I'll have you arrested for impersonating me."

"You guessed that I had telephoned—that was almost intelligent," said Leon Gonzalez.

The man swallowed something.

"Why are you here? I suppose it concerns the poor woman who escaped from a lunatic asylum today."

"So we gathered from the fact that your watchers have been on duty again tonight," said Leon; "but they were a little too late."

The man's face went a shade paler.

"You've seen her?" he asked jerkily. "And I suppose she told you a cock and bull story about me?"

Leon took from his pocket a piece of discolored linen and held it up.

"You've not seen this?" he asked. "When Mark Stamford died, this drawing was found on his sheet. He could draw these queer little things."

Lewis Lethersohn did not answer.

"Shall I tell you what this is? It is his last will."

"That's a lie!" croaked the other.

"His last will," repeated Leon sternly. "Those three queer rhomboids are rough plans of his three estates."

Lethersohn was staring at the drawing.

"No court would accept that foolery," he managed to say.

Leon showed his teeth in a grin.

"Nor the 'awl' which means 'all,' nor the four strokes which stand as 'for' nor the 'Margaret' nor the final 'Mark'?" he asked.

With an effort Lethersohn recovered his composure.

"My dear man, the idea is fantastic. He wrote a will with his own hand and—"

Leon stood with his head thrust forward. So far

Lethersohn got, when:

“He couldn’t write!” he said softly, and Lethersohn staggered back. “He couldn’t write his own name. If Mrs. Stamford had seen the registrar’s certificate she would have seen that it was signed with a cross. That is why you put in the little bit about her not attempting to prove her marriage, why you kept her prisoner at Harlow in case she made independent inquiries.”

Suddenly, Lethersohn flew to his desk and jerked open a drawer. In a second an automatic appeared in his hand.

“Help! Murder!” he shouted.

He swung round on the motionless Gonzalez and, leveling his pistol, pulled the trigger. A click—and no more!

“I emptied the magazine,” said Leon coolly, “so

the little tragedy you so carefully staged has become a farce. Shall I telephone to the police or will you?”

Scotland Yard men arrested Lewis Lethersohn as he was stepping onto the boat at Dover.

“There may be some difficulty in proving the will,” said Manfred, reading the account in the evening newspapers; “but the jury will not take long to put Lewis in his proper place.”

Later, when they questioned him, he condescended to explain.

“The rebus told me he could not write. The fact that the will did not instruct Mrs. Stamford to marry Lewis showed me that he was married and loved his wife. The rest was ridiculously easy.”