



The Four Just Men

Edgar Wallace

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As Edgar Wallace tells it in his short novel, in the early years of the last century, this fearsome foursome --- George Manfred, Leon Gonzalez, Raymond Poiccart, and a man known simply as They --- assassinated the leader of the Servian Regicides, shot a "poet-philosopher" whose sick thinking corrupted a generation of young people, and hanged a leader of the French Army in the Place de la Concorde. Vigilantes? You can call them that. But they don't act like hate-filled zealots. The Four Just Men are civilized. They advise their targets they are guilty of crimes. They tell their targets to reform. They alert their targets to the date of their death. They even give their targets a final warning --- delivered in person. As the author notes, "The honesty of the Four was their most terrible characteristic." Honesty --- how thrilling. Now the Four Just Men have a new target: Philip Ramon, the Foreign Secretary of Great Britain. He is a public servant of unquestioned integrity with a conscience in working order. And yet he is about to commit a crime. A legal crime. But a crime nonetheless: His proposed legislation --- The Alien Extradition Act of 1905 --- would send a great Spanish social reformer, currently directing his followers from a safe perch in England, back to Spain. Once there, the corrupt government would kill him. No reasonable Brit wants this to happen. But the Four Just Men are not like those of us who read the newspapers and bitch. Because they believe Sir Philip is a good man with a single blind spot, they have sent word to him: Drop the bill, or die. Naturally, almost every policeman in London is assigned to protect Sir Philip. The question is: Are they up to the task? Can they even identify the Four Just Men? Very quickly you will get past the moral question --- terrorists? vigilantes? heroes? --- and find yourself lost in the whodunnit. And the howtheydunnit. You may even find yourself rooting for The Four Just Men. How does it end? Glad you asked. Edgar Wallace held a contest when he published this novel, offering 500 pounds --- not a small sum in 1905 --- for the correct answers to some esoteric questions about the ending. Several readers guessed the answers. Wallace lost money. Or did he? For Wallace hyped 'The Four Just Men' as if it were a new flavor of Coca Cola. He took out full-page newspaper ads, put posters on subways and buses, even advertised in the movies. The publicity launched his career. And Wallace went on to become the most famous writer in the world. He was quick --- he could write a novel in a weekend. He was good. And he was prolific: 175 books, 24 plays and countless articles. The only title known to the contemporary reader? "King Kong." Maybe you've heard of it. 'We kill for justice,' claim the Four Just Men. On that morally uncertain but dramatically delicious boast rests the second of Edgar Wallace's titles that the world should remember --- and relish.

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