

The Man Who Lived at Clapham

The Law of the Four Just Men

by Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932

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Illustration:

The man in the big oaken pen looked down at the pale drawn face of a girl turned to him from the well of the court

“THE jury cannot accept the unsupported suggestion—unsupported even by the prisoner’s testimony since he has not gone into the box—that Mr. Noah Stedland is a blackmailer and that he obtained a large sum of money from

the prisoner by this practice. That is a defence which is rather suggested by the cross-examination than by the production of evidence. The defence does not even tell us the nature of the threat which Stedland employed..."

The remainder of the summing up was creditable to the best traditions of the Bar, and the jury, without retiring, returned a verdict of "Guilty".

There was a rustle of movement in the court and a thin babble of whispered talk as the Judge fixed his pince-nez and began to write.

The man in the big oaken pen looked down at the pale drawn face of a girl turned to him from the well of the court and smiled encouragingly. For his part, he did not blanch and his grave eyes went back to the figure on the Bench—the puce-gowned, white-headed figure that was writing so industriously. What did a Judge write on these occasions, he wondered? Surely not a precis of the crime. He was impatient now to have done with it all; this airy court, these blurred rows of pink faces in the gloom of the public gallery, the indifferent counsel and particularly with the two men who had sat near the lawyer's pews watching him intently.

He wondered who they were, what interest they had in the proceedings. Perhaps they were foreign authors, securing first-hand impressions. They had the appearance of foreigners. One was very tall (he had seen him rise to his feet once), the other was slight and gave an impression of boyishness, though his hair was grey. They were both clean-shaven and both were dressed in black and balanced on their knees broad-brimmed hats of soft black felt.

A cough from the Judge brought his attention back to the Bench.

"Jeffrey Storr," said his lordship, "I entirely agree with the verdict of the jury. Your defence that Stedland robbed you of your savings and that you broke into his house for the purpose of taking the law into your own hands and securing the money and a document, the character of which you do not specify but which you allege proved his guilt, could not be considered seriously by any Court of Justice. Your story sounds as though you had read of that famous, or infamous, association called the Four Just Men, which existed some years ago, but which is now happily dispersed. Those men set themselves to punish where the law failed. It is a monstrous assumption that the law ever fails! You have committed a very serious offence, and the fact that you were at the moment of your arrest and capture in possession of a loaded revolver, serves very gravely to aggravate your crime. You will be kept in penal servitude for seven years."

Jeffrey Storr bowed and without so much as a glance at the girl in the court, turned and descended the steps leading to the cells.

The two foreign-looking men who had excited the prisoner's interest and resentment were the first to leave the court.

Once in the street the taller of the two stopped. "I think we will wait for the girl," he said.

"Is she the wife?" asked the slight man.

"Married the week he made his unfortunate investment," replied the tall man, then, "It was a curious coincidence, that reference of the Judge's to the Four Just Men."

The other smiled.

"It was in that very court that you were sentenced to death, Manfred," he said, and the man called Manfred nodded.

"I wondered whether the old usher would remember me," he answered, "he has a reputation for never forgetting a face. Apparently the loss of my beard has worked a miracle, for I actually spoke to him. Here she is."

Fortunately the girl was alone. A beautiful face, thought Gonsalez, the younger of the two men. She held her chin high and there was no sign of tears. As she walked quickly toward Newgate Street they followed her. She crossed the road into Hatton Garden and then it was that Manfred spoke.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Storr," he said, and she turned and stared at the foreign-looking man suspiciously.

"If you are a reporter—" she began.

"I'm not," smiled Manfred, "nor am I a friend of your husband's, though I thought of lying to you in that respect in order to find an excuse for talking to you."

His frankness procured her interest.

"I do not wish to talk about poor Jeffrey's terrible trouble," she said. "I just want to be alone."

Manfred nodded.

"I understand that," he said sympathetically, "but I wish to be a friend of your husband's and perhaps I can help him. The story he told in the box was true—you thought that too, Leon?"

Gonsalez nodded.

"Obviously true," he said, "I particularly noticed his eyelids. When a man lies he blinks at every repetition of the lie. Have you observed, my dear George, that men cannot tell lies when their hands are clenched and that when women lie they clasp their hands together?"

She looked at Gonsalez in bewilderment. She was in no mood for a lecture on the physiology of expression and even had she known that Leon Gonsalez was the author of three large books which ranked with the best that Lombroso or Mantegazza had given to the world, she would have been no more willing to listen.

"The truth is, Mrs. Storr," said Manfred, interpreting her new distress, "we think that we can free your husband and prove his innocence. But we want as many facts about the case as we can get."

She hesitated only a moment.

"I have some furnished lodgings in Gray's Inn Road," she said, "perhaps you will be good enough to come with me."

"My lawyer does not think there is any use in appealing against the sentence," she went on as they fell in one on either side of her. Manfred shook his head.

"The Appeal Court would uphold the sentence," he said quietly, "with the evidence you have there is no possibility of your husband being released."

She looked round at him in dismay and now he saw that she was very near to tears.

"I thought... you said...?" she began a little shakily.

Manfred nodded.

"We know Stedland," he said, "and—"

"The curious thing about blackmailers, is that the occiput is hardly observable," interrupted Gonsalez thoughtfully. "I examined sixty-two heads in the

Spanish prisons and in every case the occipital protuberance was little more than a bony ridge. Now in homicidal heads the occiput sticks out like a pigeon's egg."

"My friend is rather an authority upon the structure of the head," smiled Manfred. "Yes, we know Stedland. His operations have been reported to us from time to time. You remember the Wellingford case, Leon?"

Gonsalez nodded.

"Then you are detectives?" asked the girl.

Manfred laughed softly.

"No, we are not detectives—we are interested in crime. I think we have the best and most thorough record of the unconvicted criminal class of any in the world."

They walked on in silence for some time.

"Stedland is a bad man," nodded Gonsalez as though the conviction had suddenly dawned upon him. "Did you observe his ears? They are unusually long and the outer margins are pointed—the Darwinian tubercle, Manfred. And did you remark, my dear friend, that the root of the helix divides the concha into two distinct cavities and that the lobule was adherent? A truly criminal ear. The man has committed murder. It is impossible to possess such an ear and not to murder."

The flat to which she admitted them was small and wretchedly furnished. Glancing round the tiny dining-room, Manfred noted the essential appointments which accompany a "furnished" flat.

The girl, who had disappeared into her room to take off her coat, now returned, and sat by the table at which, at her invitation, they had seated themselves.

"I realise that I am being indiscreet," she said with the faintest of smiles; "but I feel that you really want to help me, and I have the curious sense that you can! The police have not been unkind or unfair to me and poor Jeff. On the contrary, they have been most helpful. I fancy that they suspected Mr. Stedland of being a blackmailer, and they were hoping that we could supply some evidence. When that evidence failed, there was nothing for them to do but to press forward the charge. Now, what can I tell you?"

"The story which was not told in court," replied Manfred.

She was silent for a time. "I will tell you," she said at last. "Only my husband's lawyer knows, and I have an idea that he was sceptical as to the truth of what I am now telling you. And if he is sceptical," she said in despair, "how can I expect to convince you?"

The eager eyes of Gonsalez were fixed on hers, and it was he who answered.

"We are already convinced, Mrs. Storr," and Manfred nodded.

Again there was a pause. She was evidently reluctant to begin a narrative which, Manfred guessed, might not be creditable to her; and this proved to be the case.

"When I was a girl," she began simply, "I was at school in Sussex—a big girls' school; I think there were over two hundred pupils. I am not going to excuse anything I did," she went on quickly. "I fell in love with a boy—well, he was a butcher's boy! That sounds dreadful, doesn't it? But you understand I was a child, a very impressionable child—oh, it sounds horrible, I know; but I used to meet him in the garden leading out from the prep. room after prayers; he climbed over the wall to those meetings, and we talked and talked, sometimes for an hour.

There was no more in it than a boy and girl love affair, and I can't explain just why I committed such a folly."

"Mantegazza explains the matter very comfortably in his Study of Attraction," murmured Leon Gonzalez. "But forgive me, I interrupted you."

"As I say, it was a boy and girl friendship, a kind of hero worship on my part, for I thought he was wonderful. He must have been the nicest of butcher boys," she smiled again, "because he never offended me by so much as a word. The friendship burnt itself out in a month or two, and there the matter might have ended, but for the fact that I had been foolish enough to write letters. They were very ordinary, stupid love-letters, and perfectly innocent—or at least they seemed so to me at the time. To-day, when I read them in the light of a greater knowledge they take my breath away."

"You have them, then?" said Manfred.

She shook her head.

"When I said *them* I meant one, and I only have a copy of that, supplied me by Mr. Stedland. The one letter that was not destroyed fell into the hands of the boy's mother, who took it to the headmistress, and there was an awful row. She threatened to write to my parents who were in India, but on my solemn promise that the acquaintance should be dropped, the affair was allowed to blow over. How the letter came into Stedland's hands I do not know; in fact, I had never heard of the man until a week before my marriage with Jeff. Jeff had saved about two thousand pounds, and we were looking forward to our marriage day when this blow fell. A letter from a perfectly unknown man, asking me to see him at his office, gave me my first introduction to this villain. I had to take the letter with me, and I went in some curiosity, wondering why I had been sent for. I was not to wonder very long. He had a little office off Regent Street, and after he had very carefully taken away the letter he had sent me, he explained, fully and frankly, just what his summons had meant."

Manfred nodded.

"He wanted to sell you the letter," he said, "for how much?"

"For two thousand pounds. That was the diabolical wickedness of it," said the girl vehemently. "He knew almost to a penny how much Jeff had saved."

"Did he show you the letter?"

She shook her head.

"No, he showed me a photographic reproduction and as I read it and recalled what construction might be put upon this perfectly innocent note, my blood went cold. There was nothing to do but to tell Jeff, because the man had threatened to send facsimiles to all our friends and to Jeffrey's uncle, who had made Jeffrey his sole heir. I had already told Jeffrey about what happened at school, thank heaven, and so I had no need to fear his suspicion. Jeffrey called on Mr. Stedland, and I believe there was a stormy scene; but Stedland is a big, powerful man in spite of his age, and in the struggle which ensued poor Jeffrey got a little the worst of it. The upshot of the matter was, Jeffrey agreed to buy the letter for two thousand pounds, on condition that Stedland signed a receipt, written on a blank page of the letter itself. It meant the losing of his life savings; it meant the possible postponement of our wedding; but Jeffrey would not take any other course. Mr. Stedland lives in a big house near Clapham Common—"

"184 Park View West," interrupted Manfred.

"You know?" she said in surprise. "Well, it was at this house Jeffrey had to call to complete the bargain. Mr. Stedland lives alone except for a manservant, and opening the door himself, he conducted Jeffrey up to the first floor, where he had his study. My husband, realising the futility of argument, paid over the money, as he had been directed by Stedland, in American bills—"

"Which are more difficult to trace, of course," said Manfred.

"When he had paid him, Stedland produced the letter, wrote the receipt on the blank page, blotted it and placed it in an envelope, which he gave to my husband. When Jeffrey returned home and opened the envelope, he found it contained nothing more than a blank sheet of paper."

"He had rung the changes," said Manfred.

"That was the expression that Jeffrey used," said the girl. "Then it was that Jeffrey decided to commit this mad act. You have heard of the Four Just Men?"

"I have heard of them," replied Manfred gravely.

"My husband is a great believer in their methods, and a great admirer of them too," she said. "I think he read everything that has ever been written about them. One night, two days after we were married—I had insisted upon marrying him at once when I discovered the situation—he came to me.

"'Grace,' he said, 'I am going to apply the methods of the Four to this devil Stedland.'

"He outlined his plans. He had apparently been watching the house, and knew that except for the servant the man slept in the house alone, and he had formed a plan for getting in. Poor dear, he was an indifferent burglar; but you heard today how he succeeded in reaching Stedland's room. I think he hoped to frighten the man with his revolver."

Manfred shook his head.

"Stedland graduated as a gun-fighter in South Africa," he said quietly. "He is the quickest man on the draw I know, and a deadly shot. Of course, he had your husband covered before he could as much as reach his pocket."

She nodded.

"That is the story," she said quietly. "If you can help Jeff, I shall pray for you all my life."

Manfred rose slowly.

"It was a mad attempt," he said. "In the first place Stedland would not keep a compromising document like that in his house, which he leaves for six hours a day. It might even have been destroyed, though that is unlikely. He would keep the letter for future use. Blackmailers are keen students of humanity, and he knows that money may still be made, from that letter of yours. But if it is in existence—"

"If it is in existence," she repeated—and now the reaction had come and her lips were trembling—

"I will place it in your hands within a week," said Manfred, and with this promise left her.

Mr. Noah Stedland had left the Courts of Justice that afternoon with no particular sense of satisfaction save that he was leaving it by the public entrance. He was not a man who was easily scared, but he was sensitive to impressions; and

it seemed to him that the Judge's carefully chosen words had implied, less in their substance than in their tone, a veiled rebuke to himself. Beyond registering this fact, his sensitiveness did not go. He was a man of comfortable fortune, and that fortune had been got together in scraps—sometimes the scraps were unusually large—by the exercise of qualities which were not handicapped by such imponderable factors as conscience or remorse. Life to this tall, broad-shouldered, grey-faced man was a game, and Jeffrey Storr, against whom he harboured no resentment, was a loser.

He could think dispassionately of Storr in his convict clothes, wearing out the years of agony in a convict prison, and at the mental picture could experience no other emotion than that of the successful gambler who can watch his rival's ruin with equanimity.

He let himself into his narrow-fronted house, closed and double-locked the door behind him, and went up the shabbily carpeted stairs to his study. The ghosts of the lives he had wrecked should have crowded the room; but Mr. Stedland did not believe in ghosts. He rubbed his finger along a mahogany table and noted that it was dusty, and the ghost of a well-paid charlady took shape from that moment.

As he sprawled back in his chair, a big cigar between his gold-spotted teeth, he tried to analyse the queer sensation he had experienced in court. It was not the Judge, it was not the attitude of the defending counsel, it was not even the possibility that the world might censure him, which was responsible for his mental perturbation. It was certainly not the prisoner and his possible fate, or the white-faced wife. And yet there had been a something or a somebody which had set him glancing uneasily over his shoulder.

He sat smoking for half an hour, and then a bell clanged and he went down the stairs and opened the front door. The man who was waiting with an apologetic smile on his face, a jackal of his, was butler and tout and general errand-boy to the hard-faced man.

"Come in, Jope," he said, closing the door behind the visitor. "Go down to the cellar and get me a bottle of whisky?"

"How was my evidence, guv'nor?" asked the sycophant, smirking expectantly.

"Rotten," growled Stedland. "What did you mean by saying you heard me call for help?"

"Well, guv'nor, I thought I'd make it a little worse for him," said Jope humbly.

"Help!" sneered Mr. Stedland. "Do you think I'd call on a guy like you for help? A damned lot of use you would be in a rough house! Get that whisky!"

When the man came up with a bottle and a syphon, Mr. Stedland was gazing moodily out of the window which looked upon a short, untidy garden terminating in a high wall. Behind that was a space on which a building had been in course of erection when the armistice put an end to Government work. It was designed as a small factory for the making of fuses, and was an eyesore to Mr. Stedland, since he owned the ground on which it was built.

"Jope," he said, turning suddenly, "was there anybody in court we know?"

"No, Mr. Stedland," said the man, pausing in surprise. "Not that I know, except Inspector—"

“Never mind about the Inspector,” answered Mr. Stedland impatiently. “I know all the splits who were there. Was there anybody else—anybody who has a grudge against us?”

“No, Mr. Stedland. What does it matter if there was?” asked the valorous Jope. “I think we’re a match for any of ‘em.”

“How long have we been in partnership?” asked Stedland unpleasantly, as he poured himself out a tot of whisky.

The man’s face twisted in an ingratiating smile.

“Well, we’ve been together some time now, Mr. Stedland,” he said.

Stedland smacked his lips and looked out of the window again.

“Yes,” he said after a while, “we’ve been together a long time now. In fact, you would almost have finished your sentence, if I had told the police what I knew about you seven years ago—”

Illustration:

“Yes,” he said after-a while, “we’ve been together a long time now.”

The man winced, and changed the subject. He might have realised, had he thought, that the sentence of seven years had been commuted by Stedland to a sentence of life servitude, but Mr. Jope was no thinker.

“Anything for the Bank today, sir?” he asked.

“Don’t be a fool,” said Stedland. “The Bank closed at three. Now, Jope,” he turned on the other, “in future you sleep in the kitchen.”

“In the kitchen, sir?” said the astonished servant, and Stedland nodded.

“I’m taking no more risks of a night visitor,” he said. “That fellow was on me before I knew where I was, and if I hadn’t had a gun handy he would have beaten me. The kitchen is the only way you can break into this house from the outside, and I’ve got a feeling at the back of my mind that something might happen.”

“But he’s gone to gaol.”

“I’m not talking about him,” snarled Stedland. “Do you understand, take your bed to the kitchen.”

“It’s a bit draughty—” began Jope.

“Take your bed to the kitchen,” roared Stedland, glaring at the man.

“Certainly, sir,” said Jope with alacrity.

When his servant had gone, Stedland took off his coat and put on one of stained alpaca, unlocked the safe, and took out a book. It was a pass-book from his bank, and its study was very gratifying. Mr. Stedland dreamed dreams of a South American ranch and a life of ease and quiet. Twelve years’ strenuous work in London had made him a comparatively rich man. He had worked cautiously and patiently and had pursued the business of blackmail in a businesslike manner. His cash balance was with one of the best known of the private bankers. Sir William Molbury & Co., Ltd. Molbury’s Bank had a reputation in the City for the privacy and even mystery which enveloped the business of its clients—a circumstance which suited Mr. Stedland admirably. It was, too, one of those old-fashioned banks which maintain a huge reserve of money in its vaults; and this was also a recommendation to Mr. Stedland, who might wish to gather in his fluid assets in the shortest possible space of time.

The evening and the night passed without any untoward incident, except as was revealed when Mr. Jope brought his master's tea in the morning, and told, somewhat hoarsely, of a cold and unpleasant night. "Get more bedclothes," said Stedland curtly. He went off to his city office after breakfast, and left Mr. Jope to superintend the operations of the charwoman and to impress upon her a number of facts, including the high rate at which she was paid, the glut of good charwomen on the market and the consequences which would overtake her if she left Mr. Stedland's study undusted.

At eleven o'clock that morning came a respectable and somewhat elderly looking gentleman in a silk hat, and him Mr. Jope interviewed on the door-mat.

"I've come from the Safe Deposit," said the visitor.

"What Safe Deposit?" asked the suspicious Mr. Jope.

"The Fetter Lane Deposit," replied the other. "We want to know if you left your keys behind the last time you came?"

Jope shook his head. "We haven't any Safe Deposit," he said with assurance, "and the governor's hardly likely to leave his keys behind."

"Then evidently I've come to the wrong house," smiled the gentleman. "This is Mr. Smithson's?"

"No, it ain't," said the ungracious Jope, and shut the door in the caller's face.

The visitor walked down the steps into the street and joined another man who was standing at a corner.

"They know nothing of Safe Deposits, Manfred," he said.

"I hardly thought it would be at a Safe Deposit," said the taller of the two. "In fact, I was pretty certain that he would keep all his papers at the bank. You saw the man Jope, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Gonzalez dreamily. "An interesting face. The chin weak, but the ears quite normal. The frontal bones slope irregularly backward, and the head, so far as I can see, is distinctly oxycephalic."

"Poor Jope!" said Manfred without a smile. "And now, Leon, you and I will devote our attention to the weather. There is an anticyclone coming up from the Bay of Biscay, and its beneficent effects are already felt in Eastbourne. If it extends northwards to London in the next three days we shall have good news for Mrs. Storr."

"I suppose," said Gonzalez, as they were travelling back to their rooms in Jermyn Street, "I suppose there is no possibility of rushing this fellow."

Manfred shook his head.

"I do not wish to die," he said, "and die I certainly should, for Noah Stedland is unpleasantly quick to shoot."

Manfred's prophecy was fulfilled two days later, when the influence of the anticyclone spread to London and a thin yellow mist descended on the city. It lifted in the afternoon, Manfred saw to his satisfaction, but gave no evidence of dispersing before nightfall.

Mr. Stedland's office in Regent Street was small but comfortably furnished. On the glass door beneath his name was inscribed the magic word: *Financier*, and it is true that Stedland was registered as a moneylender and found it a profitable business; for what Stedland the moneylender discovered, Stedland

the blackmailer exploited, and it was not an unusual circumstance for Mr. Stedland to lend at heavy interest money which was destined for his own pocket. In this way he could obtain a double grip upon his victim.

At half past two that afternoon his clerk announced a caller.

“Man or woman?”

“A man, sir,” said the clerk, “I think he’s from Molbury’s Bank.”

“Do you know him?” asked Stedland.

“No, sir, but he came yesterday when you were out, and asked if you’d received the Bank’s balance sheet.” Mr. Stedland took a cigar from a box on the table and lit it.

“Show him in,” he said, anticipating nothing more exciting than a dishonoured cheque from one of his clients.

The man who came in was obviously in a state of agitation. He closed the door behind him and stood nervously fingering his hat.

“Sit down,” said Stedland. “Have a cigar, Mr.—”

“Curtis, sir,” said the other huskily. “Thank you, sir, I don’t smoke.”

“Well, what do you want?” asked Stedland.

“I want a few minutes’ conversation with you, sir, of a private character.” He glanced apprehensively at the glass partition which separated Mr. Stedland’s office from the little den in which his clerks worked.

“Don’t worry,” said Stedland humorously. “I can guarantee that screen is sound-proof. What’s your trouble?”

He scented a temporary embarrassment, and a bank clerk temporarily embarrassed might make a very useful tool for future use.

“I hardly know how to begin, Mr. Stedland,” said the man, seating himself on the edge of a chair, his face twitching nervously. “It’s terrible story, a terrible story.”

Stedland had heard about these terrible stories before, and sometimes they meant no more than that the visitor was threatened with bailiffs and was anxious to keep the news from the ears of his employers. Sometimes the confession was more serious—money lost in gambling, and a desperate eleventh-hour attempt to make good a financial deficiency.

“Go on,” he said. “You won’t shock me.” The boast was a little premature, however.

“It’s not about myself, but about my brother, John Curtis, who’s been cashier for twenty years, sir,” said the man nervously. “I hadn’t the slightest idea that he was in difficulties, but he was gambling on the Stock Exchange, and only today he has told me the news. I am in terrible distress about him, sir. I fear suicide. He is a nervous wreck.”

“What has he done?” asked Stedland impatiently.

“He has robbed the Bank, sir,” said the man in a hushed voice. “It wouldn’t matter if it had happened two years ago, but now, when things have been going so badly and we’ve had to stretch a point to make our balance sheet plausible, I shudder to think what the results will be.”

“Of how much has he robbed the Bank?” asked Stedland quickly.

“A hundred and fifty thousand pounds,” was the staggering reply, and Stedland jumped to his feet.

"A hundred and fifty thousand?" he said incredulously.

"Yes, sir. I was wondering whether you could speak for him; you are one of the most highly respected clients of the Bank!"

"Speak for him!" shouted Stedland, and then of a sudden he became cool. His quick brain went over the situation, reviewing every possibility. He looked up at the clock. It was a quarter to three.

"Does anybody in the Bank know?"

"Not yet, sir, but I feel it is my duty to the general manager to tell him the tragic story. After the Bank closes this afternoon I am asking him to see me privately and—"

"Are you going back to the Bank now?" asked Stedland.

"Yes, sir," said the man in surprise.

"Listen to me, my friend." Stedland's grey face was set and tense. He took a case from his pocket, opened it and extracted two notes. "Here are two notes for fifty," he said. "Take those and go home."

"But I've got to go to the Bank, sir. They will wonder—"

"Never mind what they wonder," said Stedland. "You'll have a very good explanation when the truth comes out. Will you do this?"

The man took up the money reluctantly.

"I don't quite know what you—"

"Never mind what I want to do," snapped Stedland. "That is to keep your mouth shut and go home. Do you understand plain English?"

"Yes, sir," said the shaking Curtis.

Five minutes later Mr. Stedland passed through the glass doors of Molbury's Bank and walked straight to the counter. An air of calm pervaded the establishment and the cashier, who knew Stedland, came forward with a smile.

"Unconscious of their awful doom, The little victims play;" quoted Stedland to himself. It was a favourite quotation of his, and he had used it on many appropriate occasions.

He passed, a slip of paper across the counter, and the cashier looked at it and raised his eyebrows.

"Why, this is almost your balance, Mr. Stedland," he said.

Stedland nodded.

"Yes, I am going abroad in a hurry," he said. "I shall not be back for two years, but I am leaving just enough to keep the account running."

It was a boast of Molbury's that they never argued on such occasions as these.

"Then you will want your box?" said the cashier politely.

"If you please," said Mr. Noah Stedland. If the Bank passed into the hands of the Receiver, he had no wish for prying strangers to be unlocking and examining the contents of the tin box he had deposited with the Bank, and to the contents of which he made additions from time to time.

Ten minutes later, with close on a hundred thousand pounds in his pockets, a tin box in one hand, the other resting on his hip pocket—for he took no chances—Mr. Stedland went out again on the street and into the waiting taxicab. The fog was cleared, and the sun was shining at Clapham when he arrived.

He went straight up to his study, fastened the door and unlocked the little safe. Into this he pushed the small box and two thick bundles of notes, locking the safe

door behind him. Then he rang for the faithful Jope, unfastening the door to admit him.

“Have we another camp bed in the house?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” said Jope.

“Well, bring it up here. I am going to sleep in my study tonight.”

“Anything wrong, sir?”

“Don’t ask jackass questions. Do as you’re told!”

Tomorrow, he thought, he would seek out a safer repository for his treasures. He spent that evening in his study and lay down to rest, but not to sleep, with a revolver on a chair by the side of his camp bed. Mr. Stedland was a cautious man. Despite his intention to dispense with sleep for one night, he was dozing when a sound in the street outside roused him.

It was a familiar sound—the clang of fire bells—and apparently fire engines were in the street, for he heard the whine of motors and the sound of voices. He sniffed; there was a strong smell of burning, and looking up he saw a flicker of light reflected on the ceiling. He sprang out of bed to discover the cause. It was immediately discernible, for the fuse factory was burning merrily, and he caught a glimpse of firemen at work and a momentary vision of a hose in action. Mr. Stedland permitted himself to smile. That fire would be worth money to him, and there was no danger to himself.

And then he heard a sound in the hall below; a deep voice boomed an order, and he caught the chatter of Jope, and unlocked the door. The lights were burning in the hall and on the stairway. Looking over the banisters he saw the shivering Jope, with an overcoat over his pyjamas, expostulating with a helmeted fireman.

“I can’t help it,” the latter was saying, “I’ve got to get a hose through one of these houses, and it might as well be yours.”

Mr. Stedland had no desire to have a hose through his house, and thought he knew an argument which might pass the inconvenience on to his neighbour.

“Just come up here a moment,” he said. “I want to speak to one of those firemen.”

The fireman came clumping up the stairs in his heavy boots, a fine figure of a man in his glittering brass.

“Sorry,” he said, “but I must get the hose—”

“Wait a moment, my friend,” said Mr. Stedland with a smile. “I think you will understand me after a while. There are plenty of houses in this road, and a tenner goes a long way, eh? Come in.”

He walked back into his room and the fireman followed and stood watching as he unlocked the safe. Then:

“I didn’t think it would be so easy,” he said.

Stedland swung round.

“Put up your hands,” said the fireman, “and don’t make trouble, or you’re going out, Noah. I’d just as soon kill you as talk to you.”

Illustration:

“Put up your hands,” said the fireman, “and don’t make trouble,

I’d just as soon kill you as talk to you.”

Then Noah Stedland saw that beneath the shade of the helmet the man's face was covered with a black mask.

"Who—who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

"I'm one of the Four Just Men—greatly reviled and prematurely mourned. Death is my favourite panacea for all ills..."

At nine o'clock in the morning Mr. Noah Stedland still sat biting his nails, a cold uneaten breakfast spread on a table before him.

To him came Mr. Jope wailing tidings of disaster, interrupted by Chief Inspector Holloway and a hefty subordinate who followed the servant into the room.

"Coming for a little walk with me, Stedland?" asked the cheery inspector, and Stedland rose heavily.

"What's the charge?" he asked heavily.

"Blackmail," replied the officer. "We've got evidence enough to hang you—delivered by special messenger. You fixed that case against Storr too—naughty, naughty!"

As Mr. Stedland put on his coat the inspector asked:

"Who gave you away?"

Mr. Stedland made no reply. Manfred's last words before he vanished into the foggy street had been emphatic.

"If he wanted to kill you, the man called Curtis would have killed you this afternoon when we played on your cunning; we could have killed you as easily as we set fire to the factory. And if you talk to the police of the Four Just Men, we will kill you, even though you be in Pentonville with a regiment of soldiers round you."

And somehow Mr. Stedland knew that his enemy spoke the truth. So he said nothing, neither there nor in the dock at the Old Bailey, and went to penal servitude without speaking.

