"The FOUR JUST MEN" (Ealing Studios-ABFD, 1939) Directors: Walter Forde, Produced by Michael Balcon; based on the novel by Edgar Wallace; screenplay by Angus Macgillivray, Roland Pertwee and Sergei Nolbandov; camera: Ronald Neame; music: Ernest Irving; U.S. title: "Secret Column"; released by RKO.


Not surprisingly, British studios in the 30's made frequent recourse to the mysteries of Edgar Wallace (and, to a much lesser degree, to those of Agatha Christie and A.S.W. Mason). But, considering the enormous popularity of the Wallace novels, it is surprising that few of the adaptations were more than programmers, quickly swallowed up as second features. An exception was "Dark Eyes of London", which, by virtue of Bela Lugosi and a genuinely gruesome quality, was justifiably sold as an all-out horror film rather than a Wallace mystery.

Ealing Studios made some of the better Wallace mysteries in that their films were well-written, well-cast and afforded decent production values, though - and "The Missing Million" is a good example - they tended to be a little tame and shy on real thrills. However, "The Gaunt Stranger" - an adaptation of "The Ringer" - had excellent suspense qualities. Not being a Wallace aficionado I can't comment on their faithfulness to his work, but there are some commendable deviations from formula. In "The Gaunt Stranger", the villain cunningly carries out his pre-announced murder, and escapes scotch-free; and in "The Four Just Men", the titular heroes consider themselves sufficiently above the law to carry out a political assassination with impunity.

In some ways "The Four Just Men" is perhaps the best of the Ealing Wallace films. It is certainly the longest and most ambitious, and the only one that aimed at, and received, a "A" playing time. That it holds up so well today is probably due primarily to the fact that it bears less relationship to the typical Wallace underworld stories than it does to the Hitchcockian tales of Balkan intrigues, secret treaties and international espionage rings that were then just about on their last legs. One of the villains is referred to as "having his fingers in every dirty mud-sie East of Suez", and the whole plot concerns itself with "a plot to destroy the British Empire and place world domination in the hands of one man" - a dream worthy of the talents of Mr. Nabuse himself. With the exception of "Foreign Correspondent", which came a year later and brought the war into its plotting, "The Four Just Men" is just about the last of these nostalgically simple and enjoyable spy thrillers. Ironically, it was released just as war was declared, and its climax of an alert, ready-for-anything Britain was hardly backed up by the country's actual military status, although it doubtless had a stimulating propagandist effect on moviegoers throughout the land. The foreword on this print was of course backed on for a later U.S. release to hide its dated quality. (The initial U.S. title was "The Secret Four", this later being changed to "Secret Column").

Walter Forde is no Hitchcock and more could doubtless have been done with it, yet it's rather a neat job and moves along smoothly. There are three especially colorful and bizarre murders, a tense and exciting opening, and a climax that may not be too logical but which certainly rounds it off in using style. The traditional reporter-heroine is at least less of an intrusion than usual, and Anna Lee is in any event always a welcome and pleasant sight.

It's a pity that the good old days of world spy rings and mad super-criminals have gone forever. It was not only more fun, but a good deal safer and more reassuring. At least the "unnamed powers" who were after all the toppled thrones were content with mere "world domination", and never ran the risks of world destruction in the pursuit of that aim. Somehow, the team of Nabuse-va-Lehmann is much more endearing than Kruschev-va-Kennedy!

**Intermission**
"Remember Last Night?" (Universal, 1935) Directed by James Whale
Screenplay by Doris Mallory, Dan Totheroh and Harry Crock from "The Hangover Murders" by Adam Hobhouse; camera: Joseph Valentine; produced by Carl Laemmle, Jr., edited by Tod Kent, 9 reels

In "Remember Last Night?" James Whale sets out both to spoof the popular genre of civilised, all-in-the-family mysteries exemplified by "The Thin Man", and to make a solidly enjoyable film in that genre. Perhaps no film that wants to be accepted on two such divergent levels can be wholly successful on either, but "Remember Last Night?" is such an exhilarating, fast-paced and generally stylish frolic that one never seems to care whether it succeeds or not. As deliberately incoherent and complicated as "The Big Sleep", it goes like an express train in all directions -- but remains a well-disciplined film regardless. There's one of the wildest parties we've seen in ages; a wildly lit hypnosis sequence in a thunderstorm (with Gustav von Seyffertit of course!) in which Whale kids his own stock-in-trade of Gothic terror; and there are sequences of suspense in which the veneer of fun is abandoned too quickly for comfort. There are suspects, clues and red herrings galore, and if the identity of the "hidden" killer is easily guessable from the beginning, it doesn't seem to matter because we still don't know how and why.

All in all, "Remember Last Night?" is a wonderful example of what skilled playing and directorial style can do for basically commonplace material. Richard Thorpe, Paul Sloane or John Farrow could have taken this property and it probably wouldn't be worth 95 minutes of our time today; W.S. Van Dyke, William K. Howard or James Whale could have turned it into an object lesson in how cinematics and personal style can really bring a film to life. And of course, Whale has done just that. Clocks striking never seem to be imbued with as much life of their own as in a Whale film -- as witness an exam la here -- and when his gliding cameras move, they do so with a vengeance -- through hallways, across rooms, up stairs, all in one sweeping shot. But they know when to stop too. There's a lot of elegance for its own sake, sets and lighting that are just stunning, but in a piece of froth like this, visual elegance is a legitimate and integral part of the whole, and Whale knows just how to apply it. He also can't resist the temptation of making occasional references to "Frankenstein" and "Dracula"!

"Remember Last Night?" is hardly an important re-discovery, and it's a lesser Whale film in the sense that "Fort Apache" is "lesser" Ford and "The Love Flower" is "lesser" Griffith. What a pity that today's directors don't occasionally take time out to make "lesser" pictures of this calibre too!

-Wm. K. Everson

Next Tuesday -- CLARA BOW, Percy Marmont, Ernest Torrence, Eugenie Pallette, Charlie Stevens, Josephine Crowell -- in -- MANTRAP (1926)
Directed by Victor Fleming; from a story by Sinclair Lewis

Tuesday June 25 -- Clouet's LE CORBEAU; Norman McLod's ALICE IN WONDERLAND
Tuesday July 2 -- Frank Capra's BROADWAY BILL with Warner Baxter, Myrna Loy