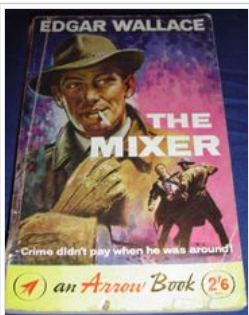


# Edgar Wallace

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**Richard  
Horatio  
Edgar  
Wallace**

(April 1,  
1875–  
February 10,  
1932) is a  
prolific  
British  
crime writer,  
journalist  
and  
playwright,  
who wrote  
175 novels,  
24 plays, and countless articles in newspapers  
and journals.



*The Mixer* (1927), 1962 Arrow paperback edition. 192 pages

Over 160 films have been made of his novels,

more than any other author.

In the 1920s, one of Wallace's publishers claimed that a quarter of all books read in England were written by him. (citation needed)

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## Parents and Birth

Edgar Wallace was born in Ashburnham Grove, Greenwich, London, on April 1st, 1875. His biological parents were theatre actors Richard Horatio Edgar (who never knew of his existence) and Mary Jane "Polly" Richards, nee Blair.

Born Mary Jane Blair in 1843, Liverpool, to an Irish Catholic immigrant family, Mary's family had been in show business for some years, and she grew up to be a theatrical "Jane of All Trades" - stagehand, usherette, bit-part actress. Though pretty and talented, Mary was not a great success. During 1867

she ended her theatrical career and married.

Also born in Liverpool during 1838, Captain Joseph Richards of the Merchant Navy was likewise from an Irish Catholic immigrant family - his father John Richards was also a Merchant Navy Captain, and his mother Catherine Richards came from a mariner family.

Mary soon became pregnant - but during January 1868, when she was eight months pregnant, Joseph Richards died at sea aged 30 years, from a sudden illness. By the time his posthumous daughter Josephine Catherine Richards was born a few weeks later, during the spring of 1868, Mary was destitute.

Assuming the stage name "Polly" Richards, Mary began theatre work again to support herself and her daughter. In 1872, Polly met and joined the "Marriott" family theatre troupe, becoming part of the "family" due to the great affection that developed between her and the "Marriott" women - the troupe

was managed by Mrs. Alice Edgar (who continued to use the stage name Alice Marriott), her husband Richard Edgar and their three adult children, Grace Edgar, Adeline Edgar and Richard Horatio Edgar.

Intelligent, shrewd and dominating, Alice's great anxiety was her only son. Usually playing the "romantic lead" due to his tall, dark and handsome looks and physique, Richard was in personality charming but indolent. Alice wished him married to a sensible young woman and producing grandchildren.

Seeing a way to demonstrate her gratitude for the warmth and kindness bestowed upon her and her little daughter, Polly actively sought to locate languid Richard a suitable bride.

In 1873, she met a poised young woman in Dundee named Jennifer Taylor, and hastened to introduce her to the Edgar family. Jenny was a willing nominee and after intense match-making by Polly, Alice, Grace and

Adeline, Richard was encouraged accordingly and he and Jenny became affianced during the spring of 1874.

In July 1874, the "Marriott" troupe experienced its greatest commercial success ever and so a "come one come all" back-stage party was held at which everyone drank "not wisely but too well". As a result of this extreme intoxication, Richard Horatio Edgar and Polly ended up having a "Boris Becker broom cupboard" style sexual encounter, which everyone was too drunk fortunately to notice.

The following morning Polly was mortified and deeply ashamed, but Richard Horatio Edgar was apparently so inebriated he did not even remember the incident. A few weeks later in August 1874, Polly realised she was pregnant. Since she had been celibate since the death of her beloved husband Joseph in 1868, Richard had to be the father. She was horrified, realising that when the truth was revealed it would destroy the troupe and tear

the Edgar family, "her" family, apart.

Polly acted decisively. During the autumn of 1874, she invented a fictitious obligation in Greenwich that would last at least half a year, and obtained a room in a boarding house where she lived by her meagre savings through until Edgar's birth on April 1, 1875.

During her confinement she had asked her midwife to locate a couple of sufficient kindness and generosity to entrust with her child's upbringing for the pittance Polly could afford to contribute. The midwife introduced Polly to her close friend, Mrs Freeman, a stout, jolly mother of ten children ranging from their early twenties downwards, whose husband George Freeman was a Billingsgate fish porter (fishmonger). The Freemans were a loving couple and excellent parents.

On [[April 9], 1875, Polly took Edgar to the Freeman family and made arrangements to visit as often as she was able without eliciting interest/suspicion by the Marriotts, since by

the time she returned to London during April 1875 Jenny Taylor and Richard Horatio Edgar, oblivious to the existence of his son, had been married a month.

## **Childhood and Early Career**

Known as Richard Freeman, Edgar had a happy childhood, forming an especially close bond with 20-year-old Clara Freeman who became like a second mother to him. His foster-father George Freeman was an honourable and kind man and determined to ensure Richard received a good education, the family being influenced perhaps by the unfortunate circumstances of Edgar's conception. From 1875-8 Polly visited as often as she was able, bringing her contribution, but maintained a certain emotional distance.

By 1878, Polly was faced with a serious dilemma. After their marriage, Richard and Jenny had relocated to Scotland, where their



children were born, including Edgar's paternal half-brother, George Marriott Edgar (1880-1951), who was renowned under his stage name of Marriott Edgar as a poet, comedian, and scriptwriter for Stanley Holloway, for whom he wrote the famous Holloway Monologues, including *The Lion & Albert*.

But the Marriott troupe was slowly dispersing, as Grace and Adeline married and Alice Marriott's health necessitated retirement. Polly took up new employment with the Hamilton troupe but now in her late 30s was increasingly limited as to the roles and backstage work she could do, forcing a commensurate decrease of earnings. In short, she could no longer afford even the small sum she had been paying the Freemans to care for Edgar.

Arriving with the news and a distraught offer to place Edgar in a workhouse, Polly found the Freemans fiercely opposed to any such action, doting on the boy. Polly left abruptly,

perhaps overwhelmed by emotion. She never visited again, perhaps because of shame. Her actions led to tragic consequences for her and Edgar decades later.

Edgar had inherited his father's swarthy handsomeness and was extroverted. However, his usual response to any problem seems to have been to withdraw from it, either literally, mentally or emotionally.

By his early teens he had held down numerous jobs and was an ardent if not very good racehorse follower. In 1894 he had rashly become engaged to a local Deptford girl, Edith Anstree, and typically sought to escape, without facing the problem properly but not wishing to hurt her feelings.

Unaware that the half-sister he did not know existed had just died, Edgar enlisted in the Infantry preparatory to leaving for South Africa.

In 1885, when she was sixteen, Josephine

Catherine Richards had become engaged to William Henry Donovan, and Polly felt honour-bound to inform her of the half-brother living in Deptford.

Considering the "Marriott" family's welfare, Josephine agreed the secret must not be revealed and apparently felt it too dangerous to arrange a meeting between her and Edgar. She married Donovan during 1886 and had their only child, named Alice Grace Adeline Donovan in honour of her foster-grandmother and aunts, was born in 1887. Like her father, Joseph Richards, Josephine died young of a sudden illness in 1894 at the age of 25 years.

At the time, Edgar was finding Army life unappealing. He found soldiering hard on the feet and ears, and indeed by the time he died was well-known for never partaking in any physical exercise (which probably contributed to his early death). He wangled a transfer to the Royal Army Medical Corps, which was less arduous but more unpleasant, and so transferred again to the Press Corps,

where he found at last his metier.

By 1898, he was a war correspondent for the *Daily Mail* in the Boer War, as well as a poet/columnist for various periodicals - a similar sequence which P G Wodehouse would experience a couple of years later. He also met the author and poet Rudyard Kipling whom he greatly admired.

## **Marriage, Initial Success, Return to UK 1898-1902**

With Edith Anstree out of sight and out of mind, he met one of his avid readers, a girl of similar age, Ivy Maude Caldecott, whose father was a Methodist minister, Reverend William Shaw Caldecott. He forbade any contact between the two.

For some years Reverend Caldecott had desired to return to England unencumbered by his family and fondly imagined them unaware of this. His wife Marion Caldecott

knew he would eventually seize upon an excuse to desert them. So, when Ivy defied her father's wishes and married Edgar Wallace, Marion sided with her daughter.

Infuriated, Caldecott did indeed book passage back to England, but was further outraged by the lack of penitently weeping family on the Johannesburg docks. Many years later, Ivy would bear the brunt of his vindictiveness.

In 1900, Ivy had their first child, Eleanor Clare Hellier Wallace, and Edgar met one Harry F. Cohen, a financier. With Cohen's complicity, Edgar came up with an ingenious way of scooping the press-hating General Kitchener in 1902 with the signing of the Treaty ending the Boer War <sup>[1]</sup>

Impressed, Cohen appointed Edgar editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* with a £2,000 per annum salary. Edgar had become successful, but it was all about to go horribly wrong.

Superstitious, Edgar viewed any

"economising" as a sign his luck was about to end, and thus had been living in excess of a £2,000 per annum salary since the first day of his employment. Then, he and Ivy were devastated when the two-year old Eleanor died of meningitis, going from healthy to dead in less than 24-hours.

Reeling from the shock, Edgar was as grief-stricken as Ivy, but he was also unemployed and seriously indebted. Eleanor's death caused Ivy (irrationally) to loathe Johannesburg, so Edgar promptly sold their house and put them aboard a liner for England whilst keeping Ivy completely unaware of their financial situation. When they arrived, Edgar possessed only 12 shillings.

His one prudence since the mid 1890s had been to "keep in" with his colleagues at the *Daily Mail* and so he presented himself at their office with the tale of his daughter's death and his wife's fragile health.

The newspaper's new proprietor Alfred Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, promptly hired Edgar as a sub-editor. Despite the annual wage being only £750, Edgar promptly took Ivy and began living in excess of his means. She was not aware of what was happening and Edgar ignored the letters of his South African creditors.

## **The Four Just Men, Career As Thriller Writer, 1903-1920**

In 1903, Edgar experienced another profound event, when his mother Polly, whom he had never known, came to him. By now 60 years-old and terminally ill, it cannot be doubted that Polly hoped for some financial assistance.

Alice Marriott and Josephine were long deceased and Polly had been unable to work for some months. She had been aware of her

son's illustrious career as a Colonial correspondent since the late 1890s - and like Ivy and everyone around Edgar, did not know that in fact he was impoverished.

Still grieving for Eleanor and ignoring his financial situation, Edgar reacted with uncharacteristic harshness, giving Polly a few pounds and turning her away. Stoically accepting this rejection, Polly used the money to travel to Bradford, where she collapsed and died in the Bradford Infirmary.

She was only saved from the ignominy of a pauper's grave when her former son-in-law, William Henry Donovan, though long remarried since Josephine's death, learned of it and hastened to pay for her interment.

When Ivy, out at the time, returned home and Edgar, already regretting his actions, related what had happened, Ivy chastised him for his harshness and emphasized that he had not given Polly any chance to explain.



Usually a generous person, Edgar agreed he had been hasty and, unaware his mother was already dead, decided that as soon as he had some spare time he would find his mother again. But events would thwart him until 1908.

The first distracting event was Ivy's second pregnancy during 1904 - to which she reacted not with joy but with anxiety and stress. Edgar went to Europe as a correspondent during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. Whilst in the Balkans he met British and Russian spies and was inspired.

Returning to England in 1905 he had in his head *The Four Just Men*, the prototype of modern thriller novels, about four young, handsome, immensely wealthy vigilantes (including a European Prince) who kill people in the name of Justice.

Upon returning, he was able to meet briefly his healthy baby son, Bryan Edgar Wallace,

before Ivy left with Bryan for South Africa, where her ill mother Marion Caldecott, mistakenly believing she was terminally ill, had expressed a wistful desire to see her grandson. This meant Ivy was not present to restrain Edgar's enthusiastic excess.

Writing the story of the Four Just Men (FJM) who would kill the Foreign Secretary if he tried to ratify an unjust law, Edgar had to create his own publishing company, Tallis, to publish it. Undeterred, he decided to manage a 'guess the murder method' competition in the *Daily Mail* with a prize of £1,000. Edgar intended to advertise the book on an unprecedented scale, not just in Britain itself but across the Empire.

He approached Harmsworth for the loan of the £1,000 and was promptly refused. Edgar wasn't really suited to editorship as he preferred to spend his afternoons at the racecourse or poker table: Harmsworth in turn was irritated by the fact that Edgar was so difficult to find instead of being on the

other end of a telephone like the other editors.

Unfazed, Edgar pressed ahead - his alarmed workmates at the *Mail* prevailed upon him to lower the prize money to £500: a £250 first prize, £200 second prize and £50 third prize, but were unable to restrain him in the privacy of his home.

Edgar had advertisements placed on buses, hoardings, flyers, and so forth, running up an incredible bill of £2,000. Though he knew he needed the book to sell sufficient copies to make £2,500 before he saw any profit, Edgar was confidently aware this would be achieved in the first three months of the book going on sale, hopelessly underestimating the expanses.

Enthusiastic, but without any substantial managerial skill, Edgar had also made a far more serious error. He ran the FJM serial competition in the *Daily Mail* but failed to include any limitation clause in the competition rules restricting payment of the

prize money to *one winner only* from each of the three categories.

Only after the competition had closed and the correct solution printed as part of the final chapter denouement did Edgar learn that he was legally obligated to pay every person who answered correctly the full prize amount in that category; if 6 people got the 1st Prize answer right, he would have to pay not £250 but 6x£250, or £1500, if 3 people got the 2nd Prize it would be £600 and so on.

Additionally, though his advertising gimmick had worked as the FJM novel was a bestseller, Edgar discovered that instead of his woefully over-optimistic three months, FJM would have to continue selling consistently with no margin of error for two full years to recoup the £2,500 he had mistakenly believed he needed to break even. Horror was added to shock when the number of entrants correctly guessing the right answer continued to inexorably rise.

Edgar's response was to simply ignore the situation, but circumstances were ominous. Newspaper companies were expected to be standards of truth and accountability: any that even mistakenly published articles that were found to be incorrect, inaccurate or misleading could lose money seriously.

As 1906 began and continued without any list of prize winners being printed, more and more suspicions were being voiced about the honesty of the competition. In addition, for a working-class Edwardian family, £250 was a fortune and since those who were winners knew it (courtesy of the published solution) they had been waiting impatiently for the prize cheque to hit the doormat.

Friction already existed between the autocratic Harmsworth and his elusive editor, and Harmsworth, having refused the initial £1,000 loan was furious at having now to loan Edgar over £5,000 to protect the newspaper's reputation because Edgar

couldn't pay.

Harmsworth's irritation simmered as instead of appropriate gratitude and contrition, Edgar recovered his ebullience and confidence, and also seemed not to be in any hurry to repay the loan.

During 1907 Edgar travelled to the Belgian Congo, to report on how the native Congolese were being horribly abused by representatives of King Leopold II of Belgium.

In the same year Ivy was again pregnant, but Bryan was two - the age Eleanor had died - making her anxious and stressed again. Meanwhile, there were during 1906-1907 two libel suits in the courts against the *Daily Mail*, involving Edgar.

The first and most serious concerned the Lever Brothers, against whom Harmsworth had led a crusade when he learned they intended to raise soap prices. But upon the

brothers publicly apologising and abandoning the idea, Harmsworth continued to gloat and approve scurrilously libellous articles, provoking the brothers into a libel suit.

Part of the case concerned an article in which Edgar had grossly inflated the figures by quoting an "unnamed washerwoman" he'd invented, as he was hopeless with money and had no idea of fiscal prudence. To Harmsworth's dismay, the Lever Brothers were awarded damages of £50,000 (the equivalent of approximately £3.6 million today).

At the same time, a Navy Lieutenant named St. George-Collard began another suit after Wallace repeated an incorrect claim that he had been disciplined for brutality towards enlisted seamen before, and won £5,000.

Though the £50,000 was entirely his own fault, Harmsworth was enraged to be £60,000 out-of-pocket for three incidents all involving Wallace, and so upon the latter's return from

the Congo, dismissed him.

Unlike in 1902, in 1908 there was no way to hide the calamity from Ivy, emotionally vulnerable from giving birth to the couple's third child Patricia Marion Caldecott Wallace, and soon they had to move to a virtual slum. Ivy and Edgar had never been truly compatible with each other in personality anyway, and 1908 marked the start of the slow disintegration of their marriage.

But again, Edgar found opportunity in the shape Mrs Isabel Thorne, who edited a minor magazine; she initially approached him about "romance" serials but he admitted he was not good at such - his teenage handsomeness and early marriage to Ivy meant he had little experience of romance. Then he began to relate his adventures in Africa, and Mrs Thorne realised that his "blood-and-thunder" tales were his metier.

She hired him to write a serial for her



magazine, and so began during 1909 the *Sanders of the River* stories which were serialized for years and which he eventually compiled into novels. The movie of the same name is remembered today mostly because it co-starred Paul Robeson as a tribal chief.

At the time there was nothing strange about a series of stories portraying as a positive and likeable protagonist the governor of an (unnamed) British colony in West Africa, who relies upon gun boats cruising along a major African river to enforce British rule and who - while not gratuitously cruel - does not shrink from using brute force on occasion.

More recently these stories have been charged with exhibiting racist and pro-imperialist attitudes. Certainly, the rather mediocre novels take for granted the justness of colonialism and European rule in Africa - in which they but reflect the mindset of their era and are little different from attitudes of such contemporary writers as H. G. Wells,

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Jules Verne and numerous others.

As shown in the listing of Wallace's output featured below, the two ten year periods from 1908-1918 and 1922-1932 were the most prolific of his life, but for different reasons.

In the first period, he wrote mainly in order to satisfy creditors. Edgar sold the rights to his novels very quickly - FJM for £75, its sequel for £80, and so forth - merely for an income and to provide token amounts to his creditors, many of which were from South Africa.

Also in 1908, he recalled his determination to find his mother, not knowing of her death. Instead, he located his niece, A. Grace Donovan, who by then was in her 21st year of life and, after losing her mother at seven years of age, eager to meet maternal relatives.

Through Grace, Edgar learned of his father and mother, his maternal half-sister and the paternal semi-siblings of whom he would

only ever meet one, Edgar Marriott. He also learned of Polly Richards' sacrifices to ensure the emotional well-being of the Marriott family.

Edgar Wallace could not cope with emotional trauma, and his conscience excoriated him as he recalled his treatment of his mother, who had then left and promptly died. Though he and Grace Donovan remained lifelong friends, he never recovered from his guilt feeling.

As his personal stress increased, his writing output also increased: he produced some of his most famous work during the 1908-1918 period.

Edgar was one of those people who did best with the least time to "think" and this was an asset for his writing, though it must be admitted that most of what he wrote was adequate rather than excellent.

As time went on, he and Ivy became more

and more separated: though too honourable to indulge in a physical betrayal of his wife, he began what today psychologists would term an "emotional" (very possibly non-sexual) affair with another woman.

Edgar's meeting of minds and minor flirtation with Mrs Edith Cockle, nee Anstree - his first fiancée - soon fizzled out. Spurred by guilt over his actions, Edgar was motivated to "woo" Ivy with sufficient success for her to become unexpectedly pregnant during 1915, though the marriage had been moribund for several years.

However, at this time Edgar hired a new secretary, a timid, quiet 15-year-old girl named Violet King. Whereas Ivy had tolerated Violet's predecessors with relief, she perceived that Violet was her successor.

Ivy knew that as Violet matured from girl to woman she would be more ideally suited to Edgar's temperament than Ivy herself had ever been. Ivy also knew that when Edgar

inevitably became adulterous with Violet, he would condemn himself over his betrayal of Ivy.

During 1916, Ivy had her last child, named Michael Blair Wallace by Edgar in belated homage to his mother, Polly. Assuring herself that Violet liked and was liked by her children, and aware they would all be at school soon, Ivy showed kindness towards Edgar to the end, gently withdrawing from his life before filing for divorce in 1918 and telling him that he was not to blame.

There was also her own personal discomfort as the inescapable reality was that Violet was the same age as Edgar and Ivy's eldest daughter Eleanor, and what she could have been had she lived - that constant reminder of dreams forever lost - upset Ivy more than anything.

## **Second Marriage, Tragedy & Success, 1918-1929**

With Ivy living in Tunbridge Wells and the children at school, Edgar could finally concentrate on his writing and from 1918 drew closer to the intelligent, ever more capable Violet. He married her in 1921.

Violet did not have any intention of disrupting her and Edgar's life much and so was shocked and upset to become pregnant, having her only child, Penelope Wallace, in 1923, though Edgar was delighted.

This gradually spurred his second ten-year writing boom, this time because of personal confidence, rather than stress. His output is often compared to that of other prolific authors, such as Isaac Asimov.

There is a famous anecdote in which visitors to his home actually observed him dictate a novel in the course of a weekend. It became a standing joke that if someone telephoned Edgar and was told he was writing a novel, they would promptly reply, "I'll wait!"

He also invented and patented the *Edgar Wallace Plot Wheel*. The wheel has several events written on it, such as "murder", and when turned one comes up and should be incorporated in the storywriting.

It is said that Wallace was the first British crime novelist to use policemen as his protagonists, rather than brilliant amateur sleuths as most other writers of the time did.

However, his heroes were far from ordinary - they were mostly special investigators of some sort who worked outside the normal police force, such as Mr J G Reeder who worked for the obscure Public Prosecutor's Office (then part of the Crown Prosecution Service).

Most of his novels are independent stand-alone stories; he seldom used series heroes, and when he did there was little point in maintaining their order as there was not any continuity from book to book.

At the beginning of this period of increased output, Edgar experienced one more terrible emotional shock, with the death of Ivy Wallace. Experiencing ill-health, she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1923, and wrote a letter to Edgar requesting "a loan for minor surgery" with such successful obfuscation that Edgar did not realise she was seriously ill. Though the tumour's removal was initially successful, it returned terminally by 1925.

Aware even *in extremis* that Edgar was incapable of coping with emotional trauma, Ivy again wrote for a loan and downplayed her condition so well Edgar believed she had a minor chest infection. The frantic summons of a doctor got Bryan to her deathbed so she did not die alone like Polly Richards, but she succumbed to breast cancer during 1926.

It was ironic that only months after Ivy's death, Edgar finally achieved tremendous fame and fortune. Ivy had been his staunchest



supporter and loyal helpmeet, being a *de facto* single parent. Even after she divorced him, Ivy kindly never stopped encouraging him - and Violet - to believe in his future success.

As well being a prolific novelist, Edgar was also a noted playwright, in fact rather better at dramas than novels. Some of his plays are listed below; but he also kept up his journalistic and columnist work.

His route to fame and fortune on an international scale came about by virtue of his play *The Gaunt Stranger* and a controversial journalistic article he wrote in the mid-1920s named *The Canker In Our Midst*.

Once alternative lifestyles and sexuality became more accepted, the article led to accusations of homophobia, though Edgar had many friends and colleagues in the show business world who were non-heterosexual.

The article was actually about paedophilia: Edgar was trying to make the point that the licentious excess traditionally associated with the show business world, partly what had led to it being treated as synonymous with prostitution and immorality in the 19th Century, caused some show business people to unwittingly leave their children vulnerable to predators. However, the article was completely tactless, over-simplistic and almost childishly naive besides being hectoring and scolding in presentation.

Amongst those outraged were theatre mogul Gerald du Maurier, father of the more famous authoress Daphne du Maurier of *Jamaica Inn* and *Rebecca* fame. He telephoned Edgar to deliver a rebuke; when he confirmed his identity as du Maurier, Edgar cheerfully asked, "Oh, you got my letter then?"

The two increasingly confused men had a cross-purposes conversation which resulted in du Maurier inviting Edgar for a meal, at

which he intended to reprimand him. When Edgar arrived, he thought du Maurier had telephoned about the letter he had sent regarding his play, *The Gaunt Stranger* (which du Maurier interestingly never did receive).

By the meal's end, du Maurier had accurately realized Edgar's enthusiastic if rather childish personality, and saw that in his own blundering way, Edgar had not been malicious but rather trying to help. He also realised that *The Gaunt Stranger* was going to be a sure-fire hit to the extent he insisted on only one change - that of the title to *The Ringer*.

As always, Edgar turned the play into a novel, and it has been serialised or made into films several times, unfortunately always with an element of rushed mediocrity. But *The Ringer* was the catalyst that propelled Edgar from being popular in England to fame and fortune in Hollywood.

The chief protagonist was a typical Wallace anti-hero vigilante, one Henry Arthur Milton, aka The Ringer, a legendary assassin who killed for personal vengeance. The drama's main character was Inspector Wembury of Scotland Yard, who is having a very bad day. It is his first day as the new commander of Deptford Division; his immediate superior, the brutish, inappropriately named Chief Inspector Bliss, is back from America full of ideas like Tommy guns on the streets of London and a British FBI: his fiancée has just taken a job as secretary to a local lawyer Maurice Meister, an outwardly respectable but actually murderous criminal who Wembury knows - but cannot prove - was responsible for his fiancée's impressionable younger brother ending up doing a 4-year jail term for a robbery.

Wembury's day is made miserably complete when the news is received that The Ringer, having been "confirmed" dead in Australia, is back in London and desiring vengeance

against Maurice Meister, for Henry Milton left his only sibling, a much younger sister, in Meister's wardship when he left London and after Milton was supposedly confirmed dead her body was found floating in the River Thames.

*The Ringer* was successful with audiences and critics alike and made a great profit for both Edgar and Gerald du Maurier.

Shortly before Ivy's death, he had met one Sir Ernest Hodder-Williams, one half of the famous publishing company Hodder-Stoughton Ltd. Recognising Edgar's literary talent, but also his personal flaws, Hodder-Williams quickly signed him to a contract and kept him busy, but introduced Edgar to the concept of *royalties*. Thanks to Hodder-Williams, Edgar now kept the copyright to his work.

In 1927, famous because of *The Ringer*, Edgar secured an extraordinary deal - unprecedented for its time - with a cinematic

company, British Lion. He was appointed Chairman of the Board (a nominal job for which he had not to do anything) and in return for giving British Lion first option on all his output, Edgar's contract gave him, incredibly, an annual salary, plus a substantial block of stock in the company, plus a large stipend from everything British Lion produced based on his work, plus 10% of British Lion's overall annual profits!

Additionally, British Lion employed his elder son Bryan E. Wallace as a film editor, bringing a second strand of income from the company into the family. Thus, by 1929, Edgar's earnings were almost £50,000 per annum, (equivalent to about £2 million in current terms).

## **The Promise of Hollywood, Death and After, 1929-1935**

Hollywood companies wooed Edgar, and he was eager to venture there and continue his

ideas of being a scriptwriter and film director: he had written several screenplays and taken cameo roles in some of his films in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock. Ivy's death devastated him, but also destroyed his egotistical confidence in his own invulnerability as Ivy had been his junior by a few years.

His lifestyle had been appallingly bad for decades, having never partaken in great physical exertion once out of the military. His diet consisted allegedly of over 20 cups of sugary tea and four packets of cigarettes a day, to which he attributed his writing success with the wry comment that such a regime should provide "sufficient inspiration for anyone".

There is not any suggestion, however, that Wallace ever resorted to illegal drugs such as cocaine or heroin, and he was known to be a virtual teetotaller.

Though he didn't know it, he was also

suffering from Diabetes and this led to ever more sudden mood swings, bouts of melancholia and, mercifully brief, periods of paranoid suspicion about his family. Many of those suspicions concerned Violet, who was entirely blameless.

Violet Wallace was an honourable woman, too much so to have an affair, but she was only human. After a while of enduring Edgar's temper tantrums and hysterical accusations and self-pitying moping, she began to stay longer at her office or on the film set: it is hardly surprising she craved laughs and pleasant conversation with youthful, handsome colleagues instead of being harangued by Edgar.

There was also Edgar's children - by 1931 Michael, the youngest, was in his mid-teens and well had his father's measure; Edgar had always excelled at the "fair weather father" type of playing and doling out money and laughs, whilst floundering at the important things a father is - a guide, an instructor, an



adviser, confidante and protector.

A good father disciplines and teaches his children morals and good conduct, whereas both Edgar's wives were *de facto* single mothers and his solution to any problem had been to hand out a £5 note or reach for his chequebook.

Only with 7-year-old Penny could Edgar maintain the illusion of omniscience. Indeed, he was estranged for several months from his eldest son Bryan until the latter's stepmother Violet persuaded Bryan to be "the bigger man" his father would never be and reconcile despite Edgar being the one most at fault.

Thus the boom-time in Hollywood was just what Edgar needed as an excuse to get away but also validate his self-belief in his silver-screen talent. Hollywood was churning out films rapidly and was desperate for someone who could produce material at great speed yet have it (mostly) make some kind of sense.

Never one to just have one iron in the fire, Edgar used his new wealth and fame to venture into politics in 1931, even as he prepared to travel across the Atlantic Ocean.

When he was elected Chairman of the Press Club, he had invented the prestigious Luncheon Club event bringing together his two greatest loves - journalism and horse-racing.

He became active in the Liberal Party and contested Blackpool in the 1931 general election as one of a handful of Independent Liberals who rejected the National Government, and the official Liberal support for it, and strongly supported free trade.

In the event, he lost the election, probably because of his reputation for gambling. Not particularly bothered, Edgar cruised to America in November 1931.

In Hollywood he began as a script "doctor".

One of his first successes was the 1932 film adaptation of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. His later play, *The Green Pack* had also opened to excellent reviews, boosting his status even further.

His ultimate objective was to get his own work on Hollywood celluloid, namely *The Four Just Men* and *Mr J G Reeder*. Also he encountered another middle-aged man in Hollywood who was Stanley Holloway's scriptwriter, none other than his own half-brother Marriott Edgar.

Marriott's most famous Monologue for Holloway was *The Lion & Albert*, in which he named the eponymous lion *Wallace*, in what is now generally recognised to be a fraternal in-joke. Marriott would outlive his elder half-brother by 19 years.

At the start of 1932, Edgar Wallace began work on a screenplay known today as *King Kong*. However, he then began to suffer sudden, severe headaches, finally summoning

a doctor. That physician, amazed that Edgar had lived so long and was in such (relatively) good shape, almost immediately informed the astonished Edgar that he had diabetes and that the doctor could not believe he had not been blind or sight-impaired for years.

Almost as if the diagnosis released the disease's restraint, Edgar's condition deteriorated drastically within days and newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic carried banner headlines declaring, *Wallace Gravely Ill*. Violet booked passage on a liner out of Southampton, but received word that Edgar had slipped into a coma and died on February 7, 1932 in Beverly Hills.

It was journalism and newspapers that had always meant the most to him in terms of his accomplishments; indeed, for all his faults Edgar was a generous man and he spent his money for the benefit of impoverished journalists and many other worthy charities.

His coffin aboard the ship to Southampton

was draped with the Union Jack and floral wreaths, as it traversed London the flags on Fleet Street's newspapers flew at half-mast and the bell of St. Bride's tolled in mourning.

Unfortunately, his tendency to cause drama wherever he went was far from ended. Once the funeral was finished and Edgar buried in Fern near Little Marlow, England, there was an unpleasant surprise for his five main heirs: Violet, Bryan, Patricia, Michael and Penelope.

At the time of his death, Edgar had been earning £50,000 a year for over two years, yet incredibly was indebted for more than £140,000 and did not have any cash to his name.

His will left Violet three-sevenths of his estate and each child one-seventh each, which in March 1932 was nothing but debt, much of which were still left over from his six years in South Africa, 35 years earlier.

Acting with the help of Theodore Goddard and Sir Patrick Hastings, King's Counsel, the inheritors managed to reduce the debt by negotiation with many creditors to receive a smaller lump sum and a deferred payment: a royalty cheque for £26,000 during 1933 also helped. By the beginning of 1934, the estate's debt was reduced to £38,000 thanks to effort by Violet and others.

Just like Ivy Wallace, Violet Wallace also never lived to enjoy the fruits of her labours. Though a quarter-century younger than Edgar, she outlived him by only 14 months, dying suddenly in April 1933 at the age of 33 with the estate still deep in debt.

Her own will had left her three-sevenths of Edgar's estate to one heir, Penelope, who became the chief benefactor and shareholder of - again, virtually nothing.

Penny Wallace was a distraught 10 year old girl who cared nothing for her financial

situation. Her only family were three semi-siblings brought up with endless wealth, now penniless and scrambling to earn a living, plus her 47-year-old cousin A. Grace Donovan and sundry half-uncles and aunts she'd never met.

The little girl was deeply devastated. It was March 1934 when the debt was finally cleared (admittedly in only two years and a month) and the four children finally received their first income dividend.

## **Postscript, 1935-Present**

A lot of work based on Edgar Wallace's material has been produced, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. A large number of movies have been based on his novels. The *Green Archer* was a well-regarded serial in the days of silent cinema. However, these works never achieved the prominence accorded to such characters as Sherlock Holmes *et al*, which is a great pity, because if

done properly, many of Wallace's best stories, such as *the Just Men* and *Mr J G Reeder* would make excellent adventure-thrillers.

In 1959 a mini-revival of his work occurred in Germany and around the Eastern Bloc, and his eldest son Bryan relocated there for some time to edit and direct many of the string of made-for-tv a string of B-movies filmed in that country. These later became a staple of late-night television.

In 2004 Oliver Kalkofe - one of the best known German comedy stars - produced the movie 'Der Wixxer' which is an homage to the popular black and white Wallace movies. It featured a large number of well known comedians.

Both his elder son Bryan Edgar Wallace and his youngest daughter Penelope Wallace were also authors of mystery and crime novels. In 1969, Penelope founded *The Edgar Wallace Appreciation Society* which she ran until her



death in 1997, the work being continued by her daughter, also named Penelope.

## **Literary works**

### **African novels**

- *Sanders of the River* (1911)
- *The People of the River* (1911)
- *The River of Stars* (1913)
- *Bosambo of the River* (1914)
- *Bones* (1915)
- *The Keepers of the King's Peace* (1917)
- *Lieutenant Bones* (1918)
- *Bones in London* (1921)
- *Sandi the Kingmaker* (1922)
- *Bones of the River* (1923)
- *Sanders* (1926)
- *Again Sanders* (1928)

### **Crime novels and short stories compilations**

- *The Four Just Men* (1905)
- *Angel Esquire* (1908)

- *The Nine Bears* (1910)
- *The Fourth Plague* (1913)
- *Grey Timothy* (1913)
- *The Man Who Bought London* (1915)
- *The Melody of Death* (1915)
- *A Debt Discharged* (1916)
- *The Tomb of T'Sin* (1916)
- *The Just Men of Cordova* (1917)
- *The Secret House* (1917)
- *The Clue of the Twisted Candle* (1918)
- *Down under Donovan* (1918)
- *The Man Who Knew* (1918)
- *The Green Rust* (1919)
- *Kate Plus 10* (1919)
- *The Daffodil Mystery* (1920)
- *Jack O'Judgment* (1920)
- *The Law of the Four Just Men* (1921)
- *The Angel of Terror* (1922)
- *The Crimson Circle* (1922)
- *Mr. Justice Maxell* (1922)
- *The Valley of Ghosts* (1922)
- *Captains of Souls* (1923)
- *The Clue of the New Pin* (1923)
- *The Green Archer* (1923)
- *The Missing Million* (1923)
- *The Dark Eyes Of London* (1924)

- *Double Dan* (1924)
- *Educated Evans* (1924)
- *The Face in the Night* (1924)
- *Room 13* (1924)
- *The Sinister Man* (1924)
- *The Three Oak Mystery* (1924)
- *The Blue Hand* (1925)
- *The Daughters of the Night* (1925)
- *The Fellowship of the Frog* (1925)
- *The Gaunt Stranger* (1925)
- *A King by Night* (1925)
- *The Mind of Mr. J.G. Reeder* (1925)
- *The Strange Countess* (1925)
- *The Avenger* (1926)
- *The Black Abbot* (1926)
- *The Day of Uniting* (1926)
- *The Door with Seven Locks* (1926)
- *The Joker* (1926)
- *The Man from Morocco* (1926)
- *The Million Dollar Story* (1926)
- *The Three Just Men* (1926)
- *More Educated Evans* (1926)
- *The Northing Tramp* (1926)
- *Penelope of the Polyantha* (1926)
- *The Square Emerald* (1926)
- *The Terrible People* (1926)

- *We Shall See!* (1926)
- *The Yellow Snake* (1926)
- *The Big Foot* (1927)
- *The Brigand* (1927)
- *The Feathered Serpent* (1927)
- *Flat 2* (1927)
- *The Forger* (1927)
- *Good Evans* (1927)
- *The Hand of Power* (1927)
- *The Man Who Was Nobody* (1927)
- *The Mixer* (1927)
- *Number Six* (1927)
- *The Squeaker* (1927)
- *Terror Keep* (1927)
- *The Traitor's Gate* (1927)
- *The Double* (1928)
- *Elegant Edward* (1928)
- *The Flying Squad* (1928)
- *The Gunner* (1928)
- *The Orator* (1928)
- *The Thief in the Night* (1928)
- *The Twister* (1928)
- *Again the Ringer* (1929)
- *Again the Three Just Men or The Law of the Three Just Men* (1929)
- *The Big Four* (1929)

- *The Black* (1929)
- *The Cat-Burglar* (1929)
- *Circumstantial Evidence* (1929)
- *Fighting Snub Reilly* (1929)
- *For Information Received* (1929)
- *Forty-Eight Short Stories* (1929)
- *Four Square Jane* (1929)
- *The Ghost of Down Hill* (1929)
- *The Golden Hades* (1929)
- *The Calendar* (1930)
- *The Hand of Power* (1930)
- *Silinski - Master Criminal: Detective T.B.Smith* (1930)
- *The Thief in the Night* (1930)
- *White Face* (1930)
- *The Clue of the Silver Key or The Silver Key* (1930)
- *The Lady of Ascot* (1930)
- *The Devil Man* (1931)
- *The Man at the Carlton* (1931)
- *The Coat of Arms or The Arranways Mystery* (1931)
- *On the Spot: Violence and Murder in Chicago* (1931)
- *The Ringer Returns or Again the Ringer* (1931)

- *Mr J.G. Reeder Returns* (1932)
- *Sergeant Sir Peter or Sergeant Dunn, C.I.D.* (1932)
- *When the Gangs Came to London* (1932)
- *The Frightened Lady* (1933)
- *The Green Pack* (1933)
- *The Mouthpiece* (1935)
- *Smoky Cell* (1935)
- *The Table* (1936)
- *Sanctuary Island* (1936)
- *Death Packs a Suitcase* (1961)
- *The Road to London* (1986)
- *The Jewel*
- *The Shadow Man*

## **Other novels**

- *The Mission That Failed* (1898)
- *War and Other Poems* (1900)
- *Writ in Barracks* (1900)
- *Unofficial Despatches* (1901)
- *Smithy* (1905)
- *The Council of Justice* (1908)
- *Captain Tatham of Tatham Island* (1909)

- *Smithy Abroad* (1909)
- *The Duke in the Suburbs* (1909)
- *Private Selby* (1912)
- *The Admirable Carfew* (1914)
- *Smithy and the Hun* (1915)
- *Tam Of The Scouts* (1918)
- *Those Folk of Bulboro* (1918)
- *The Adventure of Heine* (1917)
- *The Fighting Scouts* (1919)
- *The Book of all Power* (1921)
- *Flying Fifty-five* (1922)
- *The Books of Bart* (1923)
- *Chick* (1923)
- *Barbara on Her Own* (1926)
- *This England* (1927)

## **Fact books**

- *Famous Scottish Regiments* (1914)
- *Field Marshal Sir John French* (1914)
- *Heroes All: Gallant Deeds of the War* (1914)
- *The Standard History of the War* (1914)
- *Kitchener's Army and the Territorial Forces: The Full Story of a Great*

- *Achievement* (1915)
- *1925 - The Story of a Fatal Place* (1915)
- *Vol. 2-4. War of the Nations* (1915)
- *Vol. 5-7. War of the Nations* (1916)
- *Vol. 8-9. War of the Nations* (1917)
- *Tam of the Scouts* (1918)
- *People* (1926)

## Screenplay

- *King Kong* (1932, unused first draft)

## Plays

- *The Ringer* (1929)
- *On the Spot* (1930)
- *The Squeaker* (1930)

## Quotes

On the exploitation of Native African workers:

- "I do not regard the native as my



brother or my sister, nor even as my first cousin: nor as a poor relation. I do not love the native--nor do I hate him. To me he is just a part of the scenery, a picturesque object with uses."

#### On Intellectualism:

- "The intellectual is someone who has found something more interesting than sex".
- "What is a highbrow? He is a man who has found something more interesting than women."

### See also

- Brockley
- King Kong

### External links

- Former London home of Edgar Wallace

- Works by Edgar Wallace at Project Gutenberg
- Works by Edgar Wallace at Project Gutenberg Australia
- Edgar Wallace Bibliography
- wallace-online.de German fansite
- Article on Edgar Wallace
- Edgar Wallace films Films based on Edgar Wallace stories produced by Merton Park studios in London between the years 1960 and 1966.

## References

1. ^ For details see *The Mind of Edgar Wallace* by C D Stewart at "The Cat's Whiskers"  
<http://www.cd.stewart.btinternet.co.uk>.

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