

THE BIG FOUR

A Mystery-Romance by Agatha Christie

CHAPTER XVI

"You mean," I said, staring, "that you suspect Mr. Ryland, the multi-millionaire, of being Number Two of the Big Four?"

"Your bright intellect has grasped the idea, Hastings. Yes, I do. The tone in which you said multi-millionaire was eloquent—but let me impress upon you one fact—this thing is being run by men at the top—and Mr. Ryland has the reputation of being no beauty in his business dealings. An able, unscrupulous man, a man who has all the wealth that he needs, and is out for unlimited power."

There was undoubtedly something to be said for Poirot's view. I asked him when he had made up his mind definitely upon the point. "That is just it. I am not sure. I cannot be sure. Mon ami, I would give anything to know. Let me but place Number Two definitely as Mr. Ryland, and we draw nearer to our goal."

"He has just arrived in London, I see by this," I said, tapping the letter. "Shall you call upon him, and make your apologies in person?"

"I might do so."

"Two days later, Poirot returned to our rooms in a state of boundless excitement. He grasped me by both hands in his most impulsive manner.

"My friend, an occasion unprecedented, unprecedented, never to be repeated, has presented itself! But there is danger, grave danger. I should not even ask you to attempt it."

If Poirot was trying to frighten me, he was going the wrong way to work, and so I told him. He, coming less incoherent, he unfolded his plan.

It seemed that Ryland was looking for an English secretary, one with a good social manner and presence. It was Poirot's suggestion that I should apply for the post.

"I would do it, myself, mon ami," he explained apologetically. "But, see you, it is almost impossible for me to disguise myself in the needful manner. I speak the English very well—except when I am excited—but hardly so as to deceive the ear; and even though I were to sacrifice my moustache, I doubt not but that I should still be recognizable as Hercule Poirot."

I doubted it also, and declared myself ready and willing to take up the part and penetrate into Ryland's household.

"Ten to one he won't engage me anyway," I remarked.

"Oh, yes, he will. I will arrange for you such testimonials as shall make him lick his lips. The home secretary himself shall recommend you."

This seemed to be carrying

things a bit far, but Poirot waved aside my remonstrances.

"Oh, yes, he will do it. I investigated for him a little matter which might have caused a grave scandal. All was solved with discretion and delicacy, and now, as you would say, he perches upon my hand like the little bird and pecks the crumbs."

Our first step was to engage the services of an artist in "make-up." He was a little man, with a quiet bird-like turn of the head, not unlike Poirot's own. He considered me some time in silence, and then fell to work. When I looked at myself in the glass half an hour afterwards, I was amazed. Special shoes caused me to stand at least two inches taller, and the coat I wore was arranged so as to give me a long, lank, weedy look. My eyebrows had been cunningly altered, giving a totally different expression to my face. I wore pads in my cheeks, and the deep tan of my face was a thing of the past. My moustache had gone, and a gold tooth was prominent on one side of my mouth.

"Your name," said Poirot, "is Arthur Neville. God guard you, my friend—for I fear that you go into perilous places."

It was with a beating heart that I presented myself at the Savoy, at an hour named by Mr. Ryland, and asked to see the great man.

After being kept waiting a minute or two, I was shown upstairs to his suite.

Ryland was sitting at a table. Spread out in front of him was a letter which I could see out of the corner of my eye was in the home secretary's handwriting. It was my first sight of the American millionaire, and, in spite of myself, I was impressed. He was tall and lean, with a jutting out chin and slightly hooked nose. His eyes glittered cold and gray behind portholes. He had thick grizzled hair, and a long black cigar (without which I learned later, he was never seen) protruded rakishly from the corner of his mouth.

"Sit down," he grunted.

I sat. He tapped the letter in front of him.

"According to this piece here, you're the goods all right, and I

don't need to look further. Say, are you well up in the social matters?"

I said that I thought I could satisfy him in that respect.

"I mean to say, if I have a lot of dooks and earls and viscounts and suchlike down to the country place I've gotten, you'll be able to sort them out all right and put them where they should be round the dinner table?"

"Oh! quite easily," I replied, smiling.

We exchanged a few more preliminaries, and then I found myself engaged. What Mr. Ryland wanted was a secretary conversant with English society, as he already had an American secretary and a stenographer with him.

Two days later I went down to Hutton Chase, the seat of the Duke of Loamshire, which the American millionaire had rented for a period of six months.

My duties gave me no difficulty whatever. At one period of my life I had been private secretary to a busy member of parliament, so I was not called upon to assume a role unfamiliar to me. Mr. Ryland usually entertained a large party over the week-end, but the middle of the week was comparatively quiet. I saw very little of Mr. Ryland, the American secretary, but he seemed a pleasant, normal young American, very efficient in his work. Of Miss Martin, the stenographer, I saw rather more. She was a pretty girl of about twenty-three or four, with auburn hair and brown eyes that could look mischievous enough upon occasion, though they were usually cast demurely down. I had an idea that she both disliked and distrusted her employer, though, of course, she was careful never to hint at anything of the kind, but the time came when I was unexpectedly taken into her confidence.

I had, of course, carefully scrutinized all the members of the household. One or two of the servants had been newly engaged, one of the footmen, I think, and some of the housemaids. The butler, the housekeeper, and the chef were the duke's own staff, who had consented to remain on in the establishment. The housemaids I dismissed as unimportant. I scrutinized James, the second footman, very carefully; but it was clear that he was an under-footman only. He had, indeed, been engaged by the butler. A person of whom I was far more suspicious was Deaves, Ryland's valet, whom he had brought over from New York with him. An

Englishman by birth, with an irreproachable manner, I yet harbored vague suspicions about him.

I had been at Hutton Chase three weeks, and not an incident of any kind had arisen which I could lay my finger on in support of our theory. There was no trace of the activities of the Big Four. Mr. Ryland was a man of overpowering force and personality, but I was coming to believe that Poirot had made a mistake when he associated him with that dread organization. I even heard him mention Poirot in a casual way at dinner one night.

"Wonderful little man, they say. But he's a quitter. How do I know? I put him on a deal, and he turned me down the last minute. I'm not taking any more of your Monsieur Hercule Poirot."

It was at moments such as these that I felt my cheek pads most wearisome!

And then Miss Martin told me a rather curious story. Ryland had gone to London for the day, taking Appleby with him. Miss Martin and I were strolling together in the garden after tea. I liked the girl very much, she was so unaffected and so natural. I could see that there was something on her mind, but he seemed a pleasant, normal young American, very efficient in his work. Of Miss Martin, the stenographer, I saw rather more. She was a pretty girl of about twenty-three or four, with auburn hair and brown eyes that could look mischievous enough upon occasion, though they were usually cast demurely down. I had an idea that she both disliked and distrusted her employer, though, of course, she was careful never to hint at anything of the kind, but the time came when I was unexpectedly taken into her confidence.

"I looked somewhat astonished, and she went on hurriedly.

"Oh! I know it's a wonderful job to have got in a way. I suppose most people would think me a fool to throw it up. But I can't stand above, Major Neville. To be sworn at like a trooper is more than I can bear. No gentleman would do such a thing."

"Has Ryland been swearing at you?"

She nodded.

"Of course, he's always rather irritable and short-tempered. That one expects. It's all in the day's work. But to fly into such an absolute fury—know nothing at all. He really looked as though he could have murdered me. And, as I say, over nothing at all!"

"Tell me about it," I said, keenly interested.

"As you know, I open all Mr. Ryland's letters. Some I hand on to Mr. Appleby, others I deal with myself, but I do all the preliminary sorting. Now there are certain letters that come, written on blue paper, and with a tiny 4 marked on the corner. I beg your pardon, did you speak?"

I had been unable to repress a

stifled exclamation, but I hurriedly smothered my head, and begged her to continue.

"Well, as I was saying, these letters come, and there are strict orders that they are never to be opened, but they are handed over to Mr. Ryland intact. And, of course, I always do so. But there was an unusually heavy mail yesterday morning, and I was opening the letters in a terrific hurry. By mistake I opened one of these letters. As soon as I saw what I had done, I took it to Mr. Ryland and explained. To my utter amazement he flew into the most awful rage. As I tell you, I was quite frightened."

"What was there in the letter, I wonder, to upset him so?"

"Absolutely nothing—that's just the curious part of it. I had read it before I discovered my mistake. It was quite short. I can still remember it word for word, and there was nothing in it that could possibly upset any one."

"You can repeat it, you say?" I encouraged her.

"Yes." She paused a minute and then repeated slowly, whilst I noted down the words unobtrusively, the following:—

"Dear Sir,—The essential thing now, I should say, is to see the property. If you insist on the quarry being included, then seventeen thousand seems reasonable. 11% commission too much, 4% is ample."

"Yours truly,

"ARTHUR LEVERSHAM."

(To be continued.)

Shades of a thousand little red schoolhouses! Dr. O. K. Slason, of Reed College, Portland, Ore., told a teachers institute audience "The Idylls of the King," "Silas Marner" and various books written by Sir Walter Scott, William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens should be eliminated from the school study courses. The reason? "They aren't American; they're autocratic, aristocratic—even snobbish," he said.

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CCC CONTINUANCE

PLANNED BY F. D. R.

WASHINGTON, Oct. 27.—(AP)—President Roosevelt said today he would include estimates in the new budget for the next fiscal year for continuing the civilian conservation corps probably at around 300,000 enrollees.

The president said at a press conference that he was checking up now to determine how many youths could be expected to enroll from relief families and he thought the 300,000 would be justified for a total enrollment.

Estimates last year for the current fiscal year provided for 300,000 men, but due to floods and other emergencies, the president said congress raised this to 350,000. Coincidentally, the president made public a report from Robert Fechner, CCC director, asserting the "annual work load ahead for a permanent CCC will increase rather than diminish during the next few years."

In response to further questioning, the president said he would be unable to determine the number to be kept on works progress relief jobs until just before the

budget for 1937-38 is ready to be submitted in January.

He said it was possible he would not include estimates in the budget for WPA at the start, but

might submit a supplemental estimate on this later on. Present funds, he added, were supposed to carry the present load through until next July.

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