

THE BIG FOUR

A Mystery-Romance by Agatha Christie

CHAPTER XXIII

"Yes—but there are always two ways of looking at things. Some one goes out—some one comes in—two totally different things, Hastings. But if you assumed the wrong one, presently some little discrepancy would creep in and show you that you were on the wrong track."

"What does all this mean, Poirot?"

"It means that I have been a triple imbecile. Quick, quick, to the flat in Westminster. We may yet be in time."

We tore off in a taxi. Poirot returned no answer to my excited questions. We raced up the stairs. Repeated rings and knocks brought no reply, but listening closely I could distinguish a hollow groan coming from within.

The hall porter proved to have a master key, and after a few difficulties he consented to use it.

Poirot went straight to the inner room. A whiff of chloroform met us. On the floor was Sonia Davloff, gagged and bound, with a great wad of saturated cotton over her nose and mouth. Poirot tore it off the began to take measures to restore her. Presently a doctor arrived, and Poirot handed her over to his charge and drew aside with me. There was no sign of Dr. Savaronoff.

"What does it all mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"It means that before two equal deductions I chose the wrong one. You heard me say that it would be easy for any one to impersonate Sonia Davloff because her uncle had not seen her for so many years?"

"Yes?"

"Well, precisely the opposite held good also. It was equally easy for any one to impersonate the uncle."

"What?"

"Savaronoff did die at the outbreak of the revolution. The man who pretended to have escaped with such terrible hardships, the man who changed, that his own friends could hardly recognize him, the man who successfully laid claim to an enormous fortune—"

"Yes. Who was he?"

"Number Four. No wonder he was frightened when Sonia let him know she had overheard one of his private conversations about the Big Four. Again he has slipped through my fingers. He guessed I should get on the right track in the end, so he sent off the honest Ivan on a tortuous wild goose chase, chloroformed the girl and got out, having by now doubtless realized most of the securities left by Madame Gospoja."

"But—but who tried to kill him then?"

"Nobody tried to kill him. Wilson was the intended victim all along."

"But why?"

"My friend, Savaronoff was the second greatest chess player in the world. In all probability Number Four did not even know the rudiments of the game. Certainly he could not sustain the fiction of a match. He tried all he knew to avoid the contest. When that failed, Wilson's doom was sealed. At all costs he must be prevented from discovering that the great Savaronoff did not even know how to play chess. Wilson was fond of the Ruy Lopez opening, and was

certain to use it. Number Four arranged for death to come with the third move, before any complications of defense set in."

"But, my dear Poirot," I persisted, "are we dealing with a lunatic? I quite follow your reasoning, and admit that you must be right, but to kill a man just to sustain his role? Surely there were simpler ways out of the difficulty than that? He could have said that his doctor forbade the strain of a match."

Poirot wrinkled his forehead.

"Certainty, Hastings," he said, "there were other ways, but none so convincing. Besides, you are assuming that to kill a man is a thing to avoid, are you not? Number Four's mind, it does not act that way. I put myself in his place, a thing impossible for you. I picture his thoughts. He enjoys himself as the professor at that chess tourney, to study his part. He sits and frowns in thought; he gives the impression that he is thinking great plans, and all the time he laughs in himself. He is aware that two moves are all that he knows—and all that he needs know. Again, it would appeal to his mind to foresee the events and to make the man his own executioner at the exact time that suits Number Four."

"Oh, yes, Hastings, I begin to understand our friend and his psychology."

I shrugged.

"Well, I suppose you're right, but I can't understand any one running a risk; he could so easily avoid."

"Risk?" Poirot snorted. "Where then lay the risk? Would Japp have solved the problem? No; if Number Four had not made one small mistake he would have run no risk."

"And his mistake?" I asked, although I suspected the answer.

"Then lay the risk? Would Japp have solved the problem? No; if Number Four had not made one small mistake he would have run no risk."

"Mon ami, he overlooked the little gray cells of Hercule Poirot."

Poirot has his virtues, but modesty is not one of them.

"An infernal machine of some kind?" I hazarded.

Poirot made a sharp click with his tongue expressive of impatience.

"But no! I appeal to your imagination, and you can suggest nothing more subtle than bombs in the fireplace. Well, well, I have need of some matches, I will promenade myself despite the weather. Pardon, my friend, but is it possible that you read 'The Future of the Argentine, Mirror of Society, Cattle Breeding, The Clue of Crimson and Sport in the Rockies' at one and the same time?"

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I urged, "What have we done all this time?"

"More than you think, my friend. After all, we have established the identity of Number Two and Number Three, and we have learnt more than little about the ways and methods of Number Four."

I brightened up a little. As Poirot put it, things didn't sound so bad.

"Oh! Yes, Hastings, we have done a great deal. It is true that I am not in a position to accuse either Ryland or Madame Olivier—who would believe me? You remember I thought once I had Ryland successfully cornered? Nevertheless I have made my suspicions known in certain quarters—highest—Lord Aldington, who enlisted my help in the matter of the stolen submarine plans, is fully cognizant of all my information respecting the Big Four—and while others may doubt, he believes. Ryland and Madame Olivier, and Li Chang Yen himself may to their ways, but there is a searchlight turned on all their movements."

"And Number Four?" I asked.

"As I said just now—I am beginning to know and understand his methods. You may smile Hastings—but to penetrate a man's personality, to know exactly what he will do under any given circumstances—that is the beginning of success. It is a duel between us, and whilst he is constantly giving away his mentality to me, I endeavour to let him know little or nothing of mine. He is in the light, I in the shade. I tell you, Hastings, that every day they fear me the more for my chosen inactivity."

"They've let us alone, anyway," I observed. "There have been no more attempts on your life, and no ambushes of any kind."

"No," said Poirot thoughtfully. "On the whole, that rather surprises me. Especially as there are one or two fairly obvious ways of getting at us which I should have thought certain to have occurred to them. You catch my meaning, perhaps?"

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