

# THE BIG FOUR

A Mystery-Romance by Agatha Christie

CHAPTER XXIX  
The Right Honorable Sydney Crowther, his majesty's secretary of state for home affairs, was a well-known and popular figure. A man of some fifty years of age, with a quizzical expression and shrewd gray eyes, he received us with that delightful bonhomie of manner which was well known to be one of his principal assets.

Standing with his back to the fireplace was a tall thin man with a pointed black beard and a sensitive face.

"M. Desjardeux," said Crowther. "Allow me to introduce to you M. Hercule Poirot of whom you may, perhaps, already have heard."

The Frenchman bowed and shook hands.

"I have indeed heard of M. Hercule Poirot," he said pleasantly. "Who has not?"

"You are too amiable, monsieur," said Poirot, bowing, but his face flushed with pleasure.

"Any word for an old friend?" asked a quiet voice, and a man came forward from a corner by a tall bookcase.

It was our old acquaintance, Mr. Ingle.

Poirot shook him warmly by the hand.

"And now, M. Poirot," said Crowther, "we are at your service. I understand you to say that you had a communication of the utmost importance to make to us."

"That is so, monsieur. There is in the world today a vast organization—an organization of crime. It is controlled by four individuals, who are known and spoken of as the Big Four. Number One is a Chinaman, Li Chang Yen; Number Two is the American multi-millionaire, Abe Ryland; Number Three is a Frenchwoman; Number Four I have every reason to believe is an obscure English actor called Claud Darrell. These four are banded together to destroy the existing social order, and to replace it with an anarchy in which they would reign as dictators."

"Incredible," muttered the Frenchman. "Ryland, mixed up with a thing of that kind? Surely the idea is too fantastic."

"Listen, monsieur, whilst I recount to you some of the doings of this Big Four."

It was an enthralling narrative which Poirot unfolded. Familiar as I was with all the details, they thrilled me anew as I heard the bald recital of our adventures and escapes.

M. Desjardeux looked mutely at Mr. Crowther as Poirot finished. The other answered the look.

"Yes, M. Desjardeux, I think you must admit the existence of a 'Big Four.' Scotland Yard was included to see at first, but they have been forced to admit that M. Poirot was right in many of his claims. The only question is the extent of his aims. I cannot but feel that Mr. Poirot—exaggeration a little."

For answer Poirot set forth ten salient points. I have been asked not to give them to the public even now, and so I refrain from doing so, but they included the extraordinary disasters to submarines which occurred in a certain month, and also a series of aeroplane accidents and forced landings. According to Poirot, these were all the work of the Big Four, and bore witness to the fact that they were in possession of various scientific secrets unknown to the world at large.

This brought us straight to the question which I had been waiting for the French Premier to ask.

"You say that the third member of this organization is a Frenchwoman. Have you any idea of her name?"

"It is a well-known name, monsieur. An honored name. Number Three is not less than the famous Madame Olivier."

At the mention of the world-famous scientist, successor to the Curies, M. Desjardeux positively bounded from his chair, his face purple with emotion.

"Madame Olivier! Impossible! Absurd! It is an insult what you say there!"

Poirot shook his head gently, but made no answer.

Desjardeux looked at him in stupefaction for some moments. Then his face cleared, and he glanced at the home secretary and tapped his forehead significantly.

"M. Poirot is a great man," he observed. "But even the great man—sometimes he has his little mania, does he not? And seeks in high places for fancied conspiracies. It is well known. You agree with me, do you not, Mr. Crowther?"

The home secretary did not answer for some minutes. Then he spoke slowly and heavily.

"Upon my soul, I don't know," he said at last. "I have always had and still have the utmost belief in M. Poirot, but—well, this takes a bit of believing."

"This Li Chang Yen, too," continued M. Desjardeux. "Who has ever heard of him?"

"I have," said the unexpected voice of Mr. Ingle.

The Frenchman stared at him, and he stared placidly back again, looking more like a Chinese idol than ever. "Mr. Ingle," explained the home secretary, "is the greatest authority we have on the interior of China."

## His Vote Counted



"And you have heard of this Li Chang Yen?"

"Until M. Poirot here came to me, I imagined that I was the only man in England who had. Make no mistake, M. Desjardeux, there is only one man in China who counts today—Li Chang Yen. He has, perhaps, I only say perhaps, the finest brain in the world at the present time."

M. Desjardeux sat as though stunned. Presently, however, he rallied.

"There may be something in what you say, M. Poirot," he said coldly. "But as regards Madame Olivier, you are most certainly mistaken. She is a true daughter of France, and devoted solely to the cause of science."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders and did not answer.

"There was a minute or two's pause, and then my little friend rose to his feet, with an air of dignity that sat rather oddly upon his quaint personality."

"That is all I have to say, messieurs—to warn you. I thought it likely that I should not be believed. But at least you will be on your guard. My words will sink in, and each fresh event that comes along will confirm your wavering faith. It was necessary for me to speak now—later I might not have been able to do so."

"You mean—" asked Crowther, impressed in spite of himself by the gravity of Poirot's tone.

"I mean, monsieur, that since I have penetrated the identity of Number Four, my life is not worth an hour's purchase. He will seek to destroy me at all costs—and not for nothing is he named 'The Destroyer.' Messieurs, I salute you. To you, M. Crowther, I deliver this key, and this sealed envelope. I have got together all my notes on the case, and my ideas as to how best to meet the menace that any day may break upon the world, and have placed them in a certain safe deposit. In the event of my death, M. Crowther, I authorize you to take charge of those papers and make what use you can of them. And now messieurs, I wish you good day."

Desjardeux merely bowed coldly, but Crowther sprang up and held out his hand.

"You have converted me, M. Poirot. Fantastic as the whole thing seems, I believe utterly in the truth of what you have told us."

Ingle left at the same time as we did.

"I am not disappointed with the interview," said Poirot, as we walked along. "I did not expect to convince Desjardeux, but I have at least ensured that, if I die, my knowledge does not die with me. And I have made one or two converts. Not so bad!"

"I'm with you, as you know," said Ingle. "By the way, I'm going out to China as soon as I can get off."

"Is that wise?"

"No," said Ingle dryly. "But it's necessary. One must do what one can."

"Ah, you are a brave man!" cried Poirot with emotion. "If we were not in the street, I would embrace you."

I fancied that Ingle looked relieved.

"I don't suppose that I shall be in any more danger in China than you are in London," he growled.

"That is possibly true enough," admitted Poirot. "I hope that they will not succeed in massacring Hastings also, that is all. That would annoy me greatly."

I interrupted this cheerful conversation to remark that I had no intention of letting myself be massacred, and shortly afterwards Ingle parted from us.

For some time we went along in silence, which Poirot at length broke by uttering a totally unexpected remark.

"I think—I really think—that I shall have to bring my brother in to this."

"Your brother," I cried, astonished. "I never knew you had a brother."

"You surprise me, Hastings. Do you not know that all celebrated detectives have brothers who

would be even more celebrated than they are were it not for constitutional infirmity?"

Poirot employs a peculiar manner sometimes which makes it well-nigh impossible to know whether he is jesting or in earnest. That manner was very evident at the moment.

"What is your brother's name?" I asked, trying to adjust myself to this new idea.

"Achille Poirot," replied Poirot gravely. "He lives near Spa in Belgium."

"What does he do?" I asked with some curiosity, putting aside a half-formed wonder as to the character and disposition of the late Madame Poirot, and her classical taste in Christian names.

"He does nothing. He is, as I tell of a singularly indolent disposition. But his abilities are hardly less than my own—which is saying a great deal."

"Is he like you to look at?"

"Not unlike. But not nearly so handsome. And he wears no moustaches."

"Is he older than you, or younger?"

"He happens to have been born on the same day."

"Exactly, Hastings. You jump to the right conclusion with uncanny accuracy. But here we are at home again. Let us at once get to work on that little affair of the duchess' necklace."

But the duchess' necklace was doomed to wait awhile. A case of quite another description was waiting for us.

(To be continued)

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## CONFERENCE ON WILDLIFE CALLED

CORVALLIS, Ore., Nov. 12.—(AP)—Extensive preparation for the statewide wildlife conference called by Governor Charles Martin for Oregon State college Nov. 19 and 20 indicate college officials expect this to be one of the most important meetings of the year.

Governor Martin has expressed a hope that a closely coordinated program, backed by a general federation of the various interests, will evolve from the conference.

R. E. Dimick, head of the department of fish, game and fur animal management in the school of agriculture, has been appointed by Dean Schoenfeld to head the arrangements committee. A banquet Thursday night, Nov. 19, to be addressed by the governor, has been scheduled.

## VEGETABLES TO BE OSC MEET TOPIC

CORVALLIS, Ore., Nov. 12.—(AP)—Problems and possibilities ahead of Oregon vegetable growers will be discussed at a three-day vegetable growers' conference at Oregon State college beginning Monday, Nov. 16. A. G. B. Bouquet, professor of vegetable crops, will

be in charge of the conference. All producers, whether of a home garden or of commercial truck crops, will be welcome. Professor Bouquet said. The first day will be devoted largely to soils, fertilizer and irrigation subjects, together with a report on the national farm outlook.

Insects, diseases and rodent control will occupy most of the second day. The third day will bring discussion of new crops, processing and marketing problems.

## Powder-Puff Duel



Mrs. Donna MacDonough, wife of James MacDonough, former vice president of one of New York's largest banks, is suing for divorce. She charges that she saw her husband and an unidentified blonde engaged in a spirited powder-puff duel.

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## ST. LAWRENCE PACT PROSPECT BRIGHTER

WASHINGTON, Nov. 12.—(AP)—After studying the composition of the next senate, friends of the St. Lawrence waterway said today that prospects for ratification of a Canadian-American treaty providing for the project are much improved.

A proposed treaty calling for international co-operation to complete the deep water channel from Great Lakes cities to the Atlantic was rejected in 1931 by the senate of the 73rd congress.

But officials of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Tidewater association, which numbers men from 21 states among its membership, say several senators who opposed ratification in 1931, will be missing from the next senate.

Moreover, association officials declare they already have commitments favoring ratification from

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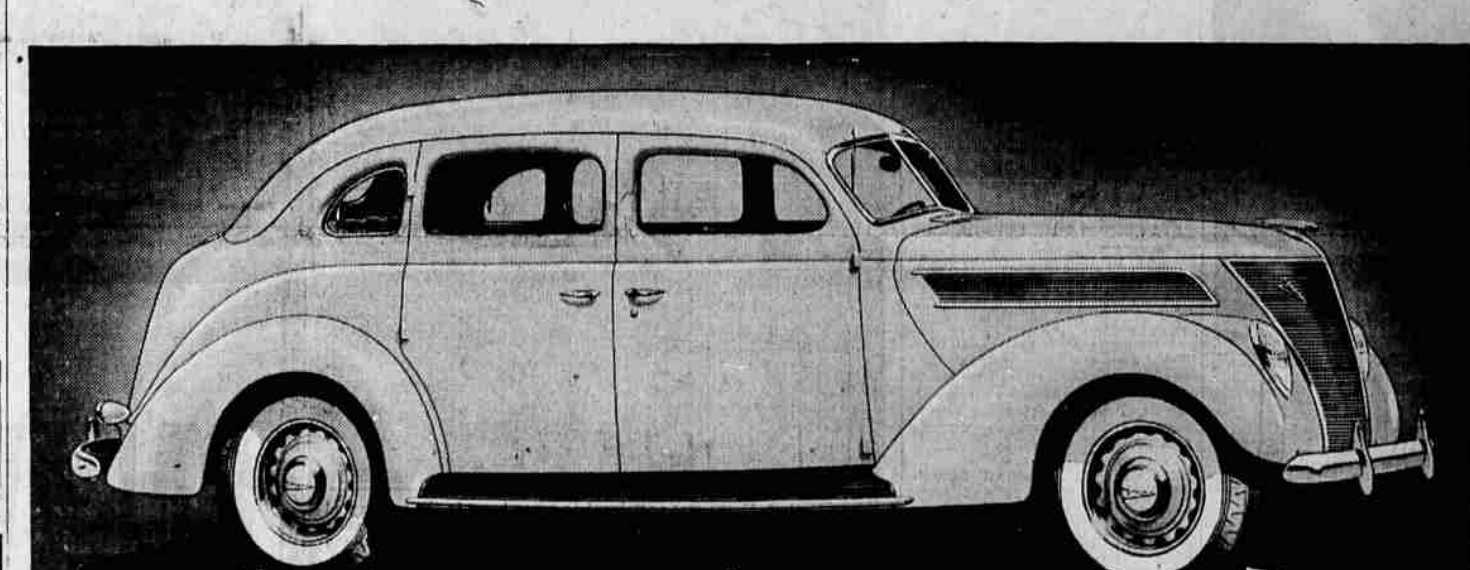
a number of the new senate members and they believe several officers who were swept into office with the tide of votes which rejected President Roosevelt will follow his leadership. They are counting upon the president to submit a revised treaty early in the session.

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