

## The Big Four

1927

[plot spoilers ahead for this, but no other novel]

This unusual book must be seen as another experiment in writing thrillers, like John Buchan or Conan Doyle, rather than 'whodunnits'. In some ways it is similar to Christie's previous racy adventure novels: *The Secret Adversary*, *The Man in the Brown Suit*, and *The Secret of Chimneys*. In contrast with those thrillers, however, the lead characters are not young lovers like Tommy and Tuppence but our old friends Poirot and Hastings so there is no sexual tension between the detectives. On being reunited after eighteen months apart Poirot 'enveloped me [Hastings] in a capacious embrace'. Hastings, one suspects, felt only embarrassment, and was glad the hug occurred in Poirot's flat, in private. In 1927 Englishmen shook hands if they felt cordial. Quite unlike the three previous Christie thrillers there is almost no romance at all - only a fleeting mention of Hastings' penchant for beautiful, auburn haired young women. Hastings has left his wife 'Cinderella' on their ranch in 'the Argentine' to visit Poirot alone.

The plot is a measured race between Hercule Poirot and The Big Four: a gang, not of Liberal Democrats, but criminal 'geniuses' dedicated to world anarchy and despotic rule.

Surprisingly the book takes a whole year to unfold: Christie's whodunnit murders are usually solved much more speedily. The Big Four have a secret weapon - harnessing radio waves - to sink war ships. One of the four is a scientific genius more brilliant than Marie Curie, working on Radium C. Remembering this was written in 1926 Christie is rather prophetic about the Second World War, a decade in the future, when she talks of 'a scientific force more powerful than the world has dreamed of' and of experiments on coolies which involve 'the most revolting disregard for human life and suffering'. Images of the atom bomb and the Nazi concentration camps inevitably come to mind for the modern reader.

You are told that all the murders are done by order of The Big Four, if not by 'No 4 The Destroyer' himself, so that is not the puzzle. The plot is a simple thriller: find out who the Big Four are, and stop their evil plan for world domination.

By far the most intriguing aspect of the book is the contradictory behaviour of Poirot. At the start of the novel Hastings reminds the reader that Poirot is a 'consulting detective' who:

scoffed at the popular idea of a human bloodhound who assumed wonderful disguises to track criminals, and who paused at every footprint to measure it...we leave that to Giraud.

Giraud is a detective in *The Murder on the Links* whom Poirot disparagingly refers to as 'the human foxhound'.

Poirot with his usual happy smugness pronounces:

Order and method...the little grey cells. Sitting in our own armchairs we see the things that these others overlook

Yet Poirot for the rest of the book forgets his own precepts, and rushes around England, France, Belgium and Italy. He is captured, bound and about to die, but, like the future James Bond, escapes with a 'Q'-type gadget - a curare blowpipe in the shape of a cigarette. You never find out whether this is real or a brilliant bluff as it is enough for Poirot to threaten its use. Oddly Hastings doesn't ask him about it. Poirot, despite age and rotundity, makes another escape by shinning down ivy from a first floor bedroom. On other occasions he narrowly misses being flattened by a falling tree. Poirot jumps out of a train twice, and is eventually blown up in his own flat. Despite all the sarcasm he heaped on Giraud, he *does* disguise both himself and Hastings as 'two loafers in dirty blue blouses'. At the Granite Bungalow on Dartmoor Poirot looks at 'traces of carpet slippers and number nine boots' on the blood stained linoleum and, we are told, uttered an excited yelp, reminiscent of a pomeranian. Whereas Inspector Giraud was a serious foxhound, Poirot is a pomeranian, a much more fastidious and self-consciously vane, groomed little fluffy dog!



**Foxhounds**



**Pomeranian puppy**

Most surprisingly of all, Poirot shaves off his beloved moustache, and even talks of matrimony. He is so unlike the character Hastings knows: 'No, there was little fear of finding Hercule Poirot far afield', that Poirot, in the final dénouement, succeeds in convincing Hastings that he is indeed *not* Hercule, but his identical twin brother, Achille.

Hercule Poirot is more human in this story than in the previous novels. At the start one feels sorry for him:

For this last year and a half I have been a very lonely old man. I am beginning to weary of this unending solving of foolish problems.

He was planning, despite facing a long sea crossing and the terrors of seasickness, to surprise Hastings and Cinderella in the Argentine and settle there too. Hastings is affected by this token of Poirot's regard.

Poirot, like Sherlock Holmes, has very few true friends. He is a loner, who only requires a sidekick to admire his brilliance. Poirot is as vane about his abilities as Holmes: at one point he says that his death would have been a 'terrible calamity for the world'.

Hastings by contrast is essentially the same as in other novels. He is kind, friendly, trusting and blunders in to all the traps laid for him. He is the epitome of a British upper class gentleman of modest means. Hastings works undercover for the multimillionaire Abe Ryland [Number 2] as 'a secretary conversant with English society', and does this job well as 'I had been private secretary to a busy member of Parliament', presumably before the Great War. Poirot knows Hastings has 'the nature so beautiful and so honest that unless you are yourself deceived, it is impossible for you to deceive others'. Poirot values this quality, which is why he keeps so many of his thoughts and plans to himself. Hastings, however, feels Poirot displayed a ridiculous distrust of his capacities. Hastings, like Tommy in *The Secret Adversary*, is brave in the face of death:

It's no good threatening me, and bullying me. Keep your threats for Chinese cowards.

However, his adversaries know he is a true Englishman, and although he does not fear his own death, he will capitulate to save his wife from torture. Cinderella has been without Hastings for a whole year, yet his love and duty to his wife counts above betraying his best friend to the Enemy. After five attacks, the penny drops: Hastings goes home 'a little sobered...I was in real danger of my life'.

One wonders whether Cinderella was rather pleased to be free of this idiot for a while, to enjoy running the ranch by herself in the Argentine.

There is only one real clue that The Big Four have been in Poirot's flat whilst he was lured away. Hastings reliably blunders in, despite Poirot going

round the room like a strange cat, cautiously, delicately, on alert for danger:  
I've caught you out for once. You had the matches last and you didn't put them back in the holder as usual – the very thing you're always cursing me for.

The reader and Poirot both cry out a warning, but too late, Hastings has set off the explosion that knocks him unconscious for a day and (apparently) kills Poirot.

You are told Li Chang Yen is No1 early on. The reader can guess No 3 is the mad scientist, Madame Oliver, a chapter before she is revealed. The reader can also guess Abe Ryland is No 2, since Ryland tries to get Poirot 'out of the way' to Rio, right at the start of the book. The English actor, No 4, is tracked down, although the reader would love to know how he got to be so good as a hit man. He is the classic Christie murderer: a method actor that can blend in to the surroundings: adopting the guise of a butcher's deliveryman, a psychiatric nurse from the Asylum, or a foolish young man: 'nondescript eyes, nondescript ears, and a perfect set of false teeth.'

What is strange is how easily Poirot destroys the Big Four at the end, simply by surrounding their headquarters. One feels that they should have had an escape plan. Perhaps the Big Four have fooled the police by faking their own deaths in the explosion, exactly as Poirot faked his death earlier in the book, especially as the body of Number Four 'was quite unrecognizable, the head blown to pieces'. However, all this is the idle speculation of a reader disappointed with the ending.

(SH)