

THE FOURTH DEGREE

F. BRITTEN AUSTIN

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SEBRIGHT of Scotland Yard sat in our office. He had dropped in, as he often did, unofficially, for a friendly yarn.

"Unpleasant business round at the Foreign Office this morning, Q.Q.," he remarked, as he helped himself to one of the excellent cigarettes which the Chief, though a rigid nonsmoker himself, kept hospitably for his visitors. "I suppose you've heard?"

Q.Q. raised his eyebrows.

"No," he said. "What's the trouble?"

"Arbuthnot shot himself."

"Arbuthnot! Shot himself?" The Chief's voice was at once startled and incredulous.

"Yep." Sebright nodded casually, and then savored again the aroma of the cigarette between his fingers. "First-rate brand, these of yours, Quayne. Where do you get 'em?"

Mr. Quayne ignored this cold-bloodedly irrelevant question. He leaned forward across his desk, in a curious sudden alertness of expression that in any other man I should have called excitement. But Q.Q. was never excited. Merely that ice-cold brain of his, at the appropriate stimulus, could function with lightning rapidity, leap from analysis to synthesis, from clue to hypothesis, from a seeming normality to the perception of a hidden crime with a swift accuracy that left me, despite his painstaking training, always bewildered. In this case, he had some reason for interest beyond the ordinary. Old Mr. Arbuthnot of the Foreign Office had sat in this room only yesterday.

"My dear Sebright," he said, in a tone that made that gentleman look up, "are you quite sure?"

Sebright nodded again, this time more emphatically.

"Sure," he replied, still professionally nonchalant. "Saw him myself."

"I mean are you sure he shot himself?"

Sebright stared at him.

"No doubt about it. One of his clerks was passing along the corridor heard a detonation in his room opened the door and rushed in and there was Arbuthnot collapsed in his chair at his desk bullet-wound through the side of his head his own revolver lying on the floor, just as it had fallen from his hand. The clerk gave the alarm at once, of course. I was sent for found nothing had been touched clear case of suicide. The coroner's inquest may throw some light on the motive no one at the F.O. could suggest any." He gave these details with a curt definiteness, finally disposing of a question that held no further interest for him.

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The Chief pondered a moment.

"On which side of the head was the death-wound, Sebright?"

"The right-hand side, of course."

"You're certain of that?"

"Quite. You know his room when you come in from the corridor, his desk is just to the left of you, and he sits with his back to the door, facing the window. The wound was on the side of the head visible as you come in I remember seeing it at once, and accidentally kicking with my foot the revolver lying on the floor. It was the normal right-hand side, right enough."

"H'm!" Q.Q. grunted. "But not normal for Arbuthnot. He happened to be left-handed. It didn't occur to you to make inquiries on that point, I suppose?"

"Of course it didn't. People aren't usually left-handed." Sebright stared, startled, at Mr. Quayne as he made the admission. "Why, you are not suggesting "

"Murder." Q.Q. uttered the word with a grimly succinct finality.

"But why?" Sebright still stared at him out of a sudden chaos of previously settled convictions. "What makes you jump to this conclusion? Who would want to murder poor old Arbuthnot?"

"My dear Sebright," Q.Q.'s tight lips twisted in a faint smile, "only yesterday Arbuthnot sat in that chair. He had come to see me privately, unofficially and he was very much troubled. He was convinced that there was a leakage of secret information from his department. Arbuthnot was a queer old fellow, as you know. His one hobby, I believe, was the solution of acrostics and ciphers. He used to read solemnly through the agony-column of the Times every evening, while his wife sat sewing opposite him, and puzzle out the code-messages of all the illicit lovers who communicate through that medium. The evening before he came to me, he had had a shock. One of the messages he decoded conveyed to some one unknown a piece of highly secret information that could only have emanated from his department. The poor old boy was in a terrible state he did not want to go to his chief with the news until he could at the same time indicate the culprit he was of course, like most civil servants in a senior position, extremely sensitive to the honor of his department; it was heartbreaking to him to think it should be indiscriminately disgraced. He came to me for advice. He was to have called again today."

"Phew!" exclaimed Sebright, thoroughly perturbed. "This makes everything look different. I wish to heaven he had come to see me about it at once! I hate these stories at secondhand I'd give a lot to hear him tell me all about it himself!"

Q.Q. smiled quietly, rose from his chair.

"He shall tell you, my dear Sebright. You shall hear, in his own voice, everything he told me and we'll see what you make of it." He went across to a cabinet on the farther wall, opened a drawer, returned with a long black cylinder. "When a case is brought to me, I not infrequently allow my informant, unknown to himself, to tell it to the dictaphone at the same time. I have found, more than once, a help to elucidation in listening to it repeated, precisely as it was originally told, when I am sitting here undistracted by his personal presence. One can have the vital points reiterated over and over again ad libitum."

He sat down to his comfortably large desk, slipped the cylinder into a concealed slot, pressed a button which uncovered a long aperture in the side of the desk toward the room, pressed another button. There was a faint whir

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of a mechanism started into activity, and then:

"One of my clerks must somehow have taken an impression of my key "

It was the voice almost startlingly recognizable to me as I sat quietly at my own desk at the other side of the room of Mr. Arbuthnot. It evoked immediately for me the image of that large-built man with a little pointed gray beard who had, only yesterday, sat in the chair where Sebright was now sitting. Sebright jumped, involuntarily.

"My God, Q.Q.," he said, "it's uncanny to hear him like that! Just as if he were still here!"

Q.Q. smiled quietly as he bent down to the cylinder.

"The needle wasn't quite at the commencement, he said. "We'll let him tell his story again from the beginning." He made the necessary adjustment.

It was indeed uncanny even to me, accustomed to hear such repetitions from the dictaphone (Q.Q. did not use the usual ear-pieces; he had installed a loudspeaker to which he could listen while he paced up and down the room) to listen to that dead man's twice repeated with lifelike accuracy in that still room. It was a deep, solemn, booming voice, a voice that would have made a bishop of its owner had he been a parson, a voice that came vibrant with natural authority. And that voice told the story all over again, precisely as I had heard it the day before from the man's living presence, just as Q.Q. had summarized it to Sebright. The record concluded on the energetically uttered phrase: "He shall confess, Mr. Quayne I am determined on it!"

"Well, Sebright," remarked Q.Q., as he stopped the mechanism, "what do you make of it? You have heard Arbuthnot's own voice."

"I don't want to hear it again," said Sebright with a shudder. "Shut the thing off. It gives me the creeps. Remember, I saw that man lying dead this morning."

"Practice that imagination of yours, Sebright," commented the Chief with his grim smile. "It's essential **n this detective business. . . . Well, what are you going to do on this information? Anything?"

Sebright was thoughtful for a moment, evidently reluctant to open up again a matter on which he had publicly pronounced his official dictum.

"Of course," he said, "Arbuthnot might still have committed suicide in the distress, the sense of disgrace to his department, caused by his discovery."

"Do left-handed men usually shoot themselves on the right-hand side of the head, Sebright?" asked Q.Q. quietly. "I knew Arbuthnot very well indeed. I am prepared to ask that question at the coroner's inquest."

"That means a public scandal, Quayne a lot of unwelcome limelight on the F.O."

I dislike private scandals even more," said the Chief. "I regarded Arbuthnot as an old personal friend and his murderer is certainly going to be found. Remand that inquest, Sebright and if we present the murderer simultaneously with the coroner's verdict, there will be no scandal. There will be only praise for Scotland Yard."

"But how are we going to find him?" challenged Sebright, in exasperation. "There's not the slightest clue. The revolver is admittedly Arbuthnot's own one he kept in his desk. The clerk who burst into the room immediately after the detonation found no one but the dead man."

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"Who was that clerk?"

"Oglethorpe the next senior to Arbuthnot. He was passing along the corridor or so he says." Sebright stopped.
"Of course, he might have "

"What?"

Sebright was suddenly illumined with a theory. "Shot Arbuthnot with Arbuthnot's own revolver and dashed out into the corridor. There's no evidence, one way or the other. The corridor was empty. People in the vicinity heard the detonation, but before they could investigate it, Oglethorpe ran into the room where the other clerks were sitting and told his story."

"H'm!" Q.Q. stroked his jutting chin. "I know Oglethorpe. . . . How many clerks are there in Arbuthnot's personal department?"

"Six including Oglethorpe."

"Do you happen to know if the other five were in the room when Oglethorpe entered it?"

"No. There were only three it came out while I was questioning as to who had seen Arbuthnot that morning."

"Who were absent?"

"Johnson he was away looking for a file in the Registry."

Q.Q. nodded.

"And the other man?"

"D'Arcy Vaughan the next in seniority to Oglethorpe. He was out at lunch."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite. He went to lunch at twelve o'clock as usual. The tragedy occurred at ten minutes past. I saw him when he returned gave him the first news of it. . . . No, Q.Q.!" Sebright thumped his fist on his knee in emphasis. "If Arbuthnot was murdered it could only have been done by Oglethorpe!"

"Why?" Q.Q. lifted his gray eyebrows.

"On his own showing, he dashed into that room immediately after the detonation. If the murderer were someone else, he must still have been there! He could not possibly have got away."

"H'm! " Q.Q. grunted. "I know Arbuthnot's room pretty well. I seem to remember that it has a large cupboard where Arbuthnot used to hang his overcoat. Allow yourself to consider another hypothesis. The murderer hearing Oglethorpe come to the door, might have slipped into that cupboard and dodged out again immediately Oglethorpe had gone to give the alarm."

"Might!" echoed Sebright contemptuously. "All sorts of things might happen. I consider possibilities only after I've dealt with certainties. What is certain is that one of Arbuthnot's confidential clerks was passing out information, that Arbuthnot knew of it and was trying to discover the source of leakage, did discover it, perhaps, that Oglethorpe had, next to Arbuthnot himself, the easiest access to secret information, that if

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Arbuthnot was left-handed he did not shoot himself, and that Oglethorpe was admittedly there in the room so soon after the murder that no murderer could have escaped from it unless it was Oglethorpe himself, with his plausible story of hearing the shot while passing the door and then discovering the suicide." Sebright rose briskly to his feet "I'm going to check up Mr. Oglethorpe a little, Q.Q.," he concluded. "And unless my intuition is much at fault Mr. Oglethorpe is going to sleep in a police-cell tonight."

Q.Q. smiled at him.

"That intuition of yours is positively uncanny, Sebright, he said. "You may be quite right, of course. It may just as well be Oglethorpe as another. That it was one of Arbuthnot's own clerks who murdered him, I feel certain. . . . Do you mind my doing a little investigation of my own? It won't conflict with yours, and I have a personal interest in the matter."

"You can do what you like so long as you don't scare away the game," replied Sebright magnanimously. He glanced at his watch. "I'm going to get busy and I'll let you know directly I slip my handcuffs on the man."

Q.Q. smiled again.

"I'll do the same by you, Sebright," he said. "Well, the best of luck to you!"

The moment the door had closed behind Sebright's back, the Chief took up the telephone and asked for a number.

"Hello! . . . Yes. . . . Put me through to Mr. Oglethorpe, please. . . . Is that Mr. Oglethorpe speaking? . . . Good. This is Quentin Quayne of the Q.Q. Agency. Could you manage to snatch a few minutes, Mr. Oglethorpe, and come round and see me here Piccadilly Circus as soon as possible? I should be immensely obliged to you. . . . Yes, it is urgent very urgent, in fact. . . . Thank you that's excellent."

The Chief put down the telephone, looked across to me.

"Coming at once. Oglethorpe knows me well enough to know that when I say 'urgent,' it means urgent. Now I hope we shall learn something."

Perhaps ten quiet minutes elapsed ten minutes in which Q.Q. after leaning back thoughtfully in his chairs for a moment or two, bent forward to his desk and wrote rapidly a long single column of words on a sheet of paper and then Mr. Oglethorpe was announced.

He came into the room, a thin, worried-looking man of about forty-five years of age, clean-shaven, a little bald, conventionally the higher grade civil servant in his morning-coat, dark trousers, and the silk hat courteously doffed as he entered, conventionally the civil servant, too, in his precise, somewhat pedantic manner. The Chief shook hands with him like an old acquaintance, indicated the chair close to his desk. Mr. Oglethorpe seated himself.

"You want to see me about this terrible business in the office, I suppose, Mr. Quayne?" he said.

"Exactly," Q.Q. smiled at him.

"I have worked with Arbuthnot for twenty years and I should never have dreamed that he was the man to commit suicide!" exclaimed Mr. Oglethorpe, in a tone of genuine horror at the memory.

Q.Q. continued to smile as he looked straight at his visitor, but there was no humor in that smile.

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"Perhaps he did not commit suicide, Mr. Oglethorpe," he said quietly.

Mr. Oglethorpe jumped in his chair.

"What? Did not commit suicide? What on earth do you mean, Mr. Quayne? It must have been suicide—why, I was in the room a fraction of a minute after his revolver went off—I heard it as I passed along the corridor. It couldn't—how could it?—have been anything else than suicide, incredible though it seems!" Mr. Oglethorpe was a picture of puzzled bewilderment—the implication in Q.Q.'s words was plain enough.

"Well, Mr. Oglethorpe," the Chief said in his smoothest tones, "there is a little doubt about it—for reasons which I will not go into. Will you just tell me all you know of the tragedy?"

Mr. Oglethorpe told his story, quite clearly and definitely, just as we had heard it already from Sebright. He was coming along the corridor from another department at ten past twelve when he heard the shot. He had rushed into the room. Arbuthnot was there alone, crumpled in his chair, a wound in the right side of his head. Horrified, he had dashed off to give the alarm. Yes—of course, he knew the cupboard in Arbuthnot's room—he could not say whether the door of it was open or shut—he hadn't given a thought to it. He had seen no one in the corridor, before or after the tragedy.

Q.Q. nodded gravely as he finished.

"Well, Mr. Oglethorpe, there is a possibility—I don't want to enlarge upon it—that Arbuthnot was murdered by one of the clerks in his own department."

"Impossible!" Mr. Oglethorpe was emphatic, all his instincts outraged. "It is a monstrously absurd suggestion, Mr. Quayne, one that—as the temporary acting head of the department and in view of the plain facts—I cannot but resent!"

"Nevertheless, Mr. Oglethorpe, it is a suggestion that has been made—and one that I am bound to probe. You would of course do all you could to assist in finding poor Arbuthnot's murderer—assuming that he was murdered?"

"Of course I should—though, I repeat, I can't for a moment believe it. What do you require of me?"

"I want to submit the six confidential clerks in your department to a little psychological test. It is one which—if I can trust the experience of the Viennese police, and sundry little efforts of my own—can scarcely fail in such circumstances. You have heard of the word—association method?"

"Something to do with psycho—analysis, isn't it? Sheer quackery all of it, in my opinion." Mr. Oglethorpe let it be seen that he was old—fashioned and proud of it.

"Precisely," Q.Q. concurred, with a smile. "It is a method much used by psycho—analysts I put a word to you. You answer as quickly as possible with the first word that rises in your mind in association. I measure the time—interval, in each case, between my question and your answer. In my list of words are one or two which have a direct bearing upon the case. When those words are put to the concealed criminal, he instantly recognizes their danger and instinctively—no matter what his command of himself—hesitates for a safe word to give in answer. It is quite automatic on his part. And accordingly, to those keywords his time—interval of association will show as appreciably longer than his average. . . . Now, I want you to have the goodness to send your clerks across to me, one by one, this afternoon, Mr. Oglethorpe—and since I want to get as wide a basis as possible for my averages, I should be very glad if you would commence with yourself now."

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"I haven't the slightest faith in any of this psycho-analytic charlatanry," said Mr. Oglethorpe, with a superior note of condescending disdain in his voice, "but if you think it will help you, go ahead by all means. Fire away I'm ready."

Q.Q. drew his sheet of paper in front of him, sat with pencil-point poised.

"Bread!" he said, and his pencil-point began to dot across the paper.

"Butter!" answered Mr. Oglethorpe promptly. Q.Q. stopped dotting at his first syllable, scribbled the word rapidly.

"Sea!" dot-dot.

"Ship!"

"Horse!" dot-dot.

"Cart!"

"House!" dot-dot-dot.

"Room!"

"Desk!" dot-dot-dot-dot.

"Chair!"

"Table!" dot-dot-dot.

"Cloth!"

"Cupboard!" dot-dot-dot

"Bone!" Mr. Oglethorpe gave the answer, an obvious nursery-rhyme memory, almost desperately. The strain of keeping his brain alert he evidently found more difficult than he had anticipated. Q.Q. scribbled down each answer as it was given.

"Carpet!" dot-dot.

"Floor!"

And so on through a list of about fifty words where, at intervals, I remarked only code, revolver and murder as specially significant.

When he had got to the end, Q.Q. looked up with his quiet smile.

"Thank you, Mr. Oglethorpe," he said. It was impossible to deduce whether or not he had detected any grounds for suspicion in that rapid quasi-schoolchild examination. "I am much obliged by your complaisance. And now will you carry it to the length of sending along your clerks, one by one, in order, let us say, of their seniority?"

Mr. Oglethorpe rose from his chair.

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"Very well, Mr. Quayne. However unfounded I may and do consider your suspicions to be, it is my duty to help you probe them. But I'm quite sure you'll find in the end that poor Arbuthnot committed suicide."

"Perhaps, Mr. Oglethorpe." Q.Q. smiled at him. "But I should all the same like to try my little test on your other clerks."

Mr. Oglethorpe departed. Q.Q. did not address a word to me in the interval while we waited for the appearance of the next clerk from Arbuthnot's office. I busied myself on the routine task before me. Q.Q. leaned back in his chair, finger-tips together, frowning in a concentration of thought beyond my guesses.

Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan was announced. He was a younger man than Mr. Oglethorpe, struck a more modern note of smartly tailored, keen-edged efficiency. The little dark mustache on his good-looking face was neatly trimmed; his monocle gave him a touch of aristocratic differentiation from the usual office-worn type; his manner had the self-confident ease produced by the best of public-schools and a university. He smiled affably with, however, a Foreign Office consciousness of personal dignity as he approached the Chief.

"Oglethorpe tells me you want to see me about poor Arbuthnot's death, Mr. Quayne." He sank easily and comfortably into the chair Q.Q. indicated to him. "Anything I can do, of course " He made a gesture of perfect readiness to oblige. "But I'm afraid that's not much."

Q.Q.'s quiet eyes were summing him up.

"So I understand. You were at lunch, I believe, when the tragedy occurred?"

"Yes. I knew nothing about it until I returned and the Scotland Yard fellow told me. It was a shock to me of course, as it was to everyone else. Poor old fellow! One would never have suspected a suicidal streak in him some private worry, perhaps."

Q.Q. caressed his chin.

"Did Mr. Oglethorpe tell you precisely why I wanted to see you, Mr. Vaughan?"

"No. He merely said that you wished to talk to me on the matter."

Q.Q. nodded.

"Then I will tell you, Mr. Vaughan and perhaps it would be as well if you regarded it as in confidence. There is reason to suspect that Mr. Arbuthnot did not commit suicide but that he was shot by one of the clerks in his personal department a clerk who had an urgent motive to suppress him promptly."

His eyes were fixed on Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan as he spoke, but Mr. Vaughan manifested only the startled vivification of interest normal in such circumstances.

"You mean murdered?" he gasped.

"I mean murdered." The Chief was impressively specific.

"But my dear sir!" Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan was obviously much perturbed. It seems to me fantastic Oglethorpe almost saw him shoot himself he was in the room a moment later before any murderer could have escaped!" He paused for a look of utter incredulity at Q.Q. "What grounds have you for such a wildly improbable theory? Who could possibly have shot Arbuthnot? Unless Oglethorpe did it himself which is grotesquely absurd!"

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"That is what we are going to try and find out, Mr. Vaughan," replied the Chief quietly. "I'm sure I can call upon you to give me any assistance in your power?"

Certainly certainly," said Mr. Vaughan, "of course! But what do you want me to do?"

"I'll explain." And Q.Q. explained to him, precisely as he had explained to Mr. Oglethorpe, the psychological test he proposed to apply to the six clerks. Mr. Vaughan accepted it unhesitatingly. "Of course, there must be no exceptions," he said.

Once more Q.Q. pronounced his list of words, dotted down the time-interval before the associated word came in answer. Mr. Vaughan replied to all with so far as I could tell an equally prompt rapidity. He was plainly a quick-brained, highly intelligent fellow.

"Thank you, Mr. Vaughan," said Q.Q. when he had finished and again it was impossible for me to guess through his quiet normality of tone and feature, whether or not he had discovered the clue he sought for. "And now perhaps you will be good enough to send across the others in order of their seniority. It is unnecessary," he added with a smile, "to tell them of the purpose for which I require them."

Three more clerks followed in due course and succession Mr. Wainwright, Mr. Turner and Mr. Billmore. All three of them were most improbable murderers, for all three Q.Q. checked their answers one against the other had been in their office all the morning, had not left it on any pretext until Mr. Oglethorpe had rushed in with the news of Arbuthnot's suicide. Nevertheless all three of them submitted to the test and Q.Q. remained quietly smiling and inscrutable as they were successively dismissed.

The next and last to present himself was the junior, Mr. Johnson, a tall, nervous but pleasant-looking lad, scarcely in his twenties.

"Sit down, Mr. Johnson," said Q.Q., smiling at him and indicating the chair in which Johnson's predecessors had sat. "You were in the Registry at the time the tragedy occurred this morning?"

"Yes sir." The boy submitted easily to the quiet authority which emanated from Q.Q.'s personality. "I was searching for a file that had been mislaid."

"Between what times precisely?"

"It was a little before ten to twelve when I left my room, sir. I returned at twenty minutes past." The lad was obviously nervous. He moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue before he spoke.

"So from ten to twelve to nearly twenty past you were in the Registry?"

"Yes sir."

Q.Q. looked at him penetratingly from under his heavy gray eyebrows.

"Very well. It is necessary for me to check all the statements I receive. I will just ring up the Registry and get them to confirm those times." He reached for the telephone.

"Don't do that, sir!" The lad had half sprung from his chair.

"Why?"

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"I did not tell you the truth, sir." I saw perspiration on the boy's brow; once more his tongue moistened his lips. He turned away his eyes from Q.Q.'s piercing scrutiny.

"Then please tell me the truth now!"

"Yes sir. I I did not go straight to the Registry. I slipped out of the building."

"Out of the building? Why?"

"To send a telegram at the post office across the road in Parliament Street."

"To whom did you send that telegram?"

"I I'd rather not say, sir."

Q.Q. frowned. I felt suddenly sorry for that lad, horrifyingly suspicious though were the circumstances that so suddenly gathered about him.

"Johnson!" The Chief's voice was sharply stern a voice it was impossible not to obey. "You will tell me at once to whom you sent that telegram!"

The lad hesitated miserably. I saw his hands clench and unclench themselves, his face go white.

"It was to a money-lender, sir," he burst out after a moment when his voice seemed to have refused to function.

"A money-lender?"

"Yes yes sir. I I wanted to keep it a secret. He was threatening to denounce me to my chiefs if I did not pay today you know what that would have meant sir?" The boy spoke hurriedly now, imploringly. "I had written to my sister, telling her all about it. At a quarter to twelve I received a telegram from her saying she would help me. Here it is, sir." The lad fished out a crumpled telegram from his pocket, held it out to Q.Q., who took it without removing his eyes from the soul under their scrutiny. "I dashed across to the post office to send a telegram to him telling him that my sister was paying to take no action." The lad stopped breathlessly, his eyes miserably on Q.Q.'s inscrutable face.

The Chief glanced at the telegram.

"This is not very explicit," he said. "It merely says, 'All right, Vera.' That might mean anything. . . . Do you grasp the point of this questioning, Johnson?"

"No no sir," the lad stuttered. "I I don't think I do."

"The point is that Mr. Arbuthnot was murdered in his room at ten minutes past twelve. On your story, you left the building at ten minutes before the hour. Where were you at ten minutes past?"

"In the post office, sir."

"From ten minutes to the hour to ten minutes past? Twenty minutes?"

"I had to wait in a queue, sir."

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"And then you returned to the Registry?"

"Yes sir. I took the file I said I wanted, and went back to my room. It was then I first heard the news about poor Mr. Arbuthnot, sir."

"H'm! Well, the post-office records will prove the truth of your statements. Your telegram will note the time it was handed in. You say that was ten past?"

"No sir. The telegram was handed in at a quarter past. At ten past I was still waiting in the queue."

"Quarter past? How long, Johnson, did it actually take you to run down from the corridor where your room is situated, to the post office?"

"Under two minutes sir."

"And you are sure quite sure that it was at ten minutes to the hour and not just after ten minutes past that you ran to the post office?" The implication in that question was terribly obvious.

"Yes sir."

"Well, I am going to test the truth of your story. Now listen to me?"

Again the Chief explained the method he was going to employ. "To answer is the only way of clearing yourself from the suspicion that now rests upon you," he said.

"Yes sir. But believe me, sir I know nothing about poor Mr. Arbuthnot's death nothing I swear to you, sir!" The lad was evidently horribly alarmed. "I was in the post office at the time, sir!"

Q.Q.'s eyes probed him.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Johnson. . . . And concentrate your mind on putting, as rapidly as possible, an associated word to the word I shall give you."

The boy gulped.

"Bread!" dot-dot-dot.

"Butter!" He forced himself to the strain of an answer, hit the natural association which all his predecessors had given.

"Sea!" dot-dot.

"Shore!"

"Horse!" dot-dot-dot-dot

"Hoof!"

Q.Q. took him right through the list, dotting the intervals of his hesitations, scribbling down his replies. The lad answered irregularly, spasmodically, a perspiration of distress upon his forehead, a look of terror in the eyes that stared as though hypnotized at Q.Q. It was all he could do, evidently, to keep his mind to the focus of what was

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required of him, and some of his associations were wildly wide – desperately clutched at in his anxiety to give a reply not too long delayed.

The Chief finished his inquisition, examined the paper with the irregular rows of dots, the final answers, compared them with the records of the others.

"H'm!" he grunted, his face inscrutable.

The lad sat staring at him, his hands twitching, scarcely daring – it would seem – to breathe.

The telephone bell rang sharply. Q.Q. took up the instrument.

"Hello? . . . Yes – Quayne speaking. . . . Who's that? . . . Oh, Sebright? . . . What? You've got your man? . . . Who is it? . . . Oglethorpe?" Q.Q. smiled, grimly. "Beware of those clear cases, Sebright. They're often only the mirror of your own ideas. I'm afraid you'll have to release Oglethorpe – with apologies. . . . Yes. Why? Because I happen to have caught the man, and it isn't Oglethorpe. I'll hand him over to you presently . . . By the way, Sebright, where are you ringing up from?; . . . The F.O.? Good! Would you mind asking Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan to step round here again as soon as possible? I've something important to speak to him about . . . Thanks." Q.Q. put back the receiver.

Young Johnson had sprung to his feet, stood quivering while Q.Q. talked. I watched him narrowly, my muscles tense to leap on him should he offer a sudden violence. There was a wild look in his frightened eyes.

"I – I didn't do it, sir!" he stammered.

The Chief smiled at him.

"I know you didn't," he said.

The boy stared, bewildered.

"Then – then – why have you asked Mr. Vaughan to come here, sir? You're not going to – to tell him about that money–lender?" There was a new and scarcely less acute alarm in his face. "For God's sake, don't, sir! Mr. Vaughan would report me at once!"

The Chief smiled again, more kindly.

"Not that, either. This experience in dealing with money–lenders will suffice you for a lifetime, I trust. That's all I have to say to you, Mr. Johnson." He nodded in dismissal.

Young Johnson still could not quite grasp the situation.

"You mean – you don't want me any more, sir?"

"No. And if you should meet Mr. Vaughan on your way back to your office, say nothing to him. Good afternoon."

Q.Q. turned back to those enigmatic papers which held a secret that tantalized my curiosity to a sudden fever–pitch

"Goo–good–afternoon, sir!" The lad went out of that room, haunted for him by a dreadful ordeal, with a gladly eager haste that was almost a flight.

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When he had gone, I looked across to the Chief.

"You've got your man, sir?"

Q.Q. glanced up at me, his face grimly satisfied in its expression.

"Yes."

"It looked bad for young Johnson, sir and he seemed to stumble terribly when you applied your test." I was, of course, fishing, but it had in fact seemed to me more than once that the lad must be betraying himself, so desperate were his hesitations.

"Pooh! His time-intervals were of course wildly erratic what one would expect from the strain he was undergoing but on the key-words he was no more erratic than elsewhere. Now, this record" he held up another sheet of paper "is curiously regular the shortest intervals of any till we come to those same vital words. And then there is a sudden seventy-five- to a hundred-per-cent increase almost imperceptible while he spoke, but evident enough here. Moreover automatically in his first quickness he gave the curious association 'hide' to the word 'cupboard' the only one to do so; after that, recognizing his slip, he was on his guard a little too much on his guard." He chuckled with satisfaction. "That's the man, Mr. Creighton!"

"Which man, sir?"

"Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan."

"D'Arcy Vaughan!" I echoed the name in astonishment. Mr. Vaughan had seemed to me the most normal of any of those six men who had sat in that chair his answers unvarying in their glib rapidity. "And you're going to arrest him, sir? Directly he comes in?" I thrilled with the sense of imminent crisis.

"Not quite as soon as that, Mr. Creighton. What I have here is evidence enough for myself. But it is not legal evidence. I'm going to get that legal evidence. I'm going to get a signed confession." His tone was curt with a confidence I did not share.

"D'Arcy Vaughan if he's the man, sir doesn't seem to me the sort of fellow to give confessions easily," I ventured. "He must have immense nerve to behave as he did in this office."

"He has a phenomenal nerve. But even the strongest nerves can be broken down Mr. Creighton." Q.Q. leaned back in his chair and smiled at me with a grim blandness. "You've heard of the third degree, I suppose? It usually implies some physical pain to the prisoner under examination. We're a little too civilized for that. I'm going to put Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan through what we may call the fourth degree considerably more subtle and quite as efficacious."

"I don't understand, sir. Do I come in on this?"

"You, Mr. Creighton, will merely quietly get up and lock that door behind Mr. Vaughan when he enters, and then you will return to your desk, and get on with your work in absolute silence. You will not utter a word, unless I speak to you."

"Very good, sir." I was utterly baffled to guess what scheme Q.Q. had in his mind, but it was with an intense impatience that I watched the minute-hand slip round the clock. It was close on five. Perhaps Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan would after all smell a rat not come? A feverish anxiety for his appearance mounted in me, obscured the petty routine task on which I was engaged.

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The office telephone—bell rang, startling me in the tension of my nerves. The Chief answered it.

"Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan? Show him in, please." From his tone, he might have been admitting the most casual of visitors, but he smiled a smile of intimate satisfaction at me as he put back the receiver.

The door opened. Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan, sprucely elegant, his monocle in place, his good—looking features happily serene, entered the room. I rose, went unobtrusively behind him, locked the door, returned to my place. Mr. Vaughan advanced toward Q.Q.

"Well, Mr. Quayne," he said, in a voice that struck me as oddly cheerful for a man whose office had been the scene of such tragic events, "you've heard what's happened in this terrible business? They've arrested Oglethorpe poor, queer old Oglethorpe! I would never have believed it possible, but Scotland Yard seems quite certain and it knows its business, I suppose. Awful! Terrible terrible!"

"Yes. I had heard," replied Q.Q. coolly.

Mr. Vaughan sat down in the chair, carefully deposited his glossy silk hat on a corner of Q.Q.'s desk, and casually crossed one nicely creased trouser—leg over the other. If he was indeed the man, I could not but admire his perfect aplomb.

"And now, Mr. Quayne," he said, "before we come to whatever you want to see me about, there's a little thing I'm curious to know. Did the results of your psycho—analytic test by any chance coincide with those of the police?"

Q.Q. leaned back in his chair, tapped his finger—tips together.

"No," he replied, "they did not."

Mr. Vaughan smiled.

"Ah?" His tone politely indicated a previous skepticism that was now justified. "I trust you psycho—analysts will have the grace to acknowledge at least one failure of your magic methods."

Q.Q. continued to tap his finger—tips together as he smiled blandly.

"It was not a failure," he said.

"Not a failure? But I do not understand I thought you said?" Mr. Vaughan was all courtesy, a rather malicious courtesy, perhaps, in a gestured sketch of baffled comprehension. He smiled frankly, pleasantly, at his interlocutor.

"It was not a failure." Q.Q. had spoken these words in the quietest, most dulcet of his tones. He rose from his chair, stood erect, spoke in a voice that to me seemed like a thunderclap in its sudden stern vehemence. "Own up, Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan! You're caught!"

The man had sprung up from his chair also in an indignation that, whether real or simulated, was impressive in its apparent authenticity.

"What do you mean?" His voice quivered, but it was with anger. "What are you trying to suggest?"

"I am suggesting, Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan," Q.Q.'s tone was sharply explicit "that you are a spy in your own department that you were betraying official secrets, that Mr. Arbuthnot detected you, called you into his room this

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morning as you passed on your way to lunch and taxed you with it, that he had the imprudence, perhaps, to threaten you possibly in self-defense with his revolver during the altercation, that you seized that revolver and shot him dead, that hearing some one come to the door, you then sprang into the clothes-cupboard and dodged out again directly the coast was clear. Is that definite enough for you?"

Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan looked as though he were going to strike his accuser in the face. I saw his fists clench, the lips go blanched under his little dark mustache. He mastered himself with an effort.

"Mr. Quayne, if you were a younger man, I would thrash you for this outrageous imputation!" he gasped in his wrath. "As it is, you have chosen to utter this monstrous slander before a witness." He jerked his hand in my direction. "You shall hear from my solicitors!" He strode toward the door.

Fascinated, I watched him as he reached it, tugged at the handle, twisted it in vain. Then he swung round again, his face ablaze with fury.

"Open that door at once!" he cried. "What does this mean?"

"It means, Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan," said Q.Q. in his most coldly level tones, "that you are a prisoner in this room until such time as you dictate and sign your confession."

The man glared at him, livid. He could scarcely speak in the rage which choked him.

"This is an outrage monstrous outrage! You dare, Mr. Quayne you dare to subject a civil servant of my standing to this gross indignity! To illegal detention! Have a care, Mr. Quayne! You are laying yourself open to an action which I will fight through court after court till I ruin you!"

Q.Q. smiled grimly.

"You may have another case to fight in the courts before that, Mr. Vaughan. It is useless to wrestle with that door. You cannot open it."

Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan had once more switched round to the door, was tugging at it, twisting at the handle in an almost maniacal fury of anger. He faced round again to Q.Q.

"Open it, I say! Open it," he choked, "or "

"Or nothing, Mr. Vaughan." Q.Q. was smoothly unruffled. "You will do nothing. You will merely in due course, when you are tired of raging at that door, sit down in that chair and dictate your confession." With which, Q.Q. himself calmly resumed his seat, picked up a paper on his desk and apparently gave it his undivided cool attention.

Mr. Vaughan stared at him for a moment, the muscles of his face twitching, his eyes murderous if ever a man's were and then he strode straight across to me.

"You!" The violence in his voice startled me, half-prepared for it though I was. "Open that door at once or I charge you as an accomplice in this felony! Felony you understand! Penal servitude!" Ugly menace looked out of him. I gripped myself, remembered Q.Q.'s orders, remained stolidly silent, bent over my work again. "Do you hear?" My shoulder was violently shaken. "Open that door, or " He had no threat vicious enough for his anger.

I glanced at him, as coolly as I could, obviously my cue was to imitate the Chief, at that moment quite unperturbed, apparently engrossed in the perusal of some document, saw the ferocity in his glare, saw his

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fingers working itching for a weapon which, thank Heaven, he did not possess and remained dumb. Not only dumb, but, as well as I could feign it, deaf! Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan, I could see in the instant before my eyes went down to my work again, could have screamed blasphemies in the extremity of his exasperation. The uncanny completeness of our silence sent a gleam of fright into his eyes. Then once more they went impotently murderous I guessed, even as with an effort of self-command I turned my gaze away from him, that he was speculating whether he would have a chance in a hand-to-hand mix-up with the pair of us.

Apparently he decided that he would not. I felt him remove his presence from over me, glanced up discreetly to see him once more in the center of the room, facing the Chief.

"Mr. Quayne!" He controlled his voice to a harsh similitude of normality. "Do you mean that you have the insane intention of keeping me a prisoner in this room until I sign a confession of a murder of which I know nothing?"

Q.Q. raised his eyes to him, as though only just again aware of his presence.

"You are begging the question, Mr. Vaughan," he said quietly, turning over a page of his papers while he spoke. "I have all the relevant information. I require only your confession. And it is certainly my intention to keep you here till I get it."

Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan achieved a short scornful laugh.

"Very well," he said. "We shall see who can wait longest." He flung himself into the chair, sat tapping with his foot upon the floor. "You yourselves cannot sit forever in this room. And when we leave it, Mr. Quayne, believe me, you shall rue this outrage!"

Mr. Quayne merely turned over another page of the document he was perusing with such concentrated attention.

His victim glared at him, opened his cigarette-case, I noticed, maliciously, that it contained only one cigarette, struck a match, commenced to smoke. The silence of that room, high above the neighboring housetops, was like the grave. It perpetuated itself, continued until even I felt it a strain upon my nerves. The only sound was the deep breathing of that man in the chair adjacent to Q.Q.'s desk. Unobtrusively I kept a sharp eye upon him, alert to interpose in that sudden panther-spring I felt to be imminent. But none came. Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan sat immobile, his lips pressed tight, smoking with the tiniest of puffs, evidently I could sympathize with him trying to economize that one and only cigarette to the last possible moment. And the silence in that room continued, persisted till it seemed to ring in my ears.

I glanced at the clock-hand. It marked half-past five.

Mr. Vaughan stirred.

"Mr. Quayne!"

Q.Q. lifted an eyebrow at him.

"How long is this madness to continue?"

"Until I get your confession." Q.Q.'s tone was quietly acceptive of the situation, was, without the faintest impatience, coolly confident of the final result.

"Pshaw!" The man jumped up from his chair again paced up and down the room in febrile exasperation. Q.Q. had once more reverted to the perusal of his documents did not so much as glance at him. The victim strode once

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more across to me, evidently on the impulse to make another trial of my subordinate resolution. I forced myself to remain unperceptive of his presence. I could feel the glare of his eyes upon me as I bent my own down to my work, could feel him hesitate over the utility of the appeal or of the threat. He renounced either. I heard his soft footfalls on the carpet recede away to the center of the room, heard them go toward Q.Q.'s desk, heard the sudden creak of his chair as he flung himself down into it again.

When, discreetly, I glanced up, I saw him sitting there, his fingers drumming on his knee, the cigarette short between his lips glowing in a momentary forgetfulness of economy.

The silence continued. The ticking of the clock became insistent, an obsession to the ear. Its hands slipped round six o'clock a quarter past. Outside, the light began to die out of the sky. Within the room there were already shadows. Long ago Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan had got to the end of his smoke. For what seemed an age he had sat like a statue, utterly motionless. What was he thinking I wondered. And still the silence remained unbroken.

It was shattered suddenly

"Quayne!" The man paused, waiting for a movement of Q.Q.'s head that did not occur. "I don't know how long this farce is going on but I'll count it as mitigation if you'll give me a cigarette."

But Mr. Quayne had apparently lost the sense of hearing. He merely picked another from the pile of documents at his hand.

Once more the room relapsed into silence into a silence that grew haunted, terrifying, vibrant with mysterious unuttered menace as the twilight deepened in the room a silence that rang and yet was soundless. A sudden mutter from the man in the chair seemed only to intensify it. How long indeed was this going on? I myself grew unnerved with the strain, felt the impulse to use my voice to break this uncanny hush rise up in me, almost irresistible. Had I been sitting there with the guilt of murder on my conscience, I could not have refrained from shouting it aloud to get relief at any cost from this intolerable ordeal of soundlessness wherein the stark fundamental outlines of one's soul seemed automatically to emerge. I should have screamed that guilt, in hysteria, long ago. But still the man I could half-see in the gloom sat motionless and silent in his chair. Still, Q.Q. remained, holding up a document to get the last of the light, seemingly oblivious of his presence. For myself, I had given up even the pretense of work. I sat, gripped in that dead hush, and waited waited while the shadows thickened.

Suddenly I heard a sound the faintest little whir; and then

"He shall confess, Mr. Quayne I am determined on it!"

The voice came out of the gloom, silent, deep-toned, vibrant with authority the voice of the murdered Arbuthnot! Even to me, who could an instant later guess its source, it came with a shock to my nerves, uncanny from the formless shadows of the room. To the man in the chair, it came with the full force of a supernatural presence sternly inexorable in a ghostly omnipotence. He sprang to his feet, stood quivering.

"What was that? Quayne, did you hear that? Arbuthnot's voice! I I no it couldn't be couldn't be! Quayne," his voice was strained with terror, "let me out of this! I'm going mad! I can't stand it any longer!"

Q.Q. apparently did not hear him. He did not move. One hand still held the document up to the last glimmer of outside light; the other was out of sight beneath his desk. Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan gasped. Once more he turned toward me, and I saw his two hands go slowly quivering up toward his head as he stood silhouetted against the window. The man was gripped in a paroxysm of terror at those suddenly vocal shadows all around him at himself.

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"No," I heard him whisper to himself, "no! It couldn't have been! It couldn't have been!"

And then once more came that solemn, deep-toned authoritative voice:

"He shall confess, Mr. Quayne I am determined on it!"

A choked scream broke from the tortured wretch.

"No no! Quiet, Arbuthnot! Quiet for God's sake! I can't bear it! I I'll tell I'll confess! I'll confess! Quayne Quayne!" His voice came almost in a shriek from the shadows which hid his face. "I'll confess I'll confess! Take it down I'll confess!"

Q.Q. laid down his papers.

"Take down what Mr. Vaughan dictates, Mr. Creighton," he said, quietly. "Resume your chair, Mr. Vaughan." He touched the switch by his desk, and the room was suddenly flooded with light.

Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan, no longer the spruce, well-groomed civil servant, but a haggard, wild-eyed wretch, I was startled at the havoc the ordeal had made in him, obeyed like a creature drained of volition, dropped heavily into his chair. I took up my pen and wrote as, quaveringly, gaspingly, the utterly unnerved, broken man began his confession. It was a confession of official secrets betrayed sent by agony-column code-messages to a great foreign commercial organization to which they were of immense utility, of precisely as Q.Q. had divined Arbuthnot's having stopped him as he went along the corridor to his lunch, taxed him with it, of a wild alarm, a determination to suppress this danger at once, of the beginnings of a murderous struggle in which Arbuthnot had snatched the revolver from his drawer of another snatch at that revolver which had seized it, of the sudden shot, of Oglethorpe at the door, of a spring into the clothes-cupboard and a moment later when Oglethorpe had dashed out again, horrified at the discovery a quick rush along the corridor, unobserved, to lunch.

Q.Q. listened, inscrutable, to the end.

"Now sign, Mr. Vaughan," he said in his quiet level voice.

The man got up from his chair, moved toward my desk stopped suddenly.

"No!" he cried. Obviously he made a great effort to pull himself together, to resume command of himself, seemed to succeed. "No! I won't sign!" He laughed like a maniac. "It's only your word against mine both of you and I'll swear it's a fabrication a tissue of lies! I'm not going to sign away my life because you played a trick on me! How you did it, I don't know but trick I'm sure it was!"

He stood glowering defiance at Q.Q.

"As you like, Mr. Vaughan," said the Chief quietly. "It makes really no difference whether you sign or not. Just listen a moment!" He bent forward, touched something on his desk. "Another little trick, Mr. Vaughan." He smiled pleasantly.

To my own astonishment there issued into the room startlingly lifelike, Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan's voice in a recapitulated, word-for-word recital of his crime. The first few sentences of it were sufficient Mr. D'Arcy Vaughan raised his hand. To his first amazement had succeeded a sudden bitterness of comprehension.

"That's enough," he said. "I don't want to hear it over again." He controlled his voice to a cynical appreciation. "A dictaphone, of course?"

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"A double-barreled one, Mr. Vaughan," said the Chief, still pleasantly. "With a blank record waiting for you."

Vaughan glared at Q.Q. in a sudden last flash of ferocity. "Curse you and your infernal cunning tricks!" he said. "All right I may as well sign." He came across to my desk, scrawled a signature at the foot of the paper I presented to him, turned again with a snarl to the Chief. "Now what are you going to do?"

Q.Q. smiled grimly, took off the telephone receiver, asked for a number.

"Sebright? . . . Ah, Quayne speaking. Just come round here, will you? . . . I've got that man for you. Yes? signed confession. He's only waiting for you."

(End.)