

The death of My Lord Jillbert, Count de la Vexin, was nothing if not spectacular.

His Lordship lived and worked in Castle Gisors, which towers over the town of the same name, the capital of the County of the Vexin, in the eastern part of the Duchy of Normandy. The basic structure of the ancient fortress has been there since the Eleventh Century, although it has been added to and partly rebuilt since.

De la Vexin had succeeded to the County Seat in 1951, and had governed the Vexin wisely and well. He had a son, a daughter, and a hobby.

It was a combination of all these that killed him.

On the night of April 11, 1974, after attending the Mass of Holy Thursday, My Lord of the Vexin ascended the helical stairway that wound itself around the inside of the Red Tower, followed by two trusted sergeants of the Count's Own Guard—who were, in turn, followed by a four-man squad of ordinary guardsmen.

This was My Lord Count's regular procedure when he went to his *sanctum sanctorum* on the top floor of the Red Tower. When he went up there, eighty feet above the flagstoned courtyard, he wanted no interruptions while he attended to his avocation.

At one minute of ten, he entered his private rooms, leaving his guardsmen outside. No one but himself had been authorized to enter the uppermost room of the Red Tower in twenty years.

He dropped the heavy bar after locking the door, completely sealing the room.

Only two people saw him alive again, and then only for a matter of seconds.

Across the wide, flagstoned courtyard from the Red Tower stood St. Martin's Hall, a new addition built in the early Sixteenth Century, as its Ricardian style attested. Its great mullioned windows cast a warm, yellowed light on the courtyard outside; the hall was brightly illuminated from within, and would remain so all night, for there was a vigil at the Altar of Repose in the Lady Chapel.

Inside, a small fire crackled in the enormous fireplace—just enough blaze to take the slight chill from the air of a pleasant spring evening. On the mantelpiece, a large clock swung its pendulum as the minute hand moved inexorably upward to mark the hour of ten.

Lord Gisors, the only son of de la Vexin, poured himself another glass of Xerez. Of average height, his blocky, not unhandsome face was almost a younger replica of his father's, except that he had his mother's near-black hair and dark brown eyes instead of the brown-and-blue combination of his father. He turned from the sideboard, still holding the unstoppered decanter. "Care for another, my dear?"

The girl seated in the big easy chair in front of the fireplace smiled. "Please." With her right hand, she held out her glass, while her left brushed the long fair hair back from her brow. *She looks beautiful*, His Lordship thought.

Lord Gisors poured, then walked back to the sideboard with the decanter. As he put the glass stopple back in, he began: "You mustn't think badly of My Lord Father, Madelaine, even though he is a bit—testy at times. He—"

"I know," she interrupted. "I know. He thinks only of the County. Never of individuals."

Frowning slightly, His Lordship came back with his glass and sat down in another easy chair near her. "But he does think of individuals, my love. He must think of every individual in the Vexin—as I must when I succeed to the County Seat. He has to take the long view and the broad view, naturally, but he is concerned about individuals."

She sipped at her glass of wine, then looked up at him with solemn gray eyes. "Does his concern for individuals include you? Or me? He knows we love each other, but he forbids our marriage, and insists that you marry Lady Evelynne de Saint-Brieuc—in spite of the fact that you do not love her nor she you. Is that concern for the individual or simply the desire to make an advantageous political marriage for you?"

Lord Gisors closed his eyes and held his tongue for a moment. The two of them had been over and over this ground many times; there was nothing new here. He had explained many times that, whereas My Lord the Count could forbid a marriage, he could not force one. Gisors had even reiterated time and

again that he could appeal his case for marriage to His Royal Highness of Normandy, and, if that failed, to His Imperial Majesty—but that he would not do so out of deference to his father. His head seemed to ache at the monotony of "time and again."

He had not, of course, mentioned his own plans for marrying Madelaine without all the rigamarole. She might very likely rebel at the notion.

He opened his eyes again. "Be patient, my darling. I can assure you that he will—"

"—Come round to your way of thinking?" she cut in. "Never! The only time the Count de la Vexin will give his consent to our marriage will be when *you* are Count de la Vexin! Your father—"

"*Quiet!*" Lord Gisors said in an imperative undertone. "*My sister.*"

At the far end of the hall, the door to the Lady Chapel had opened and closed. The woman walking toward them with a rather solemn smile on her face was carefully removing her chapel veil as she came down the wide carpeting to the fireplace. She nodded silently to each of them, then said: "Your watch, My Lord Brother. Ten to eleven, remember?"

Lord Gisors finished his wine and stood up with a smile. "Of course, My Lady Beverly. '*Can you not spend one hour with me?*' The Gospel according to Matthew." Tomorrow would be the Friday of the Crucifixion; this, the night before, would be symbolically spent in the Garden of Gethsemane with Our Lord. Gisors looked at the clock. It was the last second before ten.

"*Father, my hour has come,*' St. John—" Gisors began.

The pendulum swung down. The clock struck the first note. "*What the devil was that?*" Lord Gisors yelled.

Outside, there had been a horrendous scream.

In the courtyard itself, a minute or so earlier, two militiamen of the Count's Own had been standing near the wall of St. Martin's Hall. One was the man at post, the other the Sergeant-of-the-Guard, who was making his evening rounds. They exchanged the usual military courtesies. The guardsman reported the state of his post as being quiet; the sergeant thanked him in the proper military manner. Then he said, with a grin: "It's better doing night duty in April than in March, eh, Jaime?"

Guardsman Jaime grinned back. "At least I'm not freezing my nose off, Sergeant Andray." His eyes shifted upward as he saw a gleam of light from the corner of his eye. "Here comes My Lord Count."

Sergeant Andray turned his head to follow Jaime's gaze. He knew that Jaime did not mean that My Lord the Count was actually approaching the post, merely that His Lordship was going into his private room at the top of the Red Tower. It was an occurrence both of them were used to. The Count was irregular in his visits to his private workshop, but his behavior each time was predictable. He made his presence known to those in the courtyard below by the light of his flickering torch showing through the lozenged window as he approached it from the door of his laboratory.

Then, as he stood on the desk in front of the window to light the gas jet just above the lintel, the flame of the torch rose, lifting out of sight above the window, leaving only a half-halo of light beneath.

Then the routine changed drastically.

Instead of the warm glow of the gaslight, there was an odd, moving flare of white light that seemed to chase itself around the room for a second or two.

Then, suddenly and violently, the leaded, lozenged window burst asunder, splattering glass through the air. Through that shattered window came the twisting figure of My Lord de la Vexin, a scream tearing from his throat as he somersaulted eighty feet to the stone pavement below, his small torch still in his hand, trailing a comet's tail of flame and sparks.

The Count and the courtyard met with fatal violence, and the sudden silence was punctuated only by the tinkling rain of shards of glass still falling from the ruined window above.

At 12:44 that evening, Jaque Toile, Chief Master-at-Arms for the city of Gisors, was waiting at the railroad station with two Sergeants-at-Arms as the train from Rouen pulled into the station.

Chief Jaque's hard eyes scanned the late-night passengers as they alighted from the first-class coaches. There were few of them, and the Chief quickly spotted the trio he was looking for. "Let's go," he said to the sergeants. "That's them."

The three Officers of the King's Peace moved in.

The three men who were their target stepped out of the coach and waited. The first was a tall, brown-haired, handsome man with lean features, wearing the evening dress of an aristocrat; the second was shorter and muscularly tubby, wearing the working dress of a sorcerer; the third was a rather elderly, dried-up-looking fellow with gray hair, who wore pince-nez and the evening dress of a gentleman. On the shoulders of the latter two was embroidered the badge of the Duke of Normandy.

Chief Jaque walked up to the aristocratic-looking gentleman. "My Lord Darcy?"

Lord Darcy, Chief Investigator for His Royal Highness the Duke of Normandy, nodded. "I am. Chief Jaque Toile, I believe?"

"Yes, M'lord."

"My colleagues," said Lord Darcy by way of introduction, "Sean O Lochlainn, Master Sorcerer, Chief Forensic Sorcerer for His Royal Highness; Doctor James Pateley, Chief Forensic Chirurgeon."

The Chief Master-at-Arms acknowledged the introductions, then: "Sergeants Paul and Bertram, M'lord. We have an official carriage waiting, M'lord."

Four minutes later, the carriage was rolling toward Castle Gisors, its coil spring suspension and pneumatic tires making the ride comfortable in spite of the cobblestone streets. After what seemed a long silence, Lord Darcy's voice came smoothly.

"You seem pensive, my dear Chief."

"What? Oh. Yes. Sorry, M'lord. Just thinking."

"That was painfully apparent. May I inquire as to the subject of your thoughts?"

"Don't like cases like this," said Chief Jaque. "Not equipped for 'em. Ghosts, demons, black magic, that sort of thing. I'm not a scientist; I'm a peace officer."

Master Sean's blue eyes lit up with interest. "Ghosts? Demons? Black magic?"

"One moment," Lord Darcy' said. "Let us be systematic. The only information we received at Rouen was that de la Vexin has fallen to his death. No details were given us via teleson. Just what did happen, Chief Jaque?"

The Chief Master-at-Arms explained what had happened as pieced together from the reports of the guardsmen on duty, just prior to My Lord de la Vexin's death.

"No question he was dead," the Chief said. "Skull smashed. Neck broken. Guard Sergeant Andray called for an extension fire ladder. Only way to get up into that room. Sent the guard from the courtyard up the stairs to notify the two men on duty at His Lordship's door."

"They hadn't known?" Lord Darcy asked.

Chief Jaque shook his head. "Door's too thick. Too thick to break down in a short time, even. Need an ax. That's why Andray went up the ladder. Climbed in the window and went over to unbar the door. By that time, the door guards were alerted. That's where the funny part comes in."

"Indeed?" murmured Lord Darcy. "Funny in what way?"

"Nobody in the room. Doesn't make sense."

Master Sean thumbed his chin, thoughtfully. "If that's the case, Chief Jaque, then he wasn't pushed, eh? Might it be that it was purely an accident? That when he got up on that desk to light the gaslamp, something slipped and he fell accidentally through the window and to his death?"

The Chief Master-at-Arms shook his head. "Not very likely, Master Sorcerer; body was eighteen feet from the wall. Glass spattered even farther." He shook his head again. "Didn't just fall. Not possible. He was pushed."

Dr. Pateley took his pince-nez from his thin nose and looked at them as he polished them with a fine linen handkerchief. "Or *jumped*, perhaps?" he asked in his diffident voice.

The Chief glanced at him sharply. "*Jumped*? You mean suicide?"

"Not necessarily," said the chirurgeon. He glanced up at Lord Darcy. "There are many reasons why a man might jump—eh, My Lord?"

Lord Darcy held back a smile. "Indeed, Doctor. Most astute of you." He looked at Chief Jaque. "Could he have jumped, Chief?"

"Could have. Doesn't make sense, though. Man doesn't commit suicide by jumping through a closed window. Doesn't make sense. A suicide who decides to jump opens the window first. Doesn't just take a

flying leap through a pane of glass."

"That's not the point I had in mind," said Dr. Pateley, replacing his glasses carefully. "What if he were trying to get away from something?"

Chief Jaque's eyes widened. "I knew it! Demons!"

Twenty-five minutes later, Master Sean was saying: "Well, Me Lord, whatever it was that killed My Lord Vexin, it was certainly none of Chief Jaque's 'demons', nor any other form of projected psychic elemental."

Dr. Pateley frowned. "A what?"

"Elemental, my dear Doctor. A projected psychic manifestation symbolized by the four elementary states of matter: solid, liquid, gas, and plasma. Or earth, water, air, and fire, as they used to call them."

Along with Lord Darcy, Master Sean and the surgeon were standing in the room in the Red Tower from which the late Count had been ejected so forcibly. Master Sean had prowled round the room with his eyes half closed, his golden *crux ansata* in his right hand, probing everywhere. The others had stood by silently; it is unwise to disturb a magician at work. Then the round little Irish sorcerer had made his pronouncement.

Lord Darcy had not wasted his time in watching Master Sean; he had seen that process too many times to be interested in it. Instead, his keen gray eyes had been carefully surveying the room.

It was a fairly large room, covering the entire top floor of the Fourteenth Century tower except for the small landing at the head of the stairs. The landing was closed off by a heavy, padded walnut door.

Having noted that, Lord Darcy looked at the rest of the large room.

It was square, some twenty by twenty feet, the tower having been built in the old Norman style. There was only the one window in the room; the rest of the walls were covered with shelving and cabinets. Along the length of the west wall ran a shelf some thirty-two inches deep and three feet from the floor; it was obviously used as a worktable, for it was littered with various kinds of glassware, oddly-shaped pieces of wood and metal, a couple of balances, and other paraphernalia. The shelves above it contained rows of bottles and jars, each neatly labeled, containing liquids, powders, and crystals of various kinds.

On the south wall, flanking the shattered window, were two sections of shelving full of books. Half the east wall was filled with books, the other half with cabinets. There were more shelves and cabinets flanking the door of the north wall.

Because of the slight breeze that came in chillingly through the broken window, the gas flame in the sconce above it flickered and danced, casting weird shadows over the room and making glittering highlights on the glassware.

The Count's writing desk was set directly beneath the big window, its top flush with the sill. Lord Darcy walked over to the desk, leaned over it and looked down through the smashed window. There had been no unusual evidence there. My Lord the Count had, from all indications, died of a broken neck and a crushed skull, although the autopsy might tell more. A search of the body had revealed nothing of any consequence—but Lord Darcy now carried the key to the late Count's ultraprivate chamber in his pocket.

Below, Chief Jaque and his men were carefully lifting the body from a glittering field of broken glass and putting it into the special carriage of the local surgeon. The autopsy would be performed in the morning by Master Sean and Dr. Pateley.

Lord Darcy leaned back and looked up at the gas flame above the window. The Count de la Vexin had come in with his torch, as usual. Climbed up on his desk, as usual. Turned on the gas, as usual. Lit the gas with his torch, as usual. Then—

What?

"Spooky-looking place, eh, Me Lord?" Master Sean said.

His Lordship turned round, putting his back to the window. "Gloomy, at any rate, my dear Sean. Are there no other gas jets in this room? Ah, yes; I see them. Two on each of the other walls. Evidently the pipes were lengthened when the shelving was put in." He took out his pipe lighter. "Let's see if we can't shed a little more light on the subject." He went around the room carefully and lit the other six lamps.

Even inside their glass chimneys, they tended to flicker; the room was better illuminated, but the shadows still danced.

"Ah! And an old-fashioned oil chandelier," Lord Darcy said, looking up. It was a brass globe some fifteen inches in diameter with a ring at the bottom and a wick with a glass chimney on top, suspended by a web of chains and a pulley system that allowed it to be pulled down for refueling and lighting. Even standing on tiptoe, Lord Darcy couldn't reach the ring.

He looked around quickly, then went to the door and opened it.

"Corporal, is there a hook to lower that oil lamp?"

"Blessed if I know, My Lord," said the Corporal of the Guard. "His Lordship never used it, the lamp, I mean. Hasn't been used as long as I know. Doubt if it has any oil in it, even, My Lord."

"I see. Thank you." He closed the door again. "Well, so much for additional illumination. Hm-m-m.

Dr. Pateley, you measured the body; how tall was My Lord Count?"

"Five feet six, My Lord."

"That accounts for it, then."

"Accounts for what, My Lord?"

"There are seven gas jets in this room. Six of them are some seven and a half feet from the floor; the seventh, over the window, is nine feet from the floor. Why did he habitually light that one first? Because it is only six and a half feet from the desk top, and he could reach it."

"Then how did he reach the others if he needed more light?" Dr. Pateley asked, adjusting his pince-nez.

Master Sean grinned, but said nothing.

Lord Darcy sighed. "My dear surgeon, I honestly think you never look at anything but human bodies, ill, dying, or dead. What do you see over there?" He pointed to the northeast corner of the room.

Dr. Pateley turned. "Oh. A ladder." He looked rather embarrassed. "Certainly. Of course."

"Had it not been here," Lord Darcy said, "I would be quite astonished. How else would he get to his books and . . ."

His voice trailed off. His eyes were still on the ladder. "Hm-m-m. Interesting." He went over to the ladder, tested it, then climbed up it to the ceiling. He bent his head back to look at the ceiling carefully. "Aha. This was the old watchtower." He pushed up with one hand, then with both. Overhead, a two-and-a-half foot panel swung back on protesting hinges. Lord Darcy climbed on up and hoisted himself through the opening.

He looked around the roof of the tower, which was surrounded by crenellated walls. Then he came back down, closing the panel.

"Nothing up there, apparently, but I'll have to come back by daylight to check again, more thoroughly."

Then, without another word, he moved silently around the room, looking intently at everything but touching nothing. He looked up at the ceiling. "Heavy brass hooks," he murmured. "Why? Oh, of course. To suspend various pieces of his apparatus. Very good."

He had covered almost all the room before he finally came across something that really piqued his interest. He was standing near the door, his eyes searching the floor, when he said: "Aha! And what might this be?"

He knelt down, looked down at the object carefully, then picked it up between thumb and forefinger.

"It looks," said Master Sean, "like a four-inch piece of half-inch cotton rope, My Lord. Very dirty, too."

His Lordship smiled dryly. "That appears to be exactly what it is, my good Sean. Interesting." He examined it closely.

"I would be obliged, My Lord," said Master Sean in a semi-formal manner, "if you would explain why it is so interesting."

Dr. Pateley merely blinked behind his pince-nez and said nothing.

"You have noticed, my dear Sean," Lord Darcy said, "how immaculately clean this laboratory is. It is well dusted, well cleaned. Everything seems to be in its place. There are no papers scattered about. There are no messy areas. The place is as neat and as well-kept as a cavalry officer's saber." He made a sweeping gesture to take in the whole room.

"It is, Me Lord, but—" Master Sean began.

"Then what, may I ask," His Lordship continued, "is a short piece of dirty rope doing on the floor?"

"I don't know, Me Lord." Master Sean was honestly puzzled. "What is its significance?"

Lord Darcy's smile broadened. "I haven't the foggiest notion in the world, Master Sean. But I have no doubt that there is *some* significance. What it is will await upon further information."

Another dozen minutes of inspection revealed nothing further to Lord Darcy's scrutiny. "Very well," he said, "we'll leave the rest of this until the morrow, when the light's better. Now let us go down and discuss this affair with those concerned. We'll get little sleep tonight, I fear."

Master Sean cleared his throat apologetically. "My Lord, the good surgeon and I, not being qualified for interrogating witnesses, had best occupy our time with the autopsy. Eh?"

"Eh? Oh, certainly, if you wish. Yes, of course." This, Lord Darcy thought, is what comes of assuming that others, even one's closest associates, have the same interests as oneself.

Within St. Martin's Hall, the clock on the mantelpiece solemnly struck the quarter-hour. It was fifteen minutes after two on the morning of Good Friday, 12 April 1974.

The Reverend Father Villiers stood near the fireplace, looking up at Lord Darcy. He was not tall—five-six or so—but his lean, compact body had an aura of physical strength about it. He was quick and accurate in his movements, but never seemed jerky or nervous. There was a calm awareness in him that showed spiritual strength as well. He was, Lord Darcy judged, in his forties, with only a faint touch of gray in his hair and mustache. The fine character lines in his handsome face showed strength, kindness, and a sense of humor. But at the moment he was not smiling; there was a feeling of tragedy in his eyes.

"They are all in the Chapel, My Lord," he was saying in his brisk, pleasant, low tenor. "Lord Gisors, Lady Beverly, the Demoiselle Madelaine, and Sir Roderique MacKenzie."

"Who are the latter pair, Reverend Sir?" Lord Darcy asked.

"Sir Roderique is Captain of the Count's Own Guard. The Demoiselle Madelaine is his daughter."

"I shall not disturb them, Reverend Father," Lord Darcy said. "To seek solace before our Sacramental Lord on His Altar of Repose on this night is the sacrosanct right of every Christian, and should not be abrogated save in dire emergency."

"You don't consider murder an emergency?"

"Before its commission, yes. Not after. What makes you think it was murder, Reverend Father?"

The priest smiled a little. "It wasn't suicide. I spoke to him shortly before he went over to the Red Tower; as a Sensitive, I'd have picked up any suicidal emotions easily. And it could hardly have been an accident; if he'd merely lost his balance and fallen, he'd have landed at the foot of the wall, not eighteen or twenty feet away."

"Eighteen," murmured Lord Darcy.

"Ergo—murder," Father Villiers said.

"I agree, Reverend Father," Lord Darcy said. "The theory has been advanced that My Lord Count saw some sort of apparition which so frightened him that he leaped to his death through a closed window rather than face it. What is your opinion?"

"That would be Chief Jaque." The priest shook his head. "Hardly. His late Lordship would not even have sensed the presence of a true psychic apparition, and a phony—a piece of trickery—would have neither fooled nor frightened him."

"He couldn't have perceived a true psychic apparition?"

Father Villiers shook his head once more. "He was an example of that truly rare case, the psychically blind."

Ever since St. Hilary of Walsingham had formulated his analog equations on the Laws of Magic in the late Thirteenth Century, scientific sorcerers had realized that those laws could not be used by everyone. Some had the Talent and some did not. It was no more to be expected that everyone could be a

sorcerer or healer or sensitive than to expect everyone to be a musician, a sculptor, or a surgeon.

But the inability to play a violin does not mean an inability to enjoy—or *not* enjoy—someone else's playing. One does not have to be a musician to perceive that music exists.

Unless one is tone-deaf.

To use another analogy: There are a few—very few—men and women who are *totally* color-blind. They are not just slightly crippled, like those who cannot distinguish between red and green; they see all things in shades of gray. To them, the world is colorless. It is difficult for such a person to understand why or how three identical objects, all the same shade of gray, can be identified by someone else as "red," "blue," and "green." To the totally color-blind, those words are without referents and are meaningless.

"His late Lordship," the priest said, "had an early desire to go into the priesthood, to forego his right to the County Seat in favor of his younger brother. He could not do so, of course. An un-Talented, psychically blind man would be as useless to the Church as a colorblind man would be to the Artist's Guild."

Naturally, Lord Darcy thought, that would not exclude the late de la Vexin from an executive position in His Imperial Majesty's Government. One doesn't need magical Talent to run a County effectively.

For over eight centuries, since the time of Henry II, the Anglo-French Empire had held its own and expanded. Henry's son, Richard, after narrowly escaping death from a crossbow bolt in 1199, had taken firm control of his kingdom and expanded it. At his death in 1219, his nephew Arthur had increased the kingdom's strength even more. The Great Reform, during the reign of Richard the Great, in the late Fifteenth Century, had put the Empire on a solid working basis, using psychic science to establish a society that had been both stable and progressive for nearly half a millennium.

"Where is My Lord the late Count's younger brother?" Lord Darcy asked.

"Captain Lord Louis is with the New England Fleet," Father Villiers said. "At present, I believe, stationed at Port Holy Cross on the coast of Mechicoe."

Well, that eliminates him as a suspect, Lord Darcy told himself. "Tell me, Reverend Father," he said aloud, "do you know anything about the laboratory His late Lordship maintained on the top floor of the Red Tower?"

"A laboratory? Is that what it is? No, I didn't know. He went up there regularly, but I have no idea what he did up there. I assumed it was some harmless hobby. Wasn't it?"

"It may have been," Lord Darcy admitted. "I have no reason to believe otherwise. Have you ever been in that room?"

"No; never. Nor, to my knowledge, has anyone else but the Count. Why?"

"Because," Lord Darcy said thoughtfully, "it is a very odd laboratory. And yet there is no doubt that it *is* some kind of laboratory for scientific research."

Father Villiers touched the cross at his breast. "Odd? How?" Then he dropped his hand and chuckled. "No. Not Black Magic, of course. He didn't believe in magic at all—black, white, purple, green, red, or rainbow. He was a Materialist."

"Oh?"

"An outgrowth of his psychic blindness, you see," the priest explained. "He wanted to be a priest. He was refused. Therefore, he rejected the basis for his refusal. He refused to believe that anything which he could not detect with his own senses existed. He set out to prove the basic tenet of Materialism: 'All phenomena in the Universe can be explained as a result of nonliving forces reacting with nonliving matter.'"

"Yes," said Lord Darcy. "A philosophy which I, as a living being, find difficult to understand, to say nothing of accepting. So that is the purpose of his laboratory—to bring the scientific method to bear on the Theory of Materialism."

"So it would appear, My Lord," said Father Villiers. "Of course, I have not seen His late Lordship's laboratory, but—"

"Who has?" Lord Darcy asked. The priest shook his head. "No one that I know of. No one."

Lord Darcy glanced at his watch. "Is there anyone else in the Chapel besides the family, Reverend Sir?"

"Several. There is an outer door through which the occupants within the walls can come in directly from the courtyard. And there are four of the Sisters from the convent.

"Then I could slip in unnoticed for an hour of devotion before the Blessed Sacrament at the Altar of Repose?"

"Most assuredly, My Lord; there are people coming and going all the time. But I suggest you use the public entrance; if you use the family entrance, someone is sure to notice."

"Thank you, Reverend Father. At what hour will you celebrate the Mass of the Presanctified?"

"The service begins at eight o'clock."

"And how do I get to this outside door? Through that door and turn to my left, I believe?"

"Exactly, My Lord."

Three minutes later, Lord Darcy was kneeling in the back of the Chapel, facing the magnificently flowered Altar of Repose, his eyes on the veiled ciborium that stood at its center.

An hour and a quartet after that, he was sound asleep in the room which had been assigned him by the seneschal.

After the abrupt liturgical finale of the Mass of the Presanctified, at a little past ten on Good Friday morning, Lord Darcy and Master Sean stood waiting outside the family entrance of the Chapel. Dr. Pateley had excused himself immediately; he had volunteered to help one of the local men to prepare the late Count's body for the funeral. "Put things back the way we found 'em, My Lord," was the way he worded it.

Darcy and the stout little Irish sorcerer had placed themselves at the back of the congregation and had come out ahead of the family who were in their reserved pew at the front.

"I trust," murmured His Lordship very softly, "that Almighty God has reserved a special place of punishment for people who commit murder during Holy Week."

"Aye, Me Lord; I know what you mean," Master Sean whispered. "Meself, I enjoy the Three _ Hours of Sermon on Good Friday—especially by a really good preacher, which Father Villiers is reputed to be. But—'business before pleasure'." He paused, then went on in the same low tone. "D'you expect to clear up the case soon?"

"Before the day is out, I think."

Master Sean looked startled. "You know who did it, then?" He kept his voice down.

"Who? Of course. That should be plain. But I need more data on *how* and *why*."

Master Sean blinked. "But you haven't even questioned anyone yet, My Lord."

"No need to, for that. But my case is as yet incomplete."

Master Sean shook his head and chuckled. "Your touch of the Talent, Me Lord."

"You know, my dear Sean, you have almost convinced me that I *do* have a touch of the Talent. How did you put it?"

"Like all great detectives, My Lord, you have the ability to leap from an unjustified assumption to a foregone conclusion without passing through the distance between. Then you back up and fill in." He paused again. "Well, then, who—"

"*Ssst!* Here they come."

Three people had come out of the Chapel: Lord Gisors, Lady Beverly, and the Demoiselle Madelaine MacKenzie.

Master Sean's lips barely moved, and his voice was barely audible as he said: "Wonder where the rest of the Clan MacKenzie went, Me Lord?"

"We'll ask." Both of them knew that Captain Sir Roderique MacKenzie and his son, Sergeant An-dray, had been sitting in the family pew with the others.

The three came up the ballway toward the big fireplace in St. Martin's Hall, where Lord Darcy and Master Sean were waiting.

Lord Darcy stepped forward and bowed. "My Lord de la Vexin."

The young man looked startled. "No. My fa—" He stopped. It was the first time anyone had ever

addressed him as "Lord de la Vexin." Of course it was only a courtesy title; he would not be the Count of the Vexin until his title had been validated by the King.

Lord Darcy, seeing the young man's confusion, went on: "I am Lord Darcy, My Lord. This is Master Sean. We appreciate the invitation to breakfast that was conveyed to us by your seneschal." The new Lord de la Vexin had recovered his composure. "Ah, yes. I am pleased to meet you, My Lord. This is my sister, Lady Beverly, and the Demoiselle Madelaine. Come; breakfast should be ready for us' immediately." He led the way.

The breakfast was delicious, not sumptuous: small, exquisitely poached *quinelles de poisson*; portions of eggs Boucher; hot cross buns; milk and *cafe*.

Captain Roderique and Sergeant Andray made their appearance a few minutes before the meal began, followed almost immediately by Father Villiers.

Conversation during breakfast consisted only of small talk, allowing Lord Darcy to observe the others of the party without being obtrusive about it.

De la Vexin still seemed dazed, as though his mind were somewhere else, only partly pulled back by conversation. The Demoiselle Madelaine, blond and beautiful, behaved with decorum, but there was a bright, anticipatory gleam in her eyes that Lord Darcy did not care for. Lady Beverly, some ten years older than her brother, her dark hair faintly tinged with gray at the temples, looked as though she had been born a widow—or a cloistered nun; she was quiet, soft-spoken, and self-effacing, but underneath Lord Darcy detected a firmness and intelligence kept in abeyance. Captain Sir Roderique MacKenzie was perhaps an inch taller than Lord Darcy—lean, with an upright, square-shouldered posture, a thick light-brown mustache and beard, and a taciturn manner typical of the Franco-Scot. His son was a great deal like him, except that he was smooth-shaven and his hair was lighter, though not as blond as that of his sister Madelaine. Both had an air about them that was not quite either that of the military or that of the Keepers of the King's Peace, but partook of both. They were Guardsmen and showed it.

Father Villiers seemed preoccupied, and Lord Darcy could understand why. The symbolic death of the Lord Jesus and the actual death of the Lord de la Vexin were too closely juxtaposed for the good Father's own spiritual comfort. Being a priest is not an easy life-game to play.

After breakfast, a fruit compote of Spanish oranges was served, followed by more *cafe*.

The late Count's son cleared his throat. "My lords, ladies, gentlemen," he began. He paused for a moment and swallowed. "Several of you have addressed me as 'de la Vexin'. I would prefer, until this matter is cleared up, to retain my title of Gisors. Uh—if you please." Another pause. He looked at Lord Darcy. "You came here to question us, My Lord?"

Lord Darcy looked utterly guileless. "Not really, Lord Gisors. However, if you should care to discuss the death of His Lordship, it might clear up some of the mysterious circumstances surrounding it. I know that none of you were in that room at the time of the—ah—incident. I am not looking for alibis. But have any of you any conjectures? How did, the late Count de la Vexin die?"

Silence fell like a psychic fog, heavy and damp.

Each looked at the others to speak first, and nobody spoke.

"Well," Lord Darcy said after a time, "let's attack it from another direction. Sergeant Andray, of all the people here, you were apparently the only eyewitness. What was your impression of what happened?"

The sergeant blinked, sat up a little straighter, and cleared his throat nervously. "Well, Your Lordship, at a few minutes before ten o'clock, Guardsman Jaime and I were—"

"No, no, Sergeant," Lord Darcy interrupted gently. "Having read deposition you and Jaime gave to Chief Jaque, I am fully conversant with what you *saw*. I want to know your theories about the *cause* of what you saw."

After a pause, Sergeant Andray said, "It looked to me as if he'd *jumped* through the window, Your Lordship. But I have no idea why he would do such a thing."

"You saw nothing that might have made him jump?"

Sergeant Andray frowned. "The only thing was that ball of light. Paul and I both mentioned it in our reports."

"Yes. 'A ball of yellowish-white light that seemed to dance all over the room for a few seconds, then dropped to the floor and vanished,' you said. Is that right?"

"I should have said, 'dropped *toward* the floor,' Your Lordship. I couldn't have seen it actually hit the floor. Not from that angle."

"Very good, Sergeant! I wondered if you would correct that minor discrepancy, and you have done so to my satisfaction." Lord Darcy thought for a moment. "Now. You then went over to the body, examined it, and determined to your satisfaction that His Lordship was dead. Did you touch him?"

"Only his wrist, to try to find a pulse. There was none, and the angle of his head . . ." He stopped.

"I quite understand. Meanwhile, you had sent Guardsman Jaime for the fire wagon. When it came, you used the extension ladder to go up and unlock the door, to let the other guardsmen in. Was the gaslight still on?"

"No. It had been blown out. I shut off the gas, and then went over and opened the door. There was enough light from the yard-lamps for me to see by."

"And you found nothing odd or out of the way?"

"Nothing and nobody, Your Lordship," the sergeant said firmly. "Nor did any of the other guardsmen."

"That's straightforward enough. You searched the room then?"

"Not really searched it. We looked around to see if there was anyone there, using hand torches. But there's no place to hide in that room. We had called the armsmen; when they came, they looked more carefully. Nothing."

"Very well. Now, when I arrived, that gaslight over the window was lit. Who lit it?"

"Chief Master-at-Arms Jaque Toile, Your Lordship."

"I see. Thank you, Sergeant." He looked at the others, one at a time. Their silence seemed interminable. "Lady. Beverly, have you anything to add to this discussion?"

Lady Beverly looked at Father Villiers with her calm eyes.

The priest was looking at her. "My advice is to speak, my child. We must get to the bottom of this."

I see, Lord Darcy thought. *There is something here that has been discussed in the confessional. The Reverend Father cannot speak—but he can advise her to.*

Lady Beverly looked back to Lord Darcy. "You want a theory, My Lord? Very well." There was a terrible sadness in her voice. "His late Lordship, my father, was punished by God for his unbelief. Father Villiers has told me that this could not be so, but"—she closed her eyes—"I greatly fear that it is."

"How so, My Lady?" Darcy asked gently.

"He was a Materialist. He was psychically blind. He denied that others had the God-given gift of the Sight and the Talent. He said it was all pretense, all hogwash. He was closed off to all emotion."

She was no longer looking *at* Lord Darcy; she was looking through and beyond him, as though her eyes were focused somewhere on a far horizon.

"He was not an evil man," she continued without shifting her gaze, "but he was sinful." Suddenly her eyes flickered, and she was looking directly into Lord Darcy's gray eyes. "Do you know that he forbade a wedding between my brother and the Demoiselle Madelaine because he could not see the love between them? He wanted Gisors to marry Evelynne de Saint-Brieuc."

Darcy's eyes moved rapidly to Lord Gisors and Madelaine MacKenzie. "No. I did not know that. How many did?"

It was Captain Sir Roderique who spoke. "We all did, My Lord. He made a point of it. The Count forbade it, and I forbade it. But legally I had no right to forbid my daughter."

"But why did he—"

Lord Darcy's question was cut off abruptly by Lady Beverly.

"Politics, My Lord. And because he could not see true love. So God punished him for his obstinacy. May I be excused, My Lord? I would hear the Three Hours."

Quickly, Father Villiers said: "Would you excuse us both, My Lord?"

"Certainly, Reverend Sir, Lady Beverly," Lord Darcy said, rising. His eyes watched them in silence as they left the room.

Half past noon.

Lord Darcy and Master Sean stood in the courtyard below the Red Tower gazing at a small sea of broken glass surrounded by a ring of armsmen and guardsmen.

"Well, my dear Sean, what did you think of our little breakfast conversation?"

"Fascinating, Me Lord," said the sorcerer. "I think I'm beginning to see where you're going. Lady Beverly's mind is not exactly straight, is it?"

"Let's put it that she seems to have some weird ideas about God," Lord Darcy said. "Are you ready for this experiment, Master Sean?"

"I am, Me Lord."

"Don't you need an anchor man for this sort of thing?"

Master Sean nodded. "Of course, Me Lord. Chief Jaque is bringing Journeyman Emile, forensic sorcerer for the County. I met him last night; he's a good man; he'll be a Master one day.

"Actually, Me Lord, the spells are quite simple. According to the Law of Contiguity, any piece of a structure remains a part of the structure. We can return it to the last state in which it was still a part of the contiguous whole—completely, if necessary, but you only want to return it to the point *after* the fracture but *before* the dispersal. Doing it isn't difficult; it's holding it in place afterwards. That's why I need an anchor man."

"I'll take my measurements and make my observations as quickly as possible," Lord Darcy promised. "Ah! There they are!"

Master Sean followed His Lordship's gaze toward the main gate of the courtyard. Then, very solemnly, he said: "Ah, yes. One man is wearing the black-and-silver uniform of a chief master-at-arms; the other is wearing the working garb of a journeyman sorcerer. By which I deduce that they are *not* a squad of Imperial Marines."

"Astute of you, my dear Sean; keep working at it. You will become an expert detective on the same day that I become a Master Sorcerer. Chief Jaque and I will go up to the tower room while you and Journeyman Emile work here. Carry on."

Lord Darcy toiled up eight flights of stairs, past several offices, vaguely wishing he were in the castle at Evreux, where the Countess D'Evreux's late brother had installed a steam-powered elevator. *No fool he*, Lord Darcy thought.

At the top landing, an armsman and a guardsman came immediately to attention as His Lordship appeared. He nodded at them. "Good afternoon." With thumb and forefinger he probed his left-hand waistcoat pocket. Then he probed the other. "Is that room locked?" he asked.

The armsman tested it. "Yes, Your Lordship."

"I seem to have mislaid the key. Is there another?"

"There is a duplicate. Your Lordship," said the guardsman, "but it's locked up in Captain Sir Roderique's office. I'll fetch it for you, if you like; it's only two floors down."

"No. No need." Lord Darcy produced the key from his right-hand waistcoat pocket. "I've found it. Thank you, anyway, Guardsman. Chief Jaque will be up in a few minutes."

He unlocked the door, opened it, went in, and closed the door behind him.

Some three minutes later, when Chief Jaque opened the door, he said: "Looking for something, My Lord?"

Lord Darcy was on his knees, searching a cupboard, moving things aside; taking things out. "Yes, my dear Chief; I am looking for the wherewithal to hang a murderer. At first, I thought it more likely it would be in one of the high cupboards, but they contain nothing but glassware. So I decided it must be—ah!" He pulled his head back out of the cupboard and straightened up, still on his knees. From his fingers dangled a six-foot length of ordinary-looking cotton rope.

"Bit scanty to hang a man," Chief Jaque said dubiously.

"For this murderer, it will be quite adequate," said Lord Darcy, standing up. He looked closely at the rope. "If only it—"

He was interrupted by a halloo from below. He went to the shattered remains of the window and looked down. "Yes, Master Sean?" he called.

"We're ready to begin, My Lord," the round little Irish sorcerer shouted up. "Please stand back."

In the courtyard, armsmen and guardsmen stood in a large circle, facing outward from the center, surrounding the fragments from the broken window. Journeyman Emile, a short, lean man with a Parisian accent, had carefully chalked a pale blue line around the area, drawing it three inches behind the bootheels of the surrounding guard.

"It is that I am ready, Master," he said in his atrocious patois. "Excellent," said Master Sean. "Get the field set up and hold it. I will give you all the strength I can."

"But yes, Master." He opened his symbol-decorated carpetbag—similar to in general, but differing from in detail, Master Sean's own—and took out two mirror-polished silvery wands which were SQ deeply incised with symbol engraving that they glittered in the early afternoon sunlight. "For the Cattell Effect, it is that it is necessary for the silver, no?"

"It is," agreed Master Sean. "You will be handling the static spells while I take care of the kinetic. Are you ready?"

"I am prepared," Journeyman Emile said. "Proceed." He took his stance just inside the blue-chalked circle, facing the Red Tower and held up his wands in a ninety-degree V.

Master Sean took an insufflator from his own carpetbag and filled it with a previously-charged powder. Then, moving carefully around the circle, he puffed out clouds of the powder, which settled gently to the courtyard floor, touching each fragment of glass with at least one grain of the powder.

When he had completed the circle, Master Sean stood in front of Journeyman Emile. He put the insufflator back in his carpetbag and took out a short, eighteen-inch wand of pale yellow crystal, with which he inscribed a symbol in the air.

The Cattell Effect began to manifest itself.

Slowly at first, then more rapidly, the fragments from the shattered window began to move.

Like a reverse cascade in slow motion, they lifted and gathered themselves together, a myriad of sparkling shards moving upward, fountaining glitteringly toward the empty window casement eighty feet above. There was a tinkling like fairy bells as occasional fragments struck each other on the way up as they had struck on the way down.

Only the superb discipline of the armstnen and guardsmen kept them from turning to see.

Up, up, went the bits and pieces, like sharp-edged raindrops falling toward the sky.

At the empty opening, they coalesced and came together to form a window—that was not quite a window. It bulged.

Inside the late Count's upper room, Lord Darcy watched the flying fragments return whence they had come. When the stasis was achieved, Lord Darcy glanced at the Chief Master-at-Arms.

"Come, my dear Jaque; we must not tax our sorcerers more than necessary." He walked over to the window, followed by the Chief Armsman.

The lozenged window was neither a shattered wreckage nor a complete whole. It bulged outward curiously, each piece almost touching its neighbor, but not fitted closely to it. The leading between the lozenges was stretched and twisted outward, as if the whole window had been punched from within by a gigantic fist and had stopped stretching, at the last moment.

"Not quite sure I understand this," said Chief Jaque.

"This is the way the window was a fraction of a second after His Lordship, the late Count, struck it. At that time, it was pushed outward and broken, but the fragments had yet to scatter. I direct your attention to the central portion of the window."

The Chief Master-at-Arms took in the scene with keen eyes. "See what you mean. Like a mold, a casting. There's the chin—the chest—the belly—the knees."

"Exactly. Now try to get yourself into a position such that you would make an impression like that," Lord Darcy said.

The Chief grinned. "Don't need to. Obvious. Calves bent back at the knees. Head bent back so the chin hit first. Chest and belly hit first." He narrowed his eyes. "Didn't jump out; didn't fall out. Pushed from behind—violently."

"Precisely so. Excellent, Chief Jaque. Now let us make our measurements as rapidly and as

accurately as possible," Lord Darcy said, "being careful not to touch that inherently unstable structure. If we do, we're likely to get badly-cut hands when the whole thing collapses."

Below, in the courtyard, an unmoving tableau presented itself. Armsmen and guardsmen stood at parade rest, while the two sorcerers stood like unmoving statues, their eyes and minds on the window above, their wands held precisely and confidently.

Minute after minute went by, and the strain was beginning to tell. Then Lord Darcy's voice came: "Anytime you're ready, Master Sean!"

Without moving, Master Sean said sharply, "Sergeant! Get your men well back! Move 'em!"

The Sergeant-at-Arms called out orders, and both armsmen and guardsmen rapidly moved back toward the main gate. Then they turned to watch.

The magicians released control. The powerful forces which had held up the glass shards no longer obtained, and gravity took over. There was an avalanche, a waterfall of sparkling shards. They slid and tumbled down the stone wall with a great and joyous noise and subsided into a heap at the foot of the Red Tower.

The display had not been as spectacular as the reconstruction of the window had been, but it was quite satisfactory to the armsmen and guardsmen.

A few minutes later, Master Sean toiled his way up the stairs and entered the late Count's laboratory.

"Ah! Master Sean," said Lord Darcy, "Where is Journeyman Emile?"

The Irish sorcerer's smile was a little wan. "He's headed home, My Lord. That's exhaustin' work, and he hasn't trained for it as I have."

"I trust you conveyed to him my compliments. That was a marvelous piece of work the two of you did."

"Thank you, My Lord. I gave Journeyman Emile my personal compliments and assured him of yours. Did you get what you wanted, My Lord?"

"I did, indeed. There is but one more thing. A simple test, but I'm sure it will be most enlightening. First, I will call your attention to those two five-gallon carboys which Chief Jaque and I have just discovered in one of the lower cupboards."

The carboys, which had been lifted up to the worktable, stood side by side, labels showing. One of them, with scarcely half an inch of pale yellowish liquid in it, was labeled *Concentrated Aqueous Spirit of Niter*. The other, half full of a clear, oily-looking liquid, was *Concentrated Oil of Vitriol*.

"I suppose you knew you'd find 'em, Me Lord?" Master Sean said.

"I didn't *know*; I merely suspected. But their presence certainly strengthens my case. Do they suggest anything to you?"

Master Sean shrugged. "I know what they are, My Lord, but I'm not a specialist in the Khemic Arts."

"Nor am I." Lord Darcy took out his pipe and thumbed tobacco into it. "But an Officer of the King's Justice should be widely read enough to be a jack-of-all-trades, at least in theory. Do you know what happens when a mixture of those acids is added to common cotton?"

"No—wait. Master Sean frowned, then shook his head. "I've read it somewhere, but—the details won't come."

"You get nitrated cotton," Lord Darcy said.

Chief Jaque coughed delicately. "Well, what does *that* do, Your Lordship?"

"I think I can show you," His Lordship said with a rather mysterious smile. From his wallet, he took the four-inch piece of blackened rope he had found near the door the evening before. Then he picked up the six-foot piece of clean rope he had found half an hour before. Using his sharp pocketknife, he cut a small piece from the end of each and put them on the lab table about eighteen inches from each other.

"Chief Jaque, take these long pieces and put them on the desk, well away from here. I shouldn't want to

lose *all* my evidence. Thank you. Now watch."

He lit each bit with his pipe lighter. They both flared in a sudden hissing burst of yellow-white flame and were gone, leaving no trace. Lord Darcy calmly lit his pipe. .

Master Sean's eyes lit up. "Aaahah!"

Chief Jaque said: "The demon!"

"Precisely, my dear Chief. Now we must go down and talk to the rest of the *dramatis personae*."

As they went back down the stairs, Master Sean said: "But why was the short piece covered with dirt, My Lord?"

"Not dirt, my dear Sean; lampblack."

"Lampblack? But why?"

"To render it invisible, of course."

"You are not preaching the Three Hours, Reverend Father?" Lord Darcy asked with a raised eyebrow.

"No, My Lord," Father Villiers replied. "I am just a little too upset. Besides, I thought my presence here might be required. Father Dubois very kindly agreed to come over from the monastery and take my place."

Clouds, had come, shortly after noon, to obliterate the bright morning sun, and a damp chill had enveloped the castle. The chill was being offset by the fire in the great fireplace in St. Martin's Hall, but to the ten people seated on sofas and chairs around the fireplace, there seemed to be a different sort of chill in the huge room.

The three MacKenzies, father, son, and daughter, sat together on one sofa, saying nothing, their eyes moving around, but always coming back to Lord Darcy. Lady Beverly sat alone near the fire, her eyes watching the flames unseeingly. Master Sean and Dr. Pateley were talking in very low tones on the opposite side of the fireplace. Chief Jaque stood stolidly in front of the mullioned window, watching the entire room without seeming to do so.

On the mantelpiece, the big clock swung its pendulum with muffled clicks.

Lord Gisors rose from his seat and came toward the sideboard where Lord Darcy and Father Villiers were talking.

"Excuse me, Lord Darcy, Father." He paused and cleared his throat a little, then looked at the priest. "We're all a little nervous, Reverend Sir. I know it's Good Friday, but would it be wrong to—er—to ask if anyone wants a glass of Xerez?"

"Of course not, my son. We are all suffering with Our Lord this day, and may suffer more, but I do not think He would frown upon our use of a stiff dose of medicinal palliative. Certainly Our Lord did not. According to St. John, He said, 'I thirst,' and they held up to Him a sponge soaked in wine. After He had received it, He said, 'It is accomplished.' " Father Villiers stopped.

" 'And gave up His spirit,' " Lord Gisors quoted glumly.

"Exactly," said the priest firmly. "But by Easter Day His spirit had returned, and the only casualty among the faithful that weekend was Judas. I'll have a brandy, myself."

Only Lady Beverly and Chief Jaque refused refreshment—each for a different reason. When the drinks were about half gone, Lord Darcy walked casually to the fireplace and faced them all.

"We have a vexing problem before us. We must show how the late Count de la Vexin met his death. With the cooperation of all of you, I think we can do it. First, we have to dispense with the notion that there was any Black Magic involved in the death of His Lordship. Master Sean?"

The Irishman rolled Xerez around on his tongue and swallowed before answering. "Me Lords, ladies, and gentlemen, having thoroughly given the situation every scientific test, I would be willing to state in His Majesty's Court of Justice that, by whatever means His Lordship the Count was killed, there was no trace of any magic, black *or* white, involved. Not in any capacity by anyone."

Lady Beverly's eyes blazed suddenly. "By no *human* agency, I suppose you mean?" Her voice was low, intense.

"Aye, Me Lady," Master Sean agreed.

"But what of the punishment of God? Or the evil works of Satan?"

A silence hung in the air. After a moment, Master Sean said: "I think I'll let the Reverend Father answer that one."

Father Villiers steepled his fingers. "My child, God punishes transgressors in many ways—usually through the purgatorial torture of conscience, or, if the conscience is weak, by the reaction of the sinner's fellow men to his evildoing. The Devil, in hope that the sinner may die before he has a chance to repent, may use various methods of driving them to self-destruction.

"But you cannot ascribe an act like this to *both* God and Satan. There is, furthermore, no evidence whatever that your late father was so great a sinner that God would have resorted to such drastic punishment, nor that the Devil feared of His Lordship's relenting in the near future of such minor sins as he may have committed.

"In any case, *neither God nor the Devil disposes of a man by grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and the seat of the pants and throwing him through a window!*

"Execution by defenestration, my child, is a peculiarly human act."

Lady Beverly bowed her head and said nothing.

Again a moment of silence, broken by Lord Darcy.

"My Lord Gisors, assuming that your father was killed by purely physical means, can you suggest how it might have been done?"

Lord Gisors, who had been at the sidetable pouring himself another drink, turned slowly around.

"Yes, Lord Darcy. I can," he said thoughtfully.

Lord Darcy raised his left eyebrow again. "Indeed? Pray elucidate, My Lord."

Lord Gisors lifted his right index finger. "My father was pushed out that window. Correct?" His voice was shaking a little.

"Correct," Lord Darcy acknowledged.

"Then, by God, somebody had to push him out! I don't know who, I don't know how! But there had to be someone in there to do it!" He took another swallow of his drink and then went on in a somewhat calmer voice. "Look at it this way. Someone was in there waiting for him. My father came in, walked toward the window, got up on his desk, and that someone, whoever he was, ran up behind him and pushed him out. I don't know who or why, but that's what *had* to have happened! You're the Duke's Investigator. You find out what happened and who did it. But don't try to put it on any of us, My Lord, because none of us was anywhere near that room when it happened!"

He finished his drink in one swallow and poured another.

Lord Darcy spoke quietly. "Assuming your hypothesis is true, My Lord, how did the killer get into the room, and how did he get out?" Without waiting for an answer from Lord Gisors, Lord Darcy looked at Captain Sir Roderique. "Have you any suggestions, Sir Roderique?"

The old guardsman scowled. "I don't know. The laboratory was locked at all times, and always guarded when His Lordship was in there. But it wasn't especially guarded when Lord Jillbert was gone. He didn't go in often—not more than once or twice a week. The room wasn't particularly guarded the rest of the time. Anyone with a key could have got in. Someone could have stolen the key from My Lord de la Vexin and had a duplicate made."

"Highly unlikely," Lord Darcy said. "His Lordship wanted no one in that room but himself. On the other hand, my dear Captain, *you* have a duplicate."

Roderique's face seemed to turn purple. He came suddenly to his feet, looking down at Lord Darcy. "Are you accusing *me*?"

Darcy lifted a hand, palm outward. "Not yet, my dear Captain; perhaps not ever. Let us continue with our discussion without permitting our emotions to boil over." The Captain of the Guard sat down slowly without taking his eyes from Lord Darcy's face.

"I assure you, My Lord," the captain said, "that no other duplicate has ever been made from the key in my possession, and that the key has never been out of my possession."

"I believe you, Captain; I never said that any duplicate was made from *your* key. But let us make a hypothesis.

"Let us assume," Lord Darcy continued, "that the killer *did* have a duplicate key. Very well. What happened then?" He looked at Sergeant Andray. "Give us your opinion, Sergeant."

Andray frowned as though concentration on the problem was just a little beyond his capabilities. His handsome features seemed to be unsure of themselves. "Well—uh—well, My Lord, this is—I mean—well, if it were me—" He licked his lips again and looked at his wineglass. "Well, now, My Lord, supposing there were someone hidden inside the room, waiting for My Lord Count. Hm-m-m. His Lordship comes in and climbs up on the desk. Then the killer would have run forward and pushed him out. Yes. That's the only way it could have happened, isn't it?"

"Then how did he get out of the room afterward, Sergeant? You have told us that there was no one in the room when you went in through the window, and that the guardsmen outside found no one in the room after you let them in. The room was under guard all that time, was it not?"

"Yes, My Lord, it was."

"Then how did the killer get out?"

The sergeant blinked. "Well, My Lord, the only other way out is through the trapdoor to the roof. He might have gone out that way."

Lord Darcy shook his head slowly. "Impossible. I looked at that rooftop carefully this morning. There is no sign that anyone has been up there for some time. Besides, how would he get down? The tower was surrounded by guardsmen who would have seen anyone trying to go down ninety feet on a rope, and there is hardly any other way. At any rate, he would have been seen. And he could hardly have come down the stairs; the interior was full of the Guard." His Lordship's eyes shifted suddenly. "Do you have any suggestions, Demoiselle Madelaine?"

She looked up at him with her round blue eyes. "No, My Lord. I know nothing about such things. It still seems like magic to me."

More silence.

Well, that's enough of this, Lord Darcy thought. *Now we go on to the final phase.*

"Does anyone else have a suggestion?" Apparently, no one did. "Very well, then; perhaps you would like to know my theory of how the killer—a very solid and human killer—got in and out of that room without being seen. Better than, merely telling you, I shall demonstrate. Shall we repair to the late Count's *sanctum sanctorum*? Come."

There was a peculiar mixture of reluctance and avidity in the general feeling of those present, but they rose without objection and followed Lord Darcy across the courtyard to the Red Tower and up the long stairway to the late Count's room.

"Now," said Lord Darcy after they were all in the room, "I want all of you to obey my instructions exactly. Otherwise, someone is likely to get hurt. I am sorry there are no chairs in this room—evidently My Lord de la Vexin liked to work on his feet—so you will have to stand. Be so good as to stand over against the east wall. That's it. Thank you."

He took the five-inch brass key from his waistcoat pocket, then went over to the door and closed it. "The door was locked, so." *Click.* "And barred, so." *Thump.*

He repocketed the key and turned to face the others. "There, now. That's approximately the way things were after Lord de la Vexin locked himself in his laboratory for the last time. Except, of course, for the condition of that ruined window." He gestured toward the casement, empty now save for broken shards of glass and leading around the edges.

He looked all around the room, side to side and up and down. "No, it still isn't right, is it? Well, that can soon be adjusted properly. Firstly, we'll need to get that unused oil lamp down. Yonder ladder is a full two feet short to reach a ten-foot beam. There are no chairs or stools. A thorough search has shown that the long-handled hook which is the usual accouterment for such a lamp is nowhere in the room. Dear me! What shall we do?"

Most of the others were looking at Lord Darcy as though he had suddenly become simple-minded, but Master Sean smiled inwardly. He knew that His Lordship's blithering was to a purpose.

"Well! What have we here?" Lord Darcy was looking at the brass key in his hand as if he had never seen it before. "Hm-m-m. the end which engages the lock wards should make an excellent hook. Let us see."

Standing directly beneath the brass globe, he jumped up and accurately hooked the brass ring with the key. Then he lowered the big lamp down.

"What is this? It comes down quite easily! It balances the counterweight to a nicety. How odd! Can it be that it is not empty after all?" He took off the glass chimney, put it on the worktable of the east wall, went back and took out the wickholder. "Bless my soul! It is quite brimful of fuel."

He screwed the wickholder back in and lowered the whole lamp to the fullest extent of the pulley chain. It was hardly more than an inch off the floor. Then he grabbed the chain firmly with both hands and lifted. The lamp came up off the floor, but the chain above Lord Darcy's hands went limp and did not move upward. "Ah! The ratchet lock works perfectly. The counterweight cannot raise the lamp unless one pulls the chain down a little bit and then releases it slowly. Excellent." He lowered the lamp back down.

"Now comes the difficult part. That lamp is quite heavy." Lord Darcy smiled. "But, fortunately, we can use the ladder for this."

He brought the ladder over to the locked and barred door, bracing it against the wall over the lintel. Then his audience watched in stunned silence as he picked up the heavy lamp, carried it over to the ladder, climbed up, and hooked the chain over one of the apparatus hooks that the Count had fastened at many places in the ceiling.

"There, now," he said, descending the ladder. He looked up at the resulting configuration. The lamp chain now stretched almost horizontally from its supporting beam to the heavy hook in the ceiling over the door. "You will notice," said His Lordship, "that the supporting beam for the lamp is not in the exact center of the room. It is two feet nearer the window than it is to the door. The center of the beam is eleven feet from the door, nine feet from the window."

"What *are* you talking about?" Lady Beverly burst out suddenly. "What has all this to do with—"

"*If you please, My Lady!*" Lord Darcy cut her off sharply. Then, more calmly. "Restrain yourself, I pray. All will become clear when I have finished."

Good Lord, he thought to himself, *it should be plain to the veriest dunce.*

Aloud, he said, "We are not through yet. The rope, Master Sean."

Without a word, Master Sean O Lochlainn opened his big symbol-decorated carpetbag and took from it a coil of cotton rope; he gave it to Lord Darcy.

"This is plain, ordinary cotton rope," His Lordship said. "But it is not quite long enough. The other bit of rope, if you please, my dear Sean."

The sorcerer handed him another foot-long piece of rope that looked exactly like the coil he already held.

Using a fisherman's knot, Lord Darcy tied the two together.

He climbed up on the late Count's desk and tied the end of the rope to another hook above the gaslight—the end with the tied-on extra piece. Then he turned and threw the coil, of rope across the room to the foot of the ladder. He went back across the room and climbed the ladder again, taking with him the other end of the rope. Working carefully, he tied the rope to the chain link just above the lamp, then, taking the chain off the hook, he looped the rope over the hook so that it supported the lamp.

He climbed back down the ladder and pointed. "As you see, the lamp is now supported solely by the rope, which is fastened at the hook above the gaslamp over the window, stretches across the room, and is looped over the hook above the door to support the weight."

By this time, they all understood. There was tenseness in the room. "I said," continued Lord Darcy, "that the rope I have used is ordinary cotton. So it is, except for that last additional foot which is tied above the gaslamp. That last foot is not ordinary cotton, but of specially treated cotton which is called nitrated or nitrated cotton. It burns extremely rapidly. In the original death trap, the entire rope was made of that substance, but there was not enough left for me to use in this demonstration.

"As you will notice, the end which supports the lamp is several, inches too long, after the knot was

tied. The person who set this trap very tidily cut off the excess and then failed to pick up the discarded end. Well, we all make mistakes, don't we?"

Lord Darcy stood dramatically in the center of the room. "I want you all to imagine what it was like in this room last night. Dark—or nearly so. There is only the dim illumination from the courtyard lamps below." He picked up an unlit torch from the workbench a few feet away, then went to the door.

"My Lord Count has just come in. He has closed, locked, and barred the door. He has a torch in his hand." Lord Darcy lit the torch with his pipe lighter.

"Now, he walks across the room, to light the gaslamp above the window, as is his wont." Lord Darcy acted out his words.

"He climbs up on his desk. He turns on the gas valve. He lifts his torch to light the gas."

The gas jet shot a yellow flame several inches high. It touched the nitrated cotton rope above it. The rope flared into hissing flame.

Lord Darcy leaped aside and bounced to the floor, well away from the desk.

On the opposite side of the room, the heavy lamp was suddenly released from its hold. Like some airborne juggernaut, it swung ponderously along the arc of its chain. At the bottom of that arc, it grazed the floor with the brass ring. Then it swung up and—as anyone could see—would have smashed the window, had it still been there. Then it swung back.

Everyone in the room watched the lamp pendulum back and forth, dragging the cotton rope behind it. The nitrated section had long since vanished in flame.

Lord Darcy stood on the east side of the room, with the pendulum scything the air between himself and the others.

"Thus you see how the late Count de la Vexin came to his death. The arc this thing cuts would have struck him just below the shoulder-blades. Naturally, it would not have swung so long as now, having been considerably slowed by its impact with the Count's body." He walked over, grabbed the chain, and fought the pendulum to a standstill.

They all stared fascinated at the deadly weight which now swung in a modest two-inch wobble.

The young Lord Gisors lifted his head with a jerk and stared straight into Lord Darcy's eyes. "Surely my father would have seen that white rope, Darcy."

"Not if it were covered, with lampblack—which it was."

Lord Gisors narrowed his eyes. "Oh, fine. So that's the end of it, eh? With the lamp hanging there, almost touching the floor. Then—*will you explain how it got back up to where it belongs?*"

"Certainly," said Lord Darcy.

He walked over to the lamp, removed the length of cotton rope, pulled gently on the chain to unlock the ratchet, and eased the lamp up. After it left his outstretched hand, it moved on up quietly to its accustomed place.

"Like that," said Lord Darcy blandly. "Except of course, that the glass chimney was replaced first. And the rope did not need to be removed, since it had all been burnt up."

Before anyone else could speak, Father Villiers said: "Just a moment My Lord. If someone had done that, he would have had to have been in this room—seconds after the death. But there is no way in or out of this room except the door—which was guarded—and the door to the roof, which you have said was not used. There is no other way in or out of this room."

Lord Darcy smiled. "Oh, but there is, Reverend Father."

The priest looked blank.

"The way My Lord de la Vexin took," Lord Darcy said gently.

Surely they understand now, Lord Darcy thought. He broke the silence by saying: "The lamp was down. There was no one in this room. Then, someone climbed in through the window via the fire ladder, raised the lamp again, and—"

"*Chief Jaque!*" Lord Darcy shouted. But he was a fraction of a second too late.

Sergeant Andray had drawn a concealed sidearm. Chief Jaque was just a little too late getting his own gun out.

There was the sudden ear-shattering shock of a heavy-caliber pistol firing in a closed room, and

Chief Jaque went down with a bullet in him.

Lord Darcy's hand darted toward the pistol at his own hip, but before it could clear the holster, Captain Sir Roderique leaped toward his son.

"You fool! You—" His voice was agonized.

He grabbed the sergeant's wrist, twisted it up.

There came a second shattering blast.

Sir Roderique fell backwards; the bullet had gone in under his chin and taken the top of his head off.

Sergeant Andray screamed.

Then he spun around, leaped to the top of the desk, and flung himself out the window, still screaming.

The scream lasted just a bit over two seconds before Sergeant Andray was permanently silenced by the courtyard below.

The celebrations of Holy Saturday were over. Easter Season had officially begun. The bells were still ringing in the tower of the Cathedral of St. Cuen in the city of Rouen, the capital of the Duchy of Normandy.

His Royal Highness, Richard, Duke of Normandy, leaned back in his chair and smiled across the cozy fireplace at his Chief Investigator. Both of them were holding warming glasses of fine Champagne brandy.

His Highness had just finished reading Lord Darcy's report.

"I see, My Lord," he said. "After the trap had been set and triggered—after the late de la Vexin had been propelled through the window to his death—Sergeant Andray went up the fire ladder alone, raised the lamp back to its usual position, and then opened the barred door to allow in the other guardsmen. The fox concealing himself among the hounds."

"Precisely, Your Highness. And you see the motive."

His Highness the Duke, younger brother of His Imperial Majesty, King John IV, was blond, blue-eyed, and handsome, like all the Plantagenets, but at this moment there was a faint frown upon his forehead. "The motive was obvious from the beginning, My Lord," he said. "I can see that Sergeant Andray wanted to get rid of My Lord de la Vexin in order to clear the way for a marriage which would be beneficial to his sister—and, of course, to the rest of the family. But your written report is incomplete." He tapped the sheaf of papers in his hand.

"I fear, Your Highness," Lord Darcy said carefully, "that it must remain forever incomplete."

Prince Richard leaned back and sighed. "Very well, Darcy. Give it to me orally. Off the record, as usual."

"As you command, Your Highness," Lord Darcy said, refilling his glass.

"Young Andray must be blamed for the murder. The evidence I have can go no further, now that both he and his father are dead. Chief Jaque, who will easily recover from the bullet wound in his shoulder, has no more evidence than I have.

"Captain Sir Roderique will be buried with military honors, since eyewitnesses can and will say that he tried to stop his son from shooting me. Further hypotheses now would merely raise a discussion that could never be resolved.

"But it was not Sergeant Andray who set the trap. Only Captain Sir Roderique had access to the key that unlocked the laboratory. Only he could have gone up there and set the death trap that killed the late Count."

"Then why," the Prince asked, "did he try to stop his son?"

"Because, Your Highness," Lord Darcy replied, "he did not think I had enough evidence to convict. He was trying to stop young Andray from making a fool of himself by giving the whole thing away. Andray had panicked—which I had hoped he would, but not, I must admit, to that extent.

"He killed his father, who had plotted the whole thing, and, seeing what he had done, went into a suicidal hysteria which resulted in his death. I am sorry for that, Your Highness."

"Not your fault, Darcy. What about the Demoiselle Madelaine?"

Lord Darcy sipped at his brandy. "She was the prime mover, of course. She instigated the whole

thing—subtly. No way to prove it. But Lord Gisors sees through her now. He will wed the lady his father quite properly chose for him."

"I see," said the Prince. "You told him the truth?"

"I spoke to him, Your Highness," Lord Darcy said. "But he already knew the truth."

"Then the matter is settled." His Highness straightened up in his chair. "Now, about those notebooks you brought back with you. What do they mean?"

"They are the late Count's scientific-materialistic notes on his researches for the past twenty years, Your Highness. They represent two decades of hard research."

"But—really, Darcy. Research on Materialism? Of what use could they possibly be?"

"Your Highness, the Laws of Magic tell us how the mind of man can influence the material universe. But the universe is more than the mind of man can possibly encompass. The mind of God may keep the planets and the stars in their courses, but, if so, then He has laws by which He abides."

Lord Darcy finished his brandy. "There are more things in this universe than the mind of man, Your Highness, and there are laws which govern them. Someday, those notebooks may be invaluable."