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JANUARY

# MYSTERY



# MAGAZINE



**FOOD FOR  
COFFINS**

by **JAMES DUNCAN**

**DARK BONDAGE**

*MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL*

by **HUGH B. CAVE**



**H.M. APPEL**

**MINDRET LORD**

**DONALD BARR**

**CHIDSEY**

*"THE WEIRDEST  
STORIES EVER TOLD"*

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Volume Seven

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Number Two

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# FOOD FOR COFFINS

By James Duncan

**M**ORTEN PEQUET rose to his feet as the old lady slouched in. He had had the curtains and heavy drapes before the window drawn aside and for the past two hours his eyes had been fastened on the unfailing sheet of rain that fell in serried ranks. Now as they turned to the old woman, there was almost feverish attention in their liquid depths.

"He has come," said the old woman solemnly.

"Thanks, mother. Have him shown to the library. There's a fire there." His hands smoothed out his flowing black robe, as though to emphasize his calmness. "What is he like?"

Madame Pequet's wrinkled old face screwed up tightly. "He is bold and strong. Over-bold, perhaps," she added shrewdly. "He drove a car from Montreal in four hours. He is not the kind to be frightened easily, my son."

Morten Pequet smiled. But even his



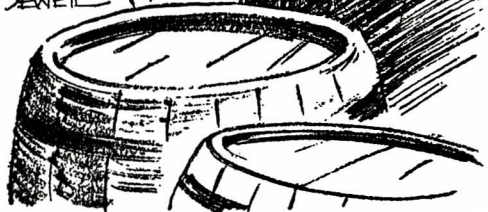
**Novelette  
of Dreadful Peril**

*What devil's power was it that sent fierce horror prowling through the shadowed rooms of the ancient house of the Ravilliacs—that left young Jerry Vernon limp and powerless, and set his sweetheart to wander in darkness, seeking the warm red blood of her loved ones?*

smile did not relieve the harsh lines of his hatchet-like face. It served only to emphasize his small, thin-lipped, cruel-looking mouth. His voice was harsh and dry and when he grew excited, it flung out words with a sharp, clipping utterance.

"Better that he be bold than a weakling," he said.

AMDS  
SEWELL



The old woman's countenance became strangely alive and alert. Her white head bobbed up and down in complete agreement.

"Yes," she murmured. "Yes, my son. It is better."

Then as softly as she had padded in, she slid out. She was a tiny woman and the door appeared to open only a crack to permit her egress. As she came into the hall, her manner seemed to change. The light in her eyes faded, the eagerness fled from her. Again her face looked like an old woman's, not radiant like a girl's.

The young man who stood in the hall, shifting his weight from foot to foot, looked inquiringly at her. A vague feeling of uneasiness had gripped him ever since he set foot in this house. When he had joyfully rung the bell a few moments before he had expected Marie herself to greet him. Instead this old hag had ushered him in, then left him shivering and wet in the hall while she traipsed over the house.

"Marie," he asked, "where is she? I expected—"

"Ah, *monsieur*, she will be down directly. Do not be so impatient. The poor girl is simply dying to see you again."

"Is she? By jiminy, not half as anxious as I am!"

The old woman's head bobbed knowingly. "Ah, you Americans! You sweep a girl off her feet, *Monsieur* Vernon. That is your name—yes? Please to follow me."

Jerry Vernon picked up the bag he had carried in from the car and followed the old woman down the length of the cavernous hall, the darkness of which seemed to advance and retreat like some monster at once curious and shy. He went through a baize-covered door and into a room where there was warmth, even

stuffiness. There was no illumination save that afforded by the fluttering, dancing light of the fire that blew like yellow pennons in the draught of the open grate. The walls were walnut paneled, dark. Shadows flitted across the ceiling. It was a depressing room, with rows upon rows of shelved books occupying one entire side from floor to ceiling. But even this was welcome after the dark, cold hall and the gloomy rain outside.

"You wait here," the old woman said, as Vernon advanced to the fire, chafing his hands. And before he could answer, she had slid out of the door and clicked the lock.

He looked after her, then turned with a shrug to the fire. The uneasy feeling that had gripped him when he first set foot into this house rose again now, only to be dispelled a second later as his right hand tapped his breast pocket. For in that pocket reposed a letter, written to him by Marie. It was only a week ago that he had received it in New York, but he had lost little time in speeding up to these God-forsaken Canadian woods just to hear her voice again, to gaze upon her lovely face.

Jerry Vernon was in love with Marie Ravilliac. The year he had spent in New York away from her had bitterly taught him that his thoughts were inextricably wound up with her. It had been nearly two years since he had first met her—at a diplomatic dinner in Washington. He had been drawn to her from the first. Love at first sight. In a week he had proposed, resting all his hope of future happiness and contentment on Marie's answer.

IT HAD been overwhelming, catastrophic when she refused him. Not because she did not love him. Oh, no! She had come to care for him as he for her. Of that, she assured him. But she would

not—could not—dare not—marry him!

Press her for reasons as he did, Jerry Vernon got no answer. The girl left soon after for her home in Canada—that baronial castle in the midst of the wilds that her father, a lumber baron, had built. Jerry Vernon moped for a year. At the last moment, Marie had extracted a promise, though reluctantly given, until now scrupulously held, that bound Jerry Vernon to not seeking her out. How much that promise had cost him in the past year, only he could tell!

And then came that glorious morning when his mail brought him an envelope with a Canadian postmark. He recognized Marie's hand at once. Almost delirious, he read her brief note. He knew it now by heart. Every word, every comma was engraved in his mind.

Dearest Jerry:

I feel that our separation has been long enough. If you still love me, then come. I am waiting.

Marie.

He was repeating these words over in his mind now, when suddenly he stopped, his head raised. From outside the library door an unmistakable footstep had sounded. A split second later and there was a tiny rattle of the doorknob. Jerry Vernon's heart nearly skipped a beat. Marie! He took a step forward.

The door opened; but it was a man that stood on the threshold. He was rather short, thin, pale-faced. He was oddly dressed in a flowing black robe made of some coarse stuff that resembled sackcloth. He made a gesture with one hand toward Vernon, in the manner of a monk's benediction. He came into the room, quietly closed the door.

Vernon's intense feeling of disappointment must have showed on his face, for the newcomer said: "I'm sorry to have troubled you. I know you're expecting

Miss Marie and my coming instead must have disturbed you."

Jerry Vernon turned abruptly to the fire. "Not at all." Then feeling the man's eyes boring into his back, he turned around again, asked with mild curiosity: "Who are you?"

The black-robed man was silent for a moment. His eyes gazed full into Vernon's as though he were deliberately measuring him. Then he said: "My name is Morten Pequet. Some call me Father Pequet. You, of course, are Jerome Vernon."

Vernon nodded, whilst wondering at the strange way this man regarded him. "Where is Marie?" he asked at last. "I confess I don't know what to make of it all. I've been here almost fifteen minutes, but I haven't seen her. And this house it so quiet—like a tomb. I thought Marie had brothers who lived with her. It wouldn't seem as if anybody lived here."

"Marie is here," Morten Pequet stated crisply. "She begged me to tell you that she cannot see you tonight. You must be patient. Perhaps in the morning. . . ."

Alarm seized Vernon. He took a step toward the man. "Anything wrong? Isn't she well?"

"Oh, she is well enough. But it is very late and she is tired. You must excuse her."

"Of course," Vernon muttered, staring hard. It seemed like a bitter pill to swallow. He had rushed like a madman from New York only to arrive and learn that Marie was tired and would not see him. For a moment he felt angry. He was being made a fool.

"Where are her brothers?" he asked, swallowing hard. "I met one of them—Geoffrey—in Washington, and I understand there are two more."

"Yes," said Pequet in an odd tone, "there are three brothers in the Ravilliac

family—Geoffrey, Albert and Hugh." He paused, rubbed his hands along the rough cloth of his cassock-like garment. "But now they sleep."

It wasn't the words so much as the sibilant way in which they were uttered that sent a chill down Vernon's spine. "Asleep?" he repeated almost dully. "That's odd. Tell me, if I don't become too personal, what is your—ah—position in the household, Father Pequet?"

The man pointed a finger at his chest. "I, *monsieur*? I am a sort of father confessor. I once took orders as a monk. I have been defrocked but that did not prevent the Ravilliacs from accepting me as their spiritual father."

He nodded his head as he spoke, and smiled. Despite himself, a vague feeling of terror was born in Vernon's breast.

His eyes fastened on the figure of the black-robed man who so calmly spoke of having been defrocked, and tried to fathom the reason for his strange feeling. At last, in an attempt to turn the conversation, he said: "Isn't it strange that in so large a house, there are no servants? Or are they also asleep?"

Father Pequet smiled quietly and moved toward the door. "There is only one servant. That old woman who showed you in. She is my mother."

"Your mother? I—I think it's strange, sir."

"Yes?" Father Pequet said with polite indifference. "I will send my mother to you. She will prepare a room for your rest." He paused at the threshold. "Good-night, young man. I trust you will sleep well."

The door closed quietly on the thin, black-garbed shoulders.

**J**ERRY VERNON had not long to wait. Within the quarter hour, he was following the white-haired Madame Pequet up the ancient stairway. He deposited

his bags in the luxurious room to which she led him. He looked about him.

"Thank you," he said. "I will require nothing more."

The old woman turned a glance on him that made him shiver as if a cold blast had fanned his neck. Her glance was a meaningful smile that somehow managed to convey an impression of consummate, malignant evil.

"I think you will be comfortable, *monsieur*," she said softly.

Jerry Vernon's nerves already were stretched to the breaking-point. It was all he could do to restrain himself from yelling at her: "Get out, witch! Leave me alone!" And the expression of his face seemed to imply as much; for the old woman moved at once to the door and slipped out, closing it behind her. Jerry Vernon fetched out a cigarette, lit it and listened thoughtfully. It was long after midnight now. The great house was perfectly still.

Something was wrong with this house. Something horrible was going on here. He could not, despite his best efforts to assure himself of the normalcy of his surroundings, shake off the feeling that this was true.

He had come tearing down the roads from Montreal, expecting Marie, her brothers, a charming, happy family circle. But instead he had encountered only queer Madame Pequet and her still queerer, black-garbed son. Everyone else in the house was asleep. He remembered, with a slight shiver, Morten Pequet's words: "There are three brothers in the Ravilliac family—Geoffrey, Albert and Hugh. But now they sleep."

Back and forth, back and forth, Jerry Vernon paced until he, too, became sleepy. With a sigh, he threw himself onto the bed, clothes and all. His eyes were fastened on the two windows of the room, blurred with rain. The single can-

dle on the little table fluttered wildly as gusts of wind unexpectedly found their way through cracks in the door and window mouldings. Then the candle went out, plunging the room into utter darkness.

Jerry Vernon made no attempt to light it again, but flung himself upon the bed. The darkness was not unpleasant and presently he slept. Soon he dreamed that he heard the door open and awoke at the slight sound. A stranger was in his room. He dreamed that he did not spring out of bed but lay quietly to see what the newcomer would do. The stranger stood on the threshold for a second or two, then glided into the room. Even in the darkness, Vernon recognized the figure as Marie Ravillac.

It was she without mistake. Only her face could possess that remarkable classical outline of features that Jerry knew so well. She was dressed in a simple white robe and wore her long dark hair in two plaits.

She advanced with slow, majestic step to the bed and leaned over him. He dreamed that his nostrils could catch the very perfume of her skin. But her face, though beautiful, was cold as marble and expressionless. That struck him as odd. He spoke her name softly, tenderly—but she did not hear. She stopped close to the bed and leaned over him.

Then he saw with the indescribable horror of a nightmare that her lips were drawn back over her teeth. Her white teeth were bared like fangs! He called her name again but she would not answer, would not hear him.

Closer and closer came her face. It was already touching his. He dreamed that he struggled to rise but her hands held him down. Her teeth locked in his throat. He felt a sharp pain, a horrible gurgling, bubbling sound. Marie! Marie was drinking his blood!

Then panic descended on him in full blast. He was suffocating, struggling against this horror that was draining him. The nightmare rose to a screaming point.

With strangled yells, Jerry Vernon awoke. For a second he lay still in the darkness. His room was empty. He was alone. But even when he was awake the horror persisted, and he lay tossing and turning.

A split second later, his blood froze. Above the sound of the heavy rain beating against the windows, was the sound of creaking hinges. The door to his room was closing! Abruptly, he sprang out of the bed and as he did he felt of his collar. It was wet, sticky, warm. Blood!

Then he had not been dreaming. There was indeed blood on his neck. His shirt collar was soaked with it! His subconscious self, which never wholly slumbers, had tried to waken him, warn him of his danger.

With a stifled oath and something like a sob, he flung himself at the door and swung it open. There was a tiny light further down the hall—a single candle. By its flickering rays he could see a figure just about to descend the broad staircase!

Jerry Vernon crouched motionless against the door-jamb, staring after that figure. His eyes went abnormally wide, his face white as chalk.

For the thing which was now majestically treading the stairs was the same white-robed figure which had appeared in his room. It was Marie!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Sleep of the Damned

AT THAT moment, Jerry would gladly have exchanged a dozen years of his life to erase that soul-shattering vision from his mind. Marie—his lovely Marie—a vampire!



Was this then the answer to that vague feeling of uneasiness he had experienced on first setting foot into this house? He groped along the cold wall and reached the head of the stairs. They were empty. Marie had disappeared! Jerry Vernon stood stock still and listened. No sound disturbed the house. It was quiet and still like—he shuddered—like a tomb. . . .

His fingers clutched the smooth balustrade as he descended on tiptoe. His one thought was to encounter Marie again, speak to her, rouse her from her somnambulistic reverie. Vampirism! His mind was working with pellucid clearness now. He was reviewing what he knew of the subject.

Vampirism, he told himself, was one of those medieval beliefs long since consigned by the medical profession to the dust heap of exploded superstitions. But those borderland subjects had a way of cropping up in the most unexpected of places. They defied logic and natural laws, mocked skeptics. Only a few years ago, India had suffered an outbreak of vampirism. Ghoulish spirits were supposed to have taken up their abode in living persons, possessing on the sudden supernatural powers of batlike flight. They lived by glutting themselves on nocturnal blood feasts.

It was horrible, too horrible even to permit his mind to dwell upon. Yet he could not forget that it was Marie who had leaned over his bed, her teeth bared to sink into his throat!

At the foot of the stairs, he paused to get his bearings. Ahead of him lay the rooms of the lower floor, the library where he had been received, the kitchen, a study, a drawing-room. Behind the staircase was a door that he thought led to a cellar. He tiptoed toward it, then stiffened abruptly as behind him a door clicked open. He turned toward it with horror-filled eyes, expecting to see Marie.

But it was not she. He breathed a faint sigh of relief. He was afraid his nerves could not stand another encounter with her. The figure in the doorway was the black-robed Morten Pequet. In one hand he held a candle which was fitted into a brass holder. In the other he held something else that Jerry Vernon could not distinguish.

Pequet stepped into the hall. A thoughtful frown settled over his hatchet-like face.

"My good man, you frightened me," he said. "It is very late. Why are you wandering about the house?"

Jerry Vernon stared, as between them the candle flame fluttered. His reply came mechanically. "I—I couldn't sleep. You see—"

"You're hurt!" Pequet's voice was sharp, ringing. To Jerry Vernon's ears, it sounded triumphant. "There's blood on your collar."

"I know," he said grimly. "I—I must've cut myself. I had a bad dream and awoke. . . ."

"To find blood?" Pequet's eyes, in the uncertain light, gleamed like twin pools reflecting moonlight.

His right hand extended in a quick gesture of commiseration. Jerry Vernon caught a glimpse of the object in Pequet's hand and started. He pointed to it.

"Wh—what is that?"

Pequet instantly withdrew his hand and the object it held from the circle of light. A cunning look battled in his eyes.

"It is nothing," he stated, off-handedly. "Just an amusing hobby of mine. I like to work with clay, make figures with it. I. . . ."

**S**TARK terror seized Jerry Vernon, held him abruptly in relentless grip. He found himself shaking and shivering. His gaze shifted to the black-robed man's

face. The face was no longer frowning. It was calm, but with the calmness of assured power. The thin, cruel lips were curved in a diabolic expression.

"What is that?" Vernon all but screamed the words.

Suddenly, Pequet thrust the object into the light. "As you can see," he said evenly, "it's a little statuette of yourself. I was amusing myself with it, when you came down. I fancy it's a remarkable resemblance, isn't it?"

It was. Jerry Vernon stood transfixed in horror. He could recognize his own features, even the cut of his Norfolk jacket. But the statuette was more life-like and realistic than that. Its throat was punctured in two places exactly as was his own! But even more horrible than that, there were two tiny drops of blood suspended in pear-shaped gobules from each puncture!

"How—where did you—?" he began, then stopped. The full horror was apparent to him now. That statuette had been made so that Marie would be forced upon her nocturnal visitation! What weird, supernatural powers did this fiend possess over Marie, over himself? . . .

Abruptly Jerry Vernon reached out, snatched the clay figure from Pequet's hands. His face was a grim mask.

"You'll answer my questions, Pequet, every one of them," he growled. "What's going on in this house? What have you done to Marie?"

Pequet's answer was a shrug of the shoulders. "My dear fellow, what can you mean? I'm sorry if I offended you by moulding a little statuette of yourself, but if—"

"There's some wicked thing you've done to this statuette and to Marie. You've put a spell on her, bewitched her! Lift the spell, or by all that's holy, I'll tear you apart!"

Pequet took a step backward. "I'm

afraid I don't—I don't understand you. It seems—"

"Can you understand this?"

Jerry Vernon's hand, knotted into a fist, smashed against Pequet's jawbone. Pequet, nearly lifted off his feet, smashed into the wall, then sank to the floor.

A scream sounded behind Vernon. His head flung about. In another doorway stood Madame Pequet. Like her son, she was attired in a black robe and her white hair was covered with a skull-like cap, also of black cloth.

"Murderer! Infidel!" she screamed.

She sprang at Vernon with outflung talons. He dodged to one side as her nails dug into the skin of his cheek. As she wheeled and came back at him, he flung the little clay statuette into her face!

She screamed with pain, but did not stop her rush. She came at him with scratching hands, biting and clawing.

And a strange thing happened to Jerry Vernon. As the little statuette struck the old woman and fell to the floor in fragments, all his strength seemed to ooze out of his body. He felt tired and languid. His shoulders drooped wearily, his arms fell to his sides.

He felt blackness cascading down upon him. He knew he was reeling. He seemed to be encased in an airless tomb, felt he would suffocate if he could not get a breath of air.

He tore at his throat, sank to the floor, gurgled hoarsely. He heard a laugh—Pequet's bitter, mocking laugh. Then he slid off into nothingness.

JERRY VERNON opened his eyes. He felt utterly weak, exhausted. When he tried to raise his head, a wave of dizziness attacked him. He lay back on the pillow again. He was lying in the bed of the room the old hag had shown him the previous night. For now it was daylight, as he could see from light that

poured in through the curtained windows.

He muttered something incoherently, turned his head. Not ten paces distant, Pequet sat on a chair facing him, smiling cruelly.

"You feel somewhat better, my friend? Ah, yes, you need not tell me. I know how you feel."

Vernon's answer was a muttered, grating oath. For a second, with those vicious eyes fixed balefully on his own, he forgot his weakness. He raised himself abruptly, stumbled off the bed, head whirling like a top. He reached out his hands to grasp his tormentor's throat, but his fingers seemed unable to respond. They clutched the air while he stood still again, sinking finally to the bed in a slumped sitting posture.

"Ah, you are weak," Pequet rasped. "No wonder, my friend. You have been on the brink of death and been pulled back. Very few men have experienced what you went through and lived."

Vernon stared at him dazedly. Slowly his mind began to click again, to function normally.

"You see—" the black-robed man shrugged—"I have my own peculiar power over people." He thrust his hand into the folds of his garment, brought forth the little clay statuette of Vernon. "You flung this at my mother. In your colossal ignorance you did not know that to break this statuette meant instant death for you. Only because I immediately snatched it up, mended it on the instant, was your life spared. In the future, you must be more careful. If you choose again to attack me, I have but to smash this lump of clay to kill you. Please to remember that!"

Vernon stared into the man's evil countenance, but said nothing. He remembered now how he had fallen not from a blow but on the instant that the statuette had broken.

"Furthermore," Pequet went on softly, "were I merely to pinch or twist any small part of this bit of fashioned clay, then you would at once suffer physical torture in the exact counterpart in your body of the spot affected. For instance, to prove my power to you, I will squeeze the throat of the statuette. Ah, you feel something, my friend?"

Vernon could not answer. A scream rose to his lips, was choked off at his throat and never uttered. Blackness swept down upon him, enveloped him. He clawed for air, made strange noises in his throat. He felt something relentlessly cutting off his breath. He tore wildly at his throat, choked, gasped. He felt his eyeballs start out of his head. He was experiencing all the sensations of a man being slowly and deliberately strangled to death! . . .

Then slowly, very slowly, the blackness left him, the terrible grip on his throat relaxed. He became aware again of his surroundings. His breath came in hoarse gasps. He saw again the grim smile of acute pleasure with which Pequet was watching him.

"Now," said Pequet, "you will obey my every command. You have a foretaste of what can happen to you. Listen!" Pequet, fondling the little clay statuette, seated himself closer to Vernon. "You have perhaps been wondering why you were sent for, what my purpose is in this strange house. I will tell you, my friend. It is useless to taste vengeance unless its purpose is fully understood."

Pequet's voice had been thin, querulous. Now it rang out with the clear triumphant accents of the conqueror.

"The Ravilliacs are a curious race, a curious breed of men. The family can be traced directly to medieval times. And over it has hovered, generation after generation, an awful curse. What that curse is, I will relate presently. In the

meantime, let me tell you something of the Ravilliacs. In medieval days, they were nobility. One of the most famous Ravilliacs fought with Joan of Arc. Later, they took to the church, to alchemy, the occult sciences—and distinguished themselves in each.

"In every age, in every time there has been a Ravilliac who has distinguished himself above his fellow-men. And correspondingly, there has been in each generation, a Ravilliac who sunk the family name and himself to the lowest depths of degradation. That, *pir*, is the curse on the house of Ravilliac. Long, long ago it was uttered and it has never failed to take its toll. The eldest son of the Ravilliac blood is doomed to death, dishonor, murder and worse.

"So inevitable has the curse become that Jacques Ravilliac, Marie's great grand-father, sought to escape by migrating to the New World. He built here a new domain—but the curse was older, stronger. Jacques' eldest son at the age of twenty-four was hanged for murder. So it has been in every generation.

"Finally came Marie's father, a clever, resourceful man. He, himself, was the youngest son. When he had grown rich, powerful, respected, he married. But he feared to bring children into the world. He feared the curse that dooms the eldest son of each generation. So, he sought to circumvent it."

**P**EUQUET'S voice had become thin, threatening, sibilant—so much so that Jerry Vernon could only stare at him. Now he understood dimly something of the reason why Marie had refused to marry him, why she had insisted that she dared not marry him.

"He sought to circumvent it," Pequet went on bitterly. "His method was simple. With the full knowledge of his wife, he had a child by a peasant woman who

already had been brought to his attention for dealing in black magic. Mother and child, he sent away immediately with enough money for their wants, lacking only his name. That he refused to bestow on his illegitimate son. His idea was to disown, forget his first-born, doomed by the curse, and calmly go about raising a family.

"I am that first-born! I am not Morten Pequet, but by all rights on heaven and earth—Morten Ravilliac! I think you begin to understand, my friend. I have come back to demand my birthright. At an early age I entered into a pact with my mother. She taught me all she knew about black magic, the occult sciences. In return, I promised to bring her and myself to rule over the house of Ravilliac. That is my vengeance on a father who disowned me, forgot my very existence."

Vernon stiffened. The realization came to him slowly that the curse on the house of Ravilliac was indeed taking its toll again. Here was the first-born turning amuck not on the world, but on the members of his own family!

"It was a simple matter," Pequet said, shrugging, "to establish myself here. I posed as a holy man. Before long, I had all the servants dismissed with the exception of my mother. Then I started my life's work. Marie is my masterpiece. She is no longer human. She is a ghou! a vampire, a blood-sucker! She has fed on the blood of her brothers. When that began to fail, I thought of you. She had told me about you, about her love for you. That was when I first came into this house. She loved you more than life. What would be simpler than summoning you here to see her—to *feed her!*"

Vernon's eyes widened, his hands trembled. A shiver coursed up and down his spine like something independently alive. His hands went taut, his arms rigid.

"You are strong, young," Pequet said

softly. "Last night you had your first taste of her nocturnal visitations. She will come again, my friend. You will be powerless to resist her. After a time, you will be drained like her brothers. Then I will make an end to the house of Raviliac! My triumph will be complete!"

He turned to the door with light, soft tread, paused as he fingered the door-knob.

"You will not be tied or confined to your room. I have only one fetter upon you." He held forth the clay statuette. "If you are missing when I need you, then I will play with this toy. I will not break it at once. I will merely twist it, piece by piece. You will die a thousand deaths before I am through. Invisible skeins bind you to this lump of fashioned clay. Your life is in my hands."

He was gone.

Jerry Vernon sat motionless, like a man in a dream. The house was perfectly still. For long minutes he did not even stir. Then he groped weakly off the bed and stood erect.

His mind still could not grasp the magnitude of what he had heard and seen. Over and over he told himself that the whole thing was only a vicious nightmare, plaguing him with unreality. The house was a chimera. Pequet, his mother, Marie, shadowy personages who never existed in actual life. But the cold voice of reason asserted itself. This *was* real. He would never forget that blood on his throat, drawn by Marie's teeth! He began to pace the floor, thinking out each separate event since he had entered the house.

Suddenly then, an exclamation rose to his lips and he stood stock still.

Of course! Pequet was not so diabolically clever after all. If he chose, he, Jerry Vernon, need not submit to the horror of Marie's blood-sucking. He could choose death! Let Pequet torture

the statuette and thus him, it would be better than. . . .

No! Jerry Vernon thrust the thought from his mind. That would be cowardice. He must stay—he must, if possible, save Marie, her brothers! He must. . . .

A sigh, broken, long-drawn, escaped his lips. He felt weak and powerless against the machinations of Pequet and his witchlike mother. With what weapons could he fight them?

He stalked to the door and eased out into the corridor. It was empty, quiet. He began to walk up and down. Anything would be better than confinement in his own room.

He saw that a door at the further end of the hall stood slightly ajar. A sense of menace, of evil descended upon him at once, like an enveloping shroud. On tip-toe, he moved to the door and peered in. It was a bedroom, more luxuriously furnished than his own. Through the tiny crack, he could just discern a brightly caparisoned bed.

With his heart in his mouth, he pushed the door wider. It creaked slightly as the hinges complained. He stepped into the room.

Instinctively, his eyes avoided the bed. He looked at everything else first before he permitted himself to glance that way. When at last he did so, a cry escaped his lips.

The last feeble rays of the sun slanted in through drawn Venetian blinds, making bars of shadow across the satin coverlet. One of those bars like an actual weight fell across the face of a girl who lay in the bed, eyes closed as in sleep. He needed but that single glance to tell Jerry Vernon that the sleeper was Marie Raviliac.

**H**IS heart thumped against his ribs with trip-hammer effect. He moved nearer until he stood just above her. Her

smooth skin was drained of all color. Only her lips were a startling carmine, in vivid contrast to her cheeks. There was not the trace of expression on her countenance.

With horror, the realization swept over Vernon that this was not sleep, but something else—something awesome, unnatural. He called her name softly, then louder, but she did not stir. Slowly, his hand reached out and touched her cheek.

He recoiled as though his fingers had come into contact with a snake.

Her cheek was cold as marble, devoid of any life-warmth. A bit of the coverlet was pulled away and he could see that she wore the same white gown that she had worn the night before. Vernon's eyes widened until they were gaping apertures. Instinctively, his right hand reached up to his own forehead and he crossed himself, mumbling a prayer he had learnt as a child.

The effect was far greater than he had bargained for. A horrible shriek rang in the room! Vernon staggered backward until the wall cut off his retreat.

It took him a second to realize that that unearthly yell had come from Marie's own lips. Her eyes were still closed but he could see them struggling to open as though trying to lift tremendous weights. Incoherent words were tumbling from her rapidly moving lips, filling the room with echoes. Her body writhed and twisted as though in agony.

The door behind him was flung open. Madame Pequet, eyes widened, rushed into the room. She flung a look at the writhing, suffering figure of the girl, at Vernon who was huddled against the wall. Her eyes sparkled like blue diamonds, her mouth worked, her voice cracked out like a snapping whip.

"You made the sign of the cross! Don't ever dare do that again! Now, get out!"

Vernon's limbs seemed devoid of pow-

er to answer his mind's dictates. Like an automaton he stumbled, dragged himself to the door. He paused only long enough to see Madame Pequet mumbling something over the girl whilst making passes with her hands over the helpless, supine body. He saw Marie's horrible writhing cease and something that resembled a smile, fleeting and ghostly, flit over her cold countenance. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. His face was white like paper. Gasping, sobbing, he reached the hall and trudged toward the stairs. . . .

The lower hall was empty and so were each of the rooms. Jerry Vernon searched for Pequet but could not find him. At last, he wandered into the kitchen. The rumbling of his stomach made him realize that he had not eaten in almost twenty-four hours. He found bread and some sandwich stuff. Literally cramming the food down his throat and washing it down with water—clear, cold and refreshing—he strode back to the hall.

The front door was open. He tried the knob, but did not venture forth. He could escape, he could run away from Pequet and his mother, take his chance with that clay statuette—but he did not attempt it. Marie needed his help. Every thought, every fiber of his being responded to that chant in his brain: Marie needed his help!

The sun had sunk below the topmost branches of the tall pines and night was coming on. Darkness was blurring his vision of the world outside this house of horror—and with the setting of the sun, there began an unpleasant, murky drizzle. Jerry Vernon recognized these signs with a shiver of dread. With the coming of night, Marie would rise from her cataleptic stupor and seek—*food!* . . .

Thinking in his dazed state of somehow hiding himself away, he retraced his

steps to the door behind the staircase that he thought would lead to the cellar. He tried it, shook it violently but could not budge it. It was locked.

His fists clenched and his eyes narrowed to bloodshot slits of hate. There was murder on his mind. If he had had Pequet in front of him now, he would have throttled out his life regardless of the consequences.

He stood hesitantly, then. The house was quiet as when he had first entered it. Turning about on his heel abruptly, he raced up the stairs. It was already pitch-dark. He crept forward cautiously toward the door to Marie's room. He crouched before the door and listened.

There was no sound. Slowly, he turned the knob and gave the door a little push. Nothing happened. He searched in his pockets and found a book of matches. There was a scraping, a sputtering sound and the match flared to life.

A sob escaped Vernon's lips as the light of the match revealed the room. The bed was empty! Marie was gone and with her, Madame Pequet!

Night had come, and in the darkness Marie had been roused to resume her visitations! . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### *The Waiting Coffin*

**T**HE match burned down to Jerry Vernon's fingertips, went out. He stood in the darkness, shuddering. What before had been only a vague presentiment was now grim reality. Instinctively, his eyes searched the deepening gloom for sight of Marie's white-clad figure. He could feel again the thumping of his heart. Soon, soon, she would be coming to drink his blood!

For a moment stark terror had him in its grip. He had no thought but to escape, to hide himself from the horror

that would claim him. Perhaps the cellar. . . .

He flung out of the room and down the stairs, three at a time. He rushed to the cellar door once more. This time, to his amazement, it opened to his reckless push.

With a muttered curse, he groped down the stairs. Grimly he waited when he reached the bottom. Crouching there with his body huddled, taut, he heard footsteps and voices beyond.

For a moment he was on the point of turning, fleeing back the way he had come. Then he caught himself. Marie must be down here. And though she sought for the nightly feast, he must try to save her.

Yet it was fully five minutes before Jerry Vernon ventured to move again in the direction from which those sounds had come. The cellar was like a sunken tomb, black as midnight. Cobwebs brushed across his face and once his groping hands encountered bottles, scores and scores of them. This was the wine cellar.

Silently he paced forward, wary lest he give his presence away by some misstep. Any sound in this subterranean chamber would be magnified a thousandfold, would convey a warning to its other occupants.

The cellar seemed endless. He moved along it, it seemed to his alert, throbbing brain, for hours and hours. At length, there was a sharp turning as though the cellar narrowed to a corridor. He stopped abruptly, stood stock still. Ahead appeared a pale streak of light and at once the sound of voices and footsteps came clearer.

A grim smile played about Vernon's tense features. That light was sufficient to guide him. He could see the cellar begin to widen out once more. He moved even more slowly now, with even greater caution.

Then again he stopped as though rooted to the spot where he stood.

Something infinitely more arresting than a light had stopped him this time. The thing was a voice, tortured, suffering. It seemed all at once to fill the cellar, to vibrate in every atom of the underground chamber's stagnant air.

And the voice was Marie's!

"Master, spare me!" she said. "I have fulfilled your wishes until now. Everything thou hast asked, I have performed—but this I cannot do! I cannot!"

The voice was supplicating, as though its owner lay prostrate upon the ground. Vernon moved forward, faster now. Then with a short gasp, he came again to a halt.

The cellar before him was no longer dark. Dim lights gleamed behind glass along the walls, set into cupped niches. He stared, turned pale. In the center of this underground room was Marie, groveling on the floor before Morten Pequet. Behind Pequet stood his mother, a malicious grin spread over her wrinkled, parchment-like face.

But even worse than that was the sight of the coffins. There were four of them, tilted against the wall, side by side, and facing Vernon. Three were occupied by the bodies of men. The fourth was empty.

It was with a shudder that Vernon recognized one of the three men as Geoffrey Ravilliac—Marie's brother. From the similarity of features, he knew at once that the rest were Marie's other brothers. Again he recalled Pequet's sinister words: "There are three brothers in the Ravilliac family—Geoffrey, Albert and Hugh. But now they sleep."

Sleep! These men looked dead. They lay in their coffins with their hands folded across their chests, their faces blank, utterly expressionless.

And the empty coffin? Jerry Vernon gasped and stood frozen, his nerveless,

cold fingers clenched at his sides. He was under no illusions about it. That fourth coffin was meant to be filled by his body.

THE realization numbed his mind, left him rigid, chilled. A full second elapsed before he could tear his eyes away from the sepulchral box. He imagined himself already in it, cold and blank-faced as the other three. Then his eyes blinked and again his attention was centered on Marie.

Pequet had muttered something and instantly the girl arose—but there was something about her now, something in the very movements of her body that expressed revolt. Even Vernon sensed it.

Pequet's face became mottled with rage. His voice rose to a fever-pitch of intensity, broke into a high-pitch squeal of wrath.

"You are to obey my will, my every whim! You are as dead, and the only voice you hear is my voice! Marie Ravilliac!"

The girl did not stir. She stood stiff and rigid, eyes wide-open and staring.

This was a species of hypnotism. Vernon realized that at once. But he saw, too, that the girl was bravely, futilely attempting to break the grip Pequet held over her. It was evident in the trembling of Pequet, the way his hands shook, his voice resounded with strain. Desperately, he stepped closer to her.

"You are as dead!" Pequet screamed. "Your soul is chained to mine! You have no will, no mind. You can only do what I tell you!" But still Marie stood stock-still, immovable, stiff but uncomprehending. She tried to move her head in a gesture of denial but her muscles would not obey.

Pequet was dancing madly now. "So you think you will deny my power, defy my strength!" Pequet was fast revealing himself for what he truly was. He



stormed and shouted. "Mother," he directed suddenly, "bring the blue drink! At once! I will show her, I will teach her to stand up against my will."

Madame Pequet shaking her head with alarm, moved over to a corner of the room where stood a table, not unlike a chemist's laboratory contraption. There was a profusion of phials, retorts, wooden racks, a Bunsen burner. The old woman mixed something—powder and liquid—in a phial and returned to her son's side with it. Vernon was conscious of a foul odor instantly permeating the place, that seemed to come directly from the phial which Pequet was now triumphantly brandishing before Marie's marble-like face.

Its color was a deep blue that was almost a purple. Pequet fondled the phial caressingly, grinned.

"We shall see!" he muttered. "We shall see who is master!"

He turned from the girl and moved toward the three coffins. He saw the old woman pry open the jaws of Geoffrey while Pequet poured a little of the noxious blue liquid down the seeming corpse's throat. This process was repeated with each of the other two. The performance was hideous, hypnotizing in its effect on its sole onlooker.

Vernon was barely able to suppress an audible gasp as he saw the serene figure of Geoffrey Ravilliac begin to move—*actually to move!*

Immediately thereafter, the other two began to stretch their limbs as though released from a long sleep! Vernon gazed unbelievably as first Geoffrey, then in turn the other two stepped out of the coffins onto the ground, stood like graven images, suddenly imbued with unnatural life!

"Brothers!" Pequet's voice was at once triumphant and scornful. "You are my brothers! I am Morten Ravilliac, the eld-

est, doomed by the curse on our house to death and dishonor. I defy the curse. I have conquered it! You are my creatures. You have been dead and now you are alive again. Your blood had been drained from your veins. You require new blood to infuse you with life."

His dark eyes appeared green with malice, with fanatical frenzy. Vernon, aghast as he was at the sight of the dead seemingly arisen, could not take his eyes off Pequet.

Pequet's arm upraised suddenly and a finger pointed at Marie. "Feed, brethren—feed upon her who drained you at my command! It is my wish! Take back the blood she stole from you!"

Vernon could see from the vacant manner in which the three brothers stared, that they had no comprehension of the horrible order Pequet had laid upon them. Almost automatically, they began to move with slow, solemn tread upon their sister, upon Marie!

**V**ERNON wanted to scream, to rush forward. A sixth sense shrieked at him to act while there yet was time. But his limbs were numb. He could only stand; the scream never reached his throat. . . .

He heard Marie's voice—suddenly cold, expressionless, dutiful: "Master, I obey!"

"Life everlasting! Life!" screamed Pequet in a perfect frenzy. "Mother, I have won! Brothers!" he rapped out sharply. "You must wait for your meal until your sister herself has been well fed."

Abruptly, the three brothers stopped their advance on Marie. Again they stood like graven images, immovable. But a new animation spread over Marie. She turned—and to his horror, Vernon saw that she faced him squarely.

In a blinding rush, he realized the reason for her sudden obstinance in the face

of Pequet's commands. She had been ordered to drink *his blood!* That was why she had tried to defy Pequet. Deep in her subconscious brain lingered a last vestige of her real humanity. She had tried to save him—Jerry Vernon, the man she loved.

The full terror of Pequet's horrible machinations struck Jerry Vernon with full force. Marie was now going to obey Pequet. Obey him!

"It is no use hiding yourself any longer," he heard Pequet's voice mockingly intone. "The cellar door was opened for you, my friend. You walked in like a fly into the spider's web. You have witnessed mysteries; you will not live to recount them. Enter, enter! Prepare for the sacrifice!"

Vernon shrieked something, he knew not what. His voice sounded strange and bizarre in his own ears, so strangled and choked were the tones. He stumbled into the lighted section of the cellar, hugging the walls, keeping as far as he could from Marie.

For a few seconds, she appeared undecided. His sudden movement seemed to have disconcerted her. Then she fixed him with an unblinking gaze. She began to move toward him. He could see her lips working. Then they bared, revealing her small, white teeth.

Words tumbled from his lips. Panic seized him, held him in relentless grip. His body was held rigid as though clamped in a vise.

"Marie! For God's sake! Marie!"

The words were a torrential jumble as they left his lips. As if again bewildered by his crying her name, Marie ceased her slow advance and stood stock-still. The room became deathly quiet, except for a moaning that sounded like a chant, that came from Madame Pequet. Then again, Marie began to move.

She was within two feet of Vernon

when suddenly his hands reached out, grasped her shoulders.

"Marie, Marie," he implored, shaking her violently as though to rouse her from a deep sleep. "What have they done to you? It's me—Jerry. It's Jerry Vernon! Marie, can't you hear me?"

Her face was close to his. A baffled look swept over it as though suddenly she were in great doubt. A frown etched a deep line between her brows. Then the frown disappeared. Her white brow was smooth again, serene. Her arms reached out as though mechanically, encircled Vernon in a tight grasp. At the same time her lips moved back in a snarl. Her teeth clicked together. She made a lapping motion with her tongue as though imbibing liquid like a cat!

Jerry Vernon uttered a cry and flung himself back. But her strength seemed suddenly greater than his. Her grip held him tightly, refused to yield to his efforts to get loose. He strained his head backward out of reach of those white, gleaming teeth!

As he did, his roving eyes caught sight of Pequet. There was a smile of satisfaction on the man's face, as though he were draining every last bit of pleasure out of the scene before him. He was gloating over it, licking his lips with his tongue, hardly breathing.

If a moment before Vernon had found Marie's grasp overpowering, now at sight of Pequet's sadistic countenance, something wild and elemental was loosed in him. His powerful arms lashed out, nearly upsetting himself and the girl. The next second, his hands caught her wrists. Before she could recover her balance, he had broken her hold on him and was free!

He heard a squeak from Pequet, a scream from the old woman. Pequet dodged to one side as Vernon rushed on him, murder in his eye. For a second, the

old woman blocked his path. Without pausing in his stride, Vernon gave her a mighty shove that sent her scuttling to a corner on hands and knees.

The path was cleared now. Pequet stood alone. Then Vernon saw him reach into his cassock-like garment and draw forth the clay statuette.

He flourished it high over his head, a mad, frenzied gleam in his eyes.

"Another step," he shouted, "and I will break this thing to a thousand fragments!"

**JERRY VERNON** stopped his mad rush. He came to a stop abruptly as though he were turned to stone. He heard Pequet speak, but he hardly heard the words. It was Pequet's voice only that he heard, harsh, lifeless. Jerry Vernon stood motionless, breathing heavily, gaping with bloodshot eyes.

"You almost managed to get your hands on me," Pequet was intoning. "Then all would have been up with me. I know that. If you had succeeded in killing me, all my work would have come to naught. Marie would be herself again, her brothers released from the dim vale into which I have sent them—half-dead! This very statuette would cease to exercise its hold upon your life, your limbs!

"Ah, you very nearly succeeded, *Monsieur* Vernon. Another step and you would have had me. When I am dead, my handiwork is dead! You are bold, my friend. I admire boldness. I revel in it! But you have failed!" Pequet was almost screaming now, the calm intonation gone from his voice. "You have failed! Marie, I command you! Drink the blood of this man!"

For a nerve-torturing second, Vernon did not move. All strength seemed to have gone from his body, leaving him limp and spent. Then slowly his head turned to face Marie. She was standing

where he had left her. Now at sound of Pequet's voice, a shudder seemed to pass over her body. But still she remained motionless.

"I command!" Pequet screamed.

Like a toy that has been wound up and moves with exaggerated awkwardness, Marie turned about and faced Jerry Vernon. For a split second, he imagined he detected a gleam of recognition in her eyes—but then it was gone and the eyes, though open wide, were blank and veiled.

Vernon stared at her, fascinated. This was the end, he was telling himself. He could do nothing now to stop her steady march. In fact, he felt no wish to do so. He was beyond any desire for life. He looked forward to death—death that would blot out this horror forever, give him rest, peace. He was conscious that one part of him was struggling to infuse a sense of self-protection in him, to stop Marie's advance before it was too late. But he fought the feeling down. He stood stiff and straight, like a condemned man facing a firing squad.

Then his eyes widened abruptly. His breath came out hissing from between his teeth. Marie! She had not sprung upon him. She had gone past him. She had gone past him, toward Pequet!

As she moved by in stately majesty, he imagined he saw her lips move, muttering: "I disobey! I dare to disobey! I disobey!"

Then she stood stock-still. Her blank eyes focused on Pequet's stiff body!

Master and slave! They stared at each other and neither moved, nor uttered a single sound. Slowly, what color there was in Pequet's face drained out of it. His lips were caught between his teeth, his eyes bulged.

Jerry Vernon, peering in absorbed fascination at both of them, vaguely realized what had happened. The very

force which had made Marie stand up against Pequet's commands before, only to capitulate to him at last, was now in evidence again. And this time, Pequet's shouts, commands would have no effect upon her. She would not hear him. She was beyond him already, beyond his mental grasp, already on a higher plane. Slave had turned upon master! The automaton was out of control!

"Marie!" screamed Pequet abruptly, making a last effort to exercise his power over her. "Stop! I command you! I—"

Madame Pequet rushed forward, tried to intercept the girl. But Vernon shot out his foot, tripped up the old woman, sent her sprawling. Pequet, meanwhile, tried to take advantage of this interlude to get clear of the corner which effectively cut off his retreat.

He gave vent to a lurid shriek; his mouth fell agape. The girl had flung herself forward bodily, stopping him short. She was only a step away from him and now a tremendous hesitancy was noticeable in her as though at the last moment, her master's will was stronger than her own and she could not bring herself to attack him.

But this hesitancy was what gave Vernon his opportunity. With a savage cry, he lunged forward past Marie, flinging off all at once the apathy which only a moment ago had held him captive. He heard an answering cry from the girl's lips—a hesitant, piteous moan—and then he landed bodily on Pequet.

SOME sixth sense made him time his leap so that Pequet's body was turned sidewise to him. One hand caught Pequet's throat and fastened like talons on it, while the other caught Pequet's wrist, shook it and forced him to drop the statuette. The clay figure dropped to the floor from a distance of only a few inches. With his foot, Vernon gave it a shove

that sent it skating clear of their writhing bodies across the floor. Then he whirled again upon Pequet.

Both hands now closed about the man's throat, squeezed tightly and more tightly. Madame Pequet, shrilling imprecations, flung herself on Vernon. So savage was her attack that for an instant he almost lost his grip on her son. The old woman, with surprising strength and agility, tore at his hair, scratched with long fingernails at his cheeks, at his eyes. There was blood in Vernon's mouth. His own blood. It was warm, salty, sticky.

But he recovered quickly, gripped Pequet more fiercely. He fought off the old woman as best he could—until beneath him Pequet at last ceased to squirm, lay still and hung limp between his hands.

With a cry that sounded more like a sob, Vernon dropped him in a heap to the floor.

Madame Pequet ceased her attack momentarily, gazed with horrified eyes upon her son. He was dead. His face was black, his eyes nearly bulging out of their sockets, his tongue protruding like an alien thing between his cruel, thin lips.

But Vernon was taking no chances with the old woman. As he stood up, his right hand doubled into a fist. Before she could utter even a cry of despair, his fist crashed against her chin. One clean blow! The old woman sank to the floor without a murmur.

Face covered with sweat, breathing hoarsely, Vernon swayed over her fallen form. "I never hit a woman in my life before," he muttered thickly. "But I enjoyed that one!"

Swaying drunkenly, he turned to Marie. She was standing, facing him, her beautiful countenance contorted as in agony. Then abruptly, she sank to the floor in a faint.

With a cry, he bent over her, chafed her wrists, murmured tender words. He

listened to her heart. It was beating smoothly, her breathing was regular, deep. A shudder seemed to pass over her body, then she lay quietly as in sleep.

He looked up at a sound. Marie's three brothers were shaking and shivering as though coming out of a bad dream. In a few seconds, they were staring about them wildly, uncomprehendingly, like children awakened in the depths of the night.

"Quick, one of you!" Vernon cried. "Run for a doctor, the police!"

They did not seem at first to understand. Then Geoffrey, the eldest, spoke. "I feel as if I've come out of a tomb," he said. He took a deep breath. "You know, I dreamed I was dead!"

**T**HE kindly old doctor nodded. "She'll be all right. All she requires now is sleep and rest. The poor girl is thoroughly exhausted," he said as Vernon accompanied him to the door. "She's suffering from hunger and some kind of drug I can't place. I could tell from the condition of her eyes. She's been in a cataleptic state for some days."

"That's right," Vernon said grimly. "What about her brothers?"

"They've been under the influence of the drug, too," the doctor stated officiously. "But of course, they're stronger. They won't need much care."

The local police captain met them as the doctor was saying good-bye. He accompanied Vernon into the library, took a chair.

"Well," he said abruptly, "we've pumped the old woman as much as we could. She's more than half crazy with

grief over the death of her son. But what she did tell us was enough. She's a devil and her son was another!"

"What did she tell you?" Vernon asked eagerly.

"It was all done by injections of a drug called himecac. I've had the Medical Examiner in Montreal on the wire and he tells me it's an obscure drug known in India. He's never heard of its use before in this country. It induces a sort of catalepsy in the patient as well as a sort of hypnotic subjection of will. I guess that worthy Pequet—by the way our investigations prove he wasn't lying; he really is an illegitimate son of the house of Ravilliac—fed Marie with real blood under the influence of the drug and forced in her a taste—" He broke off abruptly, frowning. "I'm not a superstitious man, but it seems to me that somewhere in this case there's been black magic employed!"

Vernon rose, crossed the room, picked up the little clay statuette of himself. "Think so?" he inquired coolly. "Look!" He flung the statuette against the stone of the fireplace, shattering it to a thousand bits. "That's what I think of black magic."

The police captain stared at him, uncomprehendingly.

"By the way, captain," said Vernon, "I'd like a bit of advice. If I marry a Ravilliac, my children—if any—will be not Ravilliacs but Vernons, won't they?"

"Why, of course!"

Vernon started for the door. "I'll go up and use that argument on someone!" he said, grinning.

**THE END**