

Weird Tales

The Unique Magazine

The Mystery of the Four Husbands

BY
GASTON
LEROUX

AUTHOR OF
The **PHANTOM**
of the **OPERA**



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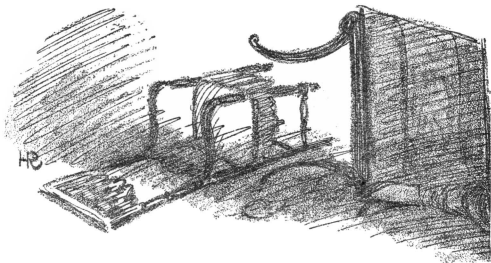
Contents for December 1929

- Cover Design** **Hugh Rankin**
Illustrating a Scene in "The Mystery of the Four Husbands"
- Fantaisie d'Antan** **Clark Ashton Smith** 724
Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin
- The Eyrie** 726
A chat with the readers
- The Mystery of the Four Husbands** **Gaston Leroux** 730
A vivid weird mystery-story of a gloriously beautiful woman and her four murdered husbands
- Children of Ubasti** **Seabury Quinn** 742
An uncanny adventure of Jules de Grandin—a tale of a ghoulish pair who were neither brute nor human

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

The Mystery

by GASTON
LEROUX



THE old sea-dogs who spent their evenings seated on the terrace of the inn which overlooked the sea had never seen Zinzin arrive in such a condition before. His eyes were popping from his head, and he was as pale as death. As soon as he had had time to drop into a chair, they pressed anxiously around him.

"What is the matter, Zinzin? What is the matter, old fellow?" Captain Michel asked.

Zinzin made a sign that he was still unable to speak, but at last he wiped his forehead.

"I have just come from the police commissioner," he began, "and he gave me a most horrible bit of news."

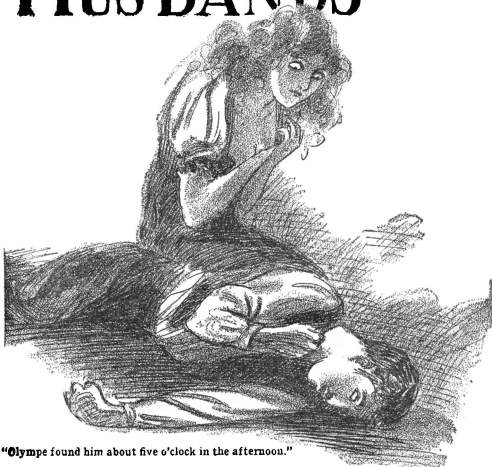
"Tell us about it before it becomes old stuff," Gaubert exclaimed. "The story is sure to change with time."

"Oh, this doesn't date from yesterday," Zinzin murmured with a sinister laugh.

"Then why so much excitement today?"

"I'll tell you why shortly," the other replied dismally. "I was mixed up in it when I was very young. It narrowly missed making me a land-lubber forever with a little garden plot over me! On my word! It's not

of the Four HUSBANDS



"Olympe found him about five o'clock in the afternoon."

the fault of the damned wedding story if I'm not fertilizing a crop of dandelions today. It caused a lot of stir in its time. They even took the case up to the court of assizes!"

"Stories of marriages exist by the legion." grouchy old Chaulieu remarked. "I know ten myself."

"I only know one," Zinzin replied

with a groan. "but I warn you that it is more horrible than all ten of Chaulieu's put together!"

He sighed heavily again and lighted his pipe. "I never told you anything about it before," he spat out, "because it seemed such an utterly fantastic affair, but today I must talk! Good God! Good God!"

"Well, what is it? What is it, Zinzin!"

"It is a horrible story." Zinzin choked.

"Perhaps," Chaulieu added quietly and skeptically.

Zinzin cast him a murderous look. "In all my life I have only been in love once," he went on, "and it was that time. It never happened again because I never met another such girl. Her name was Olympe, and there were a dozen of us who wanted to marry her."

"And here the impossible begins," sneered Chaulieu.

"Twelve, I tell you! I'll give you their names in a moment, and that doesn't include those who did not openly propose. There wasn't a man in the whole country who would not have wanted to. She wasn't rich, but she came of good family—and beautiful! At the time of which I speak she was just seventeen years old. Her section of the country was noted for its beautiful women—a big pleasant suburb worth visiting if only to watch the girls come home from church on Sundays.

"Well! In all the town there was not one girl fit to tie her shoes, and that meant a lot. . . . Listen, if you have ever gone to Cagnes, perhaps you have seen Renoir's portraits of young girls. . . . Those pictures are pure fantasy—pictures of flowers and sunlight, not humans. Well, Olympe was like that: a ray of sun and the petals of a rose. A dream! But a dream with eyes and a mouth! . . . enormous childish eyes with supernatural purity in their gaze, and the mouth of a woman! The mouth alone was of flesh and blood! Olympe was like an angel come down to earth to kiss!

"We were all crazy about her. She lived alone with her grandmother, who had taken her from school at the death of her parents and entrusted her to the safe care of the

servant Palmire, who was the girl's willing slave. Olympe was still much of a child, often playing with the country urchins, returning home with armfuls of wild flowers, baskets filled with wild strawberries. She would run behind the flocks with the sheep-dogs when she crossed them on the road, and often scandalized the old women by returning home at night astride a goat!

"In nice weather the old people would sit outside their doors on little wooden benches and wait for her to come. She had a wonderful imagination and told them stories which she made up as she went along.

"THE grandmother, who in her day had been the beautiful Madame Gratiën, lived in a big old house on the Place de l'Abbaye. The gardens were closed in by walls and at the back looked out on the open country. She knew all the élite of the neighborhood and had maintained connections in the city.

"The behavior of her granddaughter had amused her in the beginning but at last it began to preoccupy her. Olympe seemed very thoughtless for her age. . . . What would happen when she was alone in the world? Madame Gratiën suddenly decided to marry her off as soon as possible.

"She had already received several offers for the hand of her granddaughter, and when it was known that she no longer discouraged suitors, they besieged her on all sides. This flood of admirers was a new game for Olympe. Finally one Sunday we were all gathered in the living-room, when the grandmother gave Olympe a little talking-to. She told her that she was beginning to be very tired and weary with life and that she would like to see Olympe settled down before she died. Olympe greeted this announcement with tears. We thought that the

prospect of the old lady's death saddened her, but Olympe explained it differently. 'As though it were gay to marry!' she said when we tried to cheer her up.

"We burst out laughing at that and all swore that her husband would be perfectly willing to be her slave.

"First of all, I do not want to leave Grandmother,' she said, 'nor Palmire . . . And secondly I want to live in our old house.'

"Agreed, agreed,' we answered in chorus.

"And now,' said good Madame Gratiën, 'which one are you going to choose?'

"Oh, we'll talk of that later,' said Olympe. 'This is no way to marry people off. You're really not serious about it, Grandmother!'

"For six months you've said the same thing: that you'd talk it over later. Now, it's become a joke. You know that I have always done everything you wanted before. . . . Come; if you were obliged to choose one of these gentlemen, which would you take?'

"Olympe suddenly became serious, and we watched her anxiously. . . . In spite of our apparent acceptance of the whole thing as a joke, we were dead serious. . . .

"She stood up, walked around us, and sized us up from head to foot with such funny expressions that we were more than a little embarrassed. If I live to be a thousand, I'll never forget that scene! What an examination! To be truthful, we hardly dared breathe.

"She made us stand, lined us up, placing us, changing us—advancing a man to the head of the line and then, after looking him straight in the eyes, sending him back to third or fourth position. The grandmother encouraged us from time to time with a 'Hold yourselves well, gentlemen! . . .

Hold yourselves well! . . . Be serious.'

"It was funny when one thinks that we were not all young men either! I well remember the arrival of the town registrar, respectable Monsieur Pacifire, who for two years had openly bid for Olympe's hand. He came late and naturally did not know what it was all about.

"She met him at the door and placed him, dumfounded, at the end of the line. He had the last number! You can imagine how we laughed. But you can bet that when he knew what it was all about, he did not laugh at all!

"At last! It is done!' she announced. 'If I marry I'll take Monsieur Delphin first, then Monsieur Hubert, then Monsieur Sabin, then my little Zinzin (as you see, I was number four), then Monsieur Jacobini . . . and she went on down the whole twelve of us. . . . I'll enumerate them: 1st, Monsieur Delphin, a nice fellow with a great future ahead of him, son of the town pharmacist; he had taken his degree in science, was working for a fellowship in chemistry and was very well spoken of at the university. 2d, Monsieur Hubert, still young, about twenty-five, head forest warden. 3d, Dr. Felix Sabin, just out of college, and as merry as a lark . . . I think he had settled himself in the country with the idea of getting into politics. 4th, Yours truly, who had already taken to the sea but who would have given it all up to stay with Olympe. 5th, Lieutenant Jacobini, son of a colonel in the guards, a distinguished, smart fellow who had just come back from a mission in South Africa where he had made something of a name for himself. 6th, The son of a big land-owner with lots of money. 7th, A young lawyer. 8th, The son of a solicitor. 9th, An old notary. 10th, A traveling salesman. 11th, The assistant of the district attorney. 12th, Monsieur Pacifire, the

registrar . . . yes, that makes twelve. We were only twelve that day!

“Six months later, Olympe married number one, young Delphin. We all went to the wedding—but not to have a good time. I tried to reason against it, but I would have given anything to be in Delphin’s shoes. The following year, however, I no longer envied him. He was dead!

“No one knows exactly what he died of. They say that he was poisoned by some laboratory work, but nothing was sure. The physician who attended him, Dr. Sabin, shook his head when he was questioned. I think that in reality he thought of only one thing: in short, that he had now become number two and that if anything were to happen to the forest warden who preceded him, he might yet hope for a chance!

“It seemed impossible, but Olympe had become even lovelier since her marriage. Now, when she passed in her widow’s weeds, she was something to kneel before and worship. But she did not mourn her dead husband for long. In fact, if one can believe old Palmire, Monsieur Delphin was not excessively gay and for a young husband spent too much time in his laboratories, leaving his young wife for entire days while he searched for heaven knows what in the bottoms of his test-tubes.

“Monsieur Hubert’s turn was bound to arrive, and he did not lose time in pressing his suit and in promising her all the gayeties that she had missed since her first marriage. He was a jolly fellow, that Hubert, fond of good food, an excellent drinker and hunter as was fitting with a man of his position and name.

“Big celebrations and big parties now took place at Olympe’s. She began to ride horseback and there was not another like her for fifty miles around. It was a sight to see her hunt the deer and wild boar. Nothing

frightened her. We had trouble to keep up with her, and afterward she presided over the banquet with a sparkle and an ardor that gave us all fever.

“She was more courted than ever, but she made fun of us, and kept her loveliest and gayest smiles for Dr. Sabin. ‘He is number three,’ she exclaimed, laughing. ‘Everyone in turn!’

“‘Hey!’ Hubert interrupted. ‘I never felt better in my life!’

“‘And I take care of him,’ replied the doctor. ‘He is the one man whom I’m not permitted to kill. Thank the fortune, Hubert, which prohibits me from choosing my victims!’

“THIS was all very nice, but it seemed to me that Dr. Sabin made too much use of his position of family doctor in order to be familiar with Olympe. They were often seen alone in the park back of the house, or even going for a little outing in the forest when Hubert, called away on business or some bachelor party in the neighboring town, left Olympe for a few hours. She had become the general topic of conversation in the village. She scandalized the habitués of the five o’clock teas at Madame Tabureau’s, the mayor’s wife, or at Madame Blancmougin’s, the wife of the solicitor whose son had received number eight in the general classing. Madame Blancmougin never ceased congratulating herself on her son’s lucky escape.

“In fact, after the death of old Madame Gratien, which had occurred in the meantime, Olympe no longer kept her desires within any limits and she frightened many people by the liberty of those desires. Hubert made no attempt to restrain her. He was amused and flattered by the number of victims won by those innocent blue eyes and that bright mouth which seemed to be always asking for a kiss.

“He was a good liver, that Hubert, but not a real lover. ‘My!’ Palmire

would whisper to those who liked to be informed of all that went on in the house, 'he certainly loves his food more than his bed. If *Madame* were not so honest, that fact might give him a bad jolt!'

"And so saying, she shook her head on seeing *Olympe* and Dr. *Sabin* come in from one of the lessons in driving. Those driving-lessons had started a lot of gossip which was cut short by a new misfortune in *Place de l'Abbaye*.

"*Delphin* had installed a laboratory in an isolated building in a far corner of the grounds and this *Hubert* had made into a sort of hunting-pavilion. He had furnished it with his guns, his knives, his rifles, his pistols, and had also stored his ammunition there. It was like a little armory, with the exception of the walls, which were decorated with the usual trophies. It was a pleasant little spot, covered with climbing vines and flowers, and there was a fine view of the fields and country beyond. He often had lunch served there in order to be alone with his wife or friends away from the ears of the servants.

"It was there that *Hubert* was found one afternoon in August with a pistol in his hands and a bullet through his heart.

"Suicide or accident? Several even murmured the word: crime! . . . but it was said so low that no one heard them.

"You can imagine what a stir it caused. An inquest was held. The assistant district attorney, who was number eleven, managed the affair. It was Dr. *Sabin*, number three, who was called to give his opinion on the nature of the death. He pronounced it accident. The inquest hesitated a long time between accident and suicide, but they finally concluded with the theory of the accident.

"*'My goodness!'* *Palmire* sighed when she was besieged by many wanting to know what *Madame* had to say

about the death of her husband. 'What should she say? She knew nothing about it, of course. She had lunched in the little pavilion with *Monsieur*. . . . They both had seemed very gay. She left him at about two-thirty in order to dress, for she was going to town with Dr. *Sabin*. About three o'clock the gardener heard a shot and ran to the pavilion. He found *Monsieur* stretched out dead. And now you know as much as we do. Why should he have committed suicide? Life was beautiful and so was *Olympe*. He had everything to make him happy. And now *Olympe* is crying her eyes out, which is a stupid thing to do. No one is responsible for an accident, and it was his fault for not being more careful!'

"So spoke *Palmire*. The next year *Olympe* married Dr. *Sabin*."

"I expected it," interrupted *Chaulieu*; "if your blue-eyed angel with the passionate mouth had to give herself to all twelve of those gentlemen we haven't finished and it's not going to be a funny tale."

"I didn't promise you a funny story. I told you that it was horrible. *Olympe* did not give herself to all twelve, since I was number four and I'm still alive. Nevertheless, I excuse *Chaulieu* for his remark because in the village they began to say: 'They'll all go. She's capable of it.'

"And why not? If it pleases *Olympe!*' *Palmire* replied whenever she heard something of that kind. And she added, scratching her long chin, 'She would be wrong in hesitating over it as far as the worth of those men is concerned!'

"It was a terrible thing that she said, in the ignorance of a servant ready to perjure her soul for her mistress.

"Dr. *Sabin* was certainly a courageous fellow to marry into a household which seemed destined to misfortune. Some good old woman of the kind particularly skilful in slipping in a

malicious remark between a frown and a smile, remarked, however, 'Oh, nothing will happen to him. He knows what he is doing!'

"The town was a-buzz with horrible remarks. Poor doctor! He did not deserve what was said, since he, too, died, exactly three months to the day after his wedding. He lasted even a shorter time than the others."

"Good Lord!" Gaubert whistled.

"And so it came your turn," said Captain Michel.

"It's beginning to be very amusing," remarked Chaulieu.

But they all stopped joking. Zinzin had become terribly pale and his hand trembled as he put down his glass. He looked with wild eyes at a man who was approaching the table.

"Hello," exclaimed the captain, "here's the police commissioner's orderly."

It was he in fact, and he bent over and whispered in Zinzin's ear:

"We've just had a telephone message. She has been dead ten years. You don't need to worry any longer." And with that he departed.

As for Zinzin, he staggered into the captain's arms and had to be taken home.

"Let's hope he doesn't kick off before the end of his story," said Gaubert gently.

Chaulieu shrugged his shoulders. "Bah," he said, "he is working for a climactic effect."

Nevertheless we did not know the end of the story until eight days later. Zinzin certainly had been very ill. This time we listened without interrupting him.

"IT WAS my turn then, number four's turn. But I was still ignorant of the fact. I was sailing in the Baltic Sea when the thing happened, and I did not learn it until my return ashore. I threw myself on a train for home and on the way met Lieutenant Jacobini, number five, who

had himself returned only a short while ago.

"Our trip was not a merry one. I confess that in spite of the certainty I now had of being able to marry Olympe and in spite of the hope Lieutenant Jacobini had of soon being able to cheer up my widow, this double prospect did not fill us with merriment. The house on Place de l'Abbaye seemed less like a place of joy to us now and more like a tomb!

"The first thing I asked Jacobini, after he had told me the sinister news, was naturally if he could give me a few details on the doctor's death. How had he died? He answered gloomily that he hadn't the faintest idea and that no one else had either; but that he more than anyone wanted to get to the bottom of it. That was the reason for his return.

"And you?" he asked me.

"Oh," I answered, "as for me, you can understand that I am interested in the matter at least as much as you are."

"Yes," he replied without the slightest sarcasm, "I understand that. . . . It is an even more urgent matter for you."

"But," I went on, "they must have called his death by some name!"

"Not any more of a name than they gave the death of Olympe's first husband. They claimed that Delphin was poisoned by some laboratory experiment, but the thing was never proved. And as far as Dr. Sabin is concerned it can't be that."

"All these deaths are certainly very strange! Tell me, Jacobini, aren't the police interested in this?"

"Yes. Our assistant district attorney, number eleven, has ordered an investigation. I ought to add that Olympe was the first to ask it. . . . They made an autopsy on the body. . . ."

"And?"

"And found nothing. . . . But

that doesn't prove a thing,' he added in a tone which struck me.

"What do you mean? Have you a suspicion?"

"In such matters," replied Jacobini, "it is not permissible to have suspicions. One must be certain or keep still." And he kept still.

"But all this did not tend to quiet my anxiety.

"Then he died in his bed? Was he ill?"

"No! Olympe found him about five o'clock in the afternoon in his room, stretched out on the floor with a table and chair overturned, his mouth still foaming and his face distorted from horror. . . . It was proved that he had been in the room alone from three o'clock on and that the house was completely deserted, as the servants had gone to a near-by fair."

"And—Madame Sabin?"

"She had lunched with him in the little pavilion at the end of the garden and had remained there to embroider with Palmire."

"Then what was the conclusion of the inquest?"

"That Dr. Sabin died from an attack of epilepsy."

"Was he subject to it?"

"No, but it seems that that does not always follow."

"We were silent a long time. Then I sighed.

"We ought to be sincerely sorry for Olympe," I said, "because otherwise it would be too horrible."

"Yes," he replied after thinking a moment, "you are right! It would be too horrible. . . . She must be pitied. Besides, Palmire says that she is completely crushed. No one ever sees her now. She never goes out. According to gossip she wants to enter a convent. . . . It is natural enough that after three unfortunate marriages like these she should be sick of matrimony—and—and I congratulate you," he added with a strange

laugh. Then he went on quickly, because he was an extremely polite fellow: "I hope I haven't pained you in saying that!"

"I don't know," I answered.

"We arrived an hour later. We hadn't forewarned anyone and it was already late at night. We had decided to go directly to the Hotel de Bourgogne, and I was surprized to find the solicitor's son, number eight, waiting for us on the platform. I remember his name now; he was called Juste. There is nothing to say about him except that he was an honest fellow, and that Dr. Sabin had often treated him for rheumatism.

"I knew that you had landed," he said to me, "and that you were taking this train. What hotel are you going to?"

"To the Bourgogne with Lieutenant Jacobini."

"Juste had been so preoccupied with me that he hadn't noticed my companion. He shook him warmly by the hand and said that he would go with us.

"I WAS growing more puzzled every moment. At the hotel he followed me to my room and gave me a packet for which he asked a receipt.

"This was intrusted to my honor," he said, "with the mission of giving into your own hands."

"I examined the sealed envelope quickly and recognized the writing immediately. My name was written on the outside with the addition: 'To be delivered after my death.'

"Yes," the other replied, "I have accomplished my mission and I am only accountable to him; but since I haven't the faintest idea of what is contained in that letter, I want a receipt, to be on the safe side."

"I gave him his receipt.

"In giving you this letter," I asked, "Dr. Sabin said nothing special?"

"'Not a thing,' he replied. 'He told me nothing, absolutely nothing.'

"Upon which he shook my hand and took leave of me a bit hurriedly. He seemed free of a great weight. I opened the letter feverishly.

"Ten minutes later someone knocked at Jacobini's door. He was just about to get into bed and called out, asking who was there. As no one answered him, he went to the door and opened it impatiently. A ghost with a letter in its hands entered his room. This ghost was I and I hadn't strength enough even to speak. He sat me down, took the letter from my hands, locked the door and read.

"I will never forget him as he stood there, bent over the lamp. The letter which had plunged me into a sort of prostration had an entirely different effect on him. Everything about him seemed to tighten up while with me there had been a complete loosening of my will-power. He frowned heavily, his eyebrows were knitted, his chin grew more prominent, and a dangerous flame like the cold steel flash of a sword lit the eyes intent on reading the document, a document which had been written by the trembling hand of a man who knew himself condemned to death.

"THIS is what Dr. Sabin had written. The original has long been in the police files but this is a copy:

Dear Zinzin:

Before marrying Olympe I want you to read this: It is a man who is about to die who is writing you. I have been horribly poisoned. No one knows it except the guilty one or guilty ones and me. I have not complained, for I have got only what I deserved. Thanks to strong drugs I have been able at times to overcome the pain which is destroying me and still to appear human. Thus I have been able to see Juste without giving anything away to him, nor will you

tell him anything unless he, too, should want to marry Olympe—in which case you will show him this letter. But I hope that this will be the end of the matter and that after my death no one will wish to take my place, our place, the place of the three men who have entered this house full of health and life and who have disappeared from it, carrying with them the enigma of their triple misfortune.

As far as possible keep scandal from Olympe. I have loved her too much. I still love her, perhaps. No scandal, therefore, unless it be absolutely necessary. And besides, I am certain of nothing. In such a case, proof of the guilt is necessary, and I have none. I might be able to accuse her with a chance of not making a mistake, but I haven't the right; and I will tell you why. You know that after Hubert's death I returned a verdict of suicide. But Hubert did not commit suicide. Hubert was murdered!

And I knew the truth at my first sight of the body by the position of the pistol in his hand. The weapon had been placed in his hand, after his death! I won't go into details, but I could have proved it very easily. I had been called immediately after the discovery of the body in the hope that perhaps life still stirred within him, but it was all over. Next to the corpse stood Olympe in tears. Before looking at the woman I had seen the pistol and had already reached a conclusion. Then I looked at the woman. You may have suspected the affectionate ties that bound us already. Besides, Olympe made no effort to hide the truth, and I had spoken to her about it more than once. Looking at her, it seemed to me that her eyes wavered after catching mine and they left me the impression of an ardent and silent plea. Even today I am sure that I was not mistaken and I feel a chill of horror. That woman killed Hubert in order to be mine! It was horrible, but I adored her, and not only did I not

denounce her, but without her noticing and for pity of her I slipped the pistol into the correct position. I made the matter easy for the board of experts. You see, Zinzin, old man, I'm not hiding anything from you. You understand now why I haven't the right to accuse this woman. My cowardice has made me her accomplice.

I think we loved each other like the damned, trying to forget in the embrace of love a lost paradise. Between us there never came a thought of Hubert or of Delphin. One would have said that Olympe had never known those two men. But I, I was curious to know how Delphin had died and I began a cunning investigation which one day they must have noticed. From that day on, I am sure, my death was decided.

Certain contradictory remarks made by Palmire concerning Delphin's experiments and the rather mysterious circumstances of his death led me to certain clues in which I found the almost certainty of Olympe's guilt in the poisoning of Delphin with Palmire as an accomplice. I had not said anything yet to Olympe, who did not seem to suspect my thoughts. I attempted to keep as hidden as possible the hideous suspicions. But one day I felt that I had been struck! A high fever, a strange uneasiness and dull pains warned me that I had been poisoned. I still said nothing because I wanted to know—to know. And I believed that I had done the necessary things to save me in time from a drug which was already attacking the sources of life—and which I could not rid myself of.

How did they go about it? . . . To make sure that it was she, I ate nothing except what she gave me, and we drank from the same glass. Yes, but we did not eat from the same plate! Ah, what horror! . . . And this is where the matter rests today as I write you this letter. . . . I have just

had an attack which I have concealed from her. Is she really ignorant of it? Or does she find pleasure in it? Lord God! And yet my face has changed in these last weeks and several times I have pushed her from my arms. Still she seems to have noticed nothing. Oh, the monster! The two monsters! Yes, two, because I have discovered Palmire spying on me and the two of them are always together. Nevertheless, Olympe said to me yesterday: "It's funny how men change after a few weeks of marriage! After a short while they are unrecognizable. They are no longer interesting!"

Zinzin, you will have this letter and I am going to talk to her. But I won't be telling her anything she doesn't already know. She must believe by now that I know by whose hands her first two husbands were killed; but I must tell her that I know that she is killing the third and that she must stop there!

Ah, Olympe, our Olympe! . . . If you knew, Zinzin, you would understand—and you would pardon me. . . . Perhaps, after all, she is not guilty—perhaps Palmire is responsible, perhaps Palmire did it all alone. Ah, my God, if that could be true! . . . This is an idea which has come to me a little late—too late! . . . Think it over, Zinzin. I am past thinking now. I suffer too much. . . . And yet I do not like to die without knowing. If she could only prove to me that it is Palmire who did it alone! I love her still, Zinzin!

"After this last line the writing was so disordered and jumbled that it was difficult to read, and the signature which followed seemed to express the supreme effort of a man from whom life is escaping. And yet Dr. Sabin could not have died that day. Probably by the feverish use of some medicine he was able to suspend his destiny. We know that the unfortunate man did not die until after lunch the next day. . . .

"I made the copy which you have just read," Zinzin continued, "that same night, because Lieutenant Jacobini demanded the original. He had the right to it, *since he was going to take my place!* I said all the things that you or anyone would say in such horrible circumstances; but I realized that his mind was made up and that there was nothing more to do. Of course, it was no longer a question of love for Olympe.

"He had made a vow, a vow to punish her for her crimes. He would force her to confess, make her give herself up, and then we would see! . . .

"He did not tell me what we would see, but it was easy enough to understand on catching sight of his fierce, terrible look when he spoke.

"'Dr. Sabin got his just deserts,' he said to me, 'and I do not pity him; but that poor Hubert was my friend, and Delphin I loved as a younger brother and *I may be responsible for his death.* Therefore, I, Jacobini, am going to avenge them.'

"To accomplish that he decided to marry Olympe.

"'And if she doesn't want to marry?' I asked him.

"He laughed a horrible laugh. 'A woman like her will not refuse a man like me!'

"**H**E WAS right. Olympe married number five and I was best man for Jacobini. He insisted upon it. During the ceremony he stood with his arms crossed at the foot of the chancel beside his kneeling bride and looked already like a statue of vengeance. Olympe was no longer the girl we had all known and loved. There was something strangely funereal in her beauty and it seemed already to be bending under the hand of death. She looked like the figures in marble one sees on tombstones. I never expected to see her again, for the next day I set out to sea.

"At every port I threw myself on

the newspapers; I opened my mail with trembling, feverish hands. No news reached me of the hideous tragedy that I felt must have been happening at home during my absence. When, three months later, I returned, my first question was . . . yes, you have guessed it. . . .

"'Is nothing changed around here?'

"'Goodness, no.'

"'And how are the Jacobinis?'

"'The Jacobinis are fine,' I was told.

"The next day Jacobini came to call on me. He knew that I had just returned. He looked exceedingly well and had prolonged his furlough, since Olympe refused to leave the house even though he hated it. 'At heart I can't blame her,' he explained. 'She believes that if she leaves the house and this town where she spent such a happy youth it will look as though the evil tongues which claim she had a hand in the death of her three husbands have some cause for their suspicions.'

"I looked at Jacobini, but he met my gaze clearly.

"'I understand your astonishment,' he said, 'but Olympe is not to be suspected.'

"'So much the better, so much the better. Let's drop the subject, then.'

"'Zinzin!'

"'Yes, Jacobini!'

"'I have come to talk to you and you must listen to me. The first thing I did on returning to the house after the wedding was to show her Dr. Sabin's letter. Olympe cried, but did not seem in the least astonished.

"'I had a suspicion of that,' she confessed to me. 'Everybody thinks I am a monster. I wonder that you wanted to marry me.'

"'I will tell you why in due time,' I replied, 'but for the moment we are concerned with Dr. Sabin's letter.'

"'What can I say?' she con-

tinued bitterly. "I am no more guilty of Hubert's death, of which they suspect me, than I am of my first husband's. Sabin loved me madly, and there were moments when his love was strangely like hatred. He let drop words from time to time that made me understand his horrible thought . . . and he started an abominable investigation. He questioned Palmire, who repeated everything to me. I tried to quiet him. Above all I wanted to avoid any scandal. I told myself that his state of mind would pass with time and that as I had nothing to hide, he would end by understanding that we were all the victims of a horrible fate. Then suddenly he believed himself poisoned. He did not tell me in the beginning. I myself did not mention the word 'poison', so that nothing definite should happen between us. I did not want to be forced to call in the police or to send him from the house, but as he continued to suffer I suggested that he consult a doctor. He did nothing. The day of his death he was under the influence of a strong drug that made him delirious. He insisted on coming to the table, and as I knew what he suspected I made a point of drinking only what he drank and of eating from the same plate. At the dessert he threw himself at my feet and begged my pardon for having suspected me. He said he knew now that he was being poisoned by 'that horrible Palmire'. And he begged me to aid him in fastening the guilt on her. As I tried naturally to defend her, he left me abruptly and locked himself in his room. You know the rest. It was I who asked for an autopsy."

"Lieutenant Jacobini stopped.

"'And that convinced you of her innocence?' I asked.

"'No,' he answered. 'If Olympe expected something of the nature of Sabin's letter, I was ready for an explanation such as she gave me with a few tears thrown into the bargain.

My next remark to my bride of an hour was very abrupt. "And what about the tali-tali, Olympe? What have you done with it?" I asked.

"She started and turned a deathly white. "Oh," she moaned, "so you think that I poisoned him with tali-tali?"

"I took her by the wrist and it was like holding a hand of marble. "Listen, Olympe: Hubert died of an accident. I'll grant that and it doesn't matter to me; but Delphin was my friend and he and Dr. Sabin died the same death. They were both poisoned by the tali-tali which leaves no trace. It was I who gave the poison to Delphin that he might analyze it and find an antidote if possible. I brought it back with me on my last return from Africa and I want to know what has become of it. It is a terrible poison which the wizards down there give to the unfortunates who are suspected of having brought the anger of bad spirits on the village. Its victims are legion. . . . I am responsible for what it has done in France. . . . What have you done with the tali-tali, Olympe?"

"Olympe looked up at me with frozen eyes. She was no longer crying. "There is no more tali-tali," she answered.

"'Since when?' I asked brutally, trying to gain control over her

*The tall-tall of which Lieutenant Jacobini speaks here is certainly a close relative of the poison described in Andre Demaison's work. In the *Diate* is written: "A man was hovering over the cauldron in which boiled the roots and bark of the sacred tree. At its name the children were terrified and the adults lost their mind; but the sorcerer, who was now pouring rice into the horrible soup, had declared that the poison could only harm those who sucked the marrow from the bones of their own kind. . . ." And this is the picture of those put to the test: "The unfortunates fell to the ground, letting out hoarse and horrible cries of pain. The bodies hurried into a hall like partridges wounded by the hunter's bullet, or ducks with their necks cut before life is lost with the flow of blood." The tall-tall of which Lieutenant Jacobini speaks produces fulminating effects if taken in a large dose. In other cases the poisoning may be slow. Sometimes it takes twenty-four hours for it to manifest itself in all its force. The victim, as happened to Dr. Sabin, seems to have fallen from an epileptic fit.

(Continued on page 860)

The Mystery of the Four Husbands

(Continued from page 741)

obstinate mind, which was clearly fighting against me now.

" "Since I asked Delphin to destroy it. That was a gift, sir, which you should never have made, not that I believe that he died of it, but because it would have been your fault if he had killed me with it. Was it the poison that was closed in the belly of a mahogany fetish covered with bizarre signs and curious designs burned into the wood?"

" "That was it, Olympe. There is no possible error. You know the tali-tali well."

" "Yes, Delphin used this poison and the barks of the tree which you brought him to make some experiments which interested me, much more than the rest of his work, as a matter of fact. His test-tubes and apparatus amused me in the beginning, but one tires of everything. I soon noticed, however, that Delphin was not well, and I blamed his languor on the bad air of the laboratory. I asked him to give up his work for a little while. He would not, so I asked him at least to do me the favor of destroying the tali-tali. He answered that there was nothing to fear because the tali-tali was only fatal to those who drank it and that he was certainly not crazy enough to drink the liquid, which he had already tried out on chickens and rabbits. He was amused at my childishness, but I gave him no peace until he had destroyed the tali-tali in front of me and Palmire. Tired of fighting with me about it he threw the fetish and the poison into the fire and it was burned up in a moment."

" "How did the poison act in the fire?"

" "First there was a long green flame like a sky-rocket and that was followed by a suffocating vapor which we ran from. As for the fetish itself, it was nothing more than an ember

which flashed a last grimace before falling into ashes. That is all, sir, and I have nothing else to tell you, but if it was to hear this that you married me you might as well have dispensed with the ceremony. I would have given you the information just the same, and perhaps I would have loved you afterward. But now please leave this house and never let me see you again."

"When Jacobini reached this point he stopped and rolled himself a cigarette.

" "And then?" I asked.

" "Then I left her to question Palmire. I forced her to tell of the tali-tali also. I attacked her from all sides. She's an ignorant peasant and she could not have invented the chemical effects which she had seen in the fire. All she said agreed to the letter with what Olympe had told me. I asked her all kinds of questions which Olympe could not have foreseen. I went on into other matters and at the end of my investigation I went back to Olympe and threw myself on my knees before her. She pardoned me, Zinzin, because besides being honest she is also very good."

" "Possible," I said, "but she is not proud!"

" **A**S YOU can well imagine, I did not go to call on them, but I saw Jacobini eight days later. An awful anguish was visible on his pale, restless face.

" "Zinzin," he said to me in a hoarse voice, "I think I'm infected with it, too. But perhaps it is only an idea. Yes, an idea! Even the thought of that tali-tali is enough to drive one mad."

" "I didn't have time to say a word. He had already gone and I was never to see him alive again.

" "And this is the frightful trag-

edy which occurred the next day according to the police who with help from the dying Jacobini and Palmire's statements reconstructed the scene.

"At noon, Jacobini, who had not seen his wife since morning, went to the pavilion. He was filled with the darkest presentiments in spite of the fact that he tried to free himself of the idea of poison by trying to believe that his illness was due to swamp fevers which he had suffered from in the tropics.

"Luncheon was served there, and, as Jacobini entered, a door closed hurriedly at the end of the room. At the same time he heard furtive steps and the sound of a box being closed. He ran to the door, half opened it and saw Olympe engaged in low conversation with Palmire. She seemed very much troubled.

"At that moment a terrible cramp seized him in the intestines and he let the door close, having only strength enough to drop on the sofa. With one hand he had unconsciously taken hold of Olympe's work-box, which was badly closed and showed bits of fine linen. Jacobini's fingers, clutching at the lid feverishly from pain, opened it and fumbled in the laee. Suddenly they struck a hard object and he stood up, haggard and mad. . . .

"In his hand he held the fetish of death, the horrible phial, the hideous tali-tali which Olympe and Palmire had sworn was destroyed, burned before them. Olympe had lied. Olympe had poisoned him as she had poisoned the other two. He was to suffer the atrocious death which had tortured his predecessors.

"Overcoming the agony for a few minutes, Jacobini poured what was left of the poison into a bottle of wine on the table. There was enough left for a terrible dose, and then he waited for his wife.

"She was not long in coming. She kissed him and asked him how he felt

this morning. He replied that he felt much better, but that the fever had not completely left him and that he was thirsty.

" 'Then you must drink something, darling,' she said.

"He did not wait for her to pour the wine out and filled two glasses himself.

" 'But you know that the doctors have forbidden me wine,' she said, 'and that I only drink water.'

"He insisted that she drink with him in the same glass, as they had often done. She turned her head away. He seized her brutally, threw her head back and savagely pinched her nostrils, thus forcing her to drink. As she cried with fear, he spoke. 'Perhaps you would have preferred another glass,' he said, and showed her the tali-tali.

"She cried for help, but suddenly put her hand to her abdomen and was taken with a horrible cramp. At the same time the pain clutched at him, and they fell together on the sofa. They shrieked together, agonized together, clutched and scratched and bit each other. They pulled at each other like wild beasts. They twisted and writhed, contorting themselves in the same hell.

"Jacobini had still strength enough to insult her, naming the first victims. 'You won't kill any more. You are going to die. You are going to die with me.'

"But the pain was too great. It seemed as though there was hell within him. He pulled weapons down from the walls, and he tried to stab himself with a knife and so end the horror at one blow; but he only succeeded in making a terrible wound. Then he turned the steel toward Olympe and slit her open from top to bottom like an animal. The room echoed with her last howl.

"Possessed by a thousand demons he smashed her skull, pierced her like a pin-cushion, pulled out her eyes and cut her into pieces. She was nothing

more than a bleeding, nameless horror when the servants rushed into the room.

"But Jacobini did not die until the next morning and in his few moments of lucidity narrated the hideous details of their abominable martyrdom. The assistant district attorney who at one time had hoped to marry her was present, and he returned home and went to bed ill. During the night he was so delirious that they thought he would lose his mind and so add one more victim to the list."

ZINZIN stopped. Perspiration beaded his temples. He let out a sort of groan.

"The most horrible part," he went on, "is the fact that she had done nothing."

"Oh!" the others exclaimed.

"Yes, she was innocent. I learned that the other day, only the other day."

"Palmire had done it all!" Gaubert exclaimed.

"As to her," said Zinzin with a terrible laugh, "the police took her and kept her. You can well understand that I did everything in my power to have her given full punishment. All she did was to say no, and to cry about Olympe. Concerning her mistress, however, she gave us explanations which dumfounded us. They were so utterly stupid or naive. For example, when they asked her: 'If your mistress was innocent, she would not have told her husband that the tali-tali had been destroyed before the two of you.'

"'Bah, that is simple,' Palmire answered. 'We agreed between us to say that it had been because there were already rumors about and we did not want to be suspected; besides we did not know what had become of the tali-tali because we really believed that Monsieur Delphin had burned it all the day that he threw a few drops in to please *Madame*.'

"Yes, she said just that," Zinzin

went on, "and she was hissed and hooted. I cried louder than the rest."

"And what was she sentenced to?" asked Chaulieu.

"Death," replied Zinzin in a whisper.

"But they don't execute women?"

"No. . . . Her sentence was changed to life imprisonment. She died in her cell about ten years ago. I learned that the other day also."

"And did she repent? Did she confess?" Michel asked.

"No," Zinzin answered, looking at us like a madman, "and she had nothing to confess. . . . *She, too, was innocent!*"

"Good God!" Chaulieu exclaimed.

"But then, who was guilty?" Gaubert asked.

"A man who has just died and confessed on his death bed. After the tragedy he left the town and settled not far from here. Yes, he died the other day at Mourillon. That man had owned some property which touched the edge of Olympe's estate in the far corner where the pavilion was."

"But who was the man?—one of the twelve?"

"Yes, one of the twelve—the twelfth, to be exact! He naturally could not ever hope to marry Olympe, because of course she would never go through with eleven husbands after such deaths, but he eliminated those who had been happier than he . . . and at the end he had fixed it so that the evidence all pointed to Olympe.

"Do you remember, when the twelfth suitor arrived that day when we were all lined up in the drawing-room—the arrival of Monsieur Pacifire, the registrar—what fun Olympe made of him and how we had all laughed when she placed him at the foot of the line? Yes, we made fun of Monsieur Pacifire when he came into the room! Well, he avenged himself, that man!"