

Ron Goulart

**The Woman in the Mist**

IT WAS ON A RAW, WINDY afternoon in the spring of 1899 that Harry Challenge arrived in the capital city of the small Middle European country of Urbania. Before midnight he'd narrowly avoid being crushed by a falling gargoyle, be threatened by an international female spy, and almost hurled off a train by a jealous circus strongman. He'd initially gone there simply to investigate a ghost.

Harry had been in Paris quietly diverting himself after apprehending a notorious band of elite grave robbers in Lisbon, when a cablegram from New York City caught up with him.

Dear Son: Cease lollygagging in the fleshpots and hasten your dissipated carcass over to Urbania. Our client is Baron Westerman, who dwells in a castle a short train journey from St. Rolandsburg. This mutt thinks he's being haunted by his wife's ghost. Obviously we can take him for a bundle in fees. Your loving father, the Challenge International Detective Agency.

Harry arrived at the huge, domed St. Rolandsburg Station at ten minutes after two in the afternoon. Within a few minutes more he and his single suitcase were inside a hansom cab heading for the opulent Hotel Pandora two miles away.

He'd been in Urbania twice before on agency cases and had long since decided that he liked it a good deal less than France.

He was a lean, clean-shaven man of thirty-two, a bit above middle height. He wore, since his father believed it helped the image of the detective agency, a conservative dark business suit and a bowler hat.

The gargoyle, an exceptionally ugly one, had been lurking atop St. Roland Cathedral for several centuries.

The cab rattled, then abruptly halted on the cobblestone street in front of the ancient towering cathedral.

Harry, who'd just lit one of the thin dark cigars he favored, glanced out the window. "This sure as hell isn't the hotel," he observed.

The door was politely tugged open by the driver. "Beg your pardon, sir, but one of the wheels is coming loose."

"And?"

The thin young man beckoned him to disembark. "If you'll but wait on the sidewalk, sir, I'll summon a new cab to convey --"

Harry gathered up his suitcase and climbed out. "The Hotel Pandora's less than a mile from here," he said. "Just across the bridge. I can walk there before you --"

"No, sir, my employers would be much angered if that happened." He took hold of Harry's arm, led him to the sidewalk and positioned him on a spot near the curb.

Harry set his suitcase down. "Even so, I'd rather hike."

"That would also reflect on me, sir. Here." He produced, from behind his back, a bright yellow shawl and draped it over Harry's shoulders. "This will protect you from the elements."

After taking a puff of his cigar, Harry said, "Okay, I'll wait a few minutes."

"I'm most appreciative, sir." The youthful cabman took a step back, studied Harry and then moved forward again. He took hold of both Harry's arms and moved him about a foot to the right. "A much more comfortable position, I believe." Nodding, he returned to his hansom and, standing near his roan horse, began scanning the busy thoroughfare for a replacement cab to flag down.

Harry took another puff of his cigar and glanced across the wide, cobblestone Cathedral Road toward the vast Prince Leopold Gardens. A slim young woman on a bicycle came riding out of the park along a tree-lined lane, the skirt of her checkered traveling suit nipped at by the harsh afternoon wind.

She suddenly stopped, waved her arms, and yelled, "Harry, look up!"

He did.

