

# The Woman in the Mist

**Ron** Goulart

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.

Then he dived to his left, losing the bright yellow scarf, and hit the sidewalk. He went rolling over the pavement, dropped off the curb and into the gutter.

The heavy stone gargoyle he'd seen plummeting down toward him from high up on the cathedral smacked into sidewalk on exactly the spot where he'd been standing. His suitcase was squashed flat. There was an immense smashing, crunching, and cracking, and dust came swirling up as jagged fragments of paving shot up all around.

There was noise all about. People shouting, crying out, carriages and cabs rattling to stops, horses whinnying. A dog barked over in the park.

Harry, feeling a mite wobbly, got to his feet. He brushed himself off swiftly and reached into his shoulder hoister for his .38 revolver.

By that time his solicitous cabdriver was back atop the hansom, applying the whip to the roan horse.

Before Harry had the gun out, the cab was clattering away in the direction of the bridge.

"You're not exceptionally bright, Harry," said the pretty auburn-haired cyclist, who'd walked her bicycle through the halted traffic and was approaching Harry. "Quite obviously that lout positioned you there so you--"

"Thanks for the warning, Jennie." He took hold of the handlebars of her bike. "Wait here until I get back and then we'll exchange pleasantries."

"Surely you're not going after that fellow and giving him another chance to kill you?"

Grinning, Harry commandeered the bicycle, hopped onto the seat and went pedaling off in pursuit of the fleeing assistant assassin.

Harry caught up with the swaying hansom cab midway across the ornate wrought-iron bridge spanning the gray choppy waters of the River Konig .

Increasing his speed, he pulled alongside and leaped free of the borrowed bicycle. He caught hold of the windowsill on the passenger door of the speeding cab.

Jennie Barr's cycle wobbled on riderless for a few yards more, then toppled over directly in the path of a heavy horse-drawn beer wagon.

As Harry pulled himself up onto the roof of the hansom, the young driver rose up on his outside seat and swung at Harry with his whip.

Harry dodged the flick of the lash, lunged and grabbed the driver by the front of his black greatcoat. "Who hired you to plant me there?"

"It was the merest coincidence, sir," the youth told him. "My employers would never condone a sidewalk assassination."

"Who are you working for?" asked Harry, shaking the driver.

The young man wrenched free of Harry's grip on him. Striking Harry across the chest with the handle of the whip, he twisted up out of his seat. He jumped free of the cab.

As the driver hit the walkway at the side of the bridge, Harry grabbed the reins and shouted, "Whoa!"

The horse halted. Harry climbed down.

He was just in time to see the driver toss aside his greatcoat and dive off the bridge toward the river below.

Harry sprinted to the ornamental, waist-high railing and looked down. He saw a coal barge and a red and gold houseboat steaming by down there, but there was nary a sign of the driver.

"I don't think I'll pursue him any further," Harry decided.

The newly installed electric chandeliers added an extra sparkle to the crystal, silver, and crisp white tablecloths in the vast, crowded dining room of the Hotel Pandora.

Harry rested an elbow on their table, watching Jennie Barr with his left eye narrowed. "Admittedly, Jennie, we're close friends, even though we don't encounter each other that often. But I don't like to discuss current cases or--"

"All right," the young woman cut in, "don't admit that we're in St. Rolandsburg for the same darn reason."

"What I think is that the New York Daily Inquirer assigned you to trail after me to get another sensation-ridden story for that yellow sheet that employs you."

"Hooey," rejoined the auburn-haired reporter. "I arrived here two days before you, Harry. I was dispatched to investigate the rumors that the woods around WestermanCastleare haunted. As you know, I specialize in newspaper stories dealing with the weird and unusual."

On the small elevated bandstand, which was partially screened by potted palms, a formally attired string quartet was attempting Mozart.

Harry tried his champagne. "Okay, you're not tailing me," he conceded. "And, again, thanks for warning me about the failing gargoyle."

Jennie sighed. "If somebody had planted me in such an obvious spot to have a huge piece of stoneware dumped on my head, I think I would've had the common sense to look upward." She pointed a finger at the high, stained glass ceiling of the restaurant.

"Probably so."

"It's a wonder they didn't have an X chalked on the pavement where they wanted you to stand -- or perhaps a bull's-eye," said the reporter. "Honestly, Harry, I worry about these lapses of acumen that you display now and then."

"I was woolgathering," he admitted.

She shook her head. "Too bad you let that lout escape."

"Escape or drown, not sure which."

"And you didn't find anything when you climbed up into St. Roland's?" She assumed a guileless expression.

"I found some local police and evidence that one of the gargoyles had been crowbarred from his longtime roost." He tapped his forefinger against the stem of his glass. "You were up there before I was, weren'tyou?"

Jennie nodded, smiling. "While you were off ruining my rented bicycle, yes," she acknowledged. "Ahead of the law, too."

"The agency will pay for the bike. Now what did you find?"

Extracting a leather-covered notebook from her purse, Jennie carefully set it atop the table and opened it.

Pressed between the pages was a yellow rose. "This was lying near the base of the absent gargoyle. Suggest anyone?"

He picked up the flower, frowning. "Damn, is she in Urbania?"

"Opening Friday at the Theatre Royale here in St. Rolandsburg. Offering 'arias from the great operas.'"

He rubbed the yellow petals against his chin. "She's very fond of yellow roses," he said. "Lily Hope, second-rate singer and first-rate espionage agent for hire."

"It isn't the first time she's tried to kill you."

"Actually it's the fifth."

"Counting Cairo?"

"I've never been certain that the poisoned dart was her work."

"Sure, it was."

He shrugged. "Six, then. The point is, why does a master spy want to do me in?"

"Settling old scores maybe."

"Nope, Lily's more practical than that," he said with a shake of his head. "She only tries to knock me off when I stand in the way of one of her enterprises."

Reaching across, Jennie took hold of his hand. "Did Baron Westerman hire you to investigate this ghost of his?"

"He did, yeah," he answered. "And that's the sole reason for my being in this benighted land."

"But why would Lily be interested in a ghost?"

"Could be she's interested in the baron," suggested Harry. "Although the dossier I put together on him doesn't indicate any involvement with politics at all. Mostly he shoots game birds."

"He's also rumored to be not too bright."

"You can be not too bright and still get into politics. No indications, though, that the baron is."

"What do you think about his ghost?"

"Nothing yet. That's what I'm here to investigate."

"His wife's only been dead for a bit over three months," said Jennie. "If she is dead."

"Meaning?"

"The young lady, after having been married to the baron for not quite a year, disappeared one stormy midnight in the waters of a handy lake. She left a suicide note behind."

"And hasn't been seen since."

"Except in ghostly form, or so some locals swear."

"Dead or alive, the Challenge International Detective Agency gets its fee."

"Yes, I know." Jennie leaned back in her chair. "Are you taking the 11:15 to Westermanville tonight?"

"Planning to, yes. Are you?"

"No, Harry, I'm booked to take the 10:00 A.M. tomorrow morning."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the St. Roland and the Dragon Inn."

"So am I." He grinned. "We can have dinner tomorrow night."

"If I'm not out solving the mystery. After all, in the past I've --"

"Beg pardon, Mr. Challenge." A middle-aged bellboy in a gold-trimmed scarlet uniform was standing beside their table. A silver salver was held in his gloved left hand. "A message for you."

Harry dropped a gold coin on the plate, picked up the cream-colored envelope.

"Well?" inquired Jennie as he read the letter.

"It says," said Harry, clearing his throat, "'You missed death this afternoon. Next time you won't. Return to Paris.' Unsigned."

She took the letter when he handed it across. After studying it for a moment, Jennie said, "This looks a heck of a lot like Lily Hope's handwriting, doesn't it?"

"Quite a bit," he agreed.

THE RAIN, accompanied by some impressive lightning and thunder, commenced minutes after Harry's train pulled out of the station. Wind-driven rain whipped at the window of his compartment, the frequent flashes of bluish lightning illuminated the warehouses and stockyards on the outskirts of St. Rolandsburg and then the hilly countryside and vast pine forests.

Harry initially had the compartment to himself. He was smoking one of his thin black cigars, watching the stormy night the train was roaring through. He hadn't yet looked into the paper-covered Tauchnitz edition of the latest Anthony Hope novel that he'd taken out of his new suitcase. It sat unopened on the seat next to him.

"Beastly night. The corridor door had come sliding open to admit the very large man in clerical garb who lunged into the swaying compartment.

He thumped a large wicker picnic basket, which was overflowing with fat links of sausage and long loaves of dark bread, onto the seat across from Harry.

Shaking himself, doglike, he scattered drops of rain around the swaying compartment. "Frightfully sorry if I've spattered you, old man."

Harry, grinning thinly, said, "I'm wondering how you got wet, since it wasn't raining when the train pulled out."

Taking off his wide-brimmed priestly hat and tossing it atop his basket, the large, wide man pointed a thumb at the ceiling. "I was up on the roof for a bit." "Oh, so?"

"I often travel in such a manner when I'm on a mission," he explained. "Though not usually in such deucedly foul weather." He gave an appreciative nod. "You're a clever and perceptive fellow, Challenge."

Eyeing him, Harry said, "I take it you haven't dropped in to convert me to your faith."

"I'm a bit of an agnostic actually, old man. I toyed with Muscular Christianity for a spell, eventually found it dashed unsatisfying."

"I have the feeling that I've seen you before," said Harry, exhaling smoke. "I think it was at a circus in Budapest. You were the strongman."

Smiling briefly, he answered, "Yes, old man, I was known as the Mighty Orloff."

"You lifted a cow over your head."

"A bull," Orloff corrected.

"Even more impressive," said Harry. "And are you the fellow who pried the gargoyle off St. Roland's earlier in the day?" Harry took a long drag on his cigar, causing the tip to sparkle redly.

The spurious clergyman nodded, accepting responsibility. "We would have got you if that intrusive newspaper girl hadn't spoiled things."

"We being you and Lily Hope?"

The big man nodded again, scowled. "I'll tell you, dear chap, I also happen to have a personal grievance against you."

Taking another puff on his cigar, Harry said nothing.

"Damme, if I don't suspect that Lily's sweet on you."

"That most recent token of her affection doesn't suggest an overwhelming passion for me."

"The dear lady was, to my eye, almost pleased that you'd escaped being squashed," he said. "Made me devilishly jealous for a bit, I must say. So that when I do away with you now, Challenge, I'll be, as it

were, killing two birds with one stone."

Harry pointed out, "Since Lily's dispatched you to try again, she can't be harboring too much in the way of fond feelings for me."

"I'm blessed if I don't suspect she'd be pleased if I failed to kill you."

"Why exactly are you and Lily interested in the ghost of Valeria Westerman?"

"We're not, old boy. We're interested in her romantic entanglements," replied Orloff. "And now let us get down to... Oof!"

Harry had all at once flicked his burning cigar into the would-be assassin's face. The lit end hit him smack between the eyes, scattering sparks.

When the erstwhile strongman brought up his hands to rub at his eyes, Harry raised up partially to deliver a substantial kick into his groin.

The big man howled, stumbled backward, sat on his picnic basket, snapping a loaf of bread in two. Roaring in anger, he began to charge at Harry. Then he stopped.

Harry had his .38 revolver in his hand, aimed at the strongman's midsection. "Let's chat about what you and dear Lily are really up to, old man," he suggested.

"I shall never betray her."

"Would a few bullets in various parts of your body persuade you to modify that stand?"

"Never!" He suddenly grabbed up the basket and flung it straight at Harry.

Hit in the chest with the heavy assortment of comestibles, plus two bottles of cheap red wine, Harry stumbled backward and landed on the seat.

Orloff yanked open the inside door, went running along the swaying corridor.

Disentangling himself from the picnic fare, Harry, gun in hand, dived out of the compartment.

Orloff was at the end of the car. As the train slowed around a curve, he stepped into the passway between cars.

When Harry reached the passway, he found that the door to the outside was flapping open. The Great Orloff had apparently leaped from the train out into the rainswept woodlands beyond.

Reaching out and tugging the door shut, Harry observed, "I guess you should never underestimate a strongman."

IT WAS ABOUT ten minutes shy of one A.M. that evening when Harry got his first glimpse of the ghost.

The carriage from the inn was carrying him from the train station along a quirky road that passed through a dark forest. The rain continued heavy; thunder rumbled off among the trees. Then there was a great,



crackling flash of lightning off to the right of the speeding carriage.

Harry turned toward it as the forest was briefly illuminated.

"Damn, there she is!"

He saw, lit up by the lightning, a heavy white cloak over the slender shoulders of the misty, insubstantial figure of an otherwise unclothed young woman. She was walking, slowly and stiffly, along a woodland path some hundred feet in from the roadway.

Thrusting his head out of the coach window, Harry shouted, "Stop this contraption."

The driver shouted back "Nobody ever stops in Witchwood after dark, sir."

He cracked his whip. The two horses increased their speed.

Twisting on his seat, Harry looked back.

The forest was dark again.

He decided not to jump from the fast-moving carriage.

Frowning, he leaned back and lit a fresh cigar.

"Pack of superstitious louts, don't you know," observed Captain Amos Waverly. "Entire blooming country is that way. Worse than bloody England when it comes to giving credence to old wives' tales. Toby there's smarter than the whole and entire populace of Urbania."

Toby was the small pugnacious bulldog who was gnawing diligently at Harry's left boot, backside wiggling, low growls sounding deep in his gray chest.

"Shoo," suggested Harry, again turning his attention to signing the St. Roland & the Dragon register.

The captain, apparently the proprietor of the inn, was a large, heavysset man in his early sixties. Bald, bewhiskered, and pink, he was wearing a tasseled nightcap and a vast Japanese kimono over a candy-striped flannel nightshirt. He was leaning on Harry's side of the registration desk, a knobby cane in his hand and his right foot swathed in considerable windings of bandages. "Toby, my lad, abandon our guest's foot, do you hear."

Toby ignored him, growling more fervently.

Harry said, "You don't believe Witchwood is haunted?"

"Haunted, my aunt," said the captain. "No suchthing as spooks, old chap."

"What, in your opinion, have folks been seeing in the woods of an evening lately?"

"Same thing you saw." The captain leaned, tapping the bulldog gently on the backside with the tip of his cane. "Suspend your unseemly behavior, Toby. No doubt, Challenge, you sighted a wandering guest from that decadent artist's hideaway."

"Which artist?" Bending, Harry plucked the bulldog off his foot, holding him by his studded collar. "Begone or face extinction."

The dog, placed back on the plank flooring, went waddling off to sprawl in front of the stone fireplace.

"Now that's the way to handle Toby. Firmly, no nonsense," said the captain approvingly. "Far too many mollicoddles in the world today. Especially in Urbania. Thought it was bad in England, moved here, found it far worse, I must say."

"Which decadent artist?"

"One of these bright chaps, Dr. Owen Rumsford," replied Captain Waverly. "Been occupying Milverton Manor for close to a bloody year. Far too modern in his outlook, paints loathsome pictures of unclad women, indulges in strange drugs, is possibly a vivisectionist and, so I hear -- and you can never completely trust the word of the local nitwits -- stages nocturnal orgies on the premises with alarming frequency. You no doubt glimpsed some drink-crazed creature stumbling about the woods near the manor house in a disgraceful state of dishabille."

"She looked, during the brief glimpse I caught, much too insubstantial to have strayed from an orgy," he said, shaking his head. "So Dr. Rumsford lives hereabouts, huh?"

"You've heard of the scoundrel?"

"Yeah, in addition to being a noted painter, he has a considerable reputation as a scientist," answered Harry. "An unorthodox scientist."

"That's Rumsford, to be sure. Decidedly unorthodox." The innkeeper yawned. "Now then, Challenge, let me hobble upstairs, as best I can though suffering from this blasted gout, and show you to your room. You remain below, Toby."

Stretching to his feet, the bulldog followed them up the shadowy staircase.

Baron Westerman spoke English with a slight Urbanian accent. "There, Herr Challenge, is my dear departed Valeria," he said, gesturing at the unfinished painting resting on the easel at the exact center of the cluttered drawing room.

The portrait showed a slim blonde young woman with long, curly Pre-Raphaelite hair. She was perhaps twenty-five, wearing an off-the-shoulder white satin gown and an ornate emerald necklace. The painting stopped just above her waist. The lower third of the canvas was, except for some preliminary pencilling, blank white.

"A very handsome young lady." Harry made his way over to the painting, skirting a clawfooted table that had a stuffed marsh hawk perched on a stand atop it.

"Ah, yes, well might you emphasize the word young, Herr Challenge, since I am much older than poor --"

"I didn't, actually." He studied the portrait for a few silent seconds. "This was painted by your neighbor, Owen Rumsford, wasn't it?"

"That blackguard," muttered the short, amply bearded baron. "When he first moved into Milverton

Manor, I knew only his considerable reputation as a portrait painter." Hesighed, reaching over to ruffle the feathers upon the head of a stuffed grouse perched on an oaken sideboard. "I had yet to learn that Rumsford was an immoral reprobate who lived a licentious life and dabbled in the black arts."

"Chemistry isn't officially ranked as one of the black arts." Turning away from the unfinished portrait of the dead woman, Harry crossed to one of the French windows.

The early afternoon sky outside was gray; a flock of ravens came fluttering down to land on the misty lawn of the formal garden that stretched away from the mansion.

"Be that as it may," said Baron Westerman, jamming his small fists down deep into the pockets of his velvet smoking jacket. "Once I was apprised of Rumsford's true nature, I banished him from my home."

Harry turned to face his client. "How soon after that did your wife disappear?"

"Valeria did not disappear, Herr Challenge," corrected the baron. "The poor child threw herself into the waters of Lake Nebel. I showed you the suicide note she left neatly folded up with all her garments beside its dark waters. She simply said that she was too unhappy to go on living." He pointed at a window. "The lake borders the northern acres of my estate."

"Cold, jumping into a lake naked." Harry took out a thin cigar. "You say you had the lake dragged?"

"Yes, but it's very deep and no trace of poor Valeria was ever found." The baron wiped at the corner of his eye with his thumb knuckle, sniffing. "What bothers me now, now that I've accepted the grim fact that she is no longer alive, is that her perturbed spirit must wander the woods bordering my estate."

"Bordering Dr. Rumsford's place, too."

Westerman sighed once more. "I want you -- which your estimable father assures me you are fully capable of doing, Herr Challenge -- to confront my late wife's restless ghost. You must make certain that she is freed from this earthly realm and goes on to her reward in Heaven"

Lighting his cigar with a wax match, Harry asked, "Have you seen her yourself?"

Commencing to sob quietly, he replied, "I am no coward, Herr Challenge, yet I cannot bring myself to venture into Witchwood by night. Seeing my poor departed Valeria in spirit form would be too much to bear."

"But you're certain it's she?"

"I've had descriptions -- from some of my tenants and from the village postman who was returning from a nocturnal visit to his fiancée," the baron replied. "Yes, I believe that the spirit of my dead wife has come back to haunt me."

"She'd have a better chance of doing that if she showed up some place inside the house here." He nodded toward the misty garden. "Or right outside. Your garden would make a fine site for a haunting."

Frowning deeply, the baron asked. "What are you suggesting, sir?"

Harry shrugged, exhaling smoke. "Merely being curious," he answered. "Does she appear every night?"

"There seems to be no regular pattern to her materializations. In the weeks since she started appearing in Witchwood, she's showed up three nights in a row and then missed a week."

"And she usually shows up around midnight," said Harry. "Okay, I'll start roaming Witchwood every night until I spot her."

"Please, don't harm Valeria. Don't put any spells on her that will doom her to eternal damnation or --"

"I'm a detective," reminded Harry. "Very few spells do I cast."

Nodding, the baron invited, "If you're intending to enter the woods this evening, Herr Challenge, might I suggest that you stop by here for a late dinner beforehand?"

"Not this evening, baron," he said. "I already have a dinner engagement."

HARRY WAS ADJUSTING his shoulder holster when someone knocked on the oaken door of his beam-ceilinged room. It was a foggy night and thick gray mist pressed against the leaded windows.

Putting on his coat, Harry said, "Yeah?"

"It's Captain Waverly, my boy," said the innkeeper. "Accompanied by the faithful Toby."

Moving to the door, Harry opened it. "Any word from Jennie Barr?"

The captain gave a forlorn shake of his head. "The young lady, alas, has still not returned from her early afternoon stroll," he answered. "Though an optimist, I must admit that I am growing increasingly concerned."

"So am I."

When Harry returned from his client's estate, he'd learned that Jennie had arrived at St. Roland & the Dragon, signed in and, after freshening up, gone out. She'd left a note for Harry telling him she was expecting to join him for dinner. The captain she had told she was going to take a stroll in the woodlands.

The day had ended, night had closed in, but Jennie had not returned to the inn. It was now a few minutes short of eight.

"Perhaps a search party is in order," suggested Captain Waverly. "My gout prevents me from participating in such an activity, more's the pity, but I can volunteer my stable boy and --"

"I'll find her." Buttoning his coat, Harry stepped out into the corridor.

Toby growled by way of greeting him.

"Keep in mind, my dear Challenge, that Witchwood by night can be a dangerous place."

"Nevertheless." He shut his room door, headed for the shadowy stairway.

"Allow me to loan you the services of the staunch Toby."

"For what -- company?"

"You'll find him an excellent tracker. Although his scrunched up little nose doesn't look all that impressive, I can assure you that --"

"All right, if he promises not to bite me," Harry conceded. "And we'll need something that belongs to Jennie, for the scent."

"I've already thought of that." From a pocket of his ample Norfolk jacket, the captain removed a plaid scarf. "Took the liberty of extracting this from one of Miss Barr's traveling cases."

"That'll do." Somewhat gingerly, Harry held the scarf near the bulldog's nose. "This is who we're hunting for, Toby."

After sniffing thoughtfully, Toby made a brief attempt to nip Harry's fingers.

"Merely being playful," explained the innkeeper. "I'm expecting you to accomplish your mission, Toby."

A few moments later, Harry, carrying a bull's-eye lantern, was following the bulldog into the woods beyond the inn.

Less than a minute after a distant bell tower struck eleven, Harry saw the ghost again.

So did Toby, who commenced barking.

"Hush," Harry advised the dog.

About sixty feet away, on a narrow trail that ran parallel to the one along which the sniffing bulldog had been leading Harry, the blurred figure of a woman could be seen.

Draped over her shoulders was the long white cloak. What could be seen of her naked body seemed transparent; only the coating beads of mist gave it form and substance.

"She's not a ghost," realized Harry. "No, somehow -- and I'm going to have to find out how -- she's become invisible. If she weren't spotted with fog, you wouldn't see anything but that damned cloak."

He was about to start pushing his way through the misty brush and trees that separated him from the stiffly walking young woman. But then Toby spun suddenly around, alternating between barking and growling.

Harry never got to see what the object of the dog's agitation was. As he started to turn, someone conked him on the back of the head. Twice again with something heavy and metallic.

He heard the dog yelp once before he fell forward, lost consciousness, and was surrounded by mist.

Harry awoke to find a bare female foot floating a yard or so from him.

He himself, thoroughly trussed up with thick hempen rope, was sprawled, face down, amidst old straw on the dirt floor of what had once been a cow barn.

As he inhaled and exhaled slowly, he noticed a second foot floating near the other one. Both of them looked as though they belonged to a young woman, a well-groomed, upper class young woman.

"Since you're groaning, Harry, I assume you're awakening," observed a familiar voice to his left.

"I rarely groan," he said, lifting his head and twisting to the left, "except while reading one of your newspaper yarns."

Jennie Barr, wearing a rumpled plaid traveling suit, was tied to a straight-back wooden chair that sat on the barn floor about ten feet from him. The large hollow structure was lit only by a kerosene lantern that dangled from a nearby stanchion. The reporter's auburn hair was tangled and there were smudges of dirt on her face.

She said, "This isn't the place for literary criticism, Harry. What we--"

"You're a reporter? Good heavens, had I known that I would never have confided in you." The voice came out of the empty air.

Harry, lifting his head, saw that there was a second bentwood chair sitting there. Ropes floated, apparently holding an unseen young woman in place.

"You must be Valeria Westerman," said Harry, "alleged ghost."

"That she is," confirmed Jennie. "They brought her in along with you, only she wasn't out cold. We've been passing the time chatting while waiting for you to come out of your stupor. Although, as I explained to Valeria, it's sometimes difficult to tell your stupor from your normal."

"I've committed another serious error," said the unhappy invisible woman. "I should never have told you all I did, except that I supposed you, likemyself, were no more than a hapless prisoner of these fiends."

"I'm a reporter, sure, but I'm as hapless as you."

"Which specific fiends are we talking about?" inquired Harry. "Would that be Lily Hope and the Mighty Orloff?"

Jennie answered, "Lily is the one who caught me snooping around this abandoned farm earlier in the day and tossed me in here, yes. If Orloff is a big muscle-bound oaf, then he's the other fiend."

Harry nodded as best he could toward the slowly materializing young woman. "I take it, Baroness, that you ran off to join Owen Rumsford after faking your suicide."

"I have no further comments to make," said the nearly invisible woman. "Who are you, may I ask, another prying journalist?" "A detective, hired by your husband."

She sighed. "This grows more hopeless by the moment," Valeria said forlornly. "My shame will be made known to the world through the pages of a yellow journal and then my dull, tedious, bird-obsessed husband will discover that I'm not dead at all and drag me back to that taxidermy-infested pile."

"None of that," Harry pointed out, "is going to happen unless we get free of this barn."

Jennie asked, "Would you care to know why the lady's invisible?"

"Is my shame to be broadcast far and wide?"

"Only to Harry just now, Baroness."

Harry hunched his shoulders, flexed his hands. "Rumsford is a maverick scientist, greatly interested in coming up with weapons and gimmicks that can be sold for use in the many wars and skirmishes now taking place around the world. In the past he's made more money from that sideline than he has from his paintings."

"Well, you're not as dense as usual," said Jennie with a touch of admiration in her voice.

"You wouldn't be as fond of me as you are if I were actually dense." He shifted his position on the bovine-scented straw, bringing his knees up as far as the ropes would allow. "I figure Rumsford is working on a formula to make soldiers -- and maybe spies -- invisible. To test his invention, he tried it out on Valeria here. Though I can't quite guess his reason for letting his sample invisible woman wander in the woods by night."

"She sleepwalks," provided Jennie. "He tries to keep her locked up at home nights, but when he gets distracted by his laboratory work or his painting, he forgets. Valeria tosses a cloak over her invisible shoulders and wanders around Witchwood until she wakes up."

Harry spoke in the direction of the floating feet. "Why exactly did you let Rumsford experiment on you, ma'am?"

"He's a very seductive, very persuasive fellow." The fingers of her left hand were now also visible. "And, of course, he convinced me this was a humanitarian experiment and had nothing to do with any ongoing conflict. I dearly wish I'd never fallen under his spell."

Jennie mentioned, "Apparently you don't stay invisible all the time."

"No, that's what has necessitated Owen's injecting me repeatedly in the backside with his vile potion. I found out that he can't sell his formula to any foreign power unless he can guarantee it will keep a user safely invisible for at least ten hours. So far I've never remained unseen for more than five."

"Lily, I imagine, knowing Rumsford's reputation, guessed what the ghost of Witchwood really was," said Harry, rolling to the right. "She came out here, grabbed Valeria and plans to trade her back to Rumsford in exchange for this invisibility formula."

"I fear," said the young woman, "that he no longer values me that much."

Jennie frowned down at the writhing Harry. "Whatever are you doing?"

"It's a trick my magician friend the Great Lorenzo tried to teach me once," he replied. "He calls it the Marvelous Escape Trick in his traveling magic show."

"Did he succeed in teaching it to you?"

"We'll see."

"How is Lorenzo?"

"When I last had a cablegram from him, he was playing in the capital city of Graustark."

Valeria sighed again. "Ah, my distant homeland," she said. "Would that I were safely back there and free of both the Baron and Owen Rumsford."

Harry grunted, straining at the thick ropes. Then he said, "I might be able to arrange that if --"

"Good news!" Orloff, dressed in an Inverness overcoat, had stepped into the barn from out of the misty night. "Lily, after considerable cajoling on my part, has consented to allow me to sink you in Lake Nebel, Challenge."

"That is good news, yeah," said Harry.

THE MIGHTY ORLOFF'S boots crunched on the shale beach that bordered the mist-shrouded Lake Nebel. Unseen night birds were hooting in the dark forest they'd just passed through.

Slung over the former strongman's broad shoulder, Harry remarked, "For a fellow who once lifted a full-grown cow over his head, you're sure huffing and puffing."

"It was a bull," the big, wide man corrected. "Besides, dear chap, your twisting and writhing doesn't make carrying you down to the lake all that easy."

"The thought of my impending death gives me the fidgets."

"That will cease once I fill your various pockets with heavy stones and shot-put you into your watery grave, Challenge."

"I'm curious," said the restless Harry.

"As to how deep the lake might be? The guidebooks inform us that Lake Nebel is close to bottomless. Not that the fact will make any difference to--"

"No, about whether Dr. Rumsford has agreed to trade his invisibility formula for the safe return of Valeria."

Orloff halted, still about ten yards from the waters of the night lake. "How the devil did you come to know about that?" "I'm a detective," he reminded the strongman.

"That's most interesting, that is. Lily has assured me on more than one occasion that you aren't as simple as you appear, yet I failed to believe her," said Orloff. "I had assumed her schoolgirl affection for you simply clouded her judgment."

Harry persisted. "Is Rumsford going to make the trade?"

Orloff made a resigned noise. "This very night at one A.M. in the old barn," he said. "The doctor will hand over his notebooks and his entire supply of the invisibility potion." He took two steps forward. "We have several interested potential clients among the major nations. As to what we'll eventually do with the petite Miss Barr, we haven't as yet --"

"It does work," announced Harry.

"What works, old man?"



"My friend Lorenzo's rope escape trick." Harry, shedding his bonds, dropped to the beach. Scooping up a large stone, he reached up and smacked Orloff across the temple with it several times.

The strongman collapsed on the shale.

The barn was on fire.

Harry saw the flames while he was still hurrying back through the misty forest.

He started running, dodging oaks and maples.

The right wall of the old structure was afire, flames crackling and climbing up into the night. Smoke was swirling, mixing with the fog.

He was trotting past the rundown farmhouse when someone hailed him. "I advise you to stop, Harry dear."

Halting, he turned to see Lily Hope stepping out from behind a gnarled tree. She held what looked to be a filigreed dueling pistol in her gloved hand. The flames from the burning barn two hundred feet away made its barrel sparkle.

She was a handsome woman, about Harry's age and ten pounds heavier than when he'd last encountered her. Lily wore a long dark velvet cloak over her scarlet gown and her currently blonde hair was piled high on her head and was studded with quite a few glistening diamonds.

"Don't have time for a chat, Lily. There are two women in that damn barn,"

"Yes, isn't that rather apity. "

"I'm going in after them."

"I imagine your dear friend Jennie Barr managed to knock over the lantern in her hopeless struggles," said the international spy and soprano. "I was dozing when I became aware of the conflagration." "You need the baroness and she's in there, too."

Lily shrugged. "We can simply waylay dear Dr. Rumsford while he's on his way here," she said. "In a way, Harry, it's much simpler and cleaner if Valeria is dead."

"Like hell." He spun, started running again.

"I'll shoot you, Harry. You mustn't doubt that."

He continued to run, closing the distance between himself and the barn.

"I shall count to three," Lily called. "If you don't halt, I'll shoot you in your handsome back."

He was almost to the entrance to the flaming building.

"One."

He reached the threshold.

"Two."

Just as he was about to enter the smoke-filled barn someone off in the fog a few yards away said, "Ninny, you don't have to go in there."

Harry stepped back, staring into the mist at his left.

"We got out," said Jennie. "But I knocked over the darn lantern when I tipped my chair over to smash it and loosen the ropes."

"How's Valeria?"

"Right here hunkered down with me, and about fifty-sixty percent visible now. We were about to go looking for you when I heard you come lumbering through the woods."

"Three," announced Lily, striding over to where Harry was standing. "Ah, your little reporter and the baroness have escaped. Don't make an attempt to flee, any of you."

"I wonder," put in Valeria, who was huddled behind the now-standing Jennie, "if I might borrow your cloak, Miss Hope. My visibility is now nearly total and I'm naked."

"All of you come away from this potential inferno and back to the farmhouse," ordered Lily. "Harry can loan you his coat."

Easing out of his coat, Harry handed it toward the nearly visible baroness, eyes averted.

"I saw you sing once in the opera house in the capital of Graustark," said Valeria, shivering in spite of the donated coat and increasing heat from the burning barn. "I must say, Miss Hope, that you seemed far more amiable upon the stage than you do tonight."

"A dreadful old pile, your ramshackle opera house." Lily backed away from the barn, beckoning them with the pistol to come along.

"By the way," said Harry as they began marching toward the old house, "you've probably realized that Orloff didn't succeed in sinking me in the picturesque waters of Lake Nebel."

"So that's why you're running around loose." She stopped, frowning at him. "I gave no such order."

"So you are still fond of me."

"Not at all, Harry, I was planning to shoot you before Dr. Rumsford arrived. What did you do to Orloff?"

"Slugged him, tied him up with the ropes he'd used on me. He's slumbering beside the lake and you --"

An angry growling interrupted Harry.

From out of the surrounding mist came Toby. He dived at one of Lily's plump ankles and sank his teeth into it.

She cried out in pain. "You nasty little beast," she said, twisting to aim the gun at the snarling bulldog.

Stepping forward, Harry socked her on the chin.

As Lily slumped, passing out, he extracted the pistol from her slack fingers.

"Ungentlemanly," observed Valeria. "Yet most effective, Herr Challenge.

"Yes, that was very helpful, Harry," added Jennie. "Who's the hound?"

Bending, Harry took hold of the dog and pulled him away from the fallen spy's boot. "This is Toby from the inn. I was wondering what had become of him."

Valeria sighed one of her forlorn sighs. "Alas, now that I'm free I must either return to my annoyingly mundane husband or resume being an increasingly reluctant guinea pig for Owen Rumsford."

"Not necessarily," Harry told her.

THERE WAS A DIFFERENT string quartet playing in the immense dining room of the Hotel Pandora. But their grasp of Mozart was only a shade better than that of their predecessors.

Since it was early evening, the place was only partially filled. The fashionable citizens of St. Rolandsburg rarely dined before ten.

Jennie, wearing yet another checkered traveling suit, clinked her champagne glass against Harry's, grinning. "You really possess very little in the way of integrity."

"On the contrary, I'm actually almost noble in my dealings with the world."

"You completely failed in your handling of Baron Westerman's case," the reporter pointed out. "You collected your enormous fee, however, and lied to the old boy as --"

"I did exactly what he paid us for," he corrected. "The baron wanted the ghost to stop appearing in the woodlands surrounding his estate. She did. Nobody's seen her since."

"That's because you allowed Valeria to slip away to head back home to Graustark."

Harry nodded. "I decided she didn't belong with either of the gents in the case."

"Sometimes," admitted Jennie, "I admire your sentimental side."

Sipping his champagne, Harry said nothing.

"You handled Dr. Rumsford well, too," she continued. "Taking his notebooks and samples from him when he showed up for the expected exchange, then sinking everything in Lake Nebel."

"He'll probably start fooling with invisibility again. At least I've slowed him down some."

"I'm not as pleased over the fact that you let Lily Hope and that circus refugee escape."

Harry held up his hand in a stop-right-there gesture. "Lily, clever woman that she is, managed to get free of that shed I'd locked her in while we were dumping the Rumsford material in Lake Nebel. And, as you'll recall, when we reached the lake all we found were the ropes I'd used to truss up Orloff."

"Sure, he probably knows Lorenzo's rope trick, too." Jennie set down her glass. "Of course, I can't file a story about the ghost at all. Not and tell the truth."

"You have a sentimental side yourself."

"Matter of fact, I do," said Jennie. "When we worked together in Paris a couple of years ago, we were...well, quite friendly."

"We were," Harry agreed.

She said, "St. Rolandsburg isn't Paris, but.... "