

Issue 15 | Fall 2022

NOVELTY FICTION GAZETTE



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Roman Trend

London
Murder
Mystery

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The
Graveyard
Shift

London Murder Mystery

A Short Story

by

Roman Trend

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The river Thames floats gray and muddy. Rows of cars are parked alongside the pier, forcing him to drive further along on an afternoon distinct only by its utter lack of distinction. Parliament is in session.

“Bloody parliamentarians!” Remington is in a foul mood. Sixth washer in two months, it’s like Jack the Ripper all over again. Need a vacation, haven’t had one in over a year, overtime piling up. Screeching sound from a car making a sudden stop. A truck in front of it, the narrow passageway, the damn fog makes everything impossible.

Judy Farrow didn’t look like much as she crossed the street. Her olive green trench coat, which went just above the knees, signaled a disdain for customs. All the other detectives wore long skin-colored coats paid for by the department.

“Dogs found anything yet?” she asked in a candy-covered voice, revealing how satisfied she was with simply being here. She had transgressed four weeks ago, earning herself an infinite suspension for sleeping with one of the young Police Constables, a major no-no for an officer of any rank. A Chief Superintendent might have gotten off with a warning, but she was merely an Inspector, so she could have been sitting home watching Mr. Bean for a couple of television seasons. Then came this case, which was eating up all available manpower, and so Lady Luck was back on the streets.

“What do you mean, yet?” he asked while looking her over condescendingly. “What makes you believe they’ll find anything at all?”

“I’ve got this sixth sense about it,” she said, undeterred in her optimism. “Care for a mint?”

She pulled out a metal box filled with green colored mint candies that stood well with her coat, only they were a brighter green. The manner in which she flipped it open with the left hand revealed a great deal of experience.

“No thanks, Lady Luck,” he sniffed, taking a stab at her by using her new nickname. The day was still young, and she’d hear it countless times before the night was over.

“I’m sitting at home with Thelma,” he went on, now addressing a couple of male uniformed officers. “Browsing through the wedding dress catalog we do, scribbling down numbers. Sending that daughter of ours through school has cost us a bundle already, and getting her properly married will cost me another 20 years on this crummy job. Well, at least we’re having tea and talking about it, a cozy kind of misery often shared between the missus and myself, when this thing rings...”

He pulled out a tiny cell phone and held it up for others to see. “Looks harmless, it does, but it has this special ring for emergencies – the kitten turns into a roaring lion when that happens!”

“Show us Mr. Chief Inspector, will you?” one of the men pleaded.

“Couldn’t demonstrate that ringtone if I wanted to,” Remington replied. “It’s scrambled or something. Only people with Level 1 access can get through to that special number that makes the lion roar. Headquarters Dispatch can do that, Mr. Finlay can of course.” He was referring to the Commissioner, highest ranking officer at the Scotland Yard. The chances of Finlay dialing Remington were like the odds of finding a snowball in Hell.

“There he is!” another young officer remarked, pointing at a cavalcade of three cars and six motorcycles driving slowly down the road, on the opposite embankment.

“Did he ring you, Paul?” the woman asked. Using his first name was tit-for-tat because he had showcased her nickname in front of the other officers. Being the lower-ranked officer, she’d have to pay a price for what she just

did, but this was neither the time nor the place for retribution.

“Bloody Hell!” Remington exclaimed as he turned around, ignoring the question. “Number One has been in Parliament for the opening ceremony, must have decided to stop by here for a photo opportunity.”

“I don’t think so!” she said firmly. “This nightmarish case is our worst performance in decades, somehow I don’t think Mr. Finlay would see a photo op in that.”

One of the young officers whistled, another one grinned, and others were struggling to keep a straight face.

“Could be he’s stopping by to issue a reprimand, to give someone special a kick in the arse,” she went on.

“Miss Farrow, you’ll keep your mouth shut about anything except our investigation, is that understood?” he puffed. “That’s a direct order! Break it, and I’ll have you removed from the case immediately.”

“Sorry sir,” she said softly, realizing she’d gone too far. “Anybody want to come with me over to take a look at the body?”

Two uniformed officers accompanied her to the river bank, where the murdered woman lay naked under a synthetic blanket. At the same time, Mr. Finlay’s motor cavalcade came to a halt within 100 yards of the remainder of the group.

“Quiet, everyone!” Remington admonished. “I need you not to let me down right now! Cookies, candies, coffee, snacks, and beer – it’s all on me afterwards. Provided I make it through!”

“With you all the way, Sir!” one officer said firmly.

They looked intently at the three cars, all of which had special royal license plates with two-digit numbers, and at the police officers mounted on their motorcycles. A tragic, nasty case was turning even weirder; the presence of such

high-level officials had given this case a twist that made it outright bizarre.

Mr. Finlay was a tall, lean man in his mid-sixties. His white hair was cut short, and his long face was smooth and tanned, which provided a deep background for his small silver rimmed glasses. He enjoyed a reputation for being soft-spoken, firmly in control of any situation. His record, 35 years on the force culminating in his appointment to the highest ranking officer five years earlier, was spotless.

“Six bodies in two months, care to comment on that?” he asked.

“Yes sir, that’s six too many,” Remington answered.

“What clues have you?”

“Circumstantial evidence, mostly. We have grounds to believe we are dealing with the same men.”

“Men... How many are there?”

“Three, maybe four.”

“Gang bangers, you mean?”

“No sir, there’s no trace of sexual abuse in any of the cases. No DNA. The dogs are our last best hope. They’ve been sniffing up empty cigarette packs, disposed beer cans, some discarded plastic wrappers; it’s all being collected and sent to the lab for analysis, but there’s been nothing conclusive so far.”

“Who is that woman over there?” Finlay asked.

“I’m sure I don’t know.” Remington felt irritated; the idea that he should have the body identified so soon was preposterous.

“Who is woman number 5, then?”

“Unidentified victim #5 is what we call her, as she hasn’t been identified yet. We have it on Interpol, advertisements all over the place, I’m sure its only a matter of time...”

“What about the first four victims?”

“All of them have been identified. They’re all Londoners. Number 5 is different, she looks like an African, and this one – #6 – I haven’t even looked at yet.”

“Let’s go have a look together then, shall we!”
Finlay’s orders could have been mistaken for a friendly suggestion.

The spot where they stood was about 150 yards from the river bank. Going down there was easy enough in the best of circumstances, but rain had made a mess of the lawn, with large hidden pools of water in places and muddied spots too soft to be easily passed on foot. They walked slowly, one after another, following an improvised trail generated by their fellow officers, doctors, and rescue workers throughout the afternoon.

As they came near to where the body lay, the two tall officers that had been leading the way stepped aside. Mr. Finlay nodded, and a health worker gently removed the brown blanket covering the dead woman. She must have been about 22, 155 centimeters tall, medium length brown hair – now all filled with sprinkles of gray mud – and white skin, which appeared to have no tattoos, bruises or birthmarks of any kind.

“Oh no, dear God!” Remington cried out. “No! No! No!”

“Slap the handcuffs on him, read him his rights,”
Finlay said. “Charge him with murdering his own daughter!”

The Graveyard Shift

A Short Story

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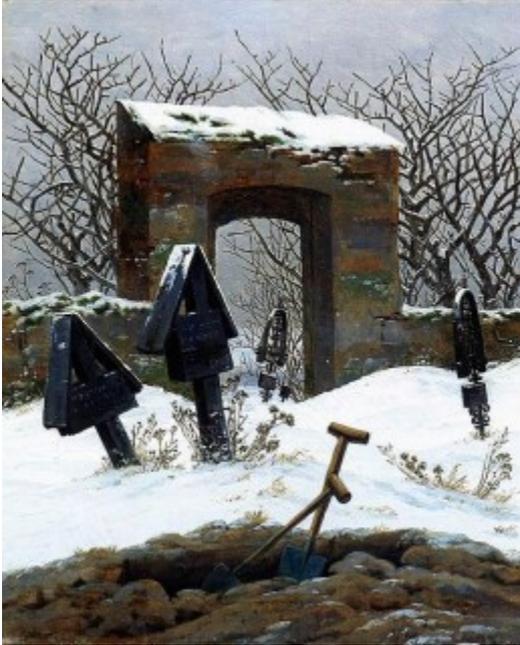
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"On my mother's grave, I swear that I will find a woman."

The two men met at 11 PM sharp. One had a job to do, a gravedigger with a preference for the moonlight shift; the other had to get up early the way executioners typically do. They shook hands firmly, warmth passing from one to another.

"Your wife," asked the gravedigger, who lived alone, "how is she?"

"As usual, jumpy but sane."

He was making an understatement. Not easy to remain sane when one is a sensitive soul, and politics have led to one's executioner husband gaining notoriety and much unexpected business. Knock, knock!

"She complains of hearing knocking sounds in her dreams," he added dryly. "Execution orders are always hand-delivered to our home by an officer, and I tend to be asleep when that happens, so she gets to open and sign for it."

The two men had difficult jobs. This was official, their pension statements reflected the duress they presumably had to endure. But the real bonus, as far as they were both concerned, was to clean the Earth, to get the scum off that walk in the streets, polluting every quarter, home, and workplace with criminal juices.

"Now, how about that beer?" asked the digger uneasily. "Do you have time for it?"

"I need only three hours of sleep on the night before an execution," the executioner replied. Giving indirect answers to the simplest questions was his usual style. "Less makes me irritable."

They walked down a short staircase to a half-filled beer lounge. Most of the customers were men, and for some reason nearly everyone was standing. The few who sat at the several low tables looked sullen and withdrawn, like they didn't fit in but were still unable to find the strength, courage and initiative to get up and leave. Everybody else

was enjoying themselves, drinking steadily through this period of national hardship and sorrow.

The executioner and the gravedigger were hardly unknown amongst the other men in the room. This was the place where they would come every night before an execution was about to take place, and even though it was quite true that there was no absolute synchrony between an execution and the burial, since the gravedigger had to dig graves every night, not only during execution season, it was equally true that there was a strong and direct synergetic effect between the execution and the burial. If the executioner was busy, chances were that the digger would be busy as well.

It was official policy of the government that the corpses of the men who were executed were to be spread across the city, so as not to favorably discriminate certain graveyards versus others, but in reality more than 80% of all business went to the particular graveyard in which the gravedigger was working. The two men had never discussed the subject, they found it beneath their dignity, but readily it could be interpreted so that there was the secret understanding between them that their personal friendship would benefit the gravedigger's business, and he might well owe the executioner a couple of major favors for that reason. He always paid for the beer, for example, and the executioner barely bothered thanking him for that.

"I have been haunted," the digger began in the type of intimate voice that is characteristic for a man who suddenly feels kinship towards another man; oftentimes accompanied by beer. "One might say that I have been haunted, but also might say that I have been blessed. All depends how one decides to look at it."

The executioner sent him a curious smile. Smiling had never been his favorite pastime, one could see pictures of

him going way back to childhood, and those in which his mouth was anything other than a straight line were few. When he did smile, it often signified something other than spontaneous appreciation; rather, there was a process going on inside of his head that he couldn't entirely contain. "Let me hear the rest, then," he calmly said.

"It is the women," the gravedigger continued shyly. "They never did much for me, and I even less so for them, but as of late it has all come to change. When my mother passed away, she left a note pointing out that I am now 45 years of age and yet unmarried, and she expressed grave concern of my continuing as a bachelor for life. On her deathbed, she extracted from me a promise that I would read her letter and take its advice seriously, and so I have, even though I had not opened the letter prior to her death, as it was handed to me by the lawyer."

"45 makes you a young man compared with me," said the executioner, who was nearing 60. On the other hand, he had been married since his early 20s, so had a bit of a difficult time empathizing with his friend's late mother.

"I started talking to the women, and to my great surprise they talked back," said the gravedigger, who now appeared outright embarrassed. "I have always been thinking that a man of my profession would be most unattractive to women, and I'm not exactly handsome either, but it turns out that there are lots of women who don't mind. They come to see me."

The executioner downed his beer, then reached across the counter for another. About a dozen glasses of fresh draft beer stood ready for anyone to grab, this was a small establishment where customers were trusted by the staff and known to pay on time. "So where do they come to see you?"

"That's what I was afraid to tell you, I somehow knew that you would ask: they come to see me on the graveyard

shift, they prefer these things when there's a full moon, and then they are scantily clad as well. They always wear high heels shoes, tight dresses, and costly handbags. They use costly perfume, which stands in stark contrast to the odors to which I have been growing accustomed."

"So what's the curse?" asked the executioner. "Is that not everything you could ever want?"

"Maybe, but these women distract me from my duties as a public trustee. They can be very demanding as far as craving attention from me and my body."

"I..." The gravedigger was getting warmed up. This was very much him, the neutral reserve was quickly washed away with beer, and once he got going he could keep talking for a long, long time. For him, about 1 AM was the best time to commence work, then finish about four, which coincided with when the executioner had to get up to be at work for the five o'clock execution.

To his slight dismay, he watched his good friend pull out a wallet, then find a bill and hand it to the waitress. "Keep the change," the executioner said in a surprisingly loving tone of voice.

The digger had never seen his friend pay for drinks. For a moment, he wanted to protest, but then he thought he had better be polite and ask instead. "Beers have always been on me," he said, "but what makes you want to do it differently this time?"

"I'm so proud of you, son," the man said in a fatherly tone of voice. "Mixing business with pleasure is nothing to be ashamed of."

It wasn't meant to be this way. Mama was only 72 years old when she took a stroke, which sent her to a comfortable bed from which she would never emerge. 19 days was all it took between her making sandwiches for her 45-year-old son

and him putting her in her grave. Well, he also did dig it, as that was his job, and those in charge saw no reason to excuse him and find a replacement.

Mama's name was Georgina, and her only child's name was Hewlett. Her husband, who had abandoned them over 40 years earlier, did not attend the funeral, nor did anyone bother with checking out whether this parenthetic figure was still alive.

"So much for family plots!" the gravedigger had been sighing while preparing the grave on the night prior to the funeral. He always worked this way, preferring them fresh. If he became ill, funerals would have to be postponed, but he never did. "I never had a sick day in my life," he had intimated to the executioner, whom he considered his only friend, "nor probably an entirely healthy one."

The executioner did attend the funeral together with his wife and their 4 adult children. This man – always called by his title "Chief Executioner," his nickname Sir Dread, or his last name, Jalabah – had a quiet demeanor that did not fit his position. A wave of politically motivated executions had swept across the land, nowhere more so than here in the capital, and he had become the King's favorite. A royal ordinance had been sent out halting all executions on the day of the funeral, so that Sir Dread could attend with full dignity.

"It wasn't meant to be this way!" Her son looked like the loneliest man in the world as he stood there on the podium in front of the beautifully decorated coffin. "But the Lord must have wanted her to come home!"

"Amen!" said the gravedigger forcefully, and the church gathering promptly followed suit, so that the word "Amen" rung through the modest-sized, packed church building.

Georgina had been put to rest in a beautiful corner on the Western section of the graveyard, which was the smallest and most peaceful. “Her feet will be facing due West, which is a good thing, as she always wanted to see America someday,” he had finally observed.

The dozen or so people who overheard this quickly nodded, then joined the others who were getting ready to leave.

Hewlett returned to an empty house that afternoon. Foremost on his mind was the meeting with the lawyer, who had sent him a formal letter within a day of Mama’s death. He intended to remain in the house if he could afford it, and was anxious to hear what the lawyer might have to say about that. She had visited the man twice a year to discuss finances and legal affairs, so the gravedigger rested assured that his mother’s finances were under good management.

The meeting far exceeded his expectations. The lawyer had been most polite and sympathetic, revealing that Georgina had left her entire fortune to her son as expected, that the house was already bought and paid for (no surprise there, either), and that she had only one codicil attached to the will: He had to marry within 12 months of her death. If he did not do this, the estate would be dissolved, and all the proceeds would go to charity. On a gravedigger’s salary, Hewlett would have to find modest accommodation somewhere in the inner city. Alas, it was time to go and meet some eligible women!

His mother had advised him to marry someone way younger than him, and so he started dating Elvira, who was in her late 20s. She was intelligent, observant, and attentive. He had met her in a restaurant often frequented by single men and women seeking companions, and he had been

quick to tell her about his circumstances, leaving out the important detail that him getting married was a condition in his mother's will. He had bluntly told her about his profession, and noticed that this caused at 10 minutes or so interruption in their otherwise fluent conversation, as she was obviously trying to think about whether this was going to work out for her. Both of them were well-dressed, he in a navy blue suit, she in a cream-colored dress, which made a fantastic contrast to her dark brown hair. They had dined for three hours, and he had followed her home.

When the woman did not show up for their next scheduled date, he was quickly growing impatient. No wonder, this man had been accustomed to his mother's undivided care and attention, and now he found it hard to compete on the open market for something as simple, yet complicated as the affection of a woman whom he didn't even know whether he fancied. "Why do I have to put up with that?" he would ask himself, working there on the graveyard late at night to vent off some steam. About halfway through the night, at a time when at least one grave had been processed, he would take a 15 minute break, and afterwards found that his mind would work more constructively.

It had been his strategy to play on his finances, since he lacked the charm and skill required to quickly break down a woman's natural defenses with his personality alone. Although he was rather shy by nature, his attendance to church functions and general mingling with the local community had given him a good and solid understanding of certain social mechanisms, none of which were more true than the fact that there were thousands upon thousands of women waiting for some gentlemen who could bring them out of their relative poverty or very humble living conditions. Not that he would postulate that these women were necessarily for sale, that was in any event not what he

wanted, but he had a sense that they might be more agreeable and thus less apprehensive to the fact that he was digging graves for a living. This assumption turned out to be correct.

He had attended what might reasonably be referred to as a seedy place, a beer lounge that offered light meals, music, and slow dancing for those so inclined. His eyes had fallen on a marvelous looking woman who all by herself had a table in the corner. She was so pretty and lovely that it was unimaginable that nobody would want to dance with her. He went straight to her table, asking whether he could buy her a drink, and to his delight she nodded enthusiastically. Clapping his hands, he prompted the waiter to bring a bottle of wine, the best of the house, as well as any other drinks the lady might like. She said wine would be more than fine with her, something that he took note of with great satisfaction. Modesty happened to be one of the qualities he appreciated the most in a person. He frankly couldn't imagine living with an immodest woman, no matter how beautiful.

After having drunk about two thirds of the wine, they went to the dance floor holding each other tight, and between their bodies was communicated a kind of urge and longing that made them oblivious to anybody else in the room. They were so hungry for one another, this was love at first sight; and once the pianist had completed his lengthy repertoire, they were quick to leave the premises, walking together down the street arm in arm.

"Where do you live, madam?" he asked. "Is it far from here?"

"Oh no," she said somewhat shyly. "I live only half a kilometer from here, so I can easily make it back on my own if you need to hurry home right now."

"You have a place of your own?" he further inquired.

"Is that important?" she asked with a sly smile. "If I do not, if I have a husband and three hungry children at home, what will you say?"

"I adore your sense of humor," he said. "Do you have a roommate? Any live-in servants?"

"I'm not sure I'm so keen on yours," she replied. "You know bloody well that I could never afford servants."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that," he apologized. She had told him that she was working part-time at the local swimming club, which was a females-only establishment. She had honestly confessed that this dress and these shoes she was wearing tonight were among her few high-quality items, that in fact they were presents given to her by men. It had bothered him a little, and now it struck him that maybe his sarcasm had been his way of getting even.

"I live alone," she said, "but the place is too simple to attract any romance. Would you like for me to come to your place?"

"I have a comfortable house all to myself," he said. "If you like, you may come home with me, and I will go and pick up your things in the morning."

"What do you do?" she asked.

"For a living?" he asked, feeling a sudden rush of heat crossing his forehead. "This is two o'clock in the morning, but what kind of question is that to be asking right now?"

"Does it matter?"

"Does what matter? My profession or you asking me about it at 2 in the morning?"

"Me asking," she said. "Haven't I the right to know something about the circumstances before I surrender myself to your loving arms?"

"I'm a gravedigger," he replied.

As she started laughing, she closed her eyes, tears rolling down her face. Her right hand fist pounded against

his chest, and the unexpected powers of joy and amusement were causing her entire body to tremble.

"All right, I dig graves. If you're really interested, I dug my mother's grave nearly 3 weeks ago. I will show it to you if you like."

"Would you?" she asked, unexpectedly able to contain her amusement. As he looked into her eyes right now, he did not find any tears, merely the dark abyss mixed with a bit of burning orange. He could've sworn that she looked like a cat that moment; and unless he was very careful, it might suddenly shrink to its natural size and start sprinting down the street.

It wasn't far from the graveyard to his house, and he took her there immediately. None of them said a single word upon approach, the atmosphere between them now suspenseful. How hard it was to imagine that less than one hour ago, they had been dancing cheek to cheek. They were complete strangers, and this had become evident now that they were out in the open. "This way," he said as the unhatched a narrow side entrance door.

With the same confidence as if he had been walking by broad daylight, he guided her down the complicated corridors of paths going left and right, north and south, there must have been at least 60 turns before he finally said: "This is my mother's grave. May she rest in peace!"

He turned around in the hope of being able to discern her facial expression. It was a full Moon, and there should be sufficient light – in spite of the trees partially blocking the view – for him to read her face. If they could go through this moment untarnished, they might be able to live together as man and wife forever. If not, he was prepared to let go of his attraction and turn her away.

As he turned his head, heavyweight kisses landed on his cheeks, and then her smooth face moved down across

his. He could feel her hot, wet tongue moving across his face, and she literally thrust herself against his body, the enormity of her desire sending a massive, yet manageable weight of flesh and blood against his body. "I want you now!" she gasped loudly into his ear, and then her tongue followed.

Just as you thought it couldn't possibly get any worse, he heard loud noises from a distant corner of the cemetery. They were female voices all right, young women who had no business going out at this time of the night, and if it hadn't been for this femme fatale distracting him, he would have picked up some weapon from the toolshed and chased them away. But it went too quickly, she had managed to get him down on the ground, and was systematically working on the seduction. Before he even knew it, there were five women additionally; and from the little he could see, they all looked more or less the same as the one sitting on his torso. The only thing distinguishing them was that they had different colored dresses, one bright red, one bright blue, one feminine salmon. The two others he could not see, they seemed oddly disengaged, maybe because they knew there were too many women for one fellow, anyway.

The four of them were all over him, and the two remaining women were howling at the Moon. Not until daybreak did he awake to the realization that he must have fallen asleep there, but something rather horrible must have happened on his mother's grave.