

Venetian Thrillers - Episode IV

The Woman in the Trunk

It was the end of April 1947 when Linda Cimetta, an attractive woman, co-owner, with her husband, of the bar "The Victory" in Belluno, made the trip to Venice, to the house of a friend, Anna Gaiotti, to buy a stock of black market cigarettes. She had found fertile ground for her trafficking thanks to the reopening of the Venetian port and had often come to the city in those months. The woman wasn't, in all truth, much loved: tried by the privations of the war and oppressed by way of a series of personal experiences which had hardened her character; it was rare to notice any compassion in her countenance, or even simple cordiality.

Unexpectedly, in those days of '47, nothing was heard of her any more. Many suppositions were devised: that she had run off with an American GI; that she had put together a large enough sum to live comfortably for many years and so had relocated to a city where no one knew her...



someone even swore to having seen her entering a convent to take the vows.

The police however didn't take too long to reach the conclusion that Linda Cimetta had been murdered, and within a matter of days, brought the alleged killers into custody with the arrest of Bartolomeo Toma and Luigi Sardi, considered respectively to be the brain and the brawn of the crime.

Instantly killed by way of blows of an axe inflicted to the head after having been lured in for the purpose of robbery, possibly with the promise of a good deal on cigarettes, the body of the woman was placed in a trunk after having its muscles and tendons sawed apart.



Sardi, who worked as a gondolier, maintained his innocence, declaring that along with Toma he had dumped a trunk in the lagoon which he thought contained a load of old stolen carpets.

Toma - a native of the port-side suburbs of Brindisi who fully lived by his own self-made smartness code - ingenuously explained that the woman was only meant to receive a frightening, as initially had been their sole intention, but Sardi (known among the gondoliers as *Mad Louie*), as he said: "... in his zeal, got into a fury and split the skull open on the first blow", ...and then, judging by the wounds, must have plunged the hatchet into the unfortunate body at least another six times.

In and around the smuggler's den, as indicated by the pair to be at number 21 in front of the *Fondamente Nove*, the investigation went on for a few days, but without any results and the immediate stir caused by the crime and its sequels demonstrated the imminent problems of widespread poverty and hunger amidst the local population during reconstruction in the immediate aftermath of post-war Venice.

It was even thought that the pair of criminals were perhaps sidetracking. But then after a short while, some kids, diving and swimming at the point where the *Fondamente* pier ends, brought up a large closed trunk, which, upon being hoisted onto the embankment and opened, was found to be full of cuttlefish and crab. After their initial surprise, the boys ravaged their haul, and many of them ran home with their hands full. Famine, in those years, was much stronger than reason. Further down although, at the bottom of the trunk, a woman's body appeared. It was what remained of Linda Cimetta. It is not known if everyone returned his "booty" but it is certain that most of the fish were thrown back into the sea.

Linda Cimetta was given a state funeral, with a procession of gondolas to accompany the body along the Grand Canal to Piazzale Roma, for the burial at Ceneda cemetery in Vittorio Veneto. An honour that the black market dealer would never have expected to receive, certainly: but the shame felt over what had happened moved the Venetians to this final, if late, redemptive act.

In the attic of the house rented by Toma, the same in which the murder had taken place, the saw used to cut the corpse in two was found. The body had obviously stiffened in the course of the day and the night passed in the apartment; traces of blood were discovered and part of the one hundred and fifty thousand lire that the woman had carelessly kept in her pocket emerged: her killers had expected a million. The dapper, slick, forty year old Toma, had been fatal for her: Linda had trusted him.

However her assassins didn't fare much better: while attempting to escape on a boat from the prison on the Isle of Ventotene, Bartolomeo Toma disappeared one night in a storm in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and his body was never found.

Luigi Sardi died in 1983. After his release from the mental hospital ten years earlier, he had earned his living by selling candy on the street.

In the winter of 1980 he'd killed a man, police marshal Savino Senisi, who had helped him to find work, hitting him over the head with an iron pipe for no reason other than perhaps that of an old score against "cops" still open in his mind. Arrested, he repeated three words with an obsessive monotony: "I was innocent, I was innocent...".

Still today, along the part of the *Fondamente Nove* where Linda Cimetta's body was pulled out of her maritime tomb, the old fishermen won't catch cuttlefish because they say that they have the look of a woman about them.



on the Fondamente Nove embankment side, near Madonna dell'Orto, one finds Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo – of which **Il Casino degli Spiriti** is part

This twentieth century murder recalls another, very similar one, which took place in the eighteenth century: Nicola Faragone, from Apulia, who'd, killed two Neapolitan prostitutes, Fortunata and Leonora, mother and daughter, of whom he was alternatively both pimp and lover. He then cut them into pieces and closed them in a trunk which he threw into the Giudecca canal weighted down by a large stone which he had attached to the end of a long rope. The rope was too long, evidently, seeing as part of it remained suspended half out of the water and became entangled with the chain anchoring a boat. On September the 12th, 1729 the man, discovered, had his head cut off and his body quartered; so, in a way quite similar to his own slaughtering method, he himself ended up sectioned and his limbs hung and shown at the four corners of the city.