

## A Foggy Tale

Elga Cummings disliked many things, but among her most prominent dislikes, wet mornings were fairly high up on the list—which was unfortunate for her, as London happened to be the home to many just such mornings. A rainy day spent indoors was not so terrible, but since Matthias (her crotchety old wart of a husband) had complained excessively of rheumatism this morning—an excuse he had been using consistently for the past three years—Elga had been obligated to leave the comfort of her perfectly dry house to stand here, on the sodden street corner, to manage the grocer's booth.

While horses and carriages clattered past, stamping through puddles and consequently spraying every passing pedestrian with a shower of puddle water, Elga stood hunched over her produce, grinding her teeth at all of them. She pulled her shawl more tightly around her bony shoulders and frowned, feeling the familiar ache in her joints that meant rain would soon be upon them again. Matthias was probably still in bed, wrapped in the covers. The old wart.

“Good morning.”

Elga looked up and nodded stiffly at the man who stood before her with a newspaper in one hand and a bag of tea leaves in the other. He offered a wan smile and placed his items on the small plank nailed to the side of the booth, and while he rummaged in his pockets for money, Elga looked him over probingly. She'd seen him about here frequently, but it had been a good few weeks since he had made his last appearance. He looked much the same as she remembered—stocky, red-headed, and too young to have that many gray streaks in his hair—but something about his appearance seemed distinctly shabbier than usual. The sleeves of his coat were fraying, a button had fallen from one of the cuffs, and his shoes bore unmistakable signs of over-use.

She was just noticing a seam in his jacket where a tear had been poorly mended when he paused suddenly in his rummaging to look at her apologetically. “Er—How much is it?”

“Sixpence,” she responded flatly.

“Right.” He dug into his pockets again and procured a measly two coins, which he dropped onto the plank with a small clatter. Elga looked at him coldly.

“You’ve only got enough to buy the one.”

The man’s face colored to match his hair. “Oh,” he said haltingly. “Yes. Right. Just the paper, then.”

She shot him another dirty look but swept the coins into her purse and nudged the newspaper at him. Still slightly flushed, he tucked the paper under his arm, touched his hat to her, and was off. Elga stared after his retreating back as he crossed the street, hunching his shoulders against a particularly icy gust of wind.

Tomorrow morning she was going to give Matthias an earful and make him get off of his old, arthritic backside.

Calvin shuddered, pulling his collar a little higher to protect against the cold air, and drew the newspaper out from under his arm to scan the front page briefly. It was a shame about the tea—a warm cup would have been a perfect comfort on a day like this—but it was something he could do without until another client came around, he supposed. Messily, he refolded the newspaper, stuck it in the crook of his arm, and set off down the sidewalk with his mind on business matters. Overhead, the sky swirled dark and heavy with clouds and looked as though it were contemplating whether it ought to release another deluge onto the tiny people splashing through the streets below. On either side of the bustling street, merchants huddled under their

storefronts or shouted prices across to the passing civilians, all of whom seemed reluctant to stop and bargain in this foreboding weather.

With his hands deep in his pockets, Calvin turned off the street and onto the front steps of a tall, red-bricked building, the front door of which was plastered with a sign that read,

L.B. CALVIN

PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Bellow this, another smaller sign had been tacked beside the door handle, bearing the words, "FLAT FOR LET." Ignoring both signs, Calvin entered and climbed a set of narrow steps leading up to his flat, only to be met with yet another note tacked to his door. This one, narrowly scrawled on a piece of yellow paper, read, "NOTICE OF LATE PAYMENT."

He sighed, reaching up to tear it from the door, when a small noise sounded from inside the flat. He paused for a moment, listening. Another small thump, like the sound of footsteps.

Intruder? No. Not in broad daylight, surely. Any thief who decided to enter this flat would find himself sorely disappointed, anyway.

The thump came again, this time followed by the sound of somebody whistling.

Client?

His heart rate suddenly picked up, and he turned the handle, stepping inside.

Just as suddenly as they had lifted, his spirits dropped. Across from him, leaning against the wall beside his hat rack, was a mahogany cane that he could have recognized anywhere. It was dark and had a small ring of brass connecting the curving head to the body.

Not a client, then.

With a disappointed huff, he shut the door and rounded the corner, following the sound of whistling to the expected sight of a curly-headed man sitting in his living room and intently

leaning over his dining table.

“I don’t remember inviting you in,” Calvin said tonelessly, striding past him to go put the kettle on. He hesitated, remembering he hadn’t bought any tea, and went to stoke the fire instead.

“Your landlady said you were out to buy tea, and the door wasn’t locked, so I thought I’d invite myself in,” the visitor said brightly without looking up from his task of piecing together a jigsaw puzzle.

Calvin poked at the grate with an iron, shaking his head in a rather fond way, and said, “You heard about the murder on Abbotswell?”

The man looked up, his dark eyes alight with childish glee. “They hired you?”

“They didn’t,” Calvin said flatly, returning the iron to the fireplace with a little more force than he’d meant to. He took the paper from under his arm and tossed it onto the table, scattering puzzle pieces. “It was solved yesterday morning.”

“You didn’t buy tea?” the man asked distractedly as he picked up the paper and scanned the front page.

“They didn’t have the kind I wanted.”

“*Tragically shot by his mother in law.*” They should have hired you. This one was right up your alley.”

Calvin dropped into an armchair (the only other chair in his flat), and rubbed his forehead wearily. “People aren’t hiring detectives anymore, Alfie. They prefer the police be more involved.”

“They’re hiring this one,” Alfie offered helpfully, “*Colon*, or whatever it is.”

“*Conan*. His name is Conan.”

“Conan, then. Have you been reading his cases? They’re *amazing*—honestly, I think he

makes half of the details up himself, but they make for an entertaining read. Amazing.”

Calvin rolled his eyes, and Alfie tossed the newspaper to the floor and went back to his puzzle. For a few minutes, the room was filled with the sound of the fire crackling in the grate and the gentle murmur of the rain beginning to pick up again outside. Calvin mulled over the details of the case he had seen in the paper. A cup of tea would have been wonderful just about now.

“I saw the notice on your door.”

Calvin rubbed at his forehead again, groaning internally. *Not again.* “Which notice?”

“Both of them. She’s letting out your flat?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t tell me about it.”

Another silence, this one considerably less comfortable than the first. Alfie was staring at him, the puzzle forgotten.

“You know,” Alfie piped up again, “if you need a place to stay—”

“No,” said Calvin emphatically.

“Don’t try to spare my feelings, Calvin. If you’d rather live on the street than with me, say it.”

“I’d rather live on the street than with you.”

Alfie knew he was saying it only half-seriously, but still his boyish face darkened, and he turned away looking slightly put out. Rising from his chair, he took his hat from the dining table and dropped it back onto his curly head, announcing with an air of forced cheerfulness, “Well—I’d better be off. I’ve a new butler coming in today, and I want to see if he’ll be a good fit. Wish me luck.” Calvin stood as well, and the two men moved towards the door.

“Let me know if the new butler has a murder case that needs solving,” said Calvin as Alfie began pulling on his gloves.

“I’d conduct a murder for you myself if it meant saving you from bankruptcy,” Alfie said, and Calvin had to give a small smile at that. “I’ll drop by again tomorrow,” Alfie continued. “See if I can’t talk the landlady into giving you another month’s notice.”

“Be sure to use all of your charm,” said Calvin, with a touch of sarcasm.

“Gladly. Till tomorrow, then.”

“You’ve forgotten something.”

Alfie froze with his hand on the door handle and turned to look to where Calvin was staring pointedly at a small stack of pound notes sitting innocently on the dining table beside the half-finished jigsaw puzzle.

“They’re not mine,” said Alfie quickly in what Calvin instantly recognized to be his best lying voice. “Someone must have left them for you while you were out.”

“Alfie, I’ve told you before—”

“A bashful client, maybe.”

“Every time you do this—”

“A generous milkman—”

“Alfie!”

They stood glaring at each other for a moment until Alfie, with a rather petulant huff, stomped over to the table and snatched up the money, forcefully shoving it into one of the pockets of his immaculate coat. “Honestly,” he growled, shooting Calvin a venomous look.

“If I needed your money, I’d have asked for it,” said Calvin evenly, holding out the mahogany cane.

“As if there was ever a time you needed it more—”

“Until tomorrow, then.”

Alfie looked as though he were ready to keep arguing but evidently made the decision to let the matter rest. Still silently fuming, he wrenched the door open but paused for a moment to shake his head at his friend with a sort of exasperated affection. “Tomorrow. You bloody idiot.”

With that, he shut the door and stomped down the steps, his grumbling echoing up the stairwell after him. Calvin listened until the noise of his footsteps faded away then looked around at his empty flat.

Blast, a cup of tea would be nice right now.

The sun had nearly set, and the twilight gloom cast its shadow over the gradually emptying streets as those who had braved the cold thus far gravitated indoors and merchants closed up shop.

Elga had just finished packing away all of her wares and was calculating the day’s profit, thinking all the while of the warm bed awaiting her at home, when—

“OI! Watch where yer goin’, wouldye?”

Elga’s gaze was drawn to the other side of the street where Bruno, one of her fellow merchants, was cursing and chasing after a pair of cabbages that had been knocked to ground by a passing gentleman. The gentleman, evidently in a hurry, murmured a brief apology and continued on down the street without stopping, except to covertly brush off the shoulder of his coat. Elga watched as he pushed through the sparse crowd, drawing his hat lower over his eyes with the air of someone wishing to avoid detection. It was difficult to tell by the rapidly fading light, but from Elga’s view he appeared to be finely dressed, unlike the rest of the street’s

occupants, and the head of his walking cane glinted brightly as though it were trimmed with some form of metal. With a growing sense of suspicion, she stared as he paused once more, looking around as if to make certain that no one was watching, then turned into a deserted and dimly lit street.

Elga knew that street—Matthias had spent a good few nights down there in his rowdier days. But what would a gent dressed like that want to do in one of the seediest, most common parts of town?

Alfie turned onto the rapidly darkening street and looked around quickly once more to ensure that nobody had noticed him. Thankfully, the brutal cold seemed to have driven most people inside, and the few who were still out and about were not anxious to remain so.

Walking hurriedly, he pressed down another street and through a narrow alley or two until he reached his intended destination: a squat, somewhat dilapidated building illuminated by a single street lamp. The windows had been shaded, concealing any activity inside, but a set of large letters painted on the front in fading colors announced the name of the establishment in all capitals: “THE FOX’S FORTUNE.”

Without another backward glance, Alfie straightened his hat and entered. At once, he was met with a blast of warm, stale air and a disconcerting mixture of singing and raucous laughter. A bar counter stretched all along the nearest wall, overflowing with rosy-faced men who waved their tankards and sang tunelessly, their arms slung over one another in a rather ludicrous display of camaraderie.

Alfie swept his gaze over the center of the room where a host of evidently more sober guests were engaged in the calmer pursuits of conversation and cards. His eyes alighted on a

table near the back of the room where three men sat smoking over their cards, and his face lit up like that of a man who had suddenly recognized an old colleague. Beaming, he made a beeline for the group and stuck out his hand to the closest man at the table.

“Alfredo Cassani.” He introduced himself brightly, but none of the men appeared to give any sign of recognition. The stranger across the table, a man in a driver’s cap who looked to be about forty years of age, only extracted the cigar from the corner of his mouth and raised his eyebrows curiously.

Seemingly unperturbed by their unwelcoming reception, Alfie dropped into a chair as if he had been invited and leaned in with a confidential air. His eyes burned bright with a sort of wildness as he said, in a low voice, “So... Which one of you is a burglar?”

END