

The Hambleton Affair

A Maurice Newbury Investigation

By George Mann

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“You never did tell me about the Hambleton affair, Newbury.”

Sir Charles Bainbridge leaned back in his chair, sipped at his brandy and regarded his friend through a wreath of pungent cigar smoke. Around him, the gas lamps flickered momentarily in their fittings, as if a sudden breeze had passed through Newbury’s Chelsea living room. Unperturbed, the chief inspector crossed his legs and stifled a yawn.

Across the room, Newbury was leaning on the mantelpiece, staring silently into the fire. He turned towards the older man, the flames casting his face in stark relief. He nodded. “Indeed not. Although I will warn you, Charles, it’s not a tale with a heart-warming end.”

Bainbridge sighed. “Are they ever?”

Newbury smiled as he started across the living room to join his friend. “No, I suppose not.” He paused beside the drinks cabinet, his expression suddenly serious. He placed a hand on his left side, just above the hip.

Bainbridge furrowed his brow. “So the injuries are still troubling you?”

Newbury shrugged. His green eyes glittered. “A little. It’s this damnable cold weather.” He sucked in his breath. His tone was playful. “I heartily commend to you, Charles, to avoid getting yourself injured in the winter. The experience is rather detrimental to one’s constitution.”

Bainbridge chuckled and took another draw on his cigar.

“Still, I suppose it would do no harm to relate my little tale.” Newbury sighed, before taking the last few strides across the room with a grimace on his face and lowering himself, gingerly, into the chair opposite the other man. His black suit crumpled as he shifted to make himself comfortable. He eyed his friend.

Tonight, Newbury considered, the chief inspector was wearing his age. He looked tired. His white hair was swept back from his forehead and his eyes were rheumy and rimmed with the dark stains of too many sleepless nights. It was clear that he was in need of a rest. Newbury smiled warmly. “You look tired, Charles. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather turn in for the night?”

Bainbridge shook his head. “No. Not yet.” He raised his glass, a forlorn look in his eyes. “Tonight is the anniversary of Isobel’s death. I’d rather keep from dwelling on the matter, if it’s all the same.” He took a swig of his brandy, shuddering as the alcohol assaulted his palate. “I still think of her, you know. In the quiet times.” He shook his head. “Besides, I can’t bring myself to abandon a decent brandy.” He smiled, his bushy moustache twitching. “Come on, you’ve put this one off too many times before. Give it up!”

Newbury nodded and placed his own glass on the coffee table between them. He took up his pipe from the arm of the Chesterfield and tapped out the dottle in the palm of his hand. Discarding these, he began to fill the pipe from a small leather tobacco pouch which he searched out from amongst the scattered debris on the tabletop. A moment later he leaned back, puffing gently on the mouthpiece to kindle the flame. He had a haunted expression on his face.

“It was the spring of 'ninety-eight. April, to be precise. Just a few months before Templeton Black and the disaster at Fairview House, if you recall?”

Bainbridge looked sullen. “All too well.”

“Indeed. Well, I had just drawn a close to a particularly disturbing case involving a series of brutal murders at an archaeological site, when I received a letter from a man named Crawford, the physician of the Hambleton family of Richmond, North Yorkshire. I had schooled with Sir Clive Hambleton at Oxford, briefly, and whilst I couldn't claim him as a friend, I knew him as a man of integrity and science. Anyway, the letter went on to describe the most bizarre of affairs.” Newbury paused whilst he drew on his pipe, and Bainbridge leaned forward in his chair, urging him to go on.

Newbury smiled. “It appeared that Hambleton had taken a new wife – a young wife of only eighteen years – named Francis, who had taken up residence with him up at Hambleton Manor. Life had proved harmonious for the newlyweds for nearly twelve months, until, only a handful of days before the letter was dated, she had simply vanished from her room without a trace.”

Bainbridge took another long slug of his brandy. He eyed Newbury warily. “Well, it sounds pretty clear to me. She'd finally realised that she had inadvertently committed herself to a life of drudgery in rural Yorkshire, with an older man as her only companion. It doesn't sound like the sort of matter I would usually associate with your field of expertise. Had she taken flight?”

Newbury shook his head. “No. Not as simple as all that. But I'll admit that was the first thing that crossed my mind upon reading the missive. Until I read on, that is.” Newbury cleared his throat. “It seemed that, after dinner, Mrs Hambleton had retired to her room, as was typical of her daily routine. Only on this occasion, she failed to reappear in the drawing room an hour later. Believing that she had likely fallen into a light doze, her husband made his way up to her room to look in on her, only to find that the bed was undisturbed and that his wife was no where to be found.”

Bainbridge frowned. “You've lost me, Newbury. I still can't see how it could be anything other than the women's desire to take flight from her circumstances.”

“Quite. And Hambleton initially believed the same. Until he discovered that her belongings were all still *in situ* and had not been disturbed since that morning. Clothes were still in the dresser. Jewellery was still on the dressing table. Precious childhood mementoes were still in a box beneath the bed. Not to mention the fact that the lady had no money of her own.

Distraught, Hambleton interviewed the servants, none of whom had seen the lady leave the premises. He had them tear the place apart looking for her, but she was nowhere to be found in the house or the grounds. It seemed that, somehow, Hambleton's new wife had simply vanished without a trace.”

“Kidnap, then?”

“It remained a distinct possibility, and the local constabulary were indeed called in to investigate. But they could find no evidence of any wrong-doing, and the days that followed brought none of the expected demands from the imagined kidnapper in question. The entire affair remained a mystery, and Crawford, concerned for his charge, had been forced to watch as Hambleton had fallen into a deep fug from which he could not be roused. It was as if the life had gone out of him, leaving behind nothing but a shadow of the former man.”

Bainbridge eased himself back in his chair and clamped his cigar between his teeth. “Quite a singular case. I can see now why the man was drawn to write to you. What else did the letter say?”

“The letter stated that Crawford was aware of my reputation as a man who had experience of the occult and that, since there appeared to be no other explanation for what had become of Mrs Hambleton, asked if I would I pay a visit to Hambleton Manor to investigate. At the very least, he hoped that I would be able to rule out any occult interference. Hambleton himself, of course, knew nothing of the letter.” Newbury shrugged. “Of course, I’m a rational man and knew there had to be a rational explanation for the lady’s disappearance, but one finds it difficult to resist a challenge. I set out that very morning, taking the twelve o’clock train from Euston to York.” Newbury puffed thoughtfully on his pipe. After a moment he took it from his mouth and waved it at his companion. “Feel free to pour yourself another, Charles. You’ll forgive me for not getting up?”

Bainbridge nodded. “Of course. You stay put, Newbury. I’ll fetch the decanter over.” The chief inspector placed his glass on the table beside Newbury’s and pulled himself to his feet. He crossed the room, retrieved the bulbous, flat-bottomed vessel and returned to his seat. He removed the glass stopper with a light *clink* and began sloshing the brown liquid into his glass. He looked up. “Well, keep going man!”

Newbury laughed. “All this police work is starting to show on you, Charles. Patience certainly isn’t one of your strong points.”

“*Starting* to show! By God, Newbury, after thirty years at the Yard I’d expect even the most fresh-faced shoeshine to be able to discern *that* much information about me.”

Newbury grinned. He retrieved his glass from the table. “I hadn’t taken the time to send a telegram ahead to alert Crawford of my impending arrival, so there was no escort awaiting me at the station when the train finally pulled in at York that evening. Collecting my bag from the steward, I took a cab immediately out to Hambleton Manor, which proved to be a pleasant – if brisk – drive through the countryside. The light was starting to wane by this time, and my first sight of the house itself was almost enough to cause me to reconsider my initial thoughts about the case. The place was a rambling wreck; more a farmhouse than a country estate, and appeared so dilapidated that I had to allow for the fact that my earlier reasoning may have in fact been correct. At that point I admit I would not have been surprised to discover that the young Mrs Hambleton had indeed fled the estate in sheer desperation at her circumstances.”

Bainbridge coughed noisily and placed the stub of his cigar in the ashtray. “I take it from your tone that this was not to be the case?”

“Quite so. In fact, as the hansom drew up outside of the house it became clear that the structure was not in such an alarming state of disrepair as it had at first seemed. Certainly, it was in need of urgent cosmetic attention, but the building itself appeared to be sound and the welcome I received from the manservant, Chester, was enough to immediately put me at my ease. I clambered down from the cab and followed the wispy-haired old chap into the house.

Once inside I was taken directly to meet Crawford in the drawing room, whom – judging by the look on his face – was more than a little relieved to see another friendly face. He pumped my hand rather vigorously and bade me to take a seat.

I could tell almost immediately that Crawford was an honourable man. He was clearly concerned for his old friend, and the strain of the situation had begun to show in his face. He was in his mid-forties, with a shock of red hair and a full moustache and

beard. His skin was pale and he was obviously tired. He sent Chester away to fetch tea. I asked him where Hambleton was and he offered me a rather sheepish look. He said that he'd sedated him an hour earlier and left him in his room to get some rest. Apparently it was the only way that Crawford had so far managed to force his friend to sleep."

"Sounds like a rum job for a medical man. Was there no housekeeper who could have helped with all that?"

Newbury shook his head and regarded the bowl of his pipe thoughtfully. "I think they were all a little in awe of the man. Later I would witness the manner in which Hambleton bustled around the house barking directions at his staff, giving orders like he was running some sort of military operation. Which I suppose he was, in many respects, marshalling his troops to search the local area for evidence of his missing wife." He paused. "Still, I'm getting ahead of myself." He smiled, and Bainbridge nodded for him to continue.

"With Hambleton asleep in his room, Crawford took the opportunity to fill me in on the circumstances of the case. He explained that Hambleton had barely spoken a word for days, and spent all of his time waiting on news of his missing wife, or sitting in her room staring at her belongings, as if they could somehow reveal to him what had become of her. It was soon clear from Crawford's testimony that Hambleton was on the verge of a complete breakdown.

After Crawford had finished recapping the details he had already disclosed in his letter, I explained that I had not had any real contact with the family since my time at Oxford, and asked Crawford to fill in any gaps. He went on to explain that Hambleton had inherited the family fortune – such as it was – after his father had died a few years earlier and had invested heavily in farming and agriculture. He was currently engaged in a project to develop a method of better preserving fruit and vegetables after harvesting, and until recently had spent long hours locked away in his workshop; time, Crawford was not afraid to add, that he felt Hambleton should have been spending with his wife. Nevertheless, Crawford was quick to establish that Hambleton did in fact dote on his young wife, and that if truth be told the doctor was worried about how Hambleton would be able to carry on without her.

Soon after, Chester returned with the tea, and our conversation moved on to more practical considerations. I promised I would do all that I could to help resolve the sorry situation, and that, first thing in the morning, I would examine Mrs Hambleton's room for any signs of evidence that may have been missed. Crawford promised that I would be reacquainted with Hambleton later that evening, over dinner, and whilst the doctor was yet to enlighten his friend about my visit, he was sure that Hambleton would be pleased to see an old friend from Oxford." Newbury smiled. He eyed Bainbridge over the rim of his glass as he took a sip. "Can you begin to imagine how Hambleton *really* felt about my unannounced visit?"

Bainbridge shrugged. "Well, I'd imagine he'd be less inclined to reminisce about his schooldays than Crawford seemed to be suggesting, but glad of the extra help in searching for his missing wife, no doubt."

Newbury shook his head. "I fear that could not be further from the truth of the matter, as you'll soon be aware. I parted from Crawford after tea and Chester kindly showed me to my room. It was small but pleasant enough, furnished with oak panelling and an ostentatious four-poster bed, but with a wonderful view of the grounds. I

unpacked my case and took a while to refresh myself, before heading down to the dining room to meet the others for dinner.

No sooner had I approached the door to the dining hall, however, than I became aware of a heated debate being played out on the other side. Unsure what else I could do, I hesitated on the threshold, awaiting an opportunity to politely make an entrance.

It seemed that Crawford had finally informed Hambleton about his invitation and my subsequent arrival at the house, and the news had not been received well. I heard Hambleton cursing the doctor. ‘She’s left me, Crawford, can’t you see that? I need to be left alone to my misery.’ Crawford then uttered some sort of bumbling reply, and I decided that was the point at which to make my entrance. I strolled through the door as if oblivious to the tension between the two men, and made a point of greeting Hambleton like an old school friend would.”

“Did he alter his temperament upon seeing you?”

“Not at all. He greeted me gruffly and without emotion. He refused to look me in the eye, and showed no real sign that he recognised me from our time at Oxford together. It was as if he saw me as an interloper, come to interfere and ogle at him as he wallowed in his misery. He hardly spoke a word throughout dinner, and then made his excuses and repaired to his room, claiming he needed an early night to be fresh for the morning.” Newbury shrugged, pausing to gather his thoughts. “Crawford had certainly been right about one thing. Hambleton was indeed in a fug, and a dire one at that. The man looked as if he hadn’t slept for a week. His hair was in disarray, he had neglected to shave, his shirt sleeves were filthy and he bore the haunted look of a man who was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. It was clear that he truly cared for this girl, and that he blamed himself for whatever had become of her, to the exclusion of all else.”

“So how did you handle the man? It can't have been easy trying to help someone in that state of mind, no matter how understandable their disposition was.”

“I decided to carry on regardless. At that point in proceedings I was still unsure whether I'd actually be able to shed any light on the case, but with no other means to help the poor fellow I decided to follow Crawford’s example, and together we retreated to the drawing room to plot our next move. Over a brandy we discussed how we could get to the bottom of the situation. We both felt that our influence on Hambleton could only prove beneficial, and that, whatever had happened to his wife, it was clear he was in need of answers. If we were able to shed even the tiniest sliver of light on the subject, we should do our damndest to try. I reiterated my intention to search the lady’s room at first light. Then, downing the rest of my brandy and offering Crawford all the reassurance I could muster, I retreated to my bed to take some rest. It was at this point, however, that things began to take a turn in an entirely different direction.”

Newbury was staring at the flickering gas lamp on the wall, lost in his reminiscences. Bainbridge edged forward in his seat. He was caught up in the other man's story now; anxious to know what happened next.

“How so?”

Newbury smiled. He ran a hand over his face before continuing. “Wearily I made my way to my room, tired from my long journey and more than a little distracted by the shocking appearance of my old school friend. I spent my usual hour reading before settling in for the night – a rather lurid novel entitled *The Beetle* - and a short while later fell into a light doze. Sometime after that I found myself rudely awakened by a terrible

banging sound from elsewhere in the house. I sat bolt upright in bed, unsure what to make of the despicable racket. It was as if someone were beating panels of metal sheeting, and the sound of it quiet startled me from my bed.

Pulling my robe around my shoulders, I took up a candle and crept from my room, anxious to understand the nature of the bizarre noise. The hallway outside of my room was dark and deserted. The entire episode had the quality of an intangible dream and I wondered, briefly, if I weren't acting out the fantasies of a nightmare, inspired by the gothic novel I had indulged myself with just a few hours earlier. But the banging was so loud and persistent that I knew it had to be real. I crossed the hall, feeling the chill draught as it swelled up the stairwell. The sound was coming from deep within the bowels of the house, far below where I was standing. I wondered why there was no sign of Crawford or any of the staff. Surely they must have been woken by the thunderous sounds?"

"Remarkable. Did you find out what it was?"

Newbury laughed. "Yes. Indeed. And I fear it was nothing as sensational as you might have imagined, Charles. At the time, however, I admit I was perplexed. I made my way down the stairs in the darkness, my candle guttering and threatening to leave me stranded alone in the shadowy hallway at the foot of the stairs. Then, startled, I heard the shuffling sound of approaching footsteps and all of a sudden Chester was upon me."

Bainbridge frowned. "The manservant? Had he set upon you in the darkness?"

"No, no. But he certainly gave me a fright. His face loomed out in the candlelight like some sort of ancient, otherworldly spirit. He was dressed in a robe and his candle had been extinguished, burned down in its holder. He appeared to be heading towards the stairway, returning from a brief sojourn elsewhere in the house. He asked if he could help me with anything, evidently unclear as to the reason for my appearance in the hallway at such a late hour. Puzzled, I enquired about the banging sounds, which were still ringing loudly beneath us – underneath, I realised, the ground floor of the house itself. I surmised that there was obviously a large cellar somewhere far beneath us.

Chester, who seemed entirely nonplussed by the intolerable sound, shook his head and smiled. 'Nothing to be alarmed about, sir. The master often works late into the night. Best to leave him to his labours.' He put his hand on my arm as if to shepherd me back to bed. Unsure how else to respond, and realising that there was little I could do about the noise, I resigned myself to a sleepless night and retraced my steps, following Chester up the creaking stairs and along the galleried landing to my room. After I had heard Chester retreat to the servant's quarters I lay awake for some time, disturbed by the noise, but also suspicious of the manservant and the reasons for his midnight stroll around the house."

Bainbridge stroked his moustache thoughtfully and searched around in his jacket pockets until he located his walnut cigar case. Withdrawing a cigar, he snipped the end with his silver cutter and flicked the brown cap skilfully into the ashtray. Then, taking up one of Newbury's matches, he lit the fat tube with a brief flourish and sat back in his chair, regarding the younger man. "For how long did Hambleton continue with his bizarre nocturnal pursuit?"

"Hours. There was little peace that night, and if truth be told I rather abused Crawford's patience by taking the opportunity to rise late the next day. I was still groggy from the lack of sleep and I admit I found myself a little out of sorts.

The others were finishing their breakfast when I finally made my way down to the dining room, and even though I was suffering from a terrible bout of lethargy, I was keen to discover more about the nature of the work that had kept Hambleton busy so late into the night.”

“I suspect he looked done in, after spending most of the night beating metal?”

Newbury shook his head. “That was one of the strangest things about the entire episode. Hambleton looked fresh-faced and clean-shaven, as if he'd had a good night's rest and had risen early for breakfast. He was sitting at the table finishing a plate of eggs and bacon when I entered the room. I remember it distinctly, the manner in which he eyed me warily as I took a seat beside him. Of course, the first thing I did was enquire about the banging and the nature of his work in the cellar.”

“And was he forthcoming?”

“Only in as much as he acknowledged that he *had* been working through the night and apologised for keeping me awake. I pressed him further on the matter, politely at first, but he was loath to give away any real details. I held firm in my questioning, and eventually he relented. His explanation tallied with what Crawford had told me the previous day. He said he was working on a machine that would aid in the preservation of fruit and vegetables after picking, a means by which to maintain the freshness of the produce before it found its way to market.”

“Did he show it to you?”

“No. He was dismissive of the whole enterprise. Told me it was 'far from finished' and that there was 'very little of consequence to see.'”

“How odd. Did this not raise your suspicions about the man in any way?”

“I certainly had a sense that there was more going on at Hambleton Manor than I had initially suspected. Nevertheless, I was also acutely aware that Hambleton was suffering a great deal of distress following the disappearance of his wife, so perhaps I was a little more forgiving than I may have been in different circumstances.

Feeling that I should not press the matter any further, I finished my breakfast – indulging in copious amounts of Earl Grey to stave off the fatigue – and agreed with Crawford that he would show me to the missing woman's bedchamber directly. Hambleton, for his part, did nothing but stare at his empty plate as we left the room.

As we crossed the hall I felt the tension dissipating, and Crawford gave an audible sigh of relief. ‘He's not his usual self. Poor man. Please forgive him his brevity of conversation. At any other time I'm sure he would be delighted to reacquaint himself with an old school friend, but with Francis gone...’ The doctor clearly felt he needed to apologise for his friend and patient. I allowed him to do so, offering platitudes where necessary. I am much too long in the tooth to let such minor offences concern me.

I still had little notion of what had occurred at the house, and hoped that the coming day's investigations would yield quick, obvious results. That way I could be on my way back to London as quickly as possible. One sleepless night was already enough for my constitution.” Newbury shuffled uncomfortably in his seat, putting a hand to his side. He grimaced with obvious discomfort.

Bainbridge smiled warmly. “I'm sure it won't be too long before you're fully recovered, Newbury. I take it you're now a little more accustomed to sleepless nights?”

Newbury laughed. “Quite right. Quite right.” He sucked at his pipe.

“So did the lady’s room reveal everything that Crawford hoped it would? Evidence of foul play?”

Newbury shook his head. “Not a bit of it. I went through the place in minute detail. There was nothing of any consequence. No markings, no untoward smells, no evidence of occult activity. Hambleton had been right; the room was completely undisturbed, as if Lady Hambleton had simply disappeared without leaving a trace. There was evidence that her husband had searched the place, of course, but nothing to suggest that she had taken flight. That is, nothing to suggest that she had *planned* to take flight. There was still the slight possibility that she had fled the house on a whim, bearing none of her effects, but that seemed increasingly unlikely. Having been driven along the approach to the house in a hansom the previous day, I found it difficult to believe that anyone could have been able to flee the grounds without being seen, or else without requiring vehicular assistance of some kind. If the lady *had* run away, it was clear to me that she must have had an accomplice.

Nevertheless, I spent a good hour searching the room, attempting to get an impression of Lady Hambleton and the manner in which she went about her business. You can learn a lot from a victim’s personal effects, Charles, something your chaps at Scotland Yard could spend a little more time considering.”

Bainbridge shook his head in exasperation.

“Of course Crawford was getting desperate by this point, and was very insistent in announcing his theories. ‘You see, Sir Maurice. The disappearance simply has to have a supernatural explanation. There’s no other way to satisfactorily account for it’, or words to that effect. I admit his zeal was growing somewhat tiresome. I typically find in situations such as these that the simplest explanation is usually the correct one, and I counselled Crawford that he would do well to keep that fact in mind. Whilst the circumstances were clearly unusual, I was confident that the missing woman had not been abducted through supernatural or occult endeavour, and I resolved to put my finger on the solution before the day was out.”

Bainbridge leaned forward to dribble ash into the glass tray on the table. “Ah, so we are nearing some answers.”

Newbury smiled and shook his head. “Alas, my hopes of resolving the mystery so quickly were soon dashed. I had a notion that someone in the house knew more than they were letting on, so I next took it upon myself to interview each and every member of the staff. Crawford and I arranged ourselves in the drawing room and, in turn, each of Hambleton’s servants were called upon to give an account of the events leading up to Lady Hambleton’s disappearance. It was a day-long endeavour, and to my frustration we came away from the exercise with nothing of any real import or relevance to the case. Most of the staff proved anxious to stress that they were unaware of any furtive behaviour and that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred in the household on the day that Lady Hambleton went missing. The cook had prepared meals to her normal routine; the maids had stripped and made the beds in typical order. Even Chester, whom I had reason to suspect after finding him wandering the halls the previous night, provided a satisfactory explanation of his activities when pressed.”

“Which was?”

“Simply that he’d been woken by the banging from the cellar and had risen to ensure that his master was not in need of his services. Having received no response to his

query and finding the door to the cellar locked, he had come away to return to bed. He added that this was not an unusual occurrence and that whilst Hambleton himself often kept unsociable hours, he in no way expected his staff to accommodate him in such pursuits. His explanation seemed eminently reasonable and seemed to fit with the facts of the matter. In giving his account of the day that Lady Hambleton had disappeared, he accounted well for his whereabouts, the details of which were corroborated by at least two other members of the household staff.

I admit at this juncture in proceedings I was very nearly dumbfounded by the lack of evidence, but I knew I still had one further line of enquiry to pursue. I needed to see what Hambleton was building in his cellar.

By this time the day was drawing to a close. Hambleton himself had been out on the grounds of his estate for much of the afternoon. I suggested to Crawford that when Hambleton returned from his excursion we should question him like the other members of the household, allowing him to give his account of the hours leading up to Lady Hambleton's disappearance, and also to enlighten us further as to the nature of the device he was constructing underneath the house. Crawford, of course, was utterly appalled by this notion and rejected the idea immediately. He felt that it was not only a grave imposition on our host, but an unwise course of action, to submit a man in such a terrible state of anguish to probing questions about the loss of his wife. He went on to argue that, as a doctor, he was concerned about the health of his charge and that forcing the man to recall the events of that day would likely be enough to break him."

"Pah! I think this man Crawford was a little wet behind the ears." Bainbridge shook his head with a sigh.

Newbury laughed. "Perhaps so. But at the time I went along with his argument. I'd already resigned myself to spending another night at the manor, and I hoped that the evening may present an opportunity to discuss the matter with Hambleton to the same end. Tired, and unable to do anything more until Hambleton returned, I took myself off to my room to gain what rest I could before dinner.

I slept for two or three hours, before being woken by a loud rap on my door. Chester had come to inform me that dinner would be served within the hour, and that the master had returned to the house and was taking a brandy in the drawing room. A little dazed from the rude awakening, I thanked the manservant and then stumbled out of bed. Fifteen minutes later I was washed, dressed and on my way to the drawing room, having decided that joining Hambleton for a brandy would be a most excellent idea.

As it transpired, however, Hambleton had finished his drink and was now on his way to his room to change for dinner. I passed him on the stairs and he stopped momentarily as I bid him good evening. We eyed each other warily. 'I hear from Crawford that your search for supernatural activity on the premises has yet to bear fruit?' I couldn't help but catch the sneer that accompanied this gruff comment. I explained that I now felt beyond any doubt that there were no supernatural or occult elements involved in the disappearance of his wife, and that I was doing all I could to aid in her recovery. At this he seemed genuinely surprised, as if he'd expected me to react defensively to his offhand remark, and I could sense an immediate mellowing in his attitude towards me, as if, for the first time, he had realised that I was genuinely there to help. He smiled, sadly, and said that he'd see me shortly for dinner, but that I could find Crawford in the drawing room in the meantime.

I thanked him as he set off in the direction of his room once again, but I couldn't help thinking how far removed this person was from the distraught wreck of a man I'd seen that morning over breakfast. Evidently his turn around the estate had done him some good.

I joined Crawford in the drawing room. He was sitting in a large armchair knocking back the brandy at a rate I had rarely seen in a gentleman. He was no longer sober, and I could tell from the manner in which he looked up and greeted me that he had been there for some time. The man was evidently at his wit's end, even more so than Hambleton had seemed that evening. It occurred to me that I hadn't yet taken the opportunity to question the doctor. I took a seat opposite him and poured myself a small measure. Then, when the opportunity presented itself, I steered the topic of conversation around to his relationship with the family and his arrival at the house. I asked him how long he'd been here at the manor and whether he'd also been the physician of Lady Hambleton following her marriage to Sir Clive."

Bainbridge coughed and glowered accusingly at the end of his cigar. His moustache twitched as he considered the facts. "Very interesting indeed. So you'd come around to wondering whether Crawford himself was involved in the disappearance. Did he give a satisfactory account of himself?"

"He did, although it manifested as a rather garbled slurry of words, as the man was by then too inebriated to sensibly string his sentences together with any meaning. Nevertheless, I managed to decipher the gist of it. He claimed he'd arrived at the house the day after the disappearance, following an urgent telegram from Hambleton requesting his help. And whilst he had indeed been acting as physician to the missing lady, he claimed he'd had little cause to treat her as yet, as she was young and the perfect picture of health. I had no reason to doubt his claims – the facts were easy to corroborate. I believe his state at that time was derived simply from his frustration at being unable to help his old friend.

A short while later Hambleton appeared again, dressed for dinner. It was clear by that time, however, that Crawford was in no fit state to eat, so together we carted him off to his room to sleep off the brandy. As a result, dinner itself was a relatively low key affair, and although Hambleton was beginning to open up to me, he would talk only about our old days at Oxford together, or tell inconsequential stories of his family. When pressed to answer questions regarding his missing wife or his work in the basement, he retreated once again into an impenetrable shell and would not be drawn out.

With Crawford incapacitated and Hambleton unwilling to talk, I found myself once again at a stalemate. I repaired to my room for an early night. I knew that I had to see what Hambleton was building in his cellar, and I was now near convinced that it had something to do with the strange disappearance of his wife. There were no other obvious lines of enquiry, and no evidence to suggest that Lady Hambleton had fled the house in a fit of pique.

That night, I managed to find at least a few hours sleep before the banging recommenced to startle me from my dreams. I lay awake for some time, listening to the rhythmic hammering that, in the darkness, sounded like some dreadful heartbeat, like the house had somehow come alive whilst I slept. I stirred from my bed but hesitated at the door. I'd planned to make my way down to the cellar to surprise Hambleton and make sense of what he was doing under the house, but it occurred to me that Chester was

probably prowling the house in the darkness, and with Crawford likely still unconscious from the alcohol he had consumed, I thought it better to wait until the morning. I planned to take the first opportunity to get away from the others and slip down into the cellar to take a look at the machine. If all was well I would at least have the comfort of knowing that Hambleton was truthfully not involved in his wife's untimely disappearance." Newbury leaned forward in his chair and rubbed a hand over his face. He sighed.

"The next day brought startling revelations, Charles. Perhaps some of the strangest and most disturbing things I have ever seen. But it started auspiciously enough.

I'd fallen asleep again in the early hours of the morning and woken in good time for breakfast. Expecting to find Hambleton and Crawford in the dining room, I shaved, dressed and hurried down to greet them. I hoped to find an opportunity to steal away whilst the others were occupied, so that I may find the door to the cellar and investigate what lay beyond. To my surprise, though, Hambleton was nowhere to be seen, and Crawford, looking a little green around the gills, was taking breakfast alone. Or rather he was staring at his plate as if indecisive about whether he should attempt to consume his food or not. He looked up as I came into the room. 'Ah, Sir Maurice. Sir Clive has had to go out on urgent business and extends his apologies. He said he would return by midday and that he hoped everything would soon become clear.'

Of course, two things immediately crossed my mind. First, that Hambleton's absence from the manor would provide me with the opportunity I had been waiting for, and second, that his message could be deciphered in two different ways: that either he hoped Crawford and I would shortly find an answer to the mystery, or, as I was more inclined to believe, that it was Hambleton himself who had the answer, and that he hoped to be in a position to reveal it to us shortly. I had the sense that things were about to fall into place.

I took a light breakfast with Crawford, who stoically attempted to hide the after-effects of his over-zealous alcohol consumption the previous evening. He ate sparingly, with little conversation, and then declared he was in need of fresh air and planned to take a walk to the local village if I wished to join him. Of course, I refused on the grounds that I needed to press on with my investigations and stressed that he should feel at liberty to go on without me. He bid me good morning and took his leave, assuring me that he would return within a couple of hours to help with the matter in hand.

Being careful not to alert Chester to my plans, I finished my tea in a leisurely fashion, and then, when I was sure that I was alone, I made haste to the cellar door. It wasn't hard to locate, being situated under the staircase in the main hall. I tried the handle, only to find that the door had been locked. Unperturbed, I fished around in my pocket for the tool I had secured there earlier. Glancing from side-to-side to ensure none of the servants were about, I set to work. I spent nearly five minutes tinkering with the mechanism, attempting to get the latch to spring free. Alas, the lock proved beyond me, as I was far from an expert lock picker in those days. Frustrated, I returned to the drawing room to consider my options."

Bainbridge was confused. "Didn't you put your shoulder to it?"

Newbury shook his head. "You must remember, Charles, that I had no actual evidence of wrong-doing. Whilst I had cause to suspect that whatever Hambleton was up to down in that cellar may have somehow been connected to the disappearance of his wife, I had no empirical basis for that belief. None of the staff suspected their master of

anything more than a little streak of eccentricity and an inability to keep normal hours. If I went ahead and smashed the door off its hinges, I would have been declaring my suspicion then and there that Hambleton was somehow involved in the disappearance of his wife. If I'd been proved wrong... well, the incriminations would have been difficult to counter. I had no formal jurisdiction in that house. And more, if I was right about Hambleton's involvement, but unable to find any clear evidence in the cellar to support my claim, then the game would have been up and the villain would have been provided with the perfect opportunity to cover his tracks. It was certainly a quandary, and in the end I decided to sit it out and bide my time.

As it transpired, however, the case was soon to resolve itself.

Crawford was true to his word and came bustling into the drawing room around eleven, his cheeks flushed from the exercise. He looked as if the walk had done him good, and he had regained his usual composure. When he saw me sitting by the window with a book on my lap, he offered me a quizzical expression and came to join me, casting off his walking jacket and taking a seat nearby. 'Any developments, Sir Maurice?'

I assured him I had not been resting on my laurels, and that, whilst I didn't yet have any evidence to show, I felt that I was drawing closer to a solution. Well, I don't mind telling you, Charles, that whilst I had indeed managed to spot the culprit in the matter, I had in no way been able to foresee the manner in which the crime had been perpetrated." Newbury paused to smile. "Or indeed the reasons why."

"Anyhow, I asked Crawford to give an account of his morning stroll. He was animated, full of energy. He said he had walked to the local village as planned, enjoying the brisk stroll and the fresh morning air, but had been surprised upon his arrival to find all manner of commotion in the village square. It soon unfolded that a young man had been found dead on the moors – a village lad, the son of the postmaster – and that everyone had gathered to gossip about what had become of the boy. He was seventeen years old and much liked by the community. It seemed a senseless killing. Nevertheless, someone had clearly taken a dislike to the boy, and just a few hours earlier his corpse had been recovered from amongst the heather; battered, bruised and broken.

Crawford was obviously appalled by such goings-on, but clearly saw no connection to the case in hand. I, on the other hand, believed I now had all the information I needed. This was the motive I had been looking for, and all that remained was to await Hambleton's return. Then, I was convinced, I would have all of the evidence I needed to build my case."

"So what, Hambleton killed this boy on the moors? But why? Had he got something to do with Lady Hambleton's disappearance?"

"In a manner of speaking. But it was much more complicated than all that, as you'll soon hear.

It was only a short while before Hambleton himself returned to the manor. Crawford and I, sitting silently in the drawing room, were alerted to his arrival by the sound of his horse whinnying noisily in the driveway. We both clambered to our feet. Of course, Chester was the first one out of the door, crossing the hall before either of us had even made it out of the drawing room. And indeed, it was Chester who was to inadvertently give his master away. Coming out into the hall, both Crawford and I heard the manservant exclaim upon seeing his master. 'Sir? Are you hurt?' Hambleton's reply was sharp. 'Don't be ridiculous, man. It's not my blood. Hear, take the reins.'

Glancing cautiously at each other, Crawford and I made our way out into the bright afternoon to get a measure of the situation. Chester was leading the horse away across the gravelled courtyard. Hambleton, still wearing his hat and cape, was spattered with blood. It was all over him; up his arms, over his chest. Even flecked over his collar and chin. His gloves were dripping in the stuff. He gave us a cursory glance, before pushing past us and into the hall, his boots leaving muddy footprints behind him.

Crawford was appalled. ‘Look here, Sir Clive. What’s the meaning of all this blood? What the devil have you been up to? This morning you said that you hoped everything would become clear, but as yet, things continue to be as murky as ever!’

Hambleton stared at his friend for a long while. His shoulders fell. It was as if a light had gone out behind his eyes. ‘Very well, Crawford. I had hoped to at least find myself some clean attire, but I suppose it is time. You too, Newbury. You’ve probably worked it out by now, anyway.’

He led us across the hall, stopping at the door to his workshop. There, he fished a key out from under his coat, smearing oily blood all over his clothes. He turned the key hastily in the lock and then, pulling the door open, revealed a staircase which he quickly descended into the darkness. Crawford hesitated on the top step, but I was quick to push past him and followed Hambleton down into the stygian depths of the workshop. A moment later I heard Crawford’s footfalls on the stairs behind me.” Newbury sighed and took a long draw on his brandy. Bainbridge was on the edge of his seat. He’d allowed his cigar to burn down in the ashtray as Newbury talked, and he was watching his friend intently, anxious to know how the mystery would resolve itself.

“The workshop was a sight to behold. It was a large room that must have filled a space equal to half the footprint of the manor itself. It was lit by only the weak glow of a handful of gas lamps and the crackling blue light of Hambleton’s bizarre machine, which filled a good third of the space and was wired to a small generator that whined with an insistent hum. Valves hissed noisily and the machine throbbed with a strange, pulsating energy; a huge brass edifice like an altar, with two immense arms that jutted out on either side of it, terminating in large discs between which electrical light crackled like caged lightning. And in the centre of all this, prone on the top of the dais, was Lady Hambleton. Her face was lit by the flickering blue light, and it was clear that she was no longer breathing.

Hambleton stepped up to take a place beside her.

Crawford, appearing behind me from the stairway, gave a terrible shout and rushed forward, as if to make a grab for Hambleton. He stopped short, however, when Hambleton raised his hand to produce a gun from under his coat. He waved it at Crawford. ‘Don’t come any closer, Crawford. I don’t want you to inadvertently come to any harm. This is only for your own good.’

Crawford was incensed, but stayed back, putting himself between me and the gun. He caught my eye, trying to get a measure of how I planned to respond to the situation. He turned back to Hambleton, his voice firm. ‘What’s going on, man? What’s happened to Francis?’

Hambleton sighed and lowered his gun. He met Crawford’s eye, and spoke to his friend as if I were not there in the room with them at all. I listened to his terrible tale as he recounted it.

‘I knew the danger of marrying a young wife was that she may quickly grow tired of an older man, or at least weary of my company as I grew only older and more stuck in my ways. I loved Francis more than it is possible to say. Love her still.’ He glanced at his wife, serene on the contraption behind him. ‘I had miscalculated just how soon she would begin to look for companionship elsewhere, however, and had not expected after only twelve months to find her making merry with the postmaster’s son in the stables. I was enraged, and stormed out of there with fire in my belly. The boy had scarpered and I had refused to see Francis for the rest of the day. That night, however, we had a blazing row over dinner, and Francis had declared her love for the boy, claiming that I was a terrible husband who had trapped her in a draughty old house and paid her no attention. This cut me dreadfully, and I found myself seething as she fled the room.’ Hambleton offered Crawford a pleading look, as if willing him to try to understand. ‘That is when the insanity took hold of me. I knew I was losing her, and I couldn’t stand it, couldn’t stand the thought of another man laying his hands on her. In a fit of madness I waited until the servants were all engaged elsewhere in the house and stormed up to her room, dragged her to the cellar and activated the machine.’

Crawford’s voice was barely a whisper. ‘What is the machine?’

‘An experimental preserving device, designed to maintain the integrity of food after harvesting. It holds things in a kind of ‘stasis’ field, a bubble of energy that preserves them indefinitely, preventing them from decaying or changing in anyway. I threw Francis into the stasis field in a fit of rage, believing that I was saving her from herself, that it was the only way to stop her leaving me forever. Too late, when the madness and rage had passed, I realised I had not yet perfected the means to bring her out of it. All of my experiments with fruit and small animals had ended in disaster. The integrity of the flesh had not been able to withstand the process of being withdrawn from the preserving field. Anything organic I put in there would simply fall apart when the field was terminated. Francis was trapped. Frozen in time, unable to be woken, unable to live her life. I couldn’t bring myself to end it, and for days I’ve been searching for an answer, a means to free her from this Godforsaken prison I’ve created.’

Crawford edged forward, and Hambleton raised his firearm once again. Tears were rolling down his cheeks. ‘Oh no, Crawford. You don’t get to save me this time. This time I deserve my fate. Besides, it’s too late now, anyway. I killed the boy this morning; practically tore the poor sod apart. There’s no going back now. The only choice I have is to submit myself to the stasis field, to join the woman I love in the prison I have created. Goodbye, Crawford. Do not think ill of me.’

Hambleton turned and threw himself onto the dais beside his wife, his gun clattering to the floor. Crawford cried out. The machine fizzed and crackled, static energy causing my hackles to rise. A moment later Hambleton was overcome, and he collapsed into a peaceful sleep beside his wife.”

Bainbridge looked aghast. “So what did you do? How did you get them out?”

“That’s just it, Charles, we didn’t. There was no way to free them from their fate. Neither Crawford nor I had any notion of how to engage the controls of the machine, and although we spent hours reading through Hambleton’s notes, we could find no evidence of a method by which to deactivate the preserving field. Hambleton had been telling the truth. They were frozen there, in that bizarre machine, and there was nothing at all we could do about it.

At a loss for how else to handle the situation, Crawford and I sealed up the basement and went directly to the local constabulary. We told them that we'd all been out walking on the moors and that Hambleton, overcome with distress about his missing wife, had thrown himself in the river. We'd tried to save him, of course, but he'd been swept away and lost. The police set about dredging the river for his body, but of course there was nothing to find. The servants could not dispute the facts, either, as only Chester had seen his master return from the village that morning, and he was loyal until the end."

Bainbridge shook his head. "My God. What a terrible tale. What became of them?"

"A while later Hambleton was declared dead and the house passed on to his nephew. Chester retired from service and Crawford had the door to the cellar panelled over before the new incumbent could move in. The missing lady was never found, presumed dead on the moor, having fled the house of her own volition."

"So, they're still there? Trapped in that cellar, I mean?"

Newbury nodded. "For all I know, yes, they're still there. Perhaps there will come a time when technological achievement is such that the machine can be deactivated and the two disenchanting lovers can be reunited. For now, though, their story ends there, in a basement underneath a manor house." Newbury paused. He eyed his friend. "As I've said before, Charles, revenge can make people do terrible things."

Bainbridge eyed Newbury over the rim of his brandy glass. "Hmmm. Well there's a lesson there for all of us, I feel. And for you in particular, Newbury."

Newbury frowned. "How so?"

"I don't think revenge has got anything to do with it. Women, Newbury. Women can make people do terrible things." His eyes sparkled. "Better keep an eye on that assistant of yours, eh?" He winked mischievously.

Newbury flushed red. "Right, you old fool. That's quite enough of that. Time you were getting some rest. I'm in need of my own bed, and you're keeping me from it."

Bainbridge laughed. "Right you are old man. Right you are." He placed his brandy glass on the table, took up his coat and hat, and, his cane tapping gently against the floor as he walked, bid his friend goodnight and made his way out into the fog-laden night. Newbury watched from the window as his friend clambered into a waiting cab. Then, hesitating only long enough to bank the fire, he extinguished the gas lamps and made his way slowly to bed.