

The Shattered Teacup

A Maurice Newbury Investigation

By George Mann

For Scott

London, December 1901

“Newbury! Thank God you’re here.”

Sir Maurice Newbury swept into the hallway, his overcoat billowing open behind him as he marched across the marble floor towards his friend. His expression was serious. “Don’t thank God, Charles. Thank the cabbie who agreed to take my fare this close to Christmas.” His face was ruddy from the biting cold and his breath was shallow with exertion. He began removing his black leather gloves, one finger at a time, eyeing the older man for any clue as to why he’d been called from his bed at such an early hour of the morning.

Sir Charles Bainbridge, his grey moustache twitching with irritation, glanced over Newbury’s shoulder as if he were expecting someone else. “Miss Hobbes?” He looked flustered.

Newbury shot his friend a stern look. “Charles. It’s Christmas Eve!”

Bainbridge nodded in acknowledgement, as if the date had only just dawned on the Chief Inspector. He glanced at his pocket watch. “Quite so, old man. Quite so.” He shook his head. “Well, Christmas or not, I’m afraid the situation here is rather grave.”

Newbury nodded. He was a young-looking man approaching his fortieth year, with jet black hair and a hawkish nose. His eyes were a startling, emerald green. He glanced into the open doorway behind Bainbridge. “Lord Carruthers?”

“In there. Dead.”

Newbury raised an eyebrow. “Indeed?” He shrugged out of his overcoat and scarf and handed them both to the Chief Inspector, who accepted them with a begrudging sigh. Newbury paused for a moment to examine the burst lock and splintered frame where the door had been forced, and then stepped over the threshold into the dimly-lit room beyond. He cast his eyes around. “The drawing room, then.”

“Yes. Not the most auspicious place to die.”

Newbury frowned, glancing round at the dusty stacks of books and trophies. “Oh, I don’t know...” Then he caught sight of Carruthers’s corpse, sprawled out on the floor before the desk and contorted into a shape that it was never meant to achieve in life. He turned to Bainbridge. “Ah. Well perhaps not.”

He paced further into the room, taking in his surroundings. The room was panelled in dark oak, giving it a gloomy cast, despite the large sash window in the south wall that looked out over an expanse of lawned garden. There was a large wooden writing desk, a bookcase full of austere biographies and Dickens novels, and a chair in one corner, a newspaper draped haphazardly over one arm. There was a small occasional table beside the chair, a well-loved pipe and an empty white saucer resting on its surface. The room had a musty smell about it, of old books and stale air. It reminded Newbury of his study back in Chelsea, only lacking the specimen jars and other, more arcane trinkets.

Something trilled in the corner of the room behind the chair. Newbury glanced at Charles.

“One of Carruthers’s little toys. We haven’t been able to work out how to shut the thing up.”

Intrigued, Newbury approached the chair. The noise sounded again, a kind of ‘tee, tee’, accompanied by a quiet mechanical whirr. Leaning over the back of the chair, Newbury peered into the shadowy corner. A strange brass object was moving about on

the floorboards, its metal feet clacking against the smooth lacquer. It was about the size of a human head, but crafted to resemble a barn owl. Its metallic feathers shimmered in the low light of the gas lamps. Newbury watched it for a moment as it paced about, just like a real bird, its head twitching from side to side as it walked. After a few seconds, it turned its head as if to regard him, gears grinding as its glittering, beady eyes adjusted their focus, turning slowly to settle on his face. Then its brass wings clacked and fluttered noisily, and it began to trill again, shuffling off to hide beneath the chair.

Newbury looked across the room at Bainbridge. “What a marvellous little device. Seems almost as if it’s alive.”

“Hmmm.”

Newbury grinned at his friend’s disdain. The older man looked tired and exasperated, and was clearly in need of a rest. He decided to press on. “So, before I examine the body, what can you tell me of the circumstances?” He indicated Carruthers’s cadaver with a wave of his hand. “How did you come to find him like this?”

Bainbridge moved over to stand beside Newbury. He kept his eyes on the corpse whilst he talked, as if the dead man were somehow likely to move if he so much as dared to look in the other direction. “Well, it seems to me that he’s suffered a massive failure of the heart. The door was locked from the inside when the valet found him this morning. He’s been here since some time last night. Alone.”

Newbury nodded, urging the other man to continue. “Go on.”

Bainbridge cleared his throat. He frowned. “I’ll admit it doesn’t sit right with me, Newbury. He was a healthy man, in the prime of his life. He was only thirty-six, for Heaven’s sake. What should cause him to drop down dead in such a way?” He rubbed his hands over his face, sighing. “And then there’s the note.”

“The half-scrawled note on the desk, you mean?”

Bainbridge raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I thought you would have spotted it.” He sighed, as if in recognition of the fact that his observations were likely to be redundant in the presence of the other man. “Over here.” He led Newbury over to Carruthers’s desk, stepping around the contorted body, which lay heaped on a Turkish rug, a wooden chair overturned just beside it. He pointed to a sheet of crisp, vellum paper that was resting on the surface of the desk. “He must have been trying to write it as he died.”

Newbury stooped over to examine it. Bainbridge was right – it did look as if the note had been prematurely curtailed. The letters B, R, O had been scrawled untidily in black ink, printed hastily in capital letters with a shaky hand. This half-formed word was followed by a smudged black line that trailed off the page and across the desk, terminating at the lip of the desk as if the pen had been dragged violently across the surface. He noted that the leather writing surface had been severely scored where the nib of the pen had bitten into it, opening a large rent.

Newbury crouched, searching out the missing pen. It lay on the floor a few inches from Carruthers’s right hand. He reached for it, turning it over in his fingers. It was a fine specimen, crafted in Switzerland about a decade before. He touched the tip against the back of his hand. The nib was dry. The note had been written hours ago.

He glanced under the desk. There was a heap of shredded paper, bits of torn envelope, cream-coloured writing paper, and newspaper. It seemed almost as if the strange clockwork owl had been trying to build a nest.

Newbury turned his attention to the body, noting that the dead man's fingers were stained with black ink. It was clear that Carruthers had been trying to scrawl a message on his notepad when whatever had killed him had caused him to convulse to the floor, leaving the message unfinished. He was still dressed for dinner, although he had obviously retired to the drawing room in his shirtsleeves, as his jacket was absent from the scene. His hair was blonde and clipped short. His eyes had once been blue, but had now taken on a milky glaze. His skin, too, had developed a waxy sheen, and his face was twisted in a disturbing, rictus grin. He had clearly been dead for some hours.

Bainbridge cleared his throat. "What do you make of it?"

Newbury, still crouching beside the body, looked thoughtful. "The note? Nothing, as yet." He studied the corpse for a moment longer, before glancing up at Bainbridge, distracted. "What is it that you're not telling me, Charles?"

Bainbridge smiled, caught out. "I believe I have a measure of what that note could mean. Carruthers's valet. His name is Brownlow. I've had him detained in the dining room for questioning. I supposed that Carruthers could have been attempting to identify his killer, if indeed it proves to be anything other than a natural death. The letters, see: 'BRO'. The beginning of the name: Brownlow."

Newbury stood. "Very clever, Charles." He placed the pen carefully on the desk beside the note. "And it was certainly murder. Whatever made him convulse like that...his heart may have stopped, but it wasn't the cause of his death."

Bainbridge glanced down at the body. "Strangulation? I didn't see any bruising to the throat."

Newbury shook his head. "Poison."

Bainbridge studied his friend for a moment in silence. It was the last thing he needed to hear on Christmas Eve.

The clockwork owl trilled again from the corner of the room. 'Tee, Tee.'

The moment stretched. Finally, the Chief Inspector sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He smiled at Newbury, a wordless appreciation for the other man's help. "Brownlow, then?"

Newbury nodded. "Brownlow."

Together the two men left the drawing room - and the corpse - behind them, making their way towards the dining room, where Carruthers's valet, Brownlow, was waiting patiently to be questioned.

###

The dining room was long and grandiose, with a dominating marble fireplace, exquisitely moulded cornicing, a large, austere portrait of Lord Carruthers on one wall, and a glittering glass chandelier that hung low over the table. By the door, a uniformed Bobbie was standing watch, his hands tucked neatly behind his back. He stood to attention as Bainbridge and Newbury entered the room.

At one end of the table sat an aged man in a black suit. He looked haggard and drawn, his skin pale, his eyes rheumy and tired. He was wringing his hands nervously, glancing from side to side as if he expected someone to sneak up on him from behind.

Newbury would have placed him in his mid-sixties, although, judging by his wisp of white hair and his leathery, liver-spotted skin, he could have been much older. He had evidently been worn down by many years of continual service.

“Mr. Brownlow?” Bainbridge asked, his tone authoritative, as the two investigators approached the seated man.

The other man looked up. “Yes.”

“We’ve come to ask you some questions. About the death of Lord Carruthers. My name is Sir Charles Bainbridge, of Scotland Yard.”

“Yes.” Brownlow glanced down at his hands.

Bainbridge pulled out a chair and lowered himself to sit opposite the man. Newbury stood off to one side, observing.

“So, Mr. Brownlow. You are Lord Carruthers’s valet?”

“Indeed. I’ve been with the family for many, many years.” His voice was reedy and high pitched. He was clearly distraught. “I was with Lord Carruthers’s father before he died. I’ve lived in this house all of my adult life.”

Bainbridge nodded. “I can see this has all been a grave shock to you. Who else was in the house last night, besides yourself and Lord Carruthers?”

“Just Mrs. Richards, the Housekeeper, and Mr. MacKinnon, the Butler. Many of the others servants have been dismissed for Christmas.”

Bainbridge stroked his moustache. “Can you tell us what occurred when you found your master’s body?”

Brownlow looked down at his fingers, and then moved his hands underneath the table, as if suddenly conscious of his own nervousness. “It wasn’t until this morning that I discovered anything was awry. Lord Carruthers is -” he caught himself, “*was* an early riser by habit. Consequently, I have grown accustomed to retiring early, so to be ready to rise before my master each morning. Last night he dismissed me after dinner, around eight o’clock, and I went immediately to my room. I spent some time reading before taking to my bed around half past nine.” He cleared his throat, glancing at Newbury, who was studying the man intently. “When I woke this morning I completed my usual round of preparations for the day, before looking in on the master at precisely eight o’clock. That was when I discovered his bed had not been slept in.”

Bainbridge leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful. “What was your first reaction?”

“I know my master’s habits well. This was highly irregular. I spoke with Mrs. Richards and she informed me that the last she had seen of the master was the previous evening, in the drawing room. I went immediately to the door to that room and found it locked from the inside. I knocked three times but did not elicit a response. I tried my key but found the master’s key was still in the lock from the other side. Fearing the worst, I shouldered the door from its hinges and found the master dead on the floor before his desk. I sent for the police immediately.”

Newbury stepped forward. “Did you touch anything in the room, Mr. Brownlow? This is very important. Did you move anything other than Lord Carruthers’s body?”

Brownlow shook his head. He looked perplexed. “No. I’m sure of it. I didn’t touch a thing.”

“Then thank you, Mr. Brownlow. I believe you are free to go about your business.” Newbury looked to Bainbridge, who frowned, confused, but nodded his approval, trusting Newbury’s instincts.

The valet got to his feet and shuffled slowly towards the door. Newbury pulled out a chair beside Bainbridge and lowered himself into it. Then, as if it were an afterthought, he turned around in his seat and called after the valet. “Mr. Brownlow? Could you please see if Mrs. Richards is available for interview?”

The valet nodded. “Of course. I’ll ask her to attend to you immediately.” He disappeared into the hall.

Bainbridge turned to Newbury, a question in his eyes. Newbury shook his head. “Bear with me Charles.”

The Chief Inspector sighed, loudly.

Newbury stared thoughtfully into the fireplace, where the flames were licking hungrily at the yuletide logs.

###

Mrs. Richards was stout woman in her fifties, with dark brown hair scraped back into a tight bun, and a warm face that showed what Newbury deemed to be genuine shock and sadness at the death of her employer. She sat at the end of the table facing the two investigators, her hands folded neatly on her lap. She was wearing a long, blue, flower-print dress beneath a plum-coloured apron.

Newbury leaned forward, looking her in the eye. “So tell me, Mrs. Richards. Who stands to benefit from the death of Lord Carruthers?”

The woman looked taken aback by the directness of the question. “To be honest with you, sir, I have little to no idea. As you know, the master was not yet married, and his father was buried just a year ago this last spring. There was a younger sibling, once, a boy named Harry, but he and his mother died shortly after childbirth and the former Lord Carruthers never remarried. I expect there is a cousin or an uncle who will benefit from the estate.” She shook her head. “I also expect my husband and I will be turned out before too long, once the answer to that question has been successfully ascertained.”

Newbury looked thoughtful. “When was the last time you saw Lord Carruthers alive, Mrs. Richards?”

“Last night. It was just before ten o’clock. I was on my way to bed, when I happened across Mr. MacKinnon, the Butler, who was taking the master a tray of tea. I offered to deliver it on my way.”

Newbury smiled. “And how did you find Lord Carruthers when you knocked on the door to the drawing room?”

Mrs. Richards thought for a moment. “Relieved, I should say. I recall thinking he must have been very much looking forward to the refreshment, given the look on his face.”

“But aside from that. No sense that he was feeling unwell, or troubled in any way?”

“Not unwell, no. But it was unusual for him still to be up and about at that hour. He seemed animated, certainly. Vexed, even. But he was polite enough, and when I asked him if he needed anything else he was kind to me as usual and sent me on my way.”

“And what of the tray of tea?”

“I poured him a cup and removed the tray and teapot to the hall. I collected them this morning before I began making preparations for breakfast.”

“Excellent!” Newbury stood and began pacing before the fireplace, lost in thought. The Housekeeper watched him with cautious eyes. After a moment, Newbury paused behind Mrs. Richards’s chair. “You may take your leave now, Mrs. Richards. I’d appreciate it very much if you could send Mr. MacKinnon along to talk with us.”

Mrs. Richards got to her feet, clearly relieved. “I’ll do so right away, sir.”

The two men watched her as she crossed the room and disappeared through the doorway. Bainbridge glanced at Newbury, raising an eyebrow at his friend. “I know. I won’t even ask.”

###

Douglas MacKinnon was a smart-looking man in his early thirties. He was wearing an immaculate black suit and tie, and his hair was blonde and worn in a side parting. His eyes were a piercing, electric blue. He spoke with a gentle Scottish lilt that Newbury placed as an Edinburgh accent, and his voice itself was soft and even.

Bainbridge was first to start with the questions. “So tell me, Mr. MacKinnon. How long have you been with Lord Carruthers’s household?”

The man smiled. “Only this last six months, Chief Inspector. Before then I was engaged as a butler in Edinburgh, to the Collins family.”

“And how have you found Lord Carruthers?”

“An excellent man in many regards. He treated his staff well, and I was made very welcome in his household.”

“And the rest of the staff. Did they accept you readily?”

MacKinnon shrugged. “They did. It was obviously a difficult time for many of them. They had lost the former Lord Carruthers only six months before my arrival, and they were still recovering from the loss of the previous butler, who had been with the family for many years. But they accepted me readily enough.”

Bainbridge cleared his throat. “So when did you last see your former master alive?”

Newbury watched the butler’s reaction. He remained steadfastly unemotional. “Last night. Just before ten o’clock. He rang the bell for tea.”

Newbury leaned forward. “And did you deliver that tea?”

“No, sir.” The butler paused. “After hearing the bell I called on the master in the drawing room to enquire as to his needs. Then I repaired to the kitchen to organise the tea. However, I met Mrs. Richards in the passageway outside of the kitchen, and since she was already heading in the direction of the drawing room, she offered to deliver the tray on my behalf.”

“So can you explain why Lord Carruthers may have been showing signs of vexation when she knocked on his door just a few minutes later with that very same tray?”

“I cannot.”

Newbury drew a deep breath. “You can stop pretending now, Harry. I understand that none of this has been easy.”

The butler’s eyes opened wide in shock, and he glanced at the door, as if making ready to run. The Bobby stiffened and stepped into the opening, blocking his escape route. Bainbridge stood, nearly knocking his chair over as he did. He glared at the butler.

“Harry? Harry Carruthers?”

Newbury nodded. “That’s right, isn’t it, Mr. MacKinnon? That’s your real name, although no one would know it. The Scottish accent is an excellent disguise.”

The man glowered at Newbury across the table. “It’s no disguise. I spent my childhood rotting in an orphanage in the north, abandoned by my father after my mother’s death. He couldn’t bear to give up his precious Alastair, of course – my dear brother was his pride and joy – but he blamed me for my mother’s death and cast me out, telling the world I had died alongside my mother. I was just an infant. I didn’t discover this until years later, of course, and by then I’d already been to hell and back. But a few months ago, when my father died, I finally discovered the truth. I was visited by one of the women who had taken me in at the orphanage. She said that she couldn’t live with the secret any longer.”

“So you decided to get close to the family. The death of the previous butler was the perfect opportunity, I gather?”

“I was already working as a servant at the Collins house, although my position was that of an underling. But I couldn’t let the opportunity pass. I moved to the nearby village and took a cheap room at the inn. I courted one of the maids who worked at the house, and soon enough she put a word in for me with Mr. Brownlow. He was quick to take me on when I listed my credentials. By that time they were much in need of another pair of hands.”

“And of course, the Scottish accent and the years of harsh living ensured that no one would recognise you. Not least your brother, who had no reason to even suspect a resemblance. For years he’d been labouring under the impression that you were dead.”

“And I might as well have been, for all the difference it made when I confronted him after dinner last night. He refused to believe me. He claimed that I was dredging up his family’s past in the hope of extorting his father’s fortune from him. He told me to get out of his house and to never come back.”

Newbury nodded. “So you decided to enact your revenge. You went directly to the kitchen, found the bottle of strychnine you had secured there for just this occasion, and prepared a deadly brew for your sibling. The clever part is how you tricked poor Mrs. Richards into delivering the poisoned cup on your behalf, so that you were never anywhere near the room whilst your brother was struggling for his life. Did you plan to come forward later to claim the inheritance?”

“Perhaps. I would have asked for what was rightfully mine.”

Bainbridge banged his fist on the table. “You’re a despicable wretch.” He turned to the Bobby, who had been standing patiently by the door, awaiting instructions. “Get him out of here. Throw him in a cell. He can spend Christmas where he belongs.”

He slumped back into his chair beside Newbury, and the two of them watched as the young man was led away, his hands cuffed firmly behind his back.

“How the devil did you work it out, Newbury?” The Chief Inspector looked bemused. He tugged on his moustache, pondering the flames that still danced in the grate.

Newbury laughed. “It was the clockwork owl that gave it away.”

Bainbridge turned to look at his friend, his brow furrowed. “How so?”

“It was trying to tell us all along. Those sounds it was making. ‘Tee, tee’. I think it was telling us how the murder was affected. We assumed all along that there were no actual witnesses to the murder. But we were wrong. That automaton saw everything. And that’s why it was making that infernal racket. It wasn’t just programmed to make those sounds. It was repeating the same word over and over to put us on the right trail. ‘Tea, tea’.”

“My God! Are you sure?”

“I’ll wager if we were to go back to the drawing room now and shift that chair we’d find all the pieces of that shattered teacup hidden under there, collected up by the owl during the night. That was the first thing I noticed when I walked into the room this morning. There was a saucer on the table, but no matching cup. Carruthers must have dropped it when he’d fallen, and the owl had saved the pieces as evidence, just like the nest it had built from scraps of paper under Carruthers’s desk. The Scotsman hadn’t counted on that. He was nowhere near the room when the cup was smashed, so he had no reason to look for the debris when the valet found Carruthers the next morning. He probably didn’t even consider it. But the missing cup was enough to put me on his trail.”

Bainbridge shook his head. “Remarkable. But what about the note? It seemed to be pointing to Brownlow.”

Newbury grinned. “No, Charles, although you were on the right track. If the note had been intended to implicate Brownlow, why wouldn’t he have destroyed it or removed it when he broke the door down and found Carruthers this morning, before calling the police?”

“What was it then?”

“B, R, O. He was spelling the word ‘BROTHER’. He must have realised that MacKinnon had been telling him the truth, and was trying to leave us a note. One more letter and we might have got it sooner.”

Bainbridge shrugged. “Well, it wouldn’t have helped poor old Carruthers. We were already too late for him.” He glanced at his pocket watch. “We should make haste. It’ll soon be Christmas. I’ll take you home in my carriage.”

Newbury eyed his old friend. “Do you have plans for Christmas dinner, Charles? Mrs. Bradshaw makes a passable plum pudding, and I’ve no doubt the goose is big enough for the three of us.”

Bainbridge smiled. “Well, now you come to mention it...”

“Come on then, old man. Let’s retire to Chelsea for a brandy. We can put this whole affair out of mind and attempt to enjoy what’s left of the season’s festivities. Douglas MacKinnon – or rather Harry Carruthers - can wait until Boxing Day.”

Bainbridge nodded, getting to his feet. “Thank you, Newbury. If you hadn’t put your finger on it so quickly I’d be spending my Christmas here, interviewing the staff.”

“Think nothing of it, old man. Think nothing of it. But I do ask one thing of you.”

“What’s that?”

“Keep an eye on what happens to that marvellous bird. If you find it needs a home...”

“It’s yours, Newbury.” He clapped a hand on Newbury’s shoulder, laughing out loud. “Happy Christmas.”

“Happy Christmas, Charles.”

The two men collected their coats from the stand in the hallway and set out into the fog-laden night, in search of brandy, cigars and Mrs. Bradshaw’s excellent plum pudding.