

What Lies Beneath

A Maurice Newbury Investigation

By George Mann

Dear Alice

Soon! Soon we will be together again. It seems like centuries have passed since I was last able to drink in your sweet scent, to caress your pale cheek, to gaze upon your pretty face. I miss watching you dance in the gardens in that delicate floral gown; miss seeing your tousled hair tumble loosely over your shoulder; miss your beaming smile. How much it pains me to be apart from you! Yet we must take care not to arouse suspicion. Our secret must remain safe. We share it, a burden, together. I will come to you soon, and we can be together again, if only for the shortest of times.

How I long for the day when we do not have to consider the thoughts of others. I live for it. My heart thumps in my chest even now, as I think of that day, so loud that I wonder Felicity cannot hear it in the next room!

Poor Felicity. How little she knows. Often I sit here, at my desk, and wonder whether it would be kinder to tell her the truth. It amazes me that she does not yet know. Under her own roof! She glides through her days in blissful ignorance, unaware of the love that has blossomed between her husband and another. She is no sort of wife to me, but I pity her still. I console myself with the knowledge that she will know soon enough. When the time is right, she will know.

Now, my dearest Alice, I must go. An old friend is coming to visit us. Sir Charles Bainbridge, a policeman from Scotland Yard. Think what he would say if he knew! But do not fear, my love. Soon I will hold you again. Soon.

Isambard

Dear Alice

I fear our liaison must be once more delayed. Much to my surprise, Sir Charles has arrived with another visitor in tow – Sir Maurice Newbury – an anthropologist from the British Museum.

The man is neither wanted, nor welcome. I know you shall think harshly of me for such words, Alice, but I admit I find Sir Maurice difficult to palette. He has a certain manner about him; overbearing, direct; arrogant, even. Still, it gives me a feeling of secret glee to know that neither he nor Sir Charles are aware of our secret. Nor shall they be, for I shall take great care not to let it slip, even though I feel a burning desire to shout about it from the highest rooftops.

Sir Maurice is unwell. I do not know the cause of his illness, but he starts and shivers and has dark rings beneath his eyes. He barely ate at dinner last night, but guzzled brandy readily enough, until he was clearly inebriated. Sir Charles then saw him off to his room. I wonder if he drinks to forget?

Felicity, of course, fawns over him like a pet. It's disgusting to watch. She fetches him brandy and walks around the gardens with him as if he is the most interesting man alive. Little does she pay me, her husband, such attention! (Still, my dear, I have you. That means more to me than you could possibly imagine. I do not want or need her attention any longer).

Sir Charles says that Sir Maurice is in need of a rest, that he has imposed his friend upon me in an effort to get him away from the city for a few days. Clearly there is more to the matter than that, but it remains unspoken. Of course, I have smiled

graciously and welcomed them both with open arms, as any worthy gentleman should.

But in truth I cannot wait for them to leave so that I may pay you a visit. I live in torment, awaiting the time when I can see you next.

Now, I must away to dinner.

Be patient, my love.

Isambard

Dear Alice

Questions, questions. Incessant questions! Newbury knows nothing but questions.

Today, my dear, I took the men shooting on the grounds. The pickings were lean, and we returned with only a handful of mangy rabbits. Needless to say, Newbury was near useless. It was all I could do to still my hand from aiming my shotgun at the odious academic. He proved relentless with his conversation, worming his way into our lives, probing for clues; digging, digging, digging. A constant torrent of questions, right up until we broke to change for dinner.

I think he may suspect something. Does he know of our secret? Does he imagine our trysts? I tried to test him with clever questions – eking out a little information and gauging his response – but he is clever, that one, and did not give himself away. I thought I saw a little smile on his lips, however – a secret, knowing smile – and I’ll be watching him. Watching his every movement, listening to his every word. I have a measure of the man, dear Alice, and he shall not be allowed to discover our secret. I promise you. He shall die before he knows the truth.

I shall leave this note for you tonight, my love, but shall not risk discovery by lingering for too long in the hope of seeing you. Surely they must leave soon! I need so much to hold you in my arms.

Isambard

Dear Alice

Today I almost let it slip! Tonight at dinner, Sir Charles and I we were talking of his late wife, and I said your name when I meant to speak of Felicity. Thankfully no one appeared to notice, save for a sly look from Newbury. More and more I wonder if he has somehow discovered the truth about us, and worse, that he secretly wants you for himself. You would never leave me, would you, my dearest Alice? Not for him. Not for that secretive, conniving academic. No, I know you too well for that. Of course you would not. You made me a promise, and you are mine forever more. Such is my promise to you.

Nevertheless, it gave me something of a thrill to speak of you in public, to let your sweet name form on my lips. I wish I could talk of you to Sir Charles. We were at school together, the two of us, and I long to confide in him. I am sure he would understand. But I dare not. I cannot risk it. What if he brought it up with Newbury? What if he were unable to keep it to himself, to share in the secret, just as you and I do? Then they would be free to spirit you away from me, and I would lose you forever. I could not bear that.

I must get rid of them, and soon. Sir Charles seems insistent on overstaying his welcome. Two days already! The longer they remain, the longer it will be before we can be together.

Your love

Isambard

Dear Alice

Newbury is incorrigible! Today I found him skulking around the entrance hall, examining things, looking for answers, for hidden clues. He'll never work it out, the damn fool. He claimed to be simply admiring the portraits, but I know his words for the lies they are. He is looking for evidence. He plans to expose us.

If he and Sir Charles do not leave after breakfast tomorrow I will have to take action. Newbury is already ill. I will introduce a poison to his meal. I have some hidden in the potting shed. A slow, deadly poison that will offer up all the symptoms of a heart complaint. He will be dead by late afternoon, and no one will suspect a thing. I know you will think me clever and brave for taking such decisive measures.

Tomorrow night, we will be together!

Isambard

Dear Alice

He knows! I can see it in his eyes! That damnable Newbury. He knows our secret!

He is a sly one, I'll give him that. He did not join us for lunch. After all of my efforts! I had taken great care to create an opportunity to be alone with his food. I dosed his soup with the poison, and took my place at the table just in time for Sir Charles and Felicity to arrive together (after doing heaven knows what, alone, in the gardens!).

Newbury, however, sent his apologies, claiming he was feeling unwell and would retire to his room for the remainder of the afternoon. Throughout the meal I could do nothing but imagine him creeping around upstairs whilst I was trapped in the dining room with the others. He was searching for you, Alice, rummaging around where he's not wanted, trying to expose our secret. To take you for himself.

Well, tonight I draw a line. I'm coming for you, dearest. Tonight I shall make my move. I can wait no longer. We shall flee this place, together. I shall make the preparations. Be ready, my love!

Isambard

Dear Alice

I can barely bring myself to write a word. All is lost. Newbury and Sir Charles are conspiring in the drawing room. I overheard them talking this afternoon. Newbury has seeded insidious thoughts in Sir Charles's mind. He uses words such as 'erratic behaviour' and 'unhinged'. He makes out that I have lost my mind!

I have no doubt, now, my dear. They're coming for me. I have such little time left. We shall not get away.

Hold on, my love. Our secret is exposed. I'm coming now to bid you farewell before they tear you from my arms. Newbury will not have you! I will die before I give you up.

Know this, my sweetest Alice: I have always loved you!

Isambard

Miss Veronica Hobbes placed the sheaf of letters on the low table beside the chaise longue. Her shoulder was still strapped from the bullet wound she had received two weeks earlier, during her encounter with the rogue agent, Dr. Aubrey Knox. She winced as she moved, turning to regard the man standing over by the window. She was wearing a serious expression on her pretty face. “These letters are clearly the work of a madman, Sir Charles. What the devil is going on?”

Sir Charles Bainbridge offered her a heartfelt shrug. His bushy grey moustaches twitched as he spoke. “The world is going to pieces, is what, Miss Hobbes. Dr. Isambard Ward was a good man. I spent many of my formative years in his company. It’s a damnable affair. I can hardly believe it myself.”

Veronica looked lost. “Believe what? What exactly occurred? And what of Sir Maurice?”

Bainbridge edged over to where Veronica was resting on the chaise longue. He looked at the pile of letters. “It was meant to be a relaxing break. I believed I was taking Newbury to a place of sanctuary, a place where he could cast off his dependence on that wicked poppy.” He sighed heavily. “Little did I imagine that an attempt would be made on his life, nor that I was planting him directly in the middle of another mystery.”

“So, what, Dr. Ward had lost his mind, and fixated on Sir Maurice, believing him to be a villain? But who is Alice? And what did Newbury want with her?”

Bainbridge smiled, a sad smile “Alice was once a maid in Ward’s employ. What’s clear now is that he developed an obsession with her, a deep passion that I’d venture she did not reciprocate. I believe it was this unrequited love that drove him to commit the most heinous of crimes. He became unhinged. He poisoned Alice and hid her corpse beneath the floorboards in one of the disused guest rooms. He rubbed salves into her dead flesh in an attempt to preserve her body, and paid her visits on a regular basis, fantasising that they were having an affair.” He shuddered, clearly disturbed by the memory of what he had seen. “He wrote her love letters – such as these – and posted them to her through a crack in the floorboards. He couldn’t have her in life, so he made sure she couldn’t leave him in death. His wife, Felicity, had no notion of what was going on. She was simply told that Alice had left their employ to take up a position as a governess in another nearby household.”

Veronica shook her head, clearly dismayed. “I’m so sorry, Sir Charles. It must have been a terrible shock, to discover an old friend had committed such a terrible act. How did it come to light?”

“Newbury. From the time we arrived Newbury knew that something wasn’t right with the chap. I knew he was right, but put it down to stress or anxiety. I suppose I was more forgiving of an old friend’s eccentricities. But it didn’t sit right with Newbury. Not one bit of it. He said that he’d seen the signs before. He thought that Ward was hiding something, and he was right.”

“So Ward was right, too. In the letters, I mean. Newbury really was on his trail.”

“In a manner of speaking. Newbury suspected that *something* was amiss, but in no way had he fathomed just how depraved and shocking that something would prove to be. And whilst he was certainly monitoring Ward’s behaviour, he really was unwell, and assures me that at no point did he actually spend time snooping around the house as Ward suggests in his letters. Those are just the ravings of a paranoid mind, I fear.”

“So what *did* occur?”

“It was Ward himself who gave it away. After writing that last letter, the bundle of which we discovered only after the Yard had been in to clear up the whole damn mess, Ward decided that we were on to him. In a last, desperate attempt to get away, he rushed to the guest room where he’d hidden the girl’s body and began ripping up the floorboards. I think he’d intended to steal away with the corpse. Needless to say, all that banging and shouting alerted us downstairs, and we all went rushing up to discover him cradling the dead woman’s body like a baby. The stench was near unbearable. Thankfully, Newbury was able to spare Mrs Ward the shock of seeing her husband reduced to such a state. I was able to prise Ward free of that grim embrace, and we sent for the Yard immediately. Ward confessed the whole thing to me, later, after we’d taken him back to London and thrown him in a cell.”

“I expect he’ll hang for his crime?”

“Without a doubt.”

Veronica reached for a glass of water that was perched on the table beside her. She took a long drink. Bainbridge stood by, watching her, wordless. The silence between them was enough to convey everything that they were both thinking.

“It’s Mrs Ward that concerns me.” Bainbridge turned to gaze out of the window once again, the sunlight dappling the front of his jacket. Veronica watched the dust motes dance lazily in the air. “She doted on Isambard. Hung on his every word. She’ll never be the same again, poor woman. How could you go on living after discovering a secret like that, about someone you loved?”

Veronica couldn’t look at him. “People keep secrets from one another, Sir Charles. Sometimes for the best of reasons.”

“Pah. Poppyclock. There’s never a good reason for keeping something from the people you love. Secrets are never anything but destructive. Believe me. I was married once.” He turned to meet her gaze, a warm smile on his lips. “Anyway, I didn’t come to regale you with stories of murder and insanity. I came to find out how you were recovering from your injury.”

Veronica grinned. “In that case, Sir Charles, I do believe we should have Mrs Grant put the kettle on. Would you mind terribly if I asked you to search her out and have her fetch the tea?”

“Of course not. It would be my pleasure.” He turned and quit the room, calling out for Veronica’s housekeeper as he made his way along the landing to the top of the stairs.

Veronica lay back on the cushions and sighed. He was right. Of course he was right. Secrets would be the end of them all. Secrets were the foundation upon which she had built her entire life, what lay beneath the thin veneer of her existence. Secrets were her burden, too, and she knew how they had driven Isambard Ward towards insanity.

Veronica placed the empty glass on the table and turned to see Bainbridge open the door and step into the room. Her heart sank. Secrets would be the end of her friendship with this man, and perhaps the end of her relationship with Newbury, too. She only hoped it wasn’t too late. She feared it probably was.

Only time would tell. Time, and the truth, and she feared the latter more than she had feared anything else in her entire life.