

The Stones of Mardale Green

by Jen Matteis

Early in November, when the gutters overflowed the streets on yet another dreary day of rain, I arrived at Baker Street for an impromptu visit and found Holmes deeply engrossed in his microscope. He tossed a letter to me without comment and went back to his observation. It read:

*3 Broad Street, Mardale Green
November 12th*

Dear Mr. Sherlock Holmes,

I kindly ask for your assistance in a matter of utmost importance. My wife, Anna, has disappeared on the moors, and I believe she is in grave danger.

Herein lies the proof that you must come. I fear for my wife's safety in the light of such unnatural things as I have seen in Mardale.

Faithfully yours,

Mr. Raymond Greyson

“Watson, you must have a look at this,” Holmes said, relinquishing the microscope. I wrinkled my nose as I drew near; an unpleasant scent arose from the greenish black sample. A feeling of profound unease prevented me from coming any closer.

“What do you make of it?” I asked. “Unless it is a medical matter, I defer to your skill.”

Holmes looked at me strangely. “No, I do not expect there is anything for you to see: your reaction, however, is most telling. You are not one to cringe away from an oddity. Honestly, I cannot tell what it is. It is very strange, Watson. It is a foul-smelling substance, as no doubt you are aware. It is so viscous as to almost be a solid, and with no structure that I recognize, though it has attributes similar to those of human cells. It only says one thing to me with any clarity at all.”

“What is that?”

“Pack a bag! We must take a trip to Mardale to discover the source of this sample, and how it relates to the disappearance of Mr. Greyson’s wife.”

I was at this point operating my practice and residing elsewhere, so I spent the remainder of the day hurriedly rescheduling my appointments and packing for the trip. I met Holmes at the station the next morning, and once aboard finally found the time to ask if he had reached any more conclusions about the sample.

Holmes pursed his thin lips and frowned. At first, I thought I might receive no answer, so dour was his look. “It was a substance that should not be.” I found his next words even more confusing. “When I awoke this morning, the phial Mr. Greyson had sent me was empty. The slide similarly so.”

“The phial must have not been sealed properly,” I said. “It must have evaporated or sublimated.”

Holmes furrowed his brow but did not reply. His silence made the train ride a dreary affair. A leaden rain pounded ceaselessly on the windows, streaking the countryside outside into a grey blur of

The Stones of Mardale Green

shapeless trees and endless fields studded with sodden, miserable-looking sheep. Holmes gazed out at the passing country sleepily, but behind lidded eyes his mind, I guessed, churned the details of what little we knew already and what we might yet find.

We had left Euston early, but it was late afternoon by the time we arrived in Mardale, service there being rare and antiquated. There was no true station. The train drew to a halt, and we stepped off onto a dilapidated platform that creaked unsteadily under our boots. No sooner had the door closed behind us than the train began to move, as if the conductor were eager to depart.

The sole indicator of the village's direction was a track of mud leading across a field. Far off in the distance, a farmer stood watching us. He had a rifle slung over his shoulder and an immense black dog at his side.

"Quite the welcoming committee," said Holmes. "Here, let me take some luggage."

"Thank you. I see the rain is picking up again."

"Then let us not tarry."

The dark and oppressive clouds soon yielded a drizzle that reinvigorated the mud beneath our feet, creating a sticky mire that slowed our progress substantially. We crossed the field and found ourselves at the edge of town, thankfully close to a public house. The Dun Bull, it was called, and a painting of its namesake hung from a hook in the rain, its paint flaking. Holmes and I glanced at one another and went inside, despite the building's unkempt appearance.

A bald, red-faced man with immensely broad shoulders stood behind the counter, polishing a clean glass with a dirty rag. "Come in, sit down. Get out of the rain awhile." He poured us two drinks and passed them over before we had even settled our bags. Then he looked us over without hurry, knowing we were in no rush to go back out into the rain. "What is your business in Mardale?" He poured himself a drink to accompany our own and downed it in a gulp.

“We are here at the behest of Mr. Raymond Greyson,” said Holmes.

“I might have guessed as much, but I cannot recommend it,” said he. “If I were you, and ignorant of this village and its devilry, I would strive to keep my innocence. I implore you, pick up your bags and return to wherever it is from which you came. After you’ve had a drink, of course.”

Holmes took a sip and grimaced at the taste. “What about this village recommends such a drastic course of action?”

The barkeep poured himself another shot and admired the amber liquid. “You would not believe me.” He again downed the glass in a single draught. I took a sip; it tasted vile.

“Try us,” said Holmes. “You will find us better listeners than the average.”

“I do not wish to rouse anybody’s ire by saying more. I wish simply to absolve my conscience in the sad event of your disappearance.” He took my glass, which I had abandoned, and Holmes’s, which was empty, and pointed up the street. “You will find Mr. Greyson in the yellow house on the left near the end of the road. Do not expect a hansom; in any case, it is a short walk.”

We stepped out again into the muddy street. True to the barkeep’s word, there was no traffic to speak of. A few bedraggled villagers passed us on foot, but there were no carriages.

“What a despondent village!” I remarked to Holmes as we made our way up the road.

“It is not merely despondent, it is terrified,” he said. A man passed us, and I noticed his suspicious glance and the furrowing of his brow as he appraised us.

“They must simply not trust strangers,” I said.

Holmes had been remarkably silent up to this point. Now he looked at me with such a dour and serious expression that, despite those being common expressions for him, I barely recognized him at all.

The Stones of Mardale Green

“This is not a normal town, Watson. A village like this has its secrets, and despite how few visitors they get, they are somehow extremely practiced at keeping them.” He pulled his hat down and looked about sharply, as if afraid someone might hear him. “Keep your wits about you, your eyes open, and your pistol at the ready.”

The Greyson home was a squat ugly house of wattle and daub that wore a layer of grime over a mustard yellow coat of paint. One shutter had come loose and rattled against its frame with every gust of wind. The brass door knocker was shaped like some dreadful beast. Holmes stared at it, finally using it for its intended purpose after his examination was complete.

The sound of the knocker reverberated in a way that suggested the house was empty, but soft steps soon approached the door. A young maid opened the door and greeted us. She led us to the parlor and then went to announce us. Soon there arrived an intent-looking young man with unkempt hair and serious dark eyes.

“Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson, I am delighted to meet you.” He shook our hands and bade us make ourselves comfortable, by no means an easy task in such a bare and strange home. Of furnishings, there were enough for Mr. Greyson and his wife, but not for any guests. However, every wall contained bookshelves packed with thick tomes and odd artifacts. I did not recognize the titles. Many were not in English, and those that were contained strange words I did not recognize. “Please, sit.” The maid brought in a chair from another room and assembled three together. “I apologize, we do not often have company. I hope your trip was not too unpleasant.”

“What news of Mrs. Greyson?” asked Holmes. “Has she returned from the moor?”

“No,” Mr. Greyson replied bluntly. He frowned at Holmes, as if he’d brought up an unwelcome topic. “I have spent days searching for her, days I do not even remember, so distraught have I been. I intend to try again tomorrow.” He accepted a cup of tea from the maid, as did I.

“This town is cursed.” He said it as lightly as if discussing the weather. The maid’s expression did not change, but she retreated to the kitchen. “Have you heard of the Mardale Stones? They are the reason my wife and I came here.” A dark expression drifted across his face like a cloud. “Anna and I were drawn together by a love of the arcane, as you might surmise.”

“I did notice your macabre taste,” said Holmes. “I assume that’s no insult for someone who chooses to adorn his mantelpiece with human skulls.”

He laughed. “Skulls are only frightening to those who fear death. Anna and I have studied for years in the arcane, and our home’s décor is only a mark of our trade. Everything here, however, is harmless as a dove compared to what lies outside. This house is a new growth on an ancient landscape. This land is haunted, since before man first walked it.”

I shivered, thinking of the grey foggy landscape and the farmer standing sentry in the rain.

“What of these stones?” asked Holmes. “I have never heard of them.”

“That does not surprise me. They lie on their sides like fallen soldiers on a rise above the bog. No tourists or curiosity seekers are drawn by their foreboding aspect. They are known only in certain arcane circles for the secrets that they hold. I have spent my life chasing such secrets. Now I know some dark things are best left hidden! Oh, if you had seen what happened when Anna and I implored the peat cutters to dig deeper beneath the stones.”

“What can you tell us of it?”

“To be honest, I cannot remember.” Greyson sighed and rubbed his brow, then he stood and began to pace. “Something happened, something terrible. When I came to, my wife was gone, and I was back in our bedroom. I remembered feeling an overwhelming horror, something that had made me run as fast as I could from that place. I think I wrote you a letter then.”

The Stones of Mardale Green

“You did, and you sent a sample with it.” Holmes leaned forward in his chair. “Tell me, what was it?”

Greyson frowned and sat down. “I had it with me when I found myself in the bedroom. I often carry phials on the moor to collect samples of rare mosses and other things. I do not recall where I filled it, or with what. I only knew it was nothing I had seen before, and that its uniqueness would secure your attention.”

“It is unfortunate how little you recall,” said Holmes. “But at least we know where we must go.”

“Yes, we will depart after breakfast.” Mr. Greyson glanced at a shotgun mounted above the fireplace. “We will take a dozen armed men with us.” He paused, and a vein throbbed in his forehead. He put his hand to it, and I wondered if he hid some condition. “Perhaps you do not need to come with me.” He nodded. “Indeed, it is better if you do not.”

Holmes raised an eyebrow. “I only wish we could have come sooner.” To my surprise, he did not ply Greyson with further questions, but instead spent the evening examining the books and other objects in the living room. It was obvious that his investigation made Greyson uncomfortable. However, he made no objection and instead retired early on the excuse of a headache, which I did not doubt given his tormented aspect. The moment he left, Holmes wasted no time in sabotaging the shotgun above the mantelpiece, an action of which I firmly approved.

As the evening waned, the maid showed us to a suite of adjoining rooms on the second floor.

“Thank you, this will do nicely.” Holmes yawned theatrically, then shut his door without bidding me goodnight.

“Thank you,” I said to her. “I hope everything is well with you?”

“Please, call me if you need anything.” She curtsied and closed the door. I heard her footsteps depart down the creaking stairs. Then I sat on the bed and removed my jacket.

“Watson!” Holmes hissed at the door. He poked his head in. “What are you doing?”

“Getting ready for bed.”

“You cannot possibly be tired,” he said in disbelief. He bounded into the room with a fierce energy at odds with his appearance of a moment ago, then began pacing. “I intend to do what we came here to do: find Mr. Greyson’s wife. Especially if he has lost interest in our help for some bizarre reason. I would have asked the maid, but I fear she reports everything to him.” He paused. “There is something very strange in this village. Do you remember the farmer on the field watching the station?”

“I did see the farmer, yes. An unfriendly sort carrying a rifle.”

“And the man watching the road at the end of Broad Street past this house? Equally armed?”

“No, I didn’t see that,” I said, alarmed. “What does that mean?”

“I believe Mr. Greyson is indeed looking for his wife, but not in any benevolent way. He is hunting her, not trying to save her. If we set out with all those guns and all those men, we will only put her in danger. We must find her before he does, and hope she has some answers.”

“How can we leave?” I went to the window and peered out; the room was on the second floor, with a painful, if not fatal, drop to the ground below. “It is too far down. We could try the stairs, but anyone who went down them would wake the whole household. I do not think he would appreciate us sneaking out.”

“We can climb down. Don’t look so horrified, Watson! The descent is easier from my room. I do not think it will present you with any difficulties.”

Thankfully, Holmes was proved correct. We dropped down onto an eave that protruded from the level below, and then slid down a drainage pipe to the lawn. My clothes became sodden in moments. Holmes led us through the back garden, then over a low fence and

The Stones of Mardale Green

into the lightly wooded land behind the house. The moon had not yet risen, yet he strode on determinedly as if he knew his way. Behind him, I stumbled over roots and fallen branches, doing my best to keep up.

“Where are we going?” I asked him once we had cleared the grounds.

“The only direction we’ve been given so far.”

“To the moor?”

“Precisely. We know Mrs. Greyson is somewhere on the moor. I intend to find her before her husband does.”

Holmes had taken the lantern from his room, and he unshielded it now. Soon the woods fell away and the land opened up. The ground became soft underfoot, and the lantern lit enormous puddles. The bog sucked at our boots and we left grossly exaggerated footprints behind us in the muck. A hunter could not fail to find us, should anyone care to search for our tracks. We slogged through the puddles in our sodden boots, having given up on the possibility of staying dry. The rain eventually relented but the clouds did not; their dark presence admitted not the slightest amount of moonlight.

A grouse erupted almost from under our feet in an explosion of loud whirring wing beats. I jumped back in alarm, realizing a moment later what had happened. “How could anyone survive a week out here, unaided?” I asked.

“You showed that was possible just now, by scaring up a meal,” said Holmes. “Do you see that ahead?”

“Yes, a faint light on that hill.”

In short order we reached the light, which turned out to be nothing more than a lantern sitting high on a hummock of wet earth.

“Hello!” said Holmes. “Is anyone here?”

“Behind you,” said a soft voice. I jumped and Holmes turned around slowly.

“Anna Greyson?” Holmes asked.

“Did my husband send you?” Her voice was not in the slightest bit friendly. Mostly I was concerned with the pistol she had leveled at Holmes’s face.

“That is up for debate,” said Holmes. “I am Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and this is my associate, Dr. Watson. We received a letter from your husband, but the man we met earlier today claiming to be Mr. Greyson was, I believe, someone else entirely.”

“Mr. Holmes! God bless you, Raymond, for doing that one thing at least.” She lowered the pistol. “What did he tell you?”

“His letter said surprisingly little. He wrote us that his wife had gone missing on the moor, and he sent us an odd sample to arouse our curiosity. A thick, greenish-black, vile-smelling substance.”

She nodded. “That abominable ichor would get any man of science out here in a hurry.”

“What was it?” I asked. “What is going on here?”

She turned to me and for the first time I could see her features in the lantern light. She had untidy hair that fell below her shoulders and a wide expressive face, but now it was ridden with the utmost misery. “Ichor from the being that took over Raymond, if one could call that dead distorted thing a being. Raymond was taking samples from it when it happened. I have been hiding out on the moor ever since, but I fear I am as doomed as he is.”

“What happened to you, Mrs. Greyson?” said Holmes. “Your nails are torn and you have clearly had a fright. Please, take a deep breath and tell us every detail of what you know.”

“I will tell you in the light of day, at the Mardale Stones, where you can see the truth for yourself. Please, I cannot speak of it now. I could not bear it if you did not believe me and left.”

“We are not going anywhere without you,” said Holmes firmly. “I will curb my curiosity if you promise to tell us everything on the morrow. However, I fear the longer we wait, the greater your danger grows.”

The Stones of Mardale Green

Mrs. Greyson gave out a short, sharp laugh with no mirth in it. "He hunts me each day. There is little urgency in it. If anything, we are both trying to delay the inevitable, for the love we once held for each other. As for tonight, we can sleep in the crofter's cabin, if you really intend to stay. There is no shortage of abandoned homes, though whether they belong to the wise who left or to the dead, I cannot say."

She led us a short distance to a miserable-looking shack. One window was covered with boards; the other had spiderweb cracks in one corner and a uniform layer of grime. The entire structure canted dangerously to one side, as if the slightest breeze might tip it over.

"If there is a well-built structure in this entire town, I have yet to see it," commented Holmes.

"The people frighten me too," said Mrs. Greyson. "They are not normal English country folk. I have hated this village from the moment we came here. My family is from Sheffield and if I ever can escape this place, I vow to go there and never come back."

A beast howled far off on the moors, and I shuddered. Holmes glanced at me. "Come, Watson, cheer up! We will see the end of this shortly, I do not doubt." He lay down on one of the musty cots, pulled a blanket over him, and was asleep in moments.

I do not believe I slept in that drafty shack. Despite the late hour, the night felt unending, and day did not come easily to the moors. It arrived in fits and starts, with the song of a single thrush that ended abruptly, and a low glow of light in the east. Eventually Holmes and Mrs. Greyson awoke. We ate some dried food the crofters had left then set out upon the moor.

The thick fog and vapors absorbed both sound and light, leaving us in a dim haze through which even our voices rang distorted. A chill wind sprung up; it whistled tentatively across the desolate heath and teased the branches and vegetation into uneasy motion. The day was advancing, yet the sun failed to brighten the sky, obscured by a thick layer of clouds. An occasional raindrop

slithered down the back of my neck and thunder rumbled uneasily in the distance.

“Well,” said Mrs. Greyson after a long period of silence. “Here we are.”

I looked about in some confusion. We stood on a rise devoid of features other than a few hummocks and odd depressions. “Where are the stones?”

“Beneath our feet.” Holmes knelt and brushed away a layer of slimy mud. “Here is one, at least.”

“Raymond and I found seven, most beneath the earth. Be careful. It would be easy to step in a hole.”

Now that I looked, I could see where the peat cutters had chiseled away the decomposing turf. One stone stood upright a short distance away, and it leaned at an erratic angle, mostly hidden by a layer of moss. Sunken depressions filled with brown water hinted at the others’ locations. There was also a deep hole leading under the one standing stone.

“Were these all once standing stones?” I asked.

Holmes shook his head. He had moved on to examine the hole in the ground. “This formation must have been buried at the time of its creation, given its depth.”

“Here on the surface, they appear in meaningless disarray,” said Mrs. Greyson. “However, Raymond and I discovered a grim symmetry to them, once one factors in those positioned beneath the turf. The pattern bears an uncanny resemblance to a constellation of stars associated with witchcraft, dreadful acts, and dark legends.”

“Mrs. Greyson, it is past time you told us what you and your husband sought here,” said Holmes. “Tell us what we are facing, so that we might help you put an end to it.”

“Are you always so confident?” asked Mrs. Greyson. “Even in the face of death?”

“Especially in the face of death,” he said lightly. “That is when it behooves one to be at one’s most self-possessed.”

The Stones of Mardale Green

“Let me show you the peat diggers first,” she said. “Then you might believe the rest of what I have to tell.” She led us a slight distance down the rise. “Here they found their fate.” Two bodies lay together in a twisted mass, as if they had died in the middle of a wrestling match. Mud and grime streaked their faces, but not enough to hide an expression of utmost terror on their features. I shivered but forced myself to examine the bodies.

“Holmes,” I finally managed. “I have been through a war and seen much else beside. Men do not die like this.”

Holmes kneeled beside me, thoughtful. “It would seem some do. Our eyes have not witnessed all there is to see in the world. If they had, it would make for a dull experience, would it not?” He smiled at me, and I realized it was an uncharacteristic attempt to cheer me up. “But no, nor have I beheld deaths such as these.”

“Look at their skin, closely,” said Mrs. Greyson.

Holmes dampened a kerchief in a puddle then cleaned the mud off one of the victim’s faces. He drew in a breath. “That is passing strange, Watson!”

I frowned. There were delicate etchings on the skin. “The corpse is too fresh for those to be worm tracks. The marks are too small, besides, and too evenly spread.” I leaned closer. “The wounds did not bleed, either. What the devil is this?”

“It is not the work of parasites.” Holmes had gotten out his magnifying glass. “It looks almost like hieroglyphics carved into their skin, but not any language I recognize. A man of patience could do this, had he a laboratory, the right tools, and countless hours. Yet I doubt that has happened here.” He looked up at Mrs. Greyson. “What caused this?”

She sat down, careless of the mud. “Now you must believe what I have to say. Those are the structure of an evil and ancient curse, one set in place by two warlocks long ago. The brothers achieved immortality, in a sense, and that is what Raymond seeks.”

“Impossible!” said I.

“Pray, continue,” said Holmes. “There is enough odd here that I am willing to hear any explanation. We will reserve our judgment until after we have heard it.”

“The older brother unlocked the secret, but at great cost. There is only one source of eternal life: horrific beings in another realm, whose very existence disturbs the dreams of man. Through dreams he met one, and the brother promised an endless succession of human sacrifices in return for eternal life. It was a Faustian bargain, but it became even worse when the brother realized the sacrifices would be the bodies that he possessed, again and again, over the long centuries.”

She paused to search our faces. She must have found what she sought because she continued. “The younger brother vowed to stop the elder or to save him if he could. He conducted the same ritual to bind the same being to himself, but while doing so, used his skills to bind both himself and his brother to these stones. Now, each time the brothers rise, they fight each other to mutual ruination, and neither can go far from this place. Raymond hoped to end this cycle and win immortality for both of us with spells of protection and certain arcane rituals. Some of what he hoped for must have worked, or he and I would already be dead upon this rise. We carry the spirits of those brothers within us, as well as their shared curse.”

“I am beginning to doubt the wisdom of your husband,” Holmes said. “This does not sound like a story that ends well.”

“I wish I were going mad rather than that it be true.” She spat on the ground angrily. “I used to share his interests, but for every discovery that elated me, another would lay bare the rot at the heart of it all. Raymond, unfortunately, feels elation even in the rot. I can abide the occult no more, nor him.”

Holmes had wandered a short distance away and had knelt to examine something. “Many have died here, of both genders. They have the same marks on their skin.”

The Stones of Mardale Green

“I would not be surprised if this whole mound were made of bodies,” said Mrs. Greyson. “They have fought each other in different forms since before the Romans walked here. There are countless tales of deaths and disappearances on this moor. It is only a matter of time before my husband and I fulfill our fate, and you will not want to be present when the accursed brothers go looking for new hosts.”

“On the contrary, this is the best time to be here.” Holmes stood up and came back to us. “Should we delay this problem and condemn the next hapless wanderers to face an indescribable horror? No, I think not. I doubt the future will have such tools to bear upon the situation as we have now.”

“For God’s sake, what tools, Holmes? Pistols and shovels? Are we really meant to succeed against immortal demons with nothing more?”

Holmes smiled at me. “I meant neither weapons nor shovels, Watson, which both have had ample opportunities across the centuries to solve the problem without success. I meant our shared experience in such matters, and our wit.” He gestured to the ground about us. “This is simply the scene of a crime. We must find every shred of evidence that will help us.” He bent down and wrestled a shovel from one of the peat diggers. “Watson, see what you can find at the very top of the rise, and in that tunnel. I will keep looking down here. Mrs. Greyson, please stay with me and recount every other detail you can recall.”

“Should I dig very carefully?” I asked.

“As carelessly as you wish. I wager you can do no damage to any vile thing we should find here.”

I did not relish my duty, but I returned to the top of the mound. An evil foreboding came over me as the shovel bit into the earth with a harsh scrape. The ground was so wet that it was more like shoveling mud than dirt; presently a fetid odor began to arise. It did not take me long to place it; it smelled like the sample Mr.

Greyson had sent us. Soon I had uncovered a veritable morgue of corpses. The freshest was perhaps three months old; even the oldest had the odd markings on its skin, preserved by the unique acidity of the peat.

“Look, Holmes,” I said when he returned. “Most of them are in this tunnel. They must have been trying to escape their fate.”

Holmes bent down and peered into the depths, frowning. “That makes no sense. If they had any wits, they would have run instead, as Mr. Greyson did. Going in there would only have made them more vulnerable. Oh, that smell! If Greyson meant anything by sending us that sample, I suppose this is where he wanted us. Though why he could not come out and say it, I will never know.”

To my surprise, Holmes began to climb down into the tunnel.

“What are you doing?”

“Finding out why this tunnel is so popular among the doomed. Hand me the lantern, Mrs. Greyson, please.” Holmes disappeared from sight. “Watson, look at the sides of the tunnel!”

I knelt to get a better look. The sides were not smooth by any means. Long furrows ran through them. I looked up at Mrs. Greyson and her bloodied hands.

Finally, she said, “It began with something like a moth fluttering inside my brain, right after the peat diggers killed each other so violently. Now I lose time, sometimes entire days. I come back to myself covered in dirt, my arms aching, like I’ve been digging beyond my own body’s abilities. It’s possible I awoke in that very tunnel, but the details are difficult to recall.”

“Well, you weren’t alone.” Holmes emerged from the tunnel, brushing himself off. “Most of the victims died trying to do one thing: enlarge this tunnel. Even as death came for them from behind, they spent their last moments digging their way forward.”

“Where were they trying to get to?” I asked.

“They had a different goal entirely. I believe they were trying to move one of the rocks, the enormous leaning one from what I can

The Stones of Mardale Green

see of it. In every incarnation, the younger brother used his time to dig a little farther.” Holmes clapped me on the back. “So, yes, Watson, we will answer this problem with shovels, if not guns! If shifting that rock was the younger brother’s goal, then that is our goal as well. We have one tremendous advantage here.”

“What advantage is that?” she asked.

“Modern advances in chemistry,” said Holmes. “Blasting powder! Mrs. Greyson, do you know of any other crofters’ cabins nearby? It is commonly used to blast tree stumps in the country, I believe.”

“I know a few places we can try.”

“Excellent. Watson, please go with her, in case you run into any trouble. I will remain here and dig a hole for the powder in the best arrangement I can. Now, hurry! Everything depends on that black powder, so get it as quickly as you can.”

Mrs. Greyson and I searched the nearby cabins, which were all abandoned. Soon we came upon a store of black powder in one of the basements, thankfully with fuses too. I would have left a few shillings on the table when we left, as payment for it and the damage we’d done to their lock but there seemed no point.

We hurried up the hill as fast as we could. Holmes wasted no time but took the bag of powder from me and disappeared down the tunnel with it.

“Now we wait,” he said when he reemerged. Holmes lowered his voice so Mrs. Greyson could not hear. “There is one fact we must ascertain before we light that fuse: which brother wanted to topple that stone, the good one, or the evil one? I need to know it was the younger brother’s goal, not the elder’s, to enlarge that tunnel. Mrs. Greyson has told what I think is an honest story, but we are taking her role in it on trust. I do not mean to bring down an unspeakable horror upon the world through carelessness. Watson, I am afraid I am going to have to ask you to perform an unpleasant task. Someone will need to light the fuse, and I only trust you with it. I must speak

with Mr. Greyson when he arrives, and then we will know what to do.”

Luckily, we did not have to wait long. Within the hour, a line of torches appeared in the distance, and we heard the baying of hounds. As we had planned, I stationed myself near the mouth of the tunnel to be ready on the fuse. Mrs. Greyson stayed out of sight, on the back of the rise, while I spied around its edge.

“My husband,” she said when she heard the hounds. Her face was pale but determined.

“Here comes the hunt,” said Holmes at his position above us. “Let us hope Mr. Greyson still has his wits about him.” He stood, brushing the dirt off his clothes as best he could. “I believe greeting him with cheer is the best way to avoid getting shot. Hello! Hello, Mr. Greyson!”

A trio of hounds rushed Holmes, but being unaffected by supernatural rivalries, they greeted him with wagging tails and joyous barks. Soon Mr. Greyson arrived with several men, both armed and hostile.

Holmes leaned against the single upright stone in an amiable fashion. “Mr. Greyson! I have found your wife, and she is well.”

Mr. Greyson scowled at Holmes. “We both know that is not the case. Have you learned yet of the spirit that has possessed her?”

“Possession seems quite common in these parts! Who are these men with you? I would not want to be around such heavily armed men if I thought my death were soon fated. Indeed, I would be willing to bet they are here to make sure you and your wife do not continue to defy fate. Countryfolk adhere to tradition in these matters.”

“Stand aside. You have no role to play in this.”

“On the contrary. I think I can help you. Your wife has given me a quick course in the arcane and explained the history here. There may be a way for you both to survive this and win the powers you so covet.”

The Stones of Mardale Green

A look of flagrant greed flashed across Mr. Greyson's face. The vein throbbed in his forehead. This time he did not put his hand across it, and I saw it for what it was: marks like those on the corpses had spread across his face. "Immortality?"

"I have already attained it for myself," said Holmes.

Mr. Greyson looked shocked, then began to laugh. "I sincerely doubt that."

"Test it." Holmes gestured to the gun in Greyson's hands, then raised his arms.

"You are mad, Mr. Holmes." Mr. Greyson lifted the weapon. If I had not seen everything that Holmes had done in Mr. Greyson's house, including his alterations to the shotgun mounted above the fireplace, I would have been in a panic. But then the gun went off, and Holmes stood unaffected.

"How is that possible? What did you do?" Mr. Greyson roared.

"Tell me the truth, and I will reveal everything to you. Do you have within you the elder brother, or the younger?"

"The elder," Greyson said. "Tell me what I must do."

"Close your eyes and pray your protections work."

The moment Greyson had said "the elder," I lit the fuse. Mrs. Greyson and I ran down the back of the hill, with Holmes not far behind us.

"Stop!" shouted one of the men. I heard them coming up the hill as we fled, but I did not dare risk my footing to look behind me. We barely cleared the base of it when the powder went off.

I stumbled and fell to my knees. An enormous black dust plume overtook us, and I drew my kerchief over my mouth. Then, for one interminable moment, the sky was clear. I knelt beneath a glittering panoply of unfamiliar stars. I felt an immense, dispassionate presence watching me. After a moment that world, if world it was, dropped away as if behind a curtain.

“Mrs. Greyson!” I called. “Mrs. Greyson!” I heard her coughing nearby. I reached out a hand to help pull her up. “You are unharmed?”

“I am alive, and I think I am myself again. Did it work?”

“I believe so. There is still a great deal of smoke, but I cannot see the topmost stone at all.”

“What of my husband? Is he dead?” She pulled her hand away and ran up the rise, heedless of the smoke.

Holmes came up behind me and touched my shoulder. One of his trouser legs was torn, but he did not seem injured. “Come, let us see.” We followed her up the hill. At the top, the formerly leaning stone lay shattered on the ground. Holmes looked at it with satisfaction. “I doubt the younger brother was knowledgeable about modern inventions, or he would have ended this much sooner.”

“Dr. Watson, come here!” Mrs. Greyson knelt by her husband.

“He will survive,” I said as I felt his pulse. “He was merely knocked out by the force of it.”

The villagers, on the other hand, were no better off than the stone. I felt a cringe of guilt knowing we’d practically lured them on top of the tunnel by having them chase us.

“Do not mourn them,” said Holmes, as if he could read my thoughts. “They guarded this moor and its secret. Think of all the bodies we saw. The villagers cannot have been ignorant of what happened here, and no doubt abetted it. They would have done away with both Greysons to ensure the continuation of this dark custom.”

“What should I do?” asked Mrs. Greyson. “Can I simply walk away?”

“You should return to your family in Sheffield,” said Holmes. “Your husband will be safe here now and you can settle matters with him in time. And pray, call on us at need.”

“I will be glad to be done with this place,” she said.

The Stones of Mardale Green

Holmes and I helped a vacant Mr. Greyson back to his home, where he quickly fell asleep. With Mrs. Greyson we left to flag the last train of the day. The sentries were gone, no doubt dead on the hill, but it was still a grim trip back. Everything felt like a dream, and at times I thought back to the odd vision I had seen on the hill, though I did not mention it to Holmes. To this day, I doubt whether events transpired as at the time they seemed, or if our imaginations had somehow played tricks on us. I only talked about the case once thereafter with Holmes.

“How did you know to disable the shotgun?” I asked him.

He laughed. We had met the day after our return at the Baker Street apartment, and so far had talked only of old cases, perhaps in a way to get our feet firmly back on the ground. Though lunch was the pretext, neither of us had much appetite. “I had no idea how it would help. I only knew that having it functional would not.”

“I admit, Holmes, I abhor these types of cases,” I said.

“I agree.” Holmes was silent a moment. “Normally I am all too interested in the obscure. But for once I feel the same as you do, Watson. I am happy to be back in London, flat-footed once more on the ground. Perhaps I will even enjoy the next utterly mundane case that comes my way. However, I doubt that will be the last adventure that you and I have of that nature.” Despite his words, he did not seem entirely unhappy about it. He sat back and began to fill his pipe in a thoughtful manner.

“Are you not afraid to deal in such things? I think I almost went mad at the sight of all those bodies on the hill. What of that vile substance, and the threat of a being from another realm?”

Holmes took a puff on his pipe and smiled at me. “In the end, I did not deal in such things. I could not make any sense of the substance, and I did not bargain with any devils. When it comes down to it, man’s problems are my *métier*. Should a god-like monster arise to devour the world, that would simply be beyond my powers.” He gave me a wide and honest grin. “But should they

Jen Matteis

become organizing powers of crimes among men, I will gladly face them down!”