

# *The Sound of the Basket Hills*

*A Round-Robin Pastiche*



*The Pleasant Places of Florida*

# The Sound of the Basket Hills

a Round-Robin Pastiche by

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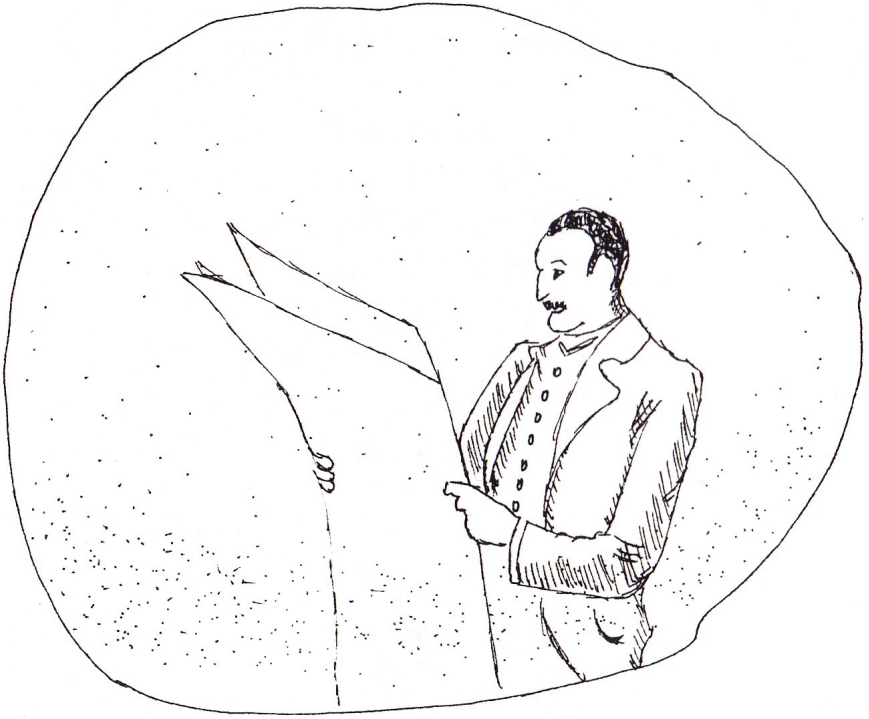
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It was an uncommonly pleasant morning in the spring of 1894. The clear azure sky allowed the sun to shine brightly into the sitting room at 221-B Baker Street, London. Holmes and Watson were enjoying their coffee and post-prandial pipes while perusing the morning papers.

The good doctor interrupted the silence. "I say, Holmes, did you see this bizarre item on page six of the Telegraph?"

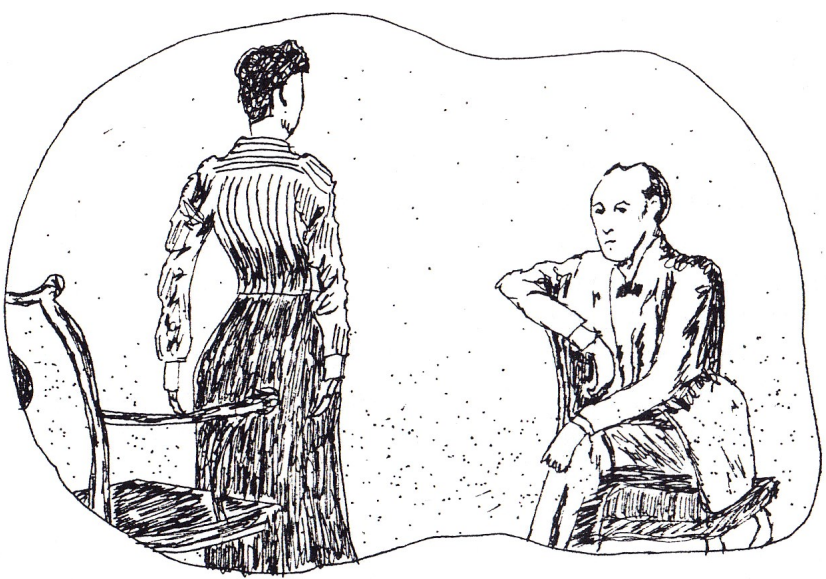
"Bizarre, you say, Watson? Elucidate, Watson, elucidate," Holmes rejoined.

"The item relates that a local exorcist enlisted the professional assistance of his barrister. It seems he had successfully performed his services for a client--that is, had gotten rid of the devil inside him--but the said client had refused to pay the exorcist his due, and now he wanted to pursue the matter in the claims court," Watson read on. "So the barrister called the exorcist's client and said unless he paid the money he owed, he'd see that he was repossessed."

As Holmes groaned, there was a sharp rap at the door. Mrs. Hudson ushered in a strikingly beautiful young lady. She was handsomely attired in the latest fashion, and had a bearing of nobility about her.

But her air of dignity and composure soon evaporated, as she rushed toward Holmes displaying tears of anguish, and cried, "Oh, Mr. Holmes! You are my last hope of salvation from ruin! Please, please help me!"

Watson placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and guided her to the settee. "Now, my dear," Watson said calmly, "just explain it all to Mr. Holmes. Things will be right as rain in no time."



## Continuation I

by Tom Takach

"Mrs. Hudson, would you please be so kind as to bring some of your most satisfactory tea for our friend here? She wants a calming influence, and nothing is better suited to that end than a brew concocted by your skillful, yet wrinkled Scottish hands." Mrs. Hudson shot a playful glance at Mr. Holmes as she exited the room. She knew that his rare forays into the realm of humor were attempted only when trying to impose order upon an uncomfortable situation.

As Watson strode over to the mantel atop the fireplace to retrieve his notebook, Sherlock Holmes took a seat opposite the settee. Closing his eyes, his hands clasped behind his head, he said, "Pray, please state your case from the beginning. Dr. Watson and I are most anxious to render any assistance which may be in our power to provide."

After taking a few deep breaths and drying her tears with

a handkerchief kindly proffered by Holmes, the lady began. "My name is Selina Kyle. Upon my soul, I must confess that I have begun our professional relationship with a deception. This beautiful dress is not my own. It belongs to an old friend of mine who lives in London. I borrowed it from him in order to make you think I was a woman of means who could afford to reward you handsomely for your services. The truth of the matter is I have little in the way of worldly wealth."

"I was aware of the fact, Miss Kyle, from the moment you accepted the handkerchief from me. Your hands tell of a life that has been spent in hard labor, not in richly appointed parlors. Money is not what draws me to a case, Miss Kyle. I am at your service. Please continue."

Watson interjected, "A moment, Holmes. Miss Kyle, did you say that your friend who loaned you the dress was a man?"

Holmes snapped, "Watson. That fact does not fall within the purview of this investigation. Please try to weed out any extraneous, though provocative, facts as we move along."

"Thank you, Mr. Holmes. I live in a small village just west of Dartmoor called Clysandra. It is a poor town, its principal claim to fame being the beautifully painted rocks which are mined from the nearby hills. Indeed, we refer to them as The Basket Hills, because they are the economic breadbasket of our small community." At this point, Miss Kyle began weeping again.

The great detective broke in with, "Please, Miss Kyle. Remember that we cannot aid you unless we know what your difficulty is." Watson nodded in assent as he blew a prodigious quantity of smoke rings from his recently-lit cigar in the general direction of the much stained ceiling of the sitting room.

Miss Kyle continued, "Of course you're right, Mr.

Holmes. It's just that, the thought of those hills reminded me of the mysterious disappearance of my twin brother, Otto. It is in fact my brother's fate which has hastened my steps in the direction of the one man in all of England who can help me. It happened only yesterday. My brother, like so many of the other villagers, was busy earning his daily bread mining the hills for those special rocks which we then so gaily paint afterwards and sell at a tremendous markup to tourists who have lost their way. Unfortunately, instead of investing the profits, we tend to squander them on riotous living and debauchery. That is why we are all as poor as church mice. But I digress. My brother left for the mines, pickaxe in hand, at the crack of dawn yesterday as was his custom. I spent the day repairing the leaky thatch roof of the small house in which we both live. I began to worry when Otto failed to return home by his normal time, which is about five o'clock. He doesn't hear as well as he used to, and that concerns me as well. He usually ceases working about four o'clock, but then he and his fellow miners will make their way down to the village pub, The Hound and Fox, to draw a few pints. My anxieties increased until they reached a zenith last night about eight o'clock when I heard a heavy knock at the door. I opened it to come face to face with Cornelius Smith, Otto's best friend. 'Miss Selina', said the swarthy dwarf, 'I'm afraid I've got some bad news about your brother Otto.' It seems it was just about quitting time when a few of the men heard...."





## Continuation II

by Caroline W. Everett

"...the sound most dreaded by the people of Basketshire! I refer to the terrifying Baa-aa-aa! of the fearsome Straw Goat--a deity never seen but one to whom we offer all we grow at the fiery harvest festival of the osiers. My brother is not the first to have disappeared during the last decade. Each time a villager vanishes, the dreadful bleating of the Straw Goat is heard beforehand.

"Despite my humble background, I have read of your exploits and turn to you as a last hope to find my brother, if indeed he be alive!" And the poor young woman collapsed into tears.

Comforted by the chivalrous Dr. Watson, she revived to hear the great detective pronounce that he would come immediately to her aid.



"Look up the next train from Paddington that passes through Clysandra, Watson! We will be on our way at once!"

As they left Baker Street, accompanied by their willowy client, Watson felt a strange premonition that he would finish this adventure as a basket case, and that a pen other than his would chronicle the extraordinary events that lay ahead.

Selina Kyle having been escorted to a second class carriage in keeping with her station, Holmes and Watson entered a first class one which was already occupied by a short, stout, country gentleman in tweeds. Overhearing his new companions discussing their destination, he interposed: "Excuse me, gentlemen, but so few travellers are bound for Basketshire, I could not help but wonder what business brings you thither. Let me introduce myself: I am Squire Mortimer Wicker of Basket Hall."

Holmes without hesitation replied, "I am Sherlock Holmes and I am investigating a disappearance in Clysandra."

"Another one!" cried Squire Wicker. "In the last few years, no less than three of the miners have vanished without a trace! I will do nothing to hamper your activities. I myself surround my manor with fascines, although I do not subscribe to the villagers' fantasy of a predatory he-goat!"

As the train drew into Clysandra station, they could see the waterways bordered with osiers stretching to the base of the Basket Hills. Villagers in coracles paddled among them while donkeys with panniers trudged on higher ground leading to the mines.

As they descended, a distraught individual in gaiters and a pork pie hat ran up to greet the Squire.

"Master Wicker!" he cried. "Constable Creel has just discovered the body of Otto Kyle!"

"Hold on, Jack!" ordered the Squire. "This is the noted detective, Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, Jack Weaver is my overseer and you can count on his testimony to be the truth. Go on, man, what did you see?"

Jack Weaver glanced with awe at Holmes but continued sturdily. "Squire, Otto was killed by a blow to the head in the wetlands."

"Did you see any marks of the assailant in the mud, then?" asked Holmes.

Weaver gave a shudder of assent and replied in a shaky voice.

"Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic goat!"



"A gigantic goat?" said Holmes. "That does place us on the horns of a dilemma, does it not? Watson, it seems this may not be the kind of caper I had assumed when we first became interested in Miss Kyle's story." Then to Jack Weaver, "May we see those wetlands, sir?"

Against the wishes of Squire Wicker, who refused to accompany them, they started across the barren moor and in half an hour were at the scene of the poor man's death. Holmes was on the ground in a moment, scratching into the earth, peering into crannies in the stony soil, and now and then picking up small objects with his tweezers and placing them in the envelopes he always carried with him for this purpose. Finally he stood up again, his face and hands stained and his clothes a shambles.

"I think I have found all I can here. Now, Miss Kyle, if I may see your brother's digs and his effects I believe I will be in a position to render some kind of judgment in this matter." In Otto's rooms Holmes' pursuit and collection of minutiae was continued while everyone waited; but after an hour or so he emerged and called the four together again.

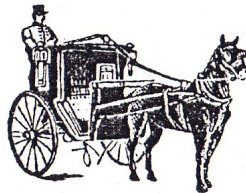
"I realized when Miss Kyle visited us in Baker Street that we would be involved in navigating a narrow channel of investigation indeed, and that has proved to be the case. I believe that our next stop must be at Basket Hall, where we shall attempt to call on Squire Wicker." As they walked across the moor towards the venerable manor house Holmes explained his line of reasoning.

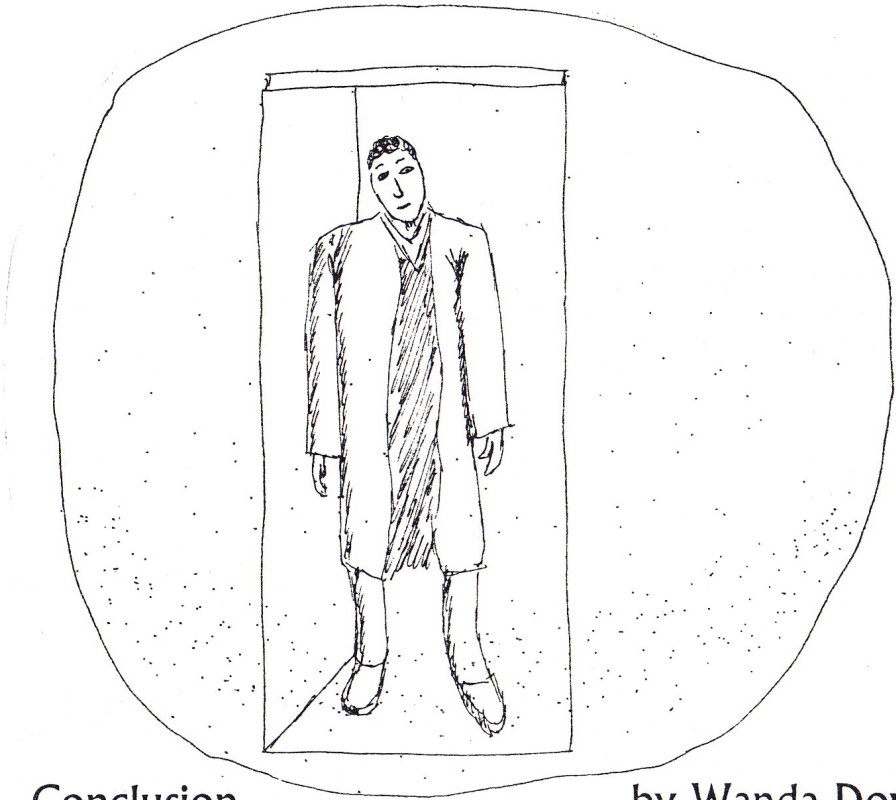
"I must confess that I harbored suspicions of Squire Wicker when I noticed on the train that his chin gave evidence

of having sported a goatee until very recently, perhaps even the last few hours. My suspicions were confirmed by some of the artifacts I have collected during the past few hours, as observe this." Holmes removed from an envelope a small scroll of wool. "I have reason to believe that this is evidence that the Squire intended not only to fleece his neighbors but to conduct experiments that would make one's blood curl. If I am not mistaken, Miss Kyle, your brother inadvertently became the scapegoat in his nefarious scheme."

Holmes paused and looked at everyone very solemnly. "I want you to be on your guard as we approach Basket Hall. We are not dealing with a nanny here, nor a ninny neither. I fear that Squire Wicker has designed a very wicked wicket for those who meddle in his affairs." He emphasized his point by pointing to the bulge in his waistcoat which gave evidence that he was carrying his service revolver.

On arriving at the main door Holmes tried the knob without success. "Obviously we shall simply have to butt our way in," he said and suiting his movements to the thought, he kicked open the door, discovering a disconcerted Squire Wicker standing in the entryway. "Well, Squire, it seems that we may indeed have arrived at a ba-a-d time. Do not do anything capricious, if you please, and Mr. Weaver will relieve you of that."





## Conclusion

by Wanda Dow

Jack Weaver stepped forward to retrieve what seemed to be a goatskin rug dangling from the hands of the Squire. Wicker released the item tenderly, with a sigh of defeat.

"Go get Creel, Jack," he said. "It's time to confess."

Watson turned to his companion in surprise, "Well, that was easy." It was the last thing he remembered before he awoke in his hotel room in Clysandra, his hands bandaged and his short-term memory lost.

"There now, Doctor," Selina Kyle smiled down at him as

she removed the damp cloth from his forehead, "It's certainly nice to see that you're back with us."

"Back? What?" He tried to raise his head, but was overwhelmed by a wave of nauseating dizziness.

"Lie back, Watson," Holmes's reassuring voice calmed him as a steady hand gently pushed him back into the pillow. "You've done enough for us all, dear fellow. Let me clear your thoughts for you while Miss Kyle lets the people who have been waiting vigil outside know that you are indeed among the living once again."

"What the devil are you talking about, Holmes?" Watson groaned. "And why does my head wish to disassociate itself from my body?"

"What the devil indeed. Tell me, Watson, what is the last thing you recall?" Holmes asked.

"Being at Basket Hall," Watson replied, then paused. "Something.... Wicker had a goatskin of some kind and had given up. Weaver was going for the Constable...odd. I don't recall anything after that."

"Weaver and the Squire had a tidy plan to dupe the villagers out of the mines and take over a supposedly haunted countryside themselves," Holmes began to explain.

"What?"

"That was my misjudgment, dear fellow, and I'm sorry for it, if only for the pain caused you. I had assumed that the Squire, being a man of means, had his own plans. I had not realized that Jack Weaver was the mastermind of the whole thing."

"Holmes," Watson sighed, covering his eyes with his hand, "You're only serving to make my head ache all the more."

"Sorry," the detective muttered. "Let me try to clarify things for you.

"Weaver had once worked in the mines with the dwarfs, mining the stones for the villagers to paint. Very few villagers could stand working with them. It seems they have an annoying habit of whistling while they work. But that is neither here nor there. Otto Kyle also worked in the mines, and being partially deaf, was great friends with the dwarfs.

"Soon after Mortimer Wicker inherited Basket Hall from his uncle, strange sightings began in and around the mines of a giant goat. A devil-god. This frightened many of the villagers away. Jack Weaver was a man of reason and not frightened easily. One evening he spent the night in the mines and discovered who this imaginary goat-god was.

But rather than turn him in, the two hatched a devilishly clever plot. They would work together to frighten the villagers and the dwarfs out of the mines. Those they could not frighten, Jack Weaver killed. Wicker merely worked to cover their tracks."

Watson eyed the detective from between his bandaged fingers, "The goat skin?"

"Excellent, Watson! Excellent! Linking their evil doings to ancient devil worship, which was common in these parts in the past, Wicker assembled a man-sized goat costume, in which he dressed and danced by the light of the moon, much to the shock and terror of the locals."

"Then his surrender was a ruse?"

"Quite the opposite," Holmes smiled. "With the killings, it had gone much further than the Squire had intended. He intended to stop. He shaved his goatee, which had been part of his disguise. He had gone into London to consult us, actually, but having seen Miss Kyle enter our rooms, he panicked and,

fearing that Weaver would find him out, he decided not to come forward. He had hoped that our investigation would point to Weaver, since he was, in fact, the murderer."

Watson held up his hands. "So I have Mr. Weaver to thank for these somehow?"

Holmes smiled, "Ah, Watson! It is indeed delightful to me that your brain was not scorched in the fire along with your hands."

"Fire?"

"When Wicker told Weaver to fetch the Constable, on his way out he set fire to the fascines surrounding the manor. The grounds were immediately aflame. It was your stout heart and army training under fire that managed to get us all out, with injury, unfortunately, to yourself. As you pushed the stunned Squire in front of you and through the narrow passageway to fresh air, a bundle fell on your hands. You staggered back in pain, but Cornelius Smith, friend of Miss Kyle and her late brother, had come to our aid, having seen the flames from his dwelling in the hills. Being a dwarf, and therefore shorter than the rest of us, he was able to duck under the smoke and drag you to safety."

"Then I must thank him." Watson cleared his throat.

"Mr. Holmes has seen to that," a raspy voice said from the doorway, and Cornelius Smith entered, followed by Constable Creel and Selina Kyle.

Watson rolled his smoke-reddened eyes at Holmes, who merely smiled and patted him gently on the chest.

"A matter of recording, old boy," he whispered. "You really can't be expected to put this all down with your hands in that condition now, can you? I figured the royalties were the least we could do for saving your life."



"Oh, you've given me much more than royalties," Cornelius grinned up at the lanky form by the bed.

"Seems not only did the good Squire confess to the hauntings, he told us why," the Constable explained. "Seems he found some papers, very old papers, in his ancestors' belongings. Seems these papers have to do with who actually owns the mines."

"Who?" Selina asked.

"We do!" grinned Cornelius.

"We?" Selina tried to clarify, "We who?"

"My brother dwarfs and I," Cornelius explained. "We always have. But as long as you stupid townsfolk just wanted the rocks in the upper caverns, what did we care?"

"You mean there's something else of value in the mines?" Selina asked, incredulous.

"Jewels, my dear," Cornelius stated, ever-grinning. "But I'm afraid with the Squire's confession and the release of this information, we can no longer trust you to stick to the upper caves. My brothers, as we speak, are collapsing the very corridors mined by your people, and the good Constable here has assured me that he will enforce our right to privacy and property. No hard feelings."

Selina stared at the dwarf, shocked. Finally she was able to speak, "But without the mines, what will my people do?"

Cornelius frowned for the first time and stomped his foot. "Look to the fields, you stupid goons! The meadows around you hold your very bread and butter!"

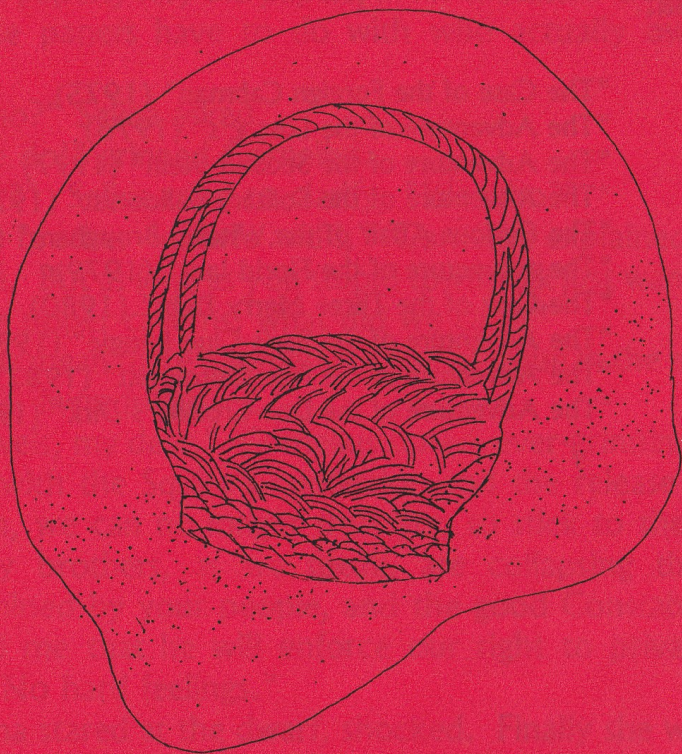
Selina gave him a blank look.

"The Basket Hills! Instead of harvesting all the reeds to use in your pagan and outdated rituals, namely, the bonfire, make baskets out of them for sale. Why do you think they are called the Basket Hills?!"

The End

## Other Round-Robin Pastiches by the Pleasant Places of Florida:

- "The Case of the Foreign Cabman" (1975)
- "The Adventure of the Lost £'s" (1976)
- "The Adventure of the Second Stein" (1977)
- "The Adventure of the Solitary Balloonist" (1977)
- "The Curious Affair of the Witch's Brougham" (1978)
- "The Adventure of the Floridians" (1979)
- "The Case of the Three Merry Debs" (1980)
- "The Adventure of the Bar's Clue Bungle" (1982)
- "The Adventure of the Pale Ontologist" (1987)
- "The Adventure of the Doc-Croaker's Dirk" (1991)



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