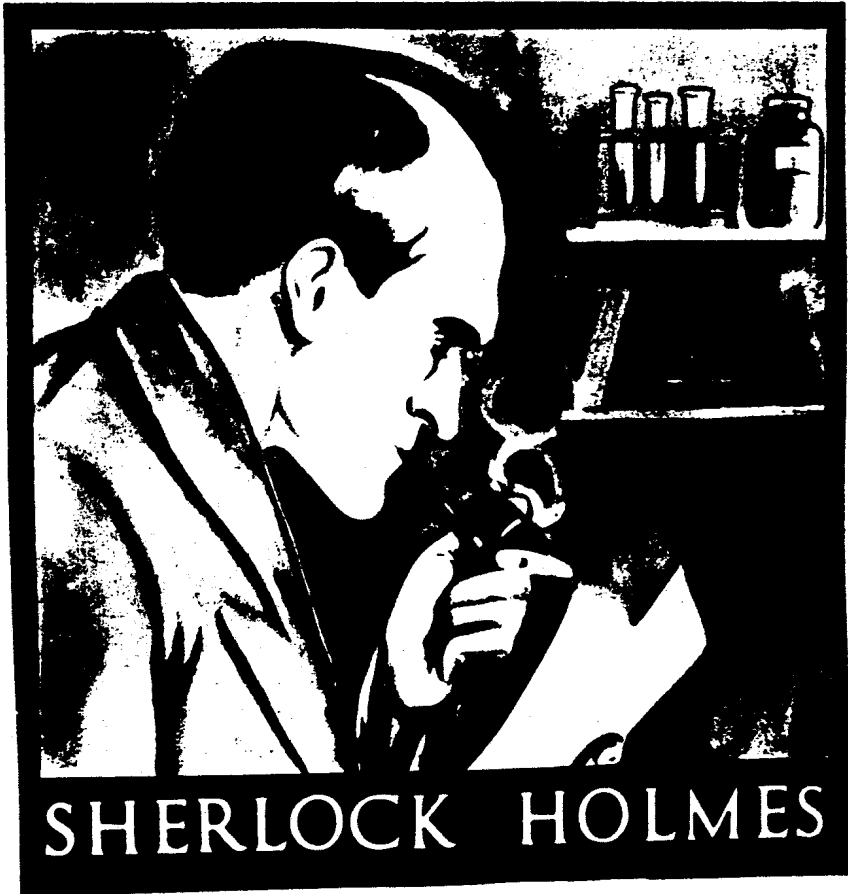


The Adventure of
The Doc-Croakers' Dirk



SHERLOCK HOLMES

Another Exciting Round-Robin Holmesian Pastiche

by Members of

The Pleasant Places of Florida



THE ADVENTURE OF
THE DOC-CROAKERS' DIRK

Introduction
by Ben Wood

It was an uncommonly mild, sunny April day on the Sussex Downs. An azure sky was dotted by an occasional cotton puff-like cloud gliding slowly by on a gentle breeze. Sherlock Holmes was enjoying his retirement. He missed the noisy, often frenetic city existence not a whit.

Holmes was engrossed in perusing the local morning paper, alternately taking a sip of hot coffee and drawing on his bowl of shag. This idyllic scene was suddenly interrupted by a sharp rap on his cottage door. He rose slowly, putting paper and pipe aside, to greet this intrepid intruder upon his peace.

He opened the door.



Continuation I
by David McCallister

Before him stood an oddly youngish-looking, but obviously elderly man in a tweed walking costume, with a knapsack on his back. He stamped his dew-bedecked heavy shoes on the threshold and struck the stone with his stout walking stick, releasing a hail of droplets. He removed his cap, showing a shock of white hair.

"Excuse me," he said, "I have lost my way hiking on the Downs. I wonder if you might kindly set me straight?"

"Why, certainly, my dear sir, come in. And I invite your chauffeur to take a cup of coffee with us. You certainly have done no hiking this morning."

The stranger scowled for a moment. "Thank you very much. In fact, I have been motoring until just now. How did you guess?"

"I never guess. It is too lazy and haphazard," responded Holmes archly. "While your boots are just wet enough for a walk up my drive, you are neither perspiring nor breathing hard from your exertions. I can see from your pallor and physique that you are a man with little inclination or opportunity for exercise; and there are other significant indications as well. But here," he added, his face brightening, "I never judge;

I merely observe. Let me set out the things while you fetch your man."

The stranger-turned-guest turned to go to his automobile, which was at the end of the winding drive. Holmes busied himself in his kitchen, made a short excursion to his den, and returned to the parlour to begin setting out the morning coffee things on his trestle table.

The stranger and his man returned to the front door. Holmes could hear them letting themselves in. At the entrance to the parlour, they stopped. The elderly man was accompanied by a large youth whose livery spoke more of the London docks than the wheel of a motor car. His hair was a flaming red.

"I don't know why I always try to feint when a straight jab would do," said the elderly man. "I understand that you claim art in the blood, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, but I assure you that my blood is more artistic, not to mention more noble, than yours by a long shot. Archie, take this meddlesome man and tie him up."

"I cannot pretend that I am surprised," said Holmes as he set down the cups and walked with his arms out towards the large, loutish young man who advanced menacingly. "And, I cannot pretend that I am unprepared!" Holmes grasped the man's forearms in a cross-handed Baritsu move, and flipped him to the carpet. At the same instant, the elderly man drew a sword out of his stick, pointed it at Holmes and quickly backed out of the front door, slamming it to.

"Stay, boy, or you'll break your wrist," said Holmes. "I've got a bit of wire here all ready to hold you. It may look thin, but I assure you the tension-knot I'm putting in it will cut through your flesh before you could untie it. There. Now, lie still and answer me some questions. Who are you and what are you about?"

"I ain't saying nuffink," said the lout. "I ain't peaching on the Duke."

"Never fear," said Holmes, "I know who the 'Duke' is, right enough. Let me finish my coffee while I read you a column in this morning's paper, the Sussex Bee." Holmes drew up his fauteuille, and spent some time re-lighting his briar before he began to read:

**LOCAL PHILANTHROPIST RETURNED TO HEARTH AND HOME
TWENTY YEARS IN DARTMOOR SERVED WITH HONOR**

by our Legal Correspondent:

All the Downs will be pleased to learn that the generous benefactor of the South Downs Foundling's Hospital, Mr. John Clay, Esq., has been released from Dartmoor, having completely served his harsh sentence for an alleged attempted robbery in London some twenty years previous.

Our readers will recall that the estimable Mr. Clay was accused by certain persons not then highly regarded by the police, and convicted on highly circumstantial evidence. The defense at the time bruited about that the confused identification of Mr. Clay by a shop-keeper was coerced by one who had also arranged circumstances in the case suggestive of entrapment. The County rejoices that Mr. Clay will once again be restored to the conduct of his good works in our locality ...

"It goes on in this vein, bleating and moaning. I imagine that the constabulary will be along any minute to pick you up. I called them just before you came in. Excuse me, then, I must look sharp, before the Duke regroups for another assault on my humble cottage."

Holmes took off his dressing gown and donned a Norfolk jacket. He clapped his deerstalker upon his head and, selecting a stick of his own from the stand, saluted the grimacing oaf laid out on his parlour floor and slipped out the door.

Holmes had barely reached the cover of the oak wood when he heard ...



Continuation II
by John Kalajian

...**T**he clattering of the country constable's wagon coming up the drive.

"Good morning, Mr. Holmes," greeted that venerable officer. "I came straight away." Sutton was attired in his customary messy raincoat. The constable always gave Holmes the impression that he had neglected to remove his clothing when retired for the evening and was unaccustomed to personal grooming.

"The tagtail is lolling inside and I trust you passed Mr. John Clay on the Village Road," said Holmes.

"I came by way of the Sunblind Trail from the Evans Estate and passed no one. Sergeant Treacle told me of your call when he arrived at the Evans home from town," responded Sutton.

"I am curious," said Holmes, "what is the matter at Dr. Evans' household to command the attention of the entire police force this fine morning?"

"Bad affairs, Mr. Holmes. Dr. Evans was put to the sword last evening. His lady help found him in his library after she was roused by a commotion shortly after retiring for the evening. It appears that Dr.

Evans put up a powerful struggle before he met his untimely end."

"We must make haste, Sutton. It is imperative that we question Mr. Clay before he boards the morning train in the village. You can fill me in on the matter at the Estate as we journey." Holmes boarded the wagon in one quick leap.

"Mr. Holmes!" exclaimed the constable. "What of your respondent?"



Continuation III
by Duane Damon

My dear constable," Holmes replied wryly, "the charming 'Archie' will be quite content with the comforts of my parlour carpet for the next hour or two. Now, to the village station. Quickly, man!"

Sutton's wagon rattled and clattered for ten minutes along the Village Road before pulling up at a long low frame building. Next to it, a waiting locomotive puffed and sighed. Leaping out, Holmes and the rumpled constable pushed into the tight knot of travelers awaiting the departure of the 10:15 to London.

"Not a sign of him," panted the constable, gazing around the crowd.

"You spoke too soon, Sutton," snapped Holmes, his eyes alight. "Look there!" He jabbed a bony finger in

the direction of a young couple engaged in earnest discussion only ten yards distant. "Our 'Mr. Clay' was not all he seemed. He's lost his white hair and tweed coat, but there's no mistaking that treacherous walking stick!"

At that moment, the young man turned toward Holmes and Sutton and uttered a cry of alarm. The young woman with him looked up with a start. Under her hat coiled a luxuriant length of fiery red hair. Her companion then hissed a few frantic words and disappeared into the throng.

"After him!" Holmes cried, setting out in pursuit. Sutton lost no time in securing a firm grip on the young woman's arm. "Nice day for an excursion, eh, Miss Higgins?" he inquired cheerfully.

Holmes, cursing his advancing age and declining agility, had difficulty keeping up with his quarry. In contrast, the young man displayed the nimbleness and speed of a cat, easily leaping the gate that led to the waiting train. By the time Holmes gained the doorway, the young man was sprinting down the platform. With a hiss and a groan, the locomotive lurched into motion. The fugitive suddenly pivoted and bounded to the top of a loaded baggage cart. Before Holmes could prevent it, the man heaved himself from the uppermost trunk to the low-hanging station awning. From there he made a breathtaking leap to the roof of the departing train. Grinning savagely, he flung a small fur-like object in Holmes' direction as the cars rushed by. It fluttered to the ground at the detective's feet. He bent to retrieve it as Sutton came puffing up.

"We've got one bird in our cage, at any rate," he said, indicating young woman in his grasp. "Name's Sylvia Higgins. I recognized her as the servant girl who discovered Dr. Evans' body at the estate, and -- what in creation is that you're holding?"

Holmes made a rueful face. "A memento of our friend's fleet-footed departure -- the white wig he wore as a disguise when he paid that pleasant visit to my cottage an hour ago."

Sutton's jaw dropped. "You mean, he was impersonating John Clay? Why? And who the devil is he? Come now, let's have it, Miss Higgins."

A defiant gleam came into the woman's eyes, yet she remained silent.

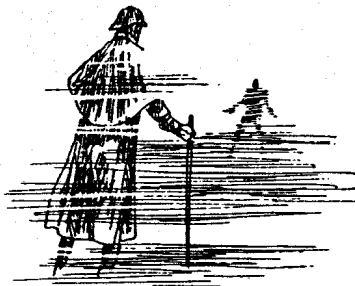
Holmes smiled humorlessly. "Perhaps you'd like news of your brother -- his name is Archie, I believe? Surely I couldn't miss the resemblance between two such striking redheads. The relationship was clear at once."

The woman's eyes widened. "What have you done with him?" she demanded hotly.

"Your brother is quite safe, I assure you, Miss Higgins. A full confession on your part might spare you both a murder charge. No? Very well. Perhaps there is more to be learned about who 'croaked' the doctor -- as our American friends would say -- at the Evans estate. Come, Sutton."

In a few moments, the three of them were seated in the constable's wagon as it jounced back up the Village Road. A thoughtful Sutton shook his head. "A murder at the estate, an attack upon you, three young people plotting some intrigue -- what does it all mean, Mr. Holmes?"

"Quite simply, Sutton," replied Holmes as the lofty gables of the Evans estate came into view over a rise. "It means revenge."



The wagon rattled through the gates into Evans' property and Holmes gracefully alit. He stopped to observe the estate, the doorway, and the U-shaped drive upon which they had just entered.

"Hmm. As usual, the local constabulary has marched across the yard as though to war. Very little to be discerned here. Really, Sutton, you should know my methods by now, via Watson's well-known reports. Very well, let's look inside."

Sutton joined Holmes at the doorway, as another policeman -- the grounds were literally teeming with them -- guarded the red-haired hellcat, Sylvia Higgins. She squirmed and struggled in his grasp.

Holmes made his entrance into the tastefully appointed foyer.

"Rather expensively furnished for a simple country doctor's home, I should think. Whatever would he have charged to have original Watteaus and Fragonards, eh, Sutton? Friend Watson was certainly never so successful."

Sutton looked about blankly as they entered the library.

"And here is the late doctor, I see." Holmes knelt down by the body and examined it thoroughly. "Nasty business, this. He was virtually disembowelled during a struggle, with some sharp object -- yes, this dirk under the table." He reached for the small, sharp knife with the oddly foreign-looking carved ivory handle, and wrapped it carefully in his handkerchief.

Holmes suddenly slipped his hand across the dead man's satin-collared dressing gown -- his attire at death's arrival. "Hello, what have we her?" He nimbly grasped a long red hair and held it up to the light.

"Well now, Mr. Holmes. Looks like the little lady outside did more than just find 'im 'ere."

"Indeed. I think you may wish to question her more closely on the matter. You may also wish to question your men as to why she was at the station earlier, rather than kept here as a witness. Even Lestrade knew better than that."

Sutton turned hot with embarrassment and attempted to turn the topic. "You said before that this murder and even the attempt on yourself was part of a plan for revenge. How? Why?"

"That this little cadre of conspirators had murderous designs on this pathetic victim is surely obvious." Holmes glanced back at the body as the coroner entered the room. He then looked out the window at the resisting young woman. "Family entanglements breed a peculiarly malevolent form of passion. But conclusive results will require a particularly careful framing of the hypothesis to be tested, and vigorous data collection and analysis of the results will be necessary to complete this case."

Sutton was, despite his admiration for Holmes, becoming clearly irritated. "But what are you saying, man? What have Sylvia Higgins and her brother been hatching here? Who was their accomplice? What was their purpose in murdering poor Dr. Evans -- or was he somehow part of their conspiracy? And why did they go after you?"

Holmes raised an eyebrow, smiled a Sphinx-like smile, and said precisely what Sutton feared might be the next word from his lips.

"Elementary."





Conclusion
by Jeff Dow

Three days later, seated in his cottage, Holmes reached for his pipe. In between gulps of air he explained to Constable Sutton that he had taken the train to Dartmoor, made some inquiries and found the recently released Mr. Clay at a local inn. Two more days followed before the younger Clay appeared. When he rendezvoused with his father, Holmes moved in with the local police force.

Holmes nodded to his guest to continue the story he had begun on the train from Dartmoor. John Clay looked tired, his skin as pale as his son's who sat beside him.

"Well, Mr. Holmes," the elder Clay said, putting the cup of tea down and licking his lips, "it was very much Dr. Evans' doing."

"Dr. Evans?" Sutton exclaimed, nearly dropping his cup. "I'll not have you speak ill of -- "

Holmes laid a hand on Sutton's arm, silencing his protestations.

"He was blackmailing me," Evans asserted.

"Blackmailing? Why, that's prepost--" Again, Holmes' large hand cut him off.

"He made it look respectable, by having me donate it to the Hospital. But I knew what he was doing with much of it -- buying all those expensive paintings, living the way he did. When I was sure of what he was doing, I went to him, confronted him. He only laughed at me, said I couldn't prove a thing, that the money was from an inheritance of his own. Then he demanded more.

"I'm not a violent man, Mr. Holmes, but I didn't know what else to do. I had to get him his money. Since I was already taking enough from my wife's estate, I couldn't possibly take any more without raising suspicion." Clay looked down. The years in prison had broken him, taken his remorse and spun it about. "That's when I had to go to London, to rob those places." He looked from Holmes to Sutton and back, his eyes pleading for the forgiveness he had denied himself. "I may as well tell you: there were five other robberies before I was caught. I can give you the names if you need them."

Holmes drew on his pipe and cast a sidelong glance at Sutton. The constable's face appeared amazed, his mouth trying to form the question the answer to which his ears did not want to listen.

"What--what was Evans' treachery?" Sutton whispered.

"Don't tell him," the younger Clay said. "You're not bound by anything, father."

"It's as well, Alexander," Clay said, patting his son's hand. "It can't hurt your dear mother now. If she's in her heaven, then she's forgiven me; if she's not, then she can at least understand my indiscretion.

"Shortly after I married sweet Christine I went to London on some business. One evening while walking I happened along the most beautiful face I had ever seen. Kathleen had the sweetest, brownest eyes, the softest hands, the clearest skin and the reddest hair I had ever seen. God forgive me, but if I hadn't had married Christine, well...

"I had no idea that our single assignation had produced what it had until I received her letter. She could have managed one child, she said, but twins were beyond her. She asked for help." A sigh racked Clay's thin chest. "Even then I deceived dear Christine by stealing from her.

"I don't know how Evans found out, but it signalled my undoing. When my trial came up, of course I couldn't say a word about all this -- the greater scandal would have destroyed Christine and her family's name even more than I already had done. Outside of this room, no one knows of Archie and Sylvia."

"What an incredible admission," Sutton said. "But where does the demise of Dr. Evans fit in?"

"Even Lestrade could figure that out," Holmes muttered. "For that answer, we must look to the younger Clay, who had a very large hand in these proceedings."

"Humpf," Alexander Clay said.

"Mr. Clay confided in his son the existence of his half-siblings while in prison. Alexander vowed revenge on -- "

"It's what the blackguard deserved. My mother was a fine woman, but the strain of my father's imprisonment killed her within a fortnight of his sentence."

"Except that you did not kill Dr. Evans."

"I most certainly did -- "

"Sylvia killed him. The red hair near the body clearly indicates that."

"How were those two ever employed by the good -- er, Dr. Evans?" Sutton interposed.

"Friend Alexander performed some detective work of his own and found his relations. As the sole heir to his parents' estate, he was able to have them educated

and then -- "

"Have them employed by their dear father's benefactor. Ironic, isn't it?" Alexander sneered. "The hard times my half-sister and half-brother fell upon when my father's money evaporated was more than I could bear. My resolution could not have been stronger after seeing their condition."

"Wouldn't the doctor have suspected something?" Sutton asked.

"We shall never be sure, but I would surmise that he was thinking of identical twins instead of fraternal. And never having met the mother, he would have seen no significance in their distinctive coloration. The news of John Clay's imminent release no doubt prompted a comment from Dr. Evans, which Sylvia overheard. You never told them about Dr. Evans' role in all of this, did you, Mr. Clay?"

Alexander Clay's stony visage was confirmation enough for Holmes. Tears filled the elder Clay's eyes. "Sylvia has her mother's temper," he whimpered.

"There's only one question left then, Mr. Holmes," Sutton said.

"Two, actually." Holmes stood up and walked over the fireplace. "I'm sure Mr. Clay had other plans for Dr. Evans' demise, and when Sylvia brought them to a very sudden end, he had to think quickly. Though he will probably never admit it, I think Mr. Clay was coming here to extract my 'meddlesome' assistance, whether I wished to provide it or not, with regard to Miss Higgins' crime. Assuming the role of his father, he intended to take me to Dartmoor, where I would meet the real John Clay. At that point, I would be told this same story. If I did not cooperate, I would suffer Dr. Evans' fate. No doubt this act against a retired consulting detective would be rationalized as revenge against the system that unjustly sent Mr. Clay to prison."



Holmes paused. Sutton leaned forward and said, "You said there were two questions?"

"Yes. Mr. Clay, the Bee suggested entrapment. How -- ?"

"It was dark. My face was covered. I thought no one would recognize me."

"Perhaps our Dr. Evans saw the opportunity to rid himself of you and your accusations. He may have gotten all he wanted from you and desired to silence you by ensuring your conviction. A few well-placed pounds, and ..." Holmes sighed. "His death, though, takes that conjecture to the grave. Well, Constable Sutton," Holmes said officiously, "my duties in this matter are complete. I shall leave further direction in this case in your, uh, capable hands. I would suggest that you do take these extenuating circumstances into proper consideration."

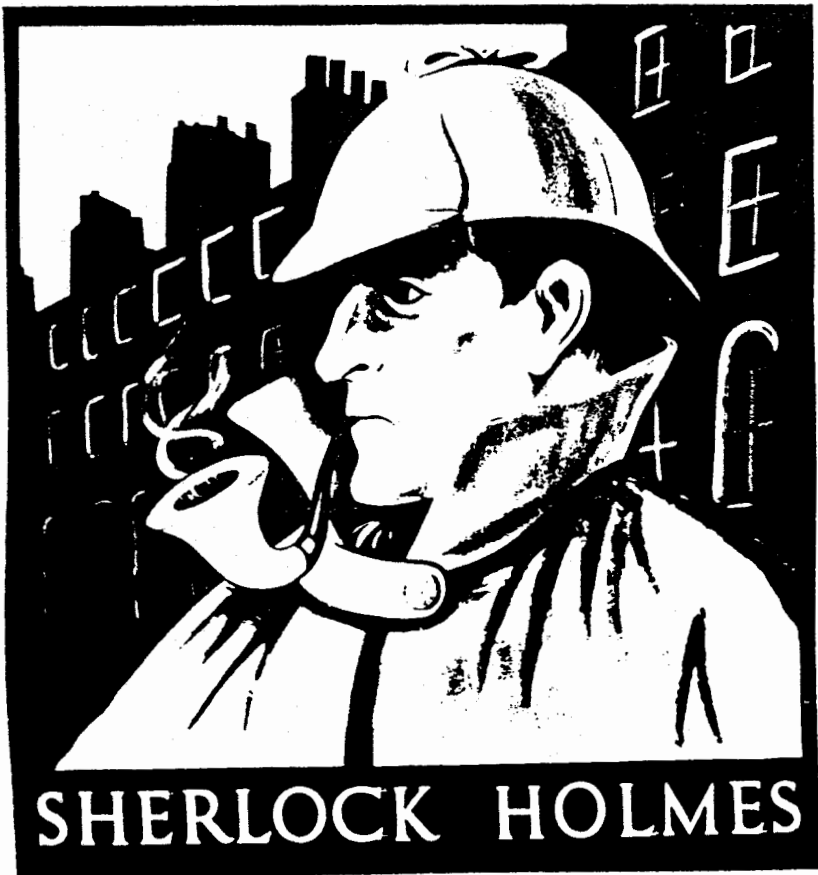
"Well, yes, of course," Sutton said standing up and slipping on his rumpled coat. "Miss Higgins should be brought before the magistrate, and what with all those involved, I expect it will be quite ... "

Holmes' scowl caused Sutton's explanation to trail off. He motioned his two prisoners to precede him out of the cottage.

"Mr. Clay," Holmes said. When they both turned around, Holmes indicated the younger one. John Clay and the constable stepped outside, and Holmes took a few steps toward Alexander. "I strongly advise you to check your anger. I shall be keeping an eye on you. Do not doubt that for a minute." Alexander sneered, turned and started for the door. "Not for a minute," Holmes repeated before the door swung shut.

"There," Holmes said as he surveyed the room. He picked up that morning's Sussex Bee, and tapped his briar clean before re-stoking it. Stretching out his long legs on the couch, he took a sip of coffee and started reading again.

THE END



The Pleasant Places of Florida



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- "The Case of the Foreign Cabman" (1975)
- "The Adventure of the Lost £'s" (1976)
- "The Adventure of the Second Stein" (1877)
- "Adventure of the Solitary Balloonist" (1977)
- "The Curious Affair of the Witch's Brougham" (1978)
- "The Adventure of the Florid Ians" (1979)
- "The Case of the Three Merry Debs" (1980)
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Published by The Pleasant Places of Florida