

## H.H. Holmes (Herman Mudgett) Trial (1896)

Around the time that Jack the Ripper rose to infamy in London, America's own serial killer was unleashing horror upon the streets of Chicago. Working under the alias Dr. Holmes, Herman Mudgett took at least twice as many victims as England's notorious killer, working so efficiently that only four of his murders were able to be proved. Considered by some at the time "the most dangerous man in the world," his crimes continue to cast a dark shadow over America's past, undiminished by the passage of time.

Born to a wealthy family in Gilmantown Academy, New Hampshire, on May 16, 1861 Mudgett was an intelligent youth, though he fostered an interest in medicine that sometimes led him to perform his own surgeries on animals. There are some accounts which even suggest he may have killed one of his childhood friends. As a young man he studied at the University of Michigan's medical school, graduating with the class of 1884, and two years later he moved to Chicago, where he adopted the name Dr. Henry Howard Holmes. Mudgett soon found a job as a pharmacist for a woman named Mrs. Holton, who was eager to employ him as she attempted to run her dying husband's business. After her disappearance four years later (which he attributed to her moving to California), Mudgett took over the business, relocating it across the street to the first story of his new hotel, The Holmes Castle.

Situated at 63rd and Wallace Streets and standing at only three stories tall, the structure was unusual in many ways, though seemingly normal from the outside. In building it, Mudgett had been extremely particular and secretive, hiring and firing more than 500 workers over the course of its construction. Along with his pharmacy, the first floor held four retail stores, while on the third floor there were 36 guest rooms. The 35 rooms of the second floor, however, were far less innocuous. Furnished with an assortment of odd features, varying from peepholes and asbestos-padded walls to gas pipes, sliding walls, and vents (controlled from Mudgett's personal apartment), many of these rooms were also windowless and soundproof. Other peculiarities of this level included secret staircases, false walls and ceilings, and doors locking from the outside. Long greased chutes lead from the second floor rooms to the two-level basement, which housed a dissection table; surgical instruments; a large vat of acid;

mounds of quicklime; an incinerator; and two vast, lime-lined vaults, buried in the ground and sealed with heavy metal doors.

After finishing the construction of The Holmes Castle, Mudgett released a number of advertisements in local newspapers for employment and even matrimony (unbeknownst to the ladies he courted, over the course of his life he had three marriages, none of which were ever terminated). In addition to those lured under false pretenses, the hotel brought in many clients due to its proximity to the World's Colombian Exposition. Held in Chicago in 1893, some 27 million people came to be part of the event over the course of the six-month venue, and the hotel received numerous travelers, even before its official opening on May 1. These guests were largely unaccounted for and often never even reported as missing.

Thus, using to great advantage the efficiency afforded him by his hotel and the anonymity provided by the World's Fair, Holmes committed numerous murders during this time, mainly involving young women. Enticed by his charm and reasonably good looks, they would stay at The Holmes Castle, often becoming engaged to "Dr. Holmes." Having secured their life savings in this manner, Mudgett would then dispose of these women at his convenience in what press later dubbed the "Murder Castle."

In addition to the profits he made by acquiring the assets of these female guests, Mudgett also made it requisite that his (usually female) employees name him as a beneficiary in their life insurance policies. These transactions allowed him to make money when they too vanished within the confines of his hotel. Even the bodies were used as means for earning cash, for Mudgett would often sell the skeletons of his victims to local medical schools.

It was not his murders, however, that eventually brought Mudgett's many crimes to light. These were discovered merely as an accidental consequence of the suspicion aroused by other illicit activities in which he'd been engaged. A deft swindler, Mudgett had a history of making money through illegitimate means such as insurance scams, the sale of purported health elixirs, and various other ploys to con people out of their land and money. Concurrently to his shady hotel dealings, Mudgett was involved in a number of insurance fraud schemes through which he accumulated the funds needed for the Castle's construction.

When he eventually felt the need to leave his hotel, due to increased pressure from creditors, among other reasons, Mudgett even attempted to gain money by setting fire to the building's top level. Though these duplicitous acts had twice landed him in prison, both times Mudgett was released soon after incarceration, whereupon such behavior would continue.

Yet in 1893, Mudgett became entered into the scheme which would ultimately prove his undoing. The plan was to insure the life of his accomplice Benjamin Pitezel for \$10,000 with Fidelity Mutual Life Association, and then fake his associate's death in a laboratory explosion involving a substitute corpse. However, for reasons unknown, on September 2, 1894, rather than feigning the entire scene, Mudgett actually killed his accomplice while they were traveling through Philadelphia, arranging Pitezel's body in such a way as to make his death appear the result of an accidental explosion.

In carrying out this ploy, Mudgett had sought the investment of Marion Hedgepeth, a fellow criminal whom he had met during a brief stint in jail. Any camaraderie shared between the two quickly evaporated when Hedgepeth was not given his share of the profits, however, and he suffered no qualms in alerting the authorities as to what had occurred. Yet by the time police became involved, Mudgett had already killed Pitezel and fled with his children, Alice (15), Nellie (11), and Howard (8) Pitezel. Fearful of exposure, Mudgett had told the children's mother that he was taking them to see their father, who, he'd assured her, was still alive and well.

Before long, insurance company officials employed the help of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, unable to locate Mudgett without assistance. After several months of searching, he was finally found in Burlington, Vermont, put on surveillance, and followed to Boston, Massachusetts where police arrested him for fraud and had him escorted back to Philadelphia, where the crime had actually occurred. The Pitezel children, however, were nowhere to be found.

Mudgett readily admitted to the insurance scam and was incarcerated at Philadelphia's Moyamensing Prison, where he began writing a memoir from his cell in December. However, by June of 1895 it became increasingly plain that Mudgett had in fact not faked the death of Pitezel. Amid rising concern as to the whereabouts of his associate's still missing children, the scope of Mudgett's guilt began

to shift, and Detective Frank Geyer was commissioned to find Alice, Howard, and Nellie. The detective embarked on this mission later that month on a highly publicized endeavor that he later wrote about in his book *The Holmes-Pitezal Case: A History of the Greatest Crime of the Century*.

At each step of Detective Geyer's arduous search for the Pitezal children, Mudgett would alter his story as needed to fit the evidence that arose. Tracing the convoluted trail of false names and fabrications that Mudgett had left, on July 15 1895 Geyer eventually found the remains of the two girls buried in the cellar of a Toronto house rented by "Dr. Holmes" the previous fall. Two months later, Howard's remains were found at the base of a chimney flue in Indianapolis, Indiana. Mudgett laid the blame for the deaths of these children on Minnie William, a woman who herself had gone missing after becoming closely acquainted Mudgett.

On September 12, a Philadelphia grand jury indicted Mudgett for the murder of Benjamin Pitezal, a crime he pleaded not guilty to. Shortly after, Holmes published his memoir, *Holmes Own Story, in which the Alleged Multimurderer and Arch Conspirator Tells of the Twenty-two Tragic Deaths and Disappearances in which he is Said to be Implicated*. In this work, he claimed to be "but a very ordinary man," and asserting that, "... to have planned and executed the stupendous amount of wrongdoing that has been attributed to me would have been wholly beyond my power."

Yet despite his claims of innocence, by the end of his five-day trial in October of 1895, Mudgett was found overwhelmingly guilty. His appeal having been denied, Mudgett thus began writing his confession. On May 7, 1896, he was hanged for the murder of Benjamin Pitezal in Moyamensing Prison.

Mudgett's greatest mistake may have been his inability to resist a chance at making money, for even on the brink of death, he sought ways to turn a profit. In April of 1896, only months before he would be executed, he sold his story to the Hearst Corporation for \$10,000, admitting to the murder of over 100 people and later changing the number to 27. In fact, if not for his fraudulent ways, he might never have been caught. "It is humiliating to think," *Chicago Inter Ocean* had stated, "that had it not been for the exertions of the insurance companies which Holmes swindled, or attempted to swindle, he might yet be at large, preying upon society, so well did he cover he the traces of his crime."

Due to the efficiency made possible by the design of his hotel, the actual number of victims Mudgett took remains impossible to determine, although police inspecting the building at the time estimated the number to be close to 100. However, even had he committed only half of the murders he was suspected of, Mudgett would have exceeded by far the number of victims taken by his later American counterparts, such as Ted Bundy and John Wayne Gacy. Widely considered America's first serial killer, Mudgett left an indelible mark upon America's history, and even now, over a century later, his crimes stand apart as some of the worst ever committed.