

H.h holmes serial killer



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H. H. Holmes: Master of Illusion Swindler [pic] Marion Hedgepeth The discovery of a murder in Philadelphia in October 1894 opened the door to a case that few could believe. Marion Hedgepeth, a one-time cellmate of a man who went by the name H. M. Howard, informed police about a recent scam. It involved insuring a man named Benjamin Pitezel for \$10, 000 with the Fidelity Mutual Life Association in 1893 in Chicago, and then faking his death in a laboratory explosion by substituting a cadaver.

All participants were then to split the insurance payment, but Howard had reneged and run off with the money. Hedgepeth was informing on him as payback, and his detailed letter about the scheme was passed along to the company. In short order, they realized that H. M. Howard was actually H. H. Holmes, clearly a swindler. A company representative who had already expressed suspicions about the death scene re-examined the circumstances surrounding the discovery of a body at 1316 Callowhill Street in Philadelphia.

It had been found in a state of rigor mortis and so badly burned in the face from chemicals and sun exposure that identity of the person could not be judged. Nevertheless, Holmes, accompanied by one of Benjamin Pitezel's children, had indeed identified this body from certain characteristics as the remains of Pitezel. After he'd collected the money, he'd disappeared with that child and two more of Pitezel's children. Benjamin Pitezel Given these details, company officers tried unsuccessfully to track him, so they hired agents from the Pinkerton National Detective Agency to go after the scoundrel.

As these more experienced men followed his trail around the country, they gathered information about his numerous frauds, thefts, and schemes, including other insurance scams years earlier in Chicago that had provided him with funds to build a three-story hotel. He was among the top swindlers they had ever come across, possibly the most accomplished. If he hadn't gotten greedy, he'd still be in business. But this time, they had him.

Pinkerton Detective Agency Arrest [pic] Herman Mudgett, aka HH Holmes

They finally caught up to Holmes in November in one of his childhood haunts in Vermont, put him under surveillance, and gave the information to police.

On the afternoon of November 16, 1894, H. H. Holmes was arrested in Boston as he was preparing to leave the country by steamship. He surrendered easily, probably believing that he could resort to his highly successful weapon, a glib tongue and a load of lies, to get himself out of a tight spot. It's likely that he was further convinced of this when they told him that he was being charged with the rather petty theft of a horse in Texas.

Secretly, he knew a lot more about what he'd done, but so did police. Even so, neither side realized at that moment what they were dealing with. [pic]

The Holmes Pitezel Case The best sources for the Holmes story are the documents from the case itself: Detective Frank P. Geyer's book on his experiences (which included evidence not used in court and which Geyer describes as "one of the most marvellous [sic] stories of modern times") and the autobiographical pieces that Holmes penned.

At first Holmes told one story, which included mundane details about his life and a load of lies posed to cover up his crimes, and then he offered a

sensational confession, which was printed at the time in the Philadelphia Inquirer (and all three documents are now available on a CD-ROM from Waterfront Productions). As well, since the Holmes story was an immediate sensation, editions of the major Philadelphia newspapers carried the story from the moment he was arrested, and in 1975, David Franke published *The Torture Doctor* (later found to have been read by healthcare serial killer Dr. Michael Swango). In addition, authors Harold Schechter and Erik Larson both have written exemplary renditions of the Holmes tale. Schechter tells the tale imaginatively as narrative nonfiction, while Larson places Holmes in the context of the development of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Larson's discussion about how he researched the book offers even more insight. [pic] *The Torture Doctor* He admittedly encountered some difficulty with the character of H. H.

Holmes, since the Philadelphia trial transcripts were limited to a single crime (he had performed the greater part of his monstrosity elsewhere). Larson found that many of the sources about this scoundrel were inconsistent, as well as interlaced with Holmes' own fantastic embellishments. In many instances, only Holmes ever knew what he actually had done. Larson describes how he agonized over recreating incidents to which there were no witnesses, and he admits that even with all of his research he still did not know by the end what had motivated Holmes to kill (and had only a slight understanding of psychopathy).

Yet, he does point out one real advantage to this work: " One of the most striking, and rather charming, aspects of criminal investigation in the 1890s is the extent to which the police gave reporters direct access to crime

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scenes, even while the investigations were in progress. " Thus, they acquired fantastic details, which they passed on to anyone who cared to take a look.

As Geyer said, the story is among the most " marvelous. " Putting on the Con

[pic] Herman W, Mudgett, aka H. H. Holmes

As Holmes was being processed in Boston, an agent from the insurance company arrived whom he recognized, so he readily offered a confession of the fraud. In the glib manner of a polished liar, he said that the damaged corpse that he'd identified as Pitezel really had been a cadaver that he had acquired and substituted to collect the money. The agent was amazed by Holmes' near-convincing performance. When asked to account for the Pitezel children, who were not now in his care, the suspect offered yet another convoluted tale: The children had been left with their father, who had gone to either South America or Florida.

Carrie Pitezel, Ben's wife, could not corroborate any of Holmes's story, except that she was aware of the insurance scheme and that he had been moving her around from one place to another, with promises of soon seeing her family. She was utterly confused about the entire experience, and her flustered manner convinced the interrogators that Pitezel was probably dead. They charged her with conspiracy and put her under arrest, although they also felt sorry for her. She seemed to have been caught in something that she barely understood. pic] Depraved by Harold Schechter Because the scheme had occurred in Philadelphia, Detective Thomas Crawford arrived in Boston to escort Holmes back to the City ofBrotherly Love. In Depraved, Schechter recounts how Holmes bragged to the detective along the way about his criminal career, admitting that he'd done enough in his life to be

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hanged “ twelve times over. ” He provided colorful tales about his various cons and claimed to have the ability to hypnotize people to do whatever he wanted.

He even offered the detective \$500 to let him perform this feat on him and escape. Crawford was unimpressed, declining the deal with grim humor, but when reporters later heard about it they attributed supernatural powers to the scam artist. It was the age of Svengali, a character made popular in a contemporary novel by George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, and Holmes was thought to have such abilities. (Holmes even enjoyed this novel later in his cell.) [pic] Moyamensing Prison, PA Holmes was eventually incarcerated in Moyamensing Prison and remained there for several months.

Larson indicates that his humid, white-washed cell was 9 feet by 14 feet, with a barred window and an electric lamp for light. He was well-behaved and despite the daily journalistic discoveries of yet more of his horrendous crimes, his guards apparently liked him. Some of them did favors for him, delivering the newspaper daily so he could keep up with the details of the investigation. As he did so, he realized that he'd have to come up with a better confession. He was always scheming. A Shift in the Tale

Holmes admitted to police in December 1894 that rather than substitute a cadaver in a con with Pitezel as he'd originally said, the corpse had actually been Pitezel, but he had not been murdered. According to the story Holmes now told, Pitezel and two other men, along with Pitezel's wife, were in on the scheme. Pitezel had rented the house at 1316 Callowhill, equipping it with bottles of chemicals as part of the appearance of a man having an “

accident. " That was all well and good, but Holmes noticed how much Pitezal was drinking and one day found him lying dead on the floor.

Pitezal had apparently grown depressed and used chloroform on himself. Holmes arranged the body and proceeded with his plan to make it difficult to identify, destroyed a letter Pitezal had written (supposedly a suicide note), and staged the scene to look like the result of an accidental explosion. He then went out of town to await a newspaper item that indicated that the body had been found. He left the account like that, and several more months passed without any word of the children. Holmes had indicated to Carrie Pitezal that they were with a guardian, Minnie Williams, in England.

On June 3, 1895, Holmes was tried for conspiracy to defraud an insurance company, and because the sentence would be light his attorneys advised him to plead guilty, which he did. The sentencing was delayed for a later date, but even the papers were now pressing for information about the Pitezal children. They seemed to have disappeared and reporters wanted to know where they were. So did Carrie Pitezal. Someone had to act. Detective Frank Geyer was assigned to the job and he went later that same month on a highly publicized expedition to find the missing Pitezal children or their remains, whichever turned out to be the case.

He later penned a book about his international trek. Even after his mission was accomplished he did not yet know exactly what kind of monster he was dealing with. He simply knew he had a job to do — a potentially unpleasant one — and he did it. Matters of Deep Concern [pic] The Devil in the White City Larson describes Geyer as a " big man with a pleasant, earnest face,"

sporting a walrus mustache. Geyer's wife and daughter had died recently in a fire, so his loss weighed heavily as he went in search of children who possibly had been murdered.

Holmes had offered no clues to assist, except to say that the children had been left with a guardian, with one female child posing as a boy. He even shed tears at the idea that someone should accuse him of killing innocent children, and Geyer said of him, " Holmes is greatly given to lying with a sort of florid ornamentation. " The man, he believed, was an actor and accomplished con, so nothing he said could be trusted. (Especially in light of the fact that this so-called guardian of the children, Minnie Williams, was also missing, along with her sister, Nettie, and both had once been closely associated with the suspect. Holmes had kept up with the news each day as papers were delivered to him, and had shifted the details of his story as the situation demanded. Geyer noticed this and noted how it fit Holmes' pattern of treatment of others: He played games and adjusted his strategy to whatever seemed necessary to move them around like pawns in some game he played to please himself. Such a manner of man made the detective uneasy. No one could know from what he said what was true... or what he might be planning next.

Yet, Holmes did admit to having had Alice Pitezal, 15, in his custody (after she had helped him to identify her father's corpse for the insurance payoff) and to picking up Howard, 8, and Nellie, 11, and taking them with him.

Alice and Nellie had written letters to their mother documenting their daily journey, which Holmes had collected but had never mailed (and which were found in his possession upon his arrest). He told their mother that they were

in the care of Minnie Williams, a woman of means in England. This woman had likely kept back their letters, Holmes had suggested, in the interest of her own safety.

Yet Geyer had found no trace of Minnie Williams or the children where Holmes had said she would be. In fact, the street name that Holmes offered for where to find her did not exist in London. Instead of going to England, where Holmes clearly was trying to direct him, Geyer focused his efforts on North America. Long Journey On June 26, Detective Geyer set out by train into the Midwest, with Alice's and Nellie's letters to orient him, along with photos of the children and of Holmes, and an inventory of items and clothing associated with them. No one in the D.

A. 's office expected to find any evidence at this late date and believed that Holmes had killed them and would have been careful to dispose of the bodies. Yet, the insurance company had readily provided funds for the trip, because it would not have to pay out for Pitezal's suicide, so Geyer agreed to make the effort. In Cincinnati, he showed photographs and asked around in various hotels for anyone who might have seen Holmes or the children, and he finally found someone who remembered the small group of travelers under the alias " Alex E. Cook. It was a name Holmes had used in business matters before. That clerk pointed Geyer in another direction and through much questioning, he came across a woman who had seen Holmes and a boy together in a house to which a large stove had been delivered. But Holmes had then given her the stove, apparently because he'd noticed that she had been watching him. Geyer now felt that he " had firm hold of the end of a string which was to lead me ultimately to the consummation of my

difficult mission. " He went from there to Indianapolis, Holmes' next destination, according to the letters.

In this city, Geyer found a trail that gave him a good sense of where the children had been. Larson points out that it was an exceedingly hot day, which made the investigation more burdensome. Finally, however, Holmes' odd game became clear: He was moving his wife (one of three, all of whom were unaware of the others) and the three children about in the same city without any party being aware of the other. Geyer could not understand why, if Holmes intended to kill the children, he would go to such effort and expense to move them so often. The puzzle deepened, and the fate of the children seemed darker still.

Geyer then went to Chicago and Detroit, the town from which Alice had written the last of her letters to her mother in which she expressed dismay that they were not together. He also learned to his surprise that Holmes had added a third party to his game - Mrs. Carrie Pitezel and her other two children. He had placed her three blocks from where he roomed the three children in his care, but had not allowed them to realize it or see one another. But, Alice also wrote something from that location to her mother that made Geyer's blood run cold. " Howard is not with us now. The Girls Going on to Toronto, Geyer looked up real estate agents to find out if a man had rented a house for only a few days. " It took considerable time to impress each agent with the importance of making a careful search for us. " He found a house that Holmes had rented, which was surrounded by a six-foot fence. The family residing there knew about some loose dirt under the house. They dug it up, firmly believing they would find one or more of the

children. To raise the suspense, they kept working as it grew dark, but had to give up without finding anything.

Geyer struck out there, as the renter turned out to have been a different man. Still, the intrepid detective felt certain the children had been killed somewhere in that town, so he persisted and found another rental that seemed suspicious. He went to check it out. Geyer learned that a man with children at this place had asked for the loan of a spade to plant potatoes in the cellar and had brought only a bed, mattress and large trunk to the house. A woman identified Holmes from a photograph as the man who had rented the house.

Geyer went there, discovered that the house had a dark cellar accessible via a trap door, and found an area of soft dirt on the floor. When he pushed a shovel into it, a stench arose and he knew he'd come to the right spot. His long, dark journey had produced what he'd both hoped for and had feared: human remains. After digging three feet, he found a small arm bone, so he employed an undertaker to take charge. In short order, they exhumed the corpses of two unclothed girls, which they believed were Nellie and Alice Pitezel. [pic] Nellie Pitezel Alice was found lying on her side with her hand to the west," Geyer wrote. " Nellie was found lying on her face, with her head to the south, her plaited hair hanging neatly down her back. " A crew of men lifted them from the grave and transferred them to coffins. Gruesomely, as Nellie was lifted, her heavy braid pulled the scalp away from her skull. Geyer was widely congratulated on his persistence and success. He sent a telegram to Philadelphia about the day's events and concluded in his book, " Thus it was proved that little children cannot be murdered in this day and

generation, beyond the possibility of discovery. Searchers found a toy in the house that was listed in Carrie Pitezel's inventory of things that her children had owned, which assisted Geyer with a firm identification of the remains, as did pieces of partially burnt clothing. Then, they brought Mrs. Pitezel to Toronto to confirm. She was allowed to see the children's hair and teeth, as the remains were too putrefied for her to view. She recognized them instantly and swooned in grief. She now knew that Holmes had lied to her and had killed her children. But Geyer still knew there was one more child to find: little Howard.

His trek was not yet done, although it now appeared to be fully pessimistic. He used logic and items from the letters to determine that Howard had been separated from the girls before their arrival in Detroit, so it was time to return to Indianapolis. Discovery He arrived there on July 24. As before, he proceeded to gain the assistance of real estate agents from around the city to learn the details of short-term rentals from the previous October. By this time, Geyer's trek had become of supreme interest to the nation and the newspapers heralded his arrival.

He was considered a real-life Sherlock Holmes, and people wanted to follow his every step the way they read a suspenseful piece of fiction. This was both a curse and a boon. He received many leads, which he followed, but most of them just wasted his time. " Days came and passed," he wrote, " but I continued to be as much in the dark as ever. " Geyer feared that " the bold and clever criminal" might have bested him on this one. It seemed increasingly more likely that little Howard might never be found.

Back in Philadelphia, Holmes avidly kept track of Geyer's journey. At first, he felt empowered, believing that Geyer could never find the children. But with the discovery of the girls' remains, things looked grim. He had to think up a tale to exonerate himself and place the blame on others. Even as he did so, investigators were analyzing the children's letters, and they sent ideas to Geyer. Some things had been overlooked or misunderstood and with renewed care, Geyer discovered that the children had been in Indianapolis four days longer than he'd figured.

He narrowed the frame of time that was unaccounted for to only two days and then returned to Chicago to check on a child's skeleton recently found. It was not Howard. Nor would Holmes, when asked, yield a word of assistance. The "king of fabricators" threw blame on another man as the likely perpetrator. Geyer traveled to several more places but instinct told him to settle in Indianapolis and keep searching there. Despite the lack of success, Geyer continued to believe that he would make a breakthrough in this town. "No less than nine hundred supposed clues were run out," he later wrote. But he needed a new strategy.

Good Instinct He then went to the smaller outlying towns, going through them as systematically as he had done in Indianapolis. Then, in Irvington, he struck pay dirt. A man who had rented a house in October remembered Holmes because his manner was so rude and abrupt. And he recalled that a boy had been with this irascible short-term tenant. Relieved and certain that he was at the end of the trail, Geyer proceeded to the rental property. There was no disturbance in the floor of the cellar that he could find, which

discouraged him at first, but there was a trunk in a small alcove, and near it some disturbed dirt.

Geyer dug into the area but found nothing. In a barn, he found a coal stove, and remembering Holmes' earlier purchase of a large stove which he'd then abandoned, Geyer suspected that this was a clue. On top were stains that looked like dried blood. By telegram, Mrs. Pitezel identified the trunk as her's. Geyer left the place but returned when he heard there was news. A doctor who had poked around showed him pieces of a charred bone - part of a skull and a femur - that he said had belonged to a male child. They had found it in a pipe hole in the chimney.

Geyer dismantled the chimney and found more human remains - a complete set of teeth and a piece of jaw, identified by a dentist as being from a boy 7 to 10 years old. " At the bottom of the chimney," Geyer recorded, " was found quite a large charred mass, which upon being cut, disclosed a portion of the stomach, liver and spleen, baked quite hard. The pelvis of the body was also found. " Plenty of witnesses had seen Holmes back in October when he was there and identified him from the photograph that Geyer carried. One man even recalled helping him to install the stove. [pic] Alice ; Howard Pitezel

Convinced he had finally, albeit tragically, found Howard Pitezel, and having it confirmed by other clues, Geyer " enjoyed the best night's sleep" that he'd had in two months. The search for truth had finally reached satisfaction. It was now August 27, fully two months after he'd left on this journey, and five weeks since he'd found Howard's unfortunate sisters. On September 12,

Holmes was indicted by a grand jury for the murder of Benjamin Pitezel. He entered a plea of not guilty and his trial date was scheduled for October 28. Even as he adopted a pretense for the court, people were learning much more about him in Chicago.

Holmes, it seemed, had quite a list of murders to his name. Land of Opportunity Holmes, whose real name was Hermann Webster Mudgett, had arrived in Chicago during the 1880s, already married to two women. The city was preparing for the World's Fair, or Great Exposition, which meant there was plenty of opportunity for a clever man for fraud and theft. Erik Larson writes eloquently about the "White City's" development, describing the many hurdles its designers and investors encountered in the process, just barely preparing the massive grounds in time for business.

Some 27 million people went through the exposition during its six-month venue, which overtaxed the city's resources and inspired plenty of crime, most of which police could not investigate. Holmes was among those who took advantage. [pic] Ferris Wheel, introduced at World's Fair He planned ahead for the many visitors who would be searching for lodging as close as possible to the fair, knowing that among them would be the most vulnerable prey: single, naive women on their own who would easily succumb to a successful and charming "doctor." He presented himself as a graduate of a prestigious medical school and a man of means.

His first Chicago employment was as a prescription clerk at 63rd and South Wallace Streets, but he soon took over from Mrs. E. S. Holton, who then "went to California" with her daughter. Indeed, no one ever heard from them

again, but Holmes took control of the shop. Across the road was a property on 63rd Street, which he bought. Soon he was gathering funds through murder and fraudulent schemes to build his three-story, 100-room "Castle," as he referred to it. When he eventually felt the need to leave, he tried to burn it down to collect insurance.

In this building, investigators now found evidence of even greater crimes than swindling and bigamy. The Castle [pic] H. H. Holmes' Castle Holmes had offered rooms to young women arriving to attend the fair, but many of those women associated with him had disappeared. In addition, he had employed a number of young women, who also had disappeared. From what could be reconstructed, it seemed that Holmes had tortured and murdered these women, disposing of their corpses in his furnace in the cellar or defleshing them and selling the skeletons to medical schools.

Schechter describes what the place was like: Holmes' Castle included soundproof sleeping chambers with peepholes, asbestos-padded walls, gas pipes, sliding walls, and vents that Holmes controlled from another room. Many of the rooms had low ceilings and trapdoors in the floors, with ladders leading to smaller rooms below. The building had secret passages, false floors, rooms with torture equipment, and a specially equipped surgery. There were also greased chutes that emptied into a two-level cellar, in which Holmes had installed a large furnace.

There was even an asbestos-lined chamber with gas pipes and evidence of something having been burned inside. It was believed that Holmes placed his chosen victims into the special chambers into which he then pumped lethal

gas, controlled from his own bedroom, and then watched them react. Apparently, he gained some fiendish pleasure from this activity. Sometimes he'd ignite the gas to incinerate them, or perhaps even place them on the "elasticity determinator," an elongated bed with straps, to see how far the human body could be stretched. When finished, he might have slid the corpses down the chutes into his cellar, where vats of acid and other chemicals awaited them. (Many more details about Holmes' activities here can be found in Schechter's and Larson's books.) Investigators discovered several complete skeletons and numerous incinerated bone fragments in the Chicago castle, including the pelvis of a 14-year-old, according to Blundell. There was also a blood-stained noose and a vault filled with quicklime. Yet, Holmes insisted that he had nothing to do with any murders. Those people had either taken their own lives, he claimed, or were killed by someone else.

Nevertheless, newspaper headlines decried the "chamber of horrors." The Chicago Tribune announced that "The Castle is a Tomb!" and The Philadelphia Inquirer described bones removed from the "charnel house." It wasn't long before true crime pulp paperbacks were published to slake the public's thirst and turn a profit. Authors searched far and wide for even more murders that Holmes may have committed, as far back as 1879.

Chicago police estimated his toll to be as high as 150. In Philadelphia, the "Holmes Museum" opened to the curious. But Holmes was ready.

He'd always gotten his way with his gift of the gab and he figured he could do so again, despite how the odds seemed stacked against him. He offered his memoir. The Art of Persuasion [pic] H. H. Holmes Own Story To exonerate

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himself, Holmes, now 34, penned *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. He included his supposed prison diary as an appendix (which Larson believes he invented rather than kept as a daily log).

The diary is a boring rendition of his routine, probably intended to make him appear to be an ordinary Joe with an interest in books, and presented as a means for his " betterment. " He viewed the whole as a " literary work," as befitted his narcissistic temperament, and claimed that he had written it with " mature deliberation," and against the protest of his attorney and acquaintances. He claimed that the murders he had been accused of were a blatant attempt to ensure that his trial would not be fair and impartial.

He wanted to formally and publicly deny them all. Thus, he set out to offer a narrative of his " entire life," including a full disclosure of his dealings with the Pitezel family. " My sole object in this publication is to vindicate my name from the horrible aspersions cast upon it," he wrote, " and to appeal to a fair-minded American public for a suspension of judgment. " [pic] Gilman, NH logo In this memoir, which he got a journalist to assist him to publish, Holmes describes Gilman Academy, N. H. , the town in which he grew up as Herman Webster Mudgett.

He was born there in 1861 and claims to have experienced an ordinary life, with an ordinary set of parents and a normal schoolboy routine. Larson disputes this, having learned from experts that psychopathic children are generally involved in conduct disorders and juvenile delinquency, but this is

not always the case. Generalizations offer poor ways to get at the truth of individual cases, and since there is no evidence either way, we cannot know what Holmes' childhood was really like. He describes a turning point in his life as the day some older boys forced him into a village doctor's office and face-to-face with a skeleton. It was a wicked and dangerous thing to do to a child of tender years and health," Holmes says, though he admits that the experience cured him of his fears. He attributes his desire to go into medicine to this memorable incident. He also discusses his childhood lies and pranks and how his father punished him. It was in college, he says, where he did his first truly dishonest act: He represented a fraudulent book, earning money from it for his expenses. He received a medical school diploma, he says, from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and then opened a practice.

He then attempted unsuccessfully to commit his first insurance fraud, helping someone to fake his own death with a purloined cadaver. From there, he served a stint as a doctor in an insane asylum, which haunted him for years. He changed his name to H. H. Holmes and posed as a pharmacist in Chicago. That was an ominous start to his career. Close Encounters Holmes continues in his memoir with a "poor me" fashion, describing the ills that befell him and the hardships he endured before meeting Ben Pitezel in 1888. They fell into a partnership that involved various pursuits that financially benefited them both.

Holmes also speaks about some of the missing women associated with him so that he can assure readers that they did things such as announcing they were going to leave and disappearing on their own. He also indicated that

many young women were alive and well, and better off for having known him. [pic] Minnie Williams As for Minnie Williams, who had disappeared without a trace, Holmes offered a story of a woman who had fallen into difficult times, had an illegitimate child, and was suicidal. She had an abortion, felt terribly ashamed, and left everyone she knew.

She served as his secretary for a time, and often ate meals in his building - which he claimed would account for any bone remains that might be found in the furnace. Her sister Nettie arrived (also referred to as Nannie) and, in short order, died. It seemed that Minnie had decided that Nettie fancied Holmes, so she struck her with a stool and killed her (having often suffered from bouts of mania, she was quite without restraint in such matters).

Holmes helped Minnie to place the body in a trunk and dump it into Lake Michigan. " But from my sight it has never passed," writes Holmes about the incident. Nor has there been a day, an hour, since that awful night that I would not have given my life if by doing so that of Nettie Williams could have been returned. " Holmes then broke everything off with Minnie. She went away and he burned the clothing she left behind, or gave it to Pitezel. No one heard from Minnie again... except for Holmes, supposedly, who said he helped her to handle her land investments in Texas. He also describes how he first met the Pitezel family and the business ventures into which he entered with Benjamin Pitezel.

In the end, he insists that he had no motive to kill anyone, and says that he was always quite generous, so that even avarice would not count, as it was inconsistent with his character. He also did not have a bad temper and had made no dishonest transactions. He also did not believe he was insane,

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having no mental illness in his family and no finding of it from doctors who had examined him thus far. Of the Pitezel situation, Holmes said that Pitezel was worth more to him alive than dead, so why would he have engaged in murder? "In conclusion," he writes, "I wish to say that I am but a very ordinary man ... and to have planned and executed the stupendous amount of wrongdoing that has been attributed to me would have been wholly beyond my power." He asked the general public to withhold judgment of his guilt or innocence until he could disprove them at his trial. He would also work to bring justice to those "for whose wrong doings I am today suffering." However, this publication was so transparently self-serving that readers preferred the more lurid tales provided in newspapers. No one really believed Holmes' "own story," although it is an interesting collector's item for criminologists. In the Game

Holmes' attorneys attempted to get his trial continued, but were unsuccessful. In addition, there was a struggle between Chicago and Philadelphia authorities, says Blundell, as to who would get to try him first, but he remained in Philadelphia. The trial commenced as scheduled on October 28. It lasted five days. On the first day, Holmes tried to defend himself but proved unable to establish points in his favor. The best account of the trial comes from the speech, reprinted in Geyer's book, from the District Attorney, George S. Graham, who recounts it in detail. Yet, he does not include some of the more interesting events. For example, from a distance, a phrenologist, John L. Capen, made an analysis of Holmes, which was published during the trial in the New York World. He described the "repulsive" face and pointed out that great murderers "have blue eyes."

Holmes's expression, Capen said, was cruel and inhuman, and his ears, twisted out of shape, stamped him as a criminal. This was all evidence of devilry and vice. In other words, Capen convicted a man not yet found guilty based on appearances alone. [pic] Judge Arnold At the trial, also described in detail by Schechter, Holmes requested to defend himself.

Judge Arnold allowed it, stating, " It is your constitutional right to try your own case. " Holmes questioned prospective jury members, at which point his team of attorneys left the courtroom. Holmes demonstrated the coolness with which he handled stress and tried rejecting each person who said he had read the papers, but the judge pointed out that this was not considered a cause for challenge. In any event, this all occurred well before the Supreme Court would rule about the unfairness of pretrial publicity. The jury was seated and the trial proceeded. His Own Defense

Holmes' request to defend himself, Schechter says, was unprecedented. No accused murderer had done it before in the United States, so several lawyers and law students attended. A reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer described Holmes' performance in court as vigorous and " remarkable. " He was deferential to the judge but nasty to the prosecutor. He asked for an analysis of the liquid that he was accused of using as a poison for the children (which the D. A. did not have in his possession), and he wanted the most recent work done on toxicology, claiming that as a doctor, he himself could analyze it (though his credentials were false).

This left the impression of a man who was prepared to use science to exonerate himself. [pic] Herman Mudgett, aka HH Holmes sketch Yet,

Holmes often deflected the questioning with forays into minutia, and he frequently squabbled with the prosecutor, who was likely disturbed at having to spar in court as an equal with the defendant. Holmes made an error when, after Pitezel's corpse was described in gruesome detail, he requested a lunch break, as he was hungry. He appeared to have no sense of sorrow over the supposed suicide of a partner and friend.

For the rest of that day, while he handled his questioning in a professional manner, he failed to elicit any points to support his innocence. The professional witnesses all concluded that Pitezel could not, as Holmes claimed, have committed suicide. The judge ordered an evening session over Holmes's protest. Holmes claimed that he was feeling ill, but it was clear that he was failing to establish his case. The evening session opened with a surprise: Holmes asked that the court allow his two defense attorneys to re-enter the case, and with that he relinquished his role as a criminal lawyer.

While he now had competent counsel, he had probably hurt his case. Between his antics and his obvious fatigue by the end of the first day, the jury had a good look at the defendant's loss of confidence and inability to shake the strongest witnesses. He may not have admitted his guilt, but his actions indicated that he had admitted defeat. He got up only once to examine another witness - his latest paramour and third wife, who testified against him. Using a heavy dose of emotion, as if stricken by her betrayal, he nevertheless failed to move her to change her testimony about his behavior on the day that Pitezel was allegedly murdered.

The prosecution made its case quite elaborately, prepared to show his activities with 35 witnesses from the various places Holmes had gone after the Pitezel murder. But the judge had ruled that the trial must be limited to the Pitezel murder, so Graham showed how they made Pitezel's identification, and adding in whatever they were allowed about Holmes' reprehensible behavior. They proved with doctors that the chloroform that had supposedly killed Pitezel by self-administration actually had been forced into him after he was already dead.

So Pitezel was dead and had not died from natural causes or his own hand. Given Holmes' admissions about being with him, there was really no other choice for jurors. In addition, Carrie Pitezel had won the courtroom with her mournful rendition of learning that her children were dead. In his closing argument, which lasted more than two hours, Graham called Holmes the "most dangerous man in the world," and asked jurors not to be afraid to do their duty and operate like "honest men." In the end, the jury convicted Holmes of Benjamin Pitezel's murder and the judge sentenced him to death by hanging. Cleansing

After his conviction, and as his attorneys prepared an appeal for a new trial (which failed), Holmes took up the pen again to make a confession, largely inspired by the promise of a \$10,000 payment from the Hearst newspaper syndicate. He published it in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. It was his third full-blown tale to date about his activities with the Pitezel incident. Aiming now to become the most notorious killer in the world, he claimed to have killed more than 100 people. Apparently having second thoughts, he reduced that number to 27, including Pitezel and his children. He insisted that he could

not help what he'd done. I was born with the Evil One as my sponsor beside the bed where I was ushered into the world," he lamented. The reading of his death warrant had been carried out and he faced execution by hanging on May 7. " It now seems a fitting time, if ever," he wrote, " to make known the details of the twenty-seven murders, of which it would be useless to longer say I am not guilty. " He admitted that there was overwhelming proof for his complicity in these deaths, and said that he would address only those cases that had been investigated and hoped that people would not therefore suppose from his silence on others that he must be guilty.

It seemed to him sufficient that Detective Geyer had gone over his life with a fine-tooth comb, so to speak, and there was really no place to hide. Holmes claimed that he wanted to make the confession at this point for several reasons, and he chose the Philadelphia Inquirer as his medium for making his revelations public. He assured his readers that he was not seeking attention and that the entire enterprise was distasteful to him. As he admitted to the murders, he said he was " thus branding myself as the most detestable criminal of modern times. " Indeed, he was. Afflicted

He sensed that his own countenance was changing as he sat in prison, and that he looked more satanic than before. " I have become afflicted with that dread disease, rare but terrible... a malformation... My head and face are gradually assuming an elongated shape. I believe fully that I am growing to resemble the devil - that the similitude is almost completed. " He self-diagnosed " acquired homicidal mania" and " degeneracy," which meant he was a moral idiot. [pic] Cesare Lombroso The criminological theories at the

time were fueled by Cesare Lombroso, an Italian anthropologist and professor at the University of Turin.

By 1876, Lombroso had published *L'uomo delinquente*. Believing that human behavior could be classified with objective tests, Lombroso was convinced that certain people were born criminals, identifiable by specific physical traits, such as bulging brows, long arms, and apelike noses. They were throwbacks to more primitive times, and he called them degenerates. Lombroso's ideas had spread quickly across Europe and America, supported by the new evolutionary thinking. Thus, Holmes fell into this erroneous diagnostic mania. In another decade or so, Lombroso would be discredited.

Yet, in keeping with the theory, Holmes "saw" a prominence on one side of his head and a "corresponding diminution on the other side." Also, a deficiency on his nose and ear, and the lengthening or shortening of various limbs. One criminologist who saw him pronounced him guilty just from his appearance. Holmes said he was confessing in part to justify the scientific deductions. Little did he know they weren't scientific at all. But his motive was more likely to bring attention to himself and to wallow in one last flight of grandiosity. No doubt he enjoyed the idea of having an audience. His first murder, he admitted, was by overdose of laudanum of a former schoolmate for insurance money. Holmes claimed (probably falsely) that it had given him a terrible guilty conscience, but he'd then developed an appetite for blood. The second murder, he said, was "accidental," when he got into a physical altercation with a man who owed him money. Then he killed a few people to sell to a "corpse dealer" for payment of \$25 to \$45

apiece. Later he lost touch with this dealer, so he sometimes buried victims in the dirt floor of his offices.

Some victims he poisoned, some he bludgeoned, and a few he closed into his vaults for gassing and asphyxia - " a slow and lingering death. " Most of these cases involved money, threat of exposure, or some other form of enrichment for Holmes. Sometimes he used confederates as accomplices. In one case, when he attempted to murder three young women at the same time, with chloroform, they escaped and turned him in. Holmes was arrested but inexplicably not prosecuted for attempted murder, or even for assault. In some cases, Holmes either did not know or could not recall the name of a victim or near-victim.

Readers were most interested in what Holmes might say about the Williams sisters and the Pitezel family, and for both he provided quite a few details (although how much is true is anyone's guess). Family Affairs Holmes made a point to affirm the " Christian character" of Minnie Williams and he retracted many of the statements he had made about her regarding her state of mind and her alleged murder of her sister. She was never in an asylum or secreted away to protect her reputation, he now said. He'd first met her in 1888 in New York, and then encountered her five years later in Chicago.

He persuaded her to give him several sizable sums of money and then maneuvered her to invite her sister to Chicago so he could get a bead on their property in Texas. Nannie/Nettie assigned her worldly goods to him (he said). " After that," Holmes writes, " she was immediately killed in order that

no one in or about the Castle should know of her having been there save the man who burned her clothing. " To his chagrin, she did leave something behind - her footprint on the door of the vault, which she produced during an unsuccessful struggle to survive. This was how Chicago authorities hoped to prove she was murdered.) Holmes told Minnie that her sister had given up her journey north. He then secured Minnie's property in his own name and killed her, as well. He poisoned her and buried her in the cellar of a house that he owned. He tried to implicate her as the murderer of her sister and the Pitezel children, which he was now repudiating: " This is the saddest and most heinous of any of my crimes," he commented. Next, he turned his attention to Pitezel. Holmes indicated that from the first hour they met, he knew that he would kill the man.

Everything he did for Pitezel that seemed to be a kindness was merely a way to gain his confidence. Pitezel " met his death" on September 2, 1894.

Holmes wrote fake letters from Mrs. Pitezel to show him, which precipitated a bout of drinking. Holmes watched and waited until he was able to come upon Pitezel in a drunken stupor in the middle of the day. He packed his bags in readiness to leave and then went to where Pitezel lay in bed, bound him, saturated his clothing and face with benzene, and lit a match. He literally burned his former accomplice alive.

Apparently Pitezel cried out and prayed for mercy, begging Holmes to end his suffering with a speedy death, " all of which had on me no effect. " When Pitezel finally expired, Holmes extinguished the flames, removed the ropes, and poured chloroform into his stomach, to make the death appear to be accidentally brought about by an explosion. That way, the insurance

company would quickly pay the full amount of the claim. He left the body in a position that exposed it to the sun for however long it would be before someone had found him - presumably to further deform it for difficulty in identification. I left the house," he wrote, " without the slightest feeling of remorse for my terrible acts. " Deviant However, Holmes said, the chloroform apparently also had the effect of depriving the tissues of alcohol, so that no one would know that Pitezel had been in a drunken state. At any rate, Pitezel was still recognizable. More bizarre, Holmes says that three weeks later he visited the grave where Pitezel was buried and pretended to be acquiring samples for microscopic analysis. He said he found that cutting into the corpse with a knife was inordinately satisfying.

As for young Howard Pitezel, Holmes also had a story to tell. He had every intention of murdering the three Pitezel children, so he hid them in a hotel until he could find a way that would not draw suspicion. After a week, he poisoned the boy and then cut him into pieces small enough to go through the door of a stove he had purchased. He felt nothing about these acts, only the pleasure he gained from killing another person. He then took the girls to Chicago, Detroit, and Toronto. There, Alice and Nellie Pitezel met their fate. They were the " twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh" of his victims.

He made them believe they would soon be reunited with their mother (whom he had also brought to Toronto in some diabolical game), while he plotted how he would be rid of them. He compelled them both to get inside a large trunk and closed them inside, leaving an air hole. Then he returned and pumped gas into the hole to kill the girls, even as their mother was traveling on to New York. He dug shallow graves, removed their clothing, and dumped

them without a thought. He considered that “ for eight years before their deaths I had been almost as much a father to them as though they had been my own children. He had a plan to end Mrs. Pitezel’s life, along with those of her two remaining children, with nitroglycerine, but he was arrested in Boston before he managed to achieve this. He closed his confession by saying that his last public utterance would be of remorse for these vile acts. He did not expect anyone to really believe him. And Geyer later says in his book that Holmes’ account, published in many papers on April 12, 1896, was so inconsistent with the facts that they had gathered about the Pitezel children’s demise that it was “ at once discredited in police circles. Then, in one quick move, according to Geyer, Holmes recanted the confession, and in fact it was learned that several of his “ victims” were not dead at all or had died in ways clearly unassociated with him. When told by police that his tale was untrue, he supposedly said, “ Of course it is not true, but the newspapers want a sensation and they got it. ” Nevertheless, police did believe what he had said about the murder of Benjamin Pitezel. Geyer found it vile that Holmes would not tell the truth even as he stood on the “ brink of eternity. ” His End

On May 7, 1896, H. H. Holmes went to the hangman’s noose. His last meal was boiled eggs, dry toast, and coffee. Even at the noose, he changed his story. He claimed to have killed only two people, and tried to say more but at 10: 13 the trapdoor opened and he was hanged. Blundell says that it took him fully 15 minutes to strangle to death on the gallows. Afraid of body-snatchers who might capitalize on his corpse, Holmes had made a request:

He wanted no autopsy and he instructed his attorneys to see that he was buried in a coffin filled with cement.

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This was taken to Holy Cross Cemetery south of Philadelphia and two Pinkerton guards stood over the grave during the night before the body was finally interred in a double grave also filled with cement. No stone was erected to mark it, Larson states, although its presence is recorded on a cemetery registry. Holmes' attorneys had turned down an offer of \$5, 000 for his body, and even refused his brain to Philadelphia's Wistar Institute, which hoped to have its experts analyze the organ for better understanding of the criminal mind.

Larson recounts a series of strange events afterward that gave credence to the rumors that Holmes was satanic, including several weird deaths and a fire at the D. A. 's office that destroyed everything there save a photograph of Holmes. During this case, another American phenomenon arose from society's fascination with sensational crime. Thousands of people lined up to see the Chicago murder site, so a former police officer remodeled the infamous building as " Holmes's Horror Castle," an attraction that offered guided tours to the suffocation chambers and torture rooms.

But before it opened it mysteriously burned to the ground. So many people who'd rented rooms from Holmes during the fair had actually gone missing that sensational estimates of his victims reached around 200, and some people perpetuated this unsubstantiated toll even today. It's likely that Holmes' own figure from his recanted confession is low, but there is no way

to know just how many he actually killed. A record of his many other frauds can be found in the authors noted in the bibliography.