

## ***The Strange Case of Dr. H. H. Holmes—Libby Larsen***

*Libretto by Libby Larsen, adapted from Holmes' Own Story, by H. H. Holmes, Burk and McFetridge, Philadelphia, 1895; Holmes Confesses 27 Murders, H. H. Holmes, Philadelphia Inquirer, April 12, 1896; The Holmes Castle, by Robert L. Corbitt, Corbitt and Morrison, 1895.*

### **Composer's Notes**

Herman Webster Mudgett (1861–1896), better known as Dr. H. H. Holmes, was among the first documented American serial killers. During the 1893 Chicago World Exposition, Holmes, already numbering several murder victims, opened a hotel which he had designed and built for himself specifically with murder in mind, and which was the location of many of his murders. While he confessed to 27 murders, of which nine were confirmed, it is estimated that he could have committed 250 such crimes. The case was notorious in its time and received wide publicity through a series of articles in William Randolph Hearst's newspapers. I've adapted this song cycle from Holmes' own confessions combined with Detective Robert Corbitt's accounts of his investigations into murder and insurance fraud suspicions against Holmes. These investigations led to Holmes' arrest and prosecution.

***--Libby Larsen***

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## I. I STATE MY CASE

A room , unused since I ceased to reside there.

In it a stove that still bears the traces of fire.

- a little spinning top and a tin man
- a topcoat
- a trunk with a strip of blue calico mending a seam
- a woman's shoe
- an ink bottle
- a handful of pearl dress buttons

A gentleman – I am - the kind you want for a companion

A civic-minded man – the kind you want in your circle

A business man – the kind you want for your partner

- Doctor
- Pharmacist
- Land development
- Glass bending
- Gas refinery
- Hotelier

HUMANUS INTELLIGENCIUS ARACHNOIDUS

My business – profit

My resources- people

ANIMA, ANIMUS, ANIMATO

- My products
  - a little spinning top and a tin man
  - a topcoat
  - a trunk with a strip of blue calico mending a seam
  - a woman's shoe
  - an ink bottle
  - a handful of pearl dress buttons
  - ..... bones

## II. AS A YOUNG MAN

September of my 20<sup>th</sup> year.  
I study medicine in Ann Arbor – hundreds of miles from friends and relatives.  
A wife and child in New York.  
Sixty dollars in my pocket  
Nine months of work ahead.

I need money – HUMANUS  
And a plan - INTELLIGENCIUS

It is well known  
That in the state of Michigan - if one studies medicine –  
All the materials necessary of dissection  
Are supplied by the State.

The State needs materials – HUMANUS  
For which they pay handsomely – ARGENTUS

I supply the materials with the help of my classmate – BUSINESS  
We graduate, and find that doctoring is not PROFITUS

We devise a plan – INTELLIGENCIUS  
For doing BUSINESS

Fraud in the form of a little waltz -

..... a trusted friend, of modest means, already insured for life,  
increases his policy to protect his child and wife.

(should harm befall him)

Later on, the trusted friend begins to drink quite heavily  
And kills his wife, and kills his child, and blames it on insanity

(In reality they go West and wait for each other)

Some months later, a body is discovered, badly decomposed

With the body, is a letter, a suicide note.

A relative collects the money, we split it into three

The relative, the trusted friend, my classmate and me.

we need three bodies - RIGOR MORTUS  
Hidden in three cities - HIDE-US SEEK-US

The plan is too complicated  
I kill my classmate instead  
I use his insurance  
To bide my time.

### III.. I BUILD MY BUSINESS (A Gallop)

It is well known that business done with men is straight on, clean and quickly settled

Item: Dr. Russell, a tenant in my hotel. Rent Due.

I struck him on the head with a heavy chair.

I sold his body (and many others) – Forty five dollars each

Item: Mr. Rogers, an acquaintance from Virginia.

I took him fishing and struck him on the head with the oar.

Just practice.

Item: Charles Cole – A Southern Speculator. At my hotel.

The vicious blow crushed his head so badly that he was almost useless

To the party that bought him. Two thousand dollars.

Item: Robert Latimer, my janitor.

Discovering my business, he wanted money.

I locked him in the vault of my hotel and slowly starved him.

CORPUS GRATIS

Item: Howard Pietzel – My business partner. And his son.

After seven years of practice, I carried out my PLAN ORIGINALIS

INSURANCE FRAUDUS

Item: Wade Warner. I bought my glass bending furnace from him.

I paid a fortune for it.

Asking him to demonstrate the furnace, I locked him in it.

INCINEROSUS...CORPUS INVISIBILIS

FORTUNE RETURNUS

BUSINESS EXPANDUS

#### **IV. THIRTEEN LADIES AND THREE WHO GOT AWAY (Grande Waltz Macabre)**

It is well known that when you gain the confidence of women, you learn to juggle trust.

Introduction:

First you set the stage – I built my hotel

Then you set the method – secret vaults, secret rooms.

You employ young ladies: stenographers, cooks, waitresses, maids:

Waltz:

Lizzie, little Lizzie, a domestic in my hotel,

Quinlan, my partner, took a fancy to her

I called her, to my office, on the pretense of a raise.

I invited her to step into my vault to retrieve a cup and tray

I closed and locked the door – she cried

She pleaded me, to let her out – denied,

Unless she wrote a letter leaving Quinlan for good.

If she wrote the letter then release her I would

She did. I killed her.

Thirteen ladies, there may have been more than

Thirteen ladies, I cannot say for sure.

Minnie and Nannie Williams, of wealthy estate

Required my protection, which I freely gave.

Minnie came to live with me of her own volition,

Frequent visits to Nannie, ignited her suspicion.

Minnie murdered Nannie – Ah!

I disposed of Minnie – Ah!

Being their protector – Ah!

I was their estate's executor – Ah! .....

Thirteen ladies, there may have been more ....

Sarah Cook, her unborn child and Mary Haracamp

A three-for-one they became.

Julie Connor and her daughter Pearl

Came to me and never came away.

Nellie and Annie Peitzal, suffocated in a trunk (they were children)

Anna Betts, Gertrude Conner, poisoned just for fun (they were easy)

Emmeline, my mistress, she broke my heart

I locked her in my vault, and watched her slowly starve.

Thirteen ladies,

Thirteen ladies,

Three waitresses in my restaurant, I thought I could connive  
To chloroform all three at once, of course to watch them die.

They escaped.

They ran to the authorities.

Suspicious were raised.

The conclusion of my stories..

## V. EVIDENCE

a little spinning top and a tin man  
a topcoat  
a trunk with a strip of blue calico mending a seam  
a woman's shoe - charred on the instep of the sole  
an ink bottle  
a handful of pearl dress buttons  
a bit of dress goods,  
some fine hair caught in the stovepipe hole  
jawbones – seventeen teeth  
two human ribs, one partially consumed

..... bones

Procuring bones, preparing bones , selling bones. It's the price of bones in the end, and come to think of it, the beginning, seal hold my fate.