

Chapter 8

“John Holmes”: Identity Unknown

We have noted that both Radclive and Ellis had rival hangmen at various times in their careers. The two main hangmen in this category were “John Holmes” in the later years of Radclive and the earlier years of Arthur Ellis; and “Sam Edwards” in the last decade of Arthur Ellis’s career. In this chapter we will deal briefly with John E. F. Holmes, who bungled most of his cases. John Holmes might have been the real name of the hangman. There were several men with that name living in Canada at the relevant time, but we do not have the proof to drag them into this narrative. However, it is also probable that “Holmes” was not the real name of the hangman.

In the chapter dealing with the decline of Radclive, we noted various hangings attributed to a man called “Holmes,” wearing a mask, hood, and a false beard. For example, he allegedly bungled the execution of Macri in Winnipeg in January 1907.¹ At an execution in Morden, Manitoba in December 1907 the hangman registered at a hotel under the assumed name, “G. Mick,” from Winnipeg, and he wore a false beard and moustache at the hanging, and by his speech was supposedly a Ruthenian, who disappeared promptly after the hanging.² The *Winnipeg Tribune* stated that he registered at the hotel as “G. Miek.”³ We suspect that the hangman was actually Holmes.

In July 1909, “Holmes” was hired by the sheriff in Edmonton when Radclive suddenly failed to appear as promised. Here again was the hangman with a mask and false moustache and

¹ “Macri Died,” *Manitoba Free Press*, Jan. 16, 1907, at 18.

² “Hanged at Morden,” *Edmonton Bulletin*, Dec. 13, 1907, at 1.

³ “Murderer is Hanged,” *Winnipeg Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1907, at 1 and 5.

here again was a bungled execution as the noose was not properly fixed, so when the body shot down, the noose slipped, and Barrett slowly died of strangulation.⁴

The next hanging in 1909 was in Winnipeg in August and Radclive again failed to show up. The hangman's identity was kept a secret, but one of the local papers noted that he was masked.⁵ This time the execution was not bungled, as the victim's neck was broken and "death was instantaneous."⁶ Given the masking, we assume that the hangman was likely Holmes.

While Radclive travelled to New Westminster, B.C. for a hanging in late December and then returned to Toronto for a hanging on Dec. 23, Holmes was again the hangman in Edmonton on Dec. 21. This time he was described as coming from Winnipeg.⁷ Nothing was said about being masked, and the hanging apparently went smoothly without a bungle.⁸

Arthur Ellis arrived in 1910 and soon became the alternative hangman to Radclive, but in the early months of the year, Holmes, wearing a black mask and false moustache, was the hangman in Regina in February,⁹ and in Prince Albert in March.¹⁰ The Prince Albert hanging was probably botched by Holmes as press reports noted that the victim had gained 40 pounds in jail and weighed 189 pounds and had died of strangulation, which implies that Holmes fearing decapitation had erred in giving the man too short a drop.¹¹

⁴ "Hangman Bungled," *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, July 14, 1909, at 8; "Barrett Hanged," *Winnipeg Tribune*, July 14, 1909, at 1.

⁵ "Doomed Murderer Refuses Sacrament," *Winnipeg Tribune*, Aug. 27, 1909, at 1 and 2.

⁶ "Pidhoney Paid," *Manitoba Free Press*, Aug. 27, 1909, at 6; "Murderer Pidhoney Hanged," *Montreal Gazette*, Aug. 28, 1909, at 1.

⁷ "Hangman in the City," *Edmonton Bulletin*, Dec. 18, 1909, at 10.

⁸ "Execution," *Edmonton Bulletin*, Dec. 21, 1909, at 1.

⁹ "Hainer Died," *Regina Leader-Post*, Feb. 18, 1910, at 3.

¹⁰ "Walks to Scaffold," *Edmonton Journal*, March 10, 1910, at 8.

¹¹ "John Mesci Dies," *Winnipeg Tribune*, March 10, 1910, at 2; "Mesci Hanged," *Calgary Herald*, March 10, 1910, at 1.

While Ellis was establishing his reputation in Ontario in 1910 and Radcliffe was still the hangman in British Columbia, Holmes was again the hangman at Fort Saskatchewan in Alberta in August. He was said to have come from Regina.¹² A side story of the masked hangman appeared in the *Edmonton Journal*:

During his stay at the Fort the official hangman has made himself so obnoxious to the Mounted Police authorities, and his assumption of authority has been so greatly resented by the force that today he called down on himself a reprimand from Inspector McDonnell for his unwarranted attempt to assume control of the prison yard.¹³

This sounds a lot like the hangman could have been Radcliffe or Ellis, but unless the press reports were wrong about being Holmes from Regina and being masked, we can only conclude that he was Holmes, displaying the same pompous character as Radcliffe and Ellis were famous for.

The identity of the hangman at Calgary in June 1911, and at Prince Albert in November 1911, was kept secret and so it is possible that Holmes was responsible for these executions.¹⁴ In any event, it was not till May of 1913 that Holmes was mentioned again, this time in Owen Sound, Ontario. The hangman was said to be "Albert" Holmes or "John" Holmes, now from Ottawa.¹⁵ The local *Owen Sound Sun* included the following information which must be taken with a great deal of scepticism:

Jack Holmes, the hangman, is a youth of about twenty- to twenty-one years, tall and slightly built. His face is marked with a red rash on the chin and cheek and his level eyes are a steely gray, cold and dispassionate. His home is near Ottawa. He has officiated at hangings in Lethbridge and Manitoba and two or three in the Western States, so that he was no novice. As he was coming away, with the black cap

¹² "Goes to Scaffold," *Edmonton Bulletin*, Aug. 2, 1910, at 1; "King Paid," *Edmonton News-Plaindealer*, Aug. 2, 1910, at 1.

¹³ "Hangman Obnoxious," *Edmonton Journal*, Aug. 2, 1910, at 1.

¹⁴ "Alak Pays," *Regina Leader-Post*, Nov. 29, 1911, at 1; "Alak Hanged," *Winnipeg Tribune*, Nov. 28, 1911, at 1; "Wife Murderer," *Edmonton Bulletin*, Nov. 29, 1911, at 1.

¹⁵ "Ottawa Man Executioner," *Ottawa Journal*, May 27, 1913, at 1; "Paid the Penalty," *Hamilton Spectator*, May 27, 1913, at 16; "Love's Statement," *Toronto Star*, May 27 at 1 and 16.

and straps rolled up in a little ball which he tossed up and caught like a little boy with a ball, the *Sun* said to him, "Apparently this isn't your first job!" His smiling reply was, "Oh, no! By no means." He had appeared no more concerned than if he had been coming out from dinner. He walked with a swagger and cocky tilt to his bared, close clipped head.¹⁶

If this report on his age is accurate, it may be that we have two bungling hangmen called Holmes. Is this the same fellow who was hanging people back in 1907, or is this a different younger man?

In January of 1914, Holmes was the hangman in Brantford, Ontario, and again he shovelled a load of questionable information to a local journalist the day before the hanging. Holmes was first described as "a young man, slight of build, medium height, with a sallow complexion and pimple spotted face... He dresses carelessly... appears to be a man of average intelligence... speaks good English and evidently has had a fair public school education."¹⁷ Holmes then provided information about himself that was probably a tall tale told by a shameless liar:

Born in England, where his mother, sisters and brother still reside unconscious of the fact that his hand has pulled the lever which has sent 28 men to face their Maker, the executioner, now 22 years of age, emigrated to the United States when he was about 15 years of age... He has many aliases and never since coming to Canada two or three years ago has he used his right name... In Canada he has no permanent home. Formerly he resided in Winnipeg...but for the past months he has been making Ottawa his headquarters... It was while in the state of Georgia that he officiated at his first execution... Holmes went on to tell how he had afterward officiated as hangman at 20 executions in the state of Georgia... It was in 1909, while still a resident of Georgia, that he first applied for a position as hangman in this country...¹⁸

¹⁶ "Walks Unflinchingly from Cell to Gallows," *Owen Sound Sun*, May 27, 1913, at 1 and 4.

¹⁷ "Hangman Talks About His Duties," *Brantford Expositor*, Jan. 22, 1914, at 1 and 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Since Holmes claimed that he had hung 8 people in Canada, the journalist pressed him to list the eight, or perhaps the journalist reconstructed the list himself. Ignoring the four hangings attributed to Holmes in 1907 and ignoring bungled hangings in Saskatchewan and elsewhere attributed to Holmes, he now claimed to have hanged five in Alberta and three in Ontario. The inconsistencies on the list were obvious. While supposedly his first hanging was Barrett in Edmonton in July of 1909, appearing on the list was an earlier hanging in Kenora in January of 1909 that was actually attributed to an assistant of Radcliffe named Thompson in the press reports. Another hanging in North Bay, Ontario, attributed to Thompson, now appeared as supposedly the work of Holmes, who claimed he had never botched a job, although he admitted that on one occasion he had underestimated the weight of the prisoner whose feet almost touched the ground. He claimed he did not drink before or after a hanging.¹⁹

The news report went on to reveal the attitude of Holmes toward the job of hanging people. Holmes asserted that he never had any second thoughts, the responsibility of the hanging being with the judge and jury. He had not yet hanged a woman but would not hesitate in doing so. Part of the conversation was as follows:

Q: Do you never have any qualms of conscience over the work in which you are engaged?

A: None whatsoever, why should I have? I merely carry out the laws of your country and do not see why there should be anymore disgrace attached to the position of hangman than to that of the judge or jurors who convict and sentence the man... someone has to do the job, and if I didn't do it someone else would. I don't see why I shouldn't get the money as well as any other person...²⁰

In 1914, in addition to the hanging in January in Brantford, Ontario, Holmes was listed as the hangman in two cases in Nova Scotia and may have been the hangman in a third case. We have already noted in Chapter five, that Holmes may have been the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

executioner at one of the worst bungles in Canadian history, namely the case of Jasper Collins in Calgary in February 1914, where the body was cut down before the victim was dead.²¹

Despite the bungles, Holmes was quite successful in competing against Ellis for hanging jobs in 1915. Ellis's absence and reports of his resignation led sheriffs to hire Holmes in at least six cases for the year, and probably more where the victim's sentence was commuted at the last minute. For example, Mr. John E. F. Holmes was reportedly the hangman in Kamloops, B.C., on July 9, 1915,²² and in Simcoe, Ontario, on December 18, 1915.²³ Thereafter Holmes again travelled to Kamloops, B.C. where he was the hangman on Dec. 23, 1915. Here he was called John Holmes.²⁴

After having such success competing with Ellis in 1915, Holmes, now giving his address as Box 385, Montreal, wrote to the Deputy Minister of Justice in Ottawa on January 9, 1916, asking to be informed when a capital case came up for review, so that he could contact the sheriff of the jurisdiction involved. Holmes inflated his body count and claimed that he had officiated at 71 executions.²⁵ The Deputy Minister of Justice wrote back informing Holmes that hangings were completely a matter for the provincial authorities and sheriffs, and the Department would not give out any information to Holmes as to potential upcoming hangings.²⁶ At the same time in January, 1916, J.M. Holmes from Ottawa wrote to the North West Mounted Police seeking to be the hangman in the West for the force. He again claimed that he had been the hangman in 71 cases over the last four years.²⁷ The reply was that the NWMP did

²¹ See Dale Brawn, *Last Moments: Sentenced to Death in Canada* (Quagmire Press, 2011) at 261-265.

²² "Death Penalty," *Kamloops Inland Sentinel*, July 9, 1915, at 1.

²³ "Shelley Hanged," *Hamilton Spectator*, Dec. 20, 1915, at 5.

²⁴ "Execution of an American," *Kamloops Inland Sentinel*, Dec. 23, 1915, at 8; "Clinger Hanged," *Nanaimo News*, Dec. 23, 1915, at 1.

²⁵ National Archives of Canada, RG 13-A-2, Volume #199, File # 1916-35.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ National Archives of Canada, RG 18-A-1, Volume # 497, File # 21-16.

not hire a hangman, but rather this was up to the sheriff of the district in which the murder took place.²⁸

As we have noted, Arthur Ellis managed to regain his position as the de facto hangman for Canada in the following years. The only reference to Holmes as hangman in 1916 occurred in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba, on March 2, where he was called John Holmes.²⁹ This execution was said to have gone smoothly. On June 2, 1916, Ellis was in Winnipeg for a hanging and on the same day there was a hanging in Sudbury, Ontario. Ellis obviously could not be at two places at once, so who was the hangman in Sudbury? The hanging received no press coverage, and so we do not know, but it could have been Holmes.

In January 1916, John E. F. Holmes wrote to the Attorney General of Ontario with a proposal to put Arthur Ellis out of business.³⁰ The proposal contained several untruths and indicated the manipulative character of the man. While he had claimed just a few months ago to have executed 71, he now claimed 54 "experiences" in Canada and the United States and gave Sheriff Thomson of Owen Sound and Sherriff Ross of Brantford as references. Holmes proposed that each province should pay him a retainer of \$370 a year and then he would perform all the hangings in the province at his own expense, and if he was not available, he would hire a substitute at his own expense. He then added the bald-faced lie that three other provinces had already agreed to this proposal, but "all must agree on it, or it will have to be dropped."³¹

An official at the Department of the Attorney-General wrote back to Holmes on March 20, 1916, asking which three provinces had agreed to the proposal.³² Of course, there is no reply from Holmes in the file. Furthermore, when the proposal

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ "Austrian Pays," *Saskatoon Star*, March 2, 1916, at 1.

³⁰ Archives of Ontario, RG 4-32 (1916) file #444, A.G. Central Registry. Letter from Holmes to Attorney General, March 9, 1916.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Ontario Archives, *Ibid.* Letter to Holmes from Department of Attorney-General, March 20, 1916.

by Holmes was passed on to the lawyer representing the Sheriffs of Ontario Association, the lawyer noted that the sheriffs would be happy with having an official hangman on retainer who was competent and hopefully sober. However, the lawyer had heard from one of the sheriffs that Holmes was not such a man. Lawyer, R. J. Maclellan wrote to Deputy Attorney General Cartwright that, “the sheriff in question was not at all favourably impressed and felt that he would not like to trust him. He has heard that he made a botch of things more than once and therefore this sheriff, expressing his personal opinion, would not like to see this particular appointment made.”³³ It was also Maclellan’s understanding that Arthur Ellis would like a retainer from the Ontario government for \$500 or \$600.

Holmes continued his attempt to compete with Arthur Ellis and wrote another letter to the Attorney General of Ontario dated January 15, 1917, asking to be notified of death sentences and seeking a general retainer to be the official hangman for Ontario.³⁴ This time he wrote from Montreal giving his contact information as Box 385, Montreal. He shamelessly lied that the Department of Justice had previously notified him as to each of the upcoming hangings, and that for the past seven years he had officiated at every execution in Quebec and Nova Scotia.

³³ Ontario Archives, *Ibid.* Letter of R. J. Maclellan to Deputy A.G., March 24, 1916.

³⁴ Ontario Archives, *Ibid.* Handwritten letter from Holmes to A.G. of Ontario, Jan 15, 1917.

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Confidential / 16 P O Box 385
Montreal Jan 15/17

The Attorney General
Province of Ontario

ATTY. GEN'L'S DEPT.
RECD. & AOKD.
JAN 18 1917

Dear Sir-

For some years past, I have been receiving from the Remission Branch of the Department of Justice, notification of persons under sentence of death. I have now been informed that henceforth, this information is to be procured from the various Attorney-Generals.

For past seven years I have officiated at every execution in Quebec and N.S. and should be glad to be retained for your province. While the appointment is usually made by the Sheriff, it is generally on instructions from your Office.

The fee is \$50⁰⁰ and expenses from
Montreal /

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Montreal, and I shall be glad to have
 a general retained for your Province.
 References can be given to Sheriffs of
 Montreal - Valleyfield - Sherbrooke St John's
 Halifax and others if necessary, as to
 efficiency and dependability.
 Shaking you in anticipation
 Believe me
 Yours faithfully
 J. M. Holmes

Someone replied to Holmes from the Attorney General's Department that the matter of hiring the hangman was completely up to each sheriff.³⁵

Not having success at being retained on a salary bases, Holmes seems to have disappeared from the hanging business for some time, leaving Ellis largely in charge. Several years later in 1918 there was a hanging in Portage la Prairie which was horribly bungled. The hangman was said to be "Elliott" from Toronto, an experienced hangman who claimed this was his first bungle. There are no references to any Elliott hanging anyone else in Canada, and we may assume that the bungling hangman was Holmes who had successfully hanged someone in Portage a few years previously.

As we have previously noted, there is a possibility that the horrible bungle of Benny Swim in 1922, which involved cutting down the body before Swim was dead, and then hanging him a

³⁵ Ontario Archives, *Ibid.* Letter from Department to Holmes, Jan. 18, 1917.

second time, might have involved a drunken Holmes using the name "Doyle."³⁶

While news reports of hanging and hangman might well be unreliable, a hanging in Kenora, Ontario, in June of 1923, reportedly was performed by hangman Holmes.³⁷ Overall, we estimate that "Holmes" executed 24 people in Canada. He seems to have bungled most of the cases. The usual combination of pathological lying, grandiosity, manipulation, and lack of any emotional empathy for the victims of his killings point to a psychopathic personality.

³⁶ "Holmes Will Act as Hangman Tomorrow," *Montreal Gazette*, Oct. 5, 1922, at 9.

³⁷ "Execution at Kenora," *Montreal Gazette*, June 14, 1923, at 2; "Foreigner Pays," *Montreal Star*, June 23, 1923, at 6.