

# BERRY JAMES

MY EXPERIENCES AS AN  
EXECUTIONER

James Berry

**My Experiences as an Executioner**

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**Berry J.**

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# James Berry

## My Experiences as an Executioner

### INTRODUCTION

The intention of both the author and the editor of this little book has been to set forth, as plainly and as simply as possible, certain facts and opinions with regard to what is undoubtedly a most important subject – the carrying out of the ultimate sentence of the law. While facts have not been in any way shirked or misrepresented, much that is horrible in detail has been suppressed; so that people who may be tempted to take up the book in search of ghastly descriptive writing, are warned at the outset that they will be disappointed.

It is believed that a publication of Mr. Berry's experiences will correct many errors and misconceptions as to the way in which capital sentences are carried out in England; and that it will lead to a consideration of the whole subject, from a practical, rather than from a sentimental, point of view.

The management, and, if possible, the regeneration of the criminal classes, is one of the most serious tasks that civilisation has to face; and those who undertake such a task require all the light that can possibly be thrown upon the subject. The public executioner has many and special opportunities of studying the criminal classes, and of knowing their attitude and feelings with regard to that capital punishment which civilisation regards as its strongest weapon in the war against crime. When, as in the case of Mr. Berry, several years' experience in various police forces can be added to his experience as an executioner, the man who has had these exceptional opportunities of studying criminals and crime, must necessarily have gathered much information and formed opinions that are worthy of attention.

Therefore, this book has a higher aim than the mere recording of the circumstances and incidents of the most painful business in which a man can engage. The recording is necessary, for without the facts before them, readers could not form their own opinions; but it is hoped that the facts will be read with more than mere curiosity, that the readers will be led to take a personal interest in the weak and erring brethren who form the criminal classes, the canker-worm of our social system.

An explanation of how this book was written may not be out of place. The statements are *entirely* those of the author, though in many cases the words are those of the editor, whose task consisted of re-arranging and very greatly condensing the mass of matter placed in his hands by Mr. Berry. The narrative and descriptive portion of the work is taken from a series of note-books and a news-cuttings book kept by Mr. Berry; who includes the most minute particulars in his diaries. One chapter – “My First Execution” – is word for word as written in the diary, with the exception that a few whole pages of descriptive detail are omitted, and indicated by points (thus...) The chapter “On Capital Punishment,” and portions of other chapters, were not written out at length by Mr. Berry, but were supplied in the form of full notes, and the principal portions dictated. In every case, however, the opinions are those of the author, with whom the editor is by no means in entire personal agreement.

## CHAPTER I

### The Executioner at Home. By H. Snowden Ward

James Berry, though regarded by some people as a monster, and by others as a curiosity, is very much like any other working-man when one comes to know him. He is neither a paragon of perfection, nor an embodiment of all vice – though different classes of people have at times placed him under both these descriptions. His character is a curious study – a mixture of very strong and very weak traits, such as is seldom found in one person. And although one of his weak points is his Yorkshire open-hearted frankness, which he tries to control as much as possible, the man who has only been with him a few days has not by any means got to the depths of his character. His wife has said to me more than once: – “I have lived with him for nineteen years, but I don’t thoroughly know him yet,” and one can quite understand it, as his character is so many-sided and in some respects contradictory. This partly accounts for the varying and contradictory views of his personality which have been published in different papers.

His strongest point is his tender-heartedness. Perhaps this may be doubted, but I state the fact from ample knowledge. Mr. Berry’s occupation was not by any means taken up from a love of the ghastly, or any pleasure in the work. Even in his business as executioner his soft-heartedness has shown itself, for though it has never caused him to flinch on the scaffold, it has led him to study most carefully the science of his subject, and to take great pains to make death painless.

Of this trait I have had many proofs. For instance, I know that on some occasions when he has been due to start for a place of execution, his repugnance to the task has been so great that his wife and her mother have been obliged to use the greatest possible force of persuasion to prevent him shirking his duty. Another instance of this characteristic appeared when I was overhauling his manuscript and cuttings for the purpose of this book. I came across a copy of a poem “For one under Sentence of Death,” and made some enquiry about it. I found that the lines were some which Mr. Berry had copied from a Dorchester newspaper, and that for a long time it had been his habit to make a copy of them, to send to the chaplain in every case where a prisoner was sentenced to death, with a request that they should be read to the prisoner. This was continued until the governor of one of the gaols resented the sending of such a poem to the chaplain, and intimated that in all cases the chaplain was best able to judge of what was necessary for the condemned man, and did not need any outside interference. After this Mr. Berry sent no more poems, but he kept one or two copies by him, and I think that it may interest the reader.

#### LINES FOR ONE UNDER SENTENCE OF DEATH

My brother, – Sit and think,  
While yet some hours on earth are left to thee;  
Kneel to thy God, who does not from thee shrink,  
And lay thy sins on Christ, who died for thee.

He rests His wounded hand  
With loving kindness, on thy sin-stained brow,  
And says – “Here at thy side I ready stand,  
To make thy scarlet sins as white as snow.

“I did not shed My blood

For sinless angels, good and pure and true;  
For hopeless sinners flowed that crimson flood,  
My heart's blood ran for you, my son, for you.

“Though thou hast grieved me sore,  
My arms of mercy still are open wide,  
I still hold open Heaven's shining door,  
Come then – take refuge in My wounded side.

“Men shun thee – but not I,  
Come close to me – I love my erring sheep.  
My blood can cleanse thy sins of blackest dye,  
I understand, if thou canst only weep.”

Words fail thee – never mind,  
Thy Saviour can read e'en a sigh, or tear;  
I came, sin-stricken heart, to heal and bind,  
And died to save thee – to My heart thou'rt dear.

Come now – the time is short,  
Longing to pardon and to bless, I wait;  
Look up to Me, My sheep so dearly bought,  
And say, “forgive me, e'er it is too late.”

#### *E. B. C.*

The soft-heartedness of Mr. Berry's nature would quite unfit him for his post if it were not that he possesses a strong resolution, and can control his feelings when he finds duty warring against inclination.

In personal appearance he is a kindly-looking man, thickset and muscular, with a florid complexion and sandy hair. He stands 5ft. 8½in. high, weighs 13 stones, and does not look the sort of man to willingly injure anyone. The appearance of his right cheek is somewhat marred by a long, deep scar, extending downwards from the corner of the eye, which has given rise to one or two sensational stories from the pens of imaginative newspaper men. The scar was caused by the kick of a horse which he attempted to ride when he was a boy about ten years old. The horse was young, unbroken and vicious, and its kick narrowly missed being fatal. Across his forehead is another great scar, the result of a terrible blow received when arresting a desperate character in a Bradford public-house. The man was one of a gang of six, and his comrades helped him to violently resist arrest, but Berry stuck to his captive until he was safely locked in the Bradford Town Hall, and the six men all had to “do time” for the assault.

Mr. Berry was born on February 8th, 1852, at Heckmondwike, in Yorkshire. His father was a wool-stapler, holding a good position in the district. Young Berry's education was obtained at the Wrea Green School, near Lytham, where he gained several prizes for his writing and drawing. His writing ability was useful to him later in life, when he was employed by a lithographer, to write “copper-plate” transfers. In 1874 he was married, and has had six children. Of these, two boys and a girl died while young, and two boys and a girl are living.

The “executioner's office,” as Mr. Berry likes to call it on his official communications, is a house just off City Road, Bradford. It is one of six owned by Mr. Berry. When he first took the position of executioner some of his neighbours were so prejudiced against the work, that they refused to live “next door to a hangman,” and as landlords naturally object to losing two or three tenants for

the sake of keeping one, Mr. Berry was obliged to move once or twice, and came to the conclusion that he had better be his own landlord. The prejudice which then existed has been lived down, and there is now no difficulty in letting neighbouring houses to respectable tenants.

The house in Bilton Place is furnished just the same as hundred of other houses in the district that are occupied by better-class artisans, and there is nothing at all gloomy or gruesome about the place. In fact, there is no indication of the business of the occupant. There are, in the front room, two frames of small photographs, which are really portraits of some of the murderers who have been executed by Mr. Berry, but the frames bear no inscription. In a glass-fronted sideboard, too, there are a few handsome electro goblets, cruet stands and similar articles that have been given to Mr. Berry by some of his admirers, but no one would connect them with his business. In drawers and cupboards about the place there are (or were, for they have now gone to Madame Tussaud's) a large number of relics and mementos of executions and other incidents. Amongst them is the great knife, once used by the executioner of Canton for the beheading of nine pirates. This was obtained in exchange for a rope with which several persons had been hanged. These relics were all stowed well away, and were not by any means "on show," though the executioner did not object to producing them if a personal friend wished to see them.

In conversation Mr. Berry is fluent, apt in anecdote and illustration, and full of a subtle Yorkshire humour which he cannot entirely shake off even when talking on serious subjects. He has a very good memory for facts, and is very observant, so that he is always ready with a personal experience or observation on almost any topic. His tastes are simple. His favourite occupations are fishing and otter hunting, of both of which sports he is passionately fond. Frequently when going to an execution in a country town he takes his rod and basket, and gets a half-day's fishing before or after the execution. He seems to like the sport on account of its quiet and contemplative nature, and says that he enjoys the fishing even if he never gets a nibble.

At home Mr. Berry devotes himself largely to mechanical pursuits. At the present time he is working a patent which he bought recently, and has the topmost room of his house fitted as a mechanic's workshop, with lathe, bench, etc. In spare time he devotes a good deal of attention to his pigeons and rabbits, for he is an ardent fancier, and keeps a large number of live pets.

## CHAPTER II

### How I became an Executioner

It has been said by some of those goody-goody moralists who are always anxious to point out sad examples of the depravity of man, and who are not very particular about the genuineness of the “facts” with which they support their theories, that I was fond, even as a boy, of revelling in the revolting details of crime, and that I was a reader of all the police literature that I could obtain. Such statements are absolutely false. As a boy I was not a great reader on any subject, and the proceedings of the courts and the careers of criminals were in no wise interesting to me until I became a member of the Bradford Borough Police Force, in 1874.

When a policeman I strove to do my duty as well as any man could, and often wished that I could make some better provision for my wife and family, but I never so much as dreamed of becoming an executioner, or took any interest in the subject of hanging.

One day, when I called at a friend’s house that was on my beat, it happened that Mr. Marwood was staying there, and I was introduced to him, and a few days later I again met him and spent an evening in his company. He was a quiet, unassuming man, kindly and almost benevolent in his manner, who was in no way ashamed of his calling, though very reticent about speaking of it, excepting to those whom he knew well. He keenly felt the odium with which his office was regarded by the public, and aimed, by performing his duties in a satisfactory manner, and by conducting his private life respectably, at removing the stigma which he felt was undeserved. At times the attitude of the public towards him was very keenly felt, and I well remember one time when this subject was the topic of conversation at the supper table, that he remarked to a gentleman present, “my position is not a pleasant one,” and turning to me, repeated with emphasis, “no! it is *not* a pleasant one.” The words seemed to come from the depths of a full heart, and I shall never forget their pathos and feeling. Altogether, Mr. Marwood never encouraged me in any way to think of his calling with feelings of envy, and though he did give me all particulars of his methods and apparatus, it was merely because I asked all sorts of questions from natural curiosity.

It was only when in company with Mr. Marwood, with whom I became quite friendly, that I ever contemplated the question of capital punishment. At other times it was far from my thoughts. My application for the post, which was left vacant at his death, was, therefore, in no way the result of a personal desire for the work or of a pre-conceived plan. I was simply driven to it by the poverty-stricken condition of my family, which I was unable to keep in reasonable comfort upon my earnings (I was then engaged as a boot-salesman, at a small salary). I knew that in the line on which I was then working there was no prospect of a material improvement in my position; I knew that I was a man of no extraordinary ability, so that my chances of rising were few, and I looked upon the vacancy of the executioner’s post as being probably my one chance in life, my “tide in the affairs of men.” Personally I had a great distaste for the work, though I did not consider it in any way dishonourable or degrading, and I had to weigh my family’s wants against my personal inclination. It seemed to me at the time that my duty was clear, so I made application for the vacant position.

It may be said that I decided to better myself without any regard to the means of that betterment, or to my fitness for the position; but when I carefully considered the matter, in the few days before sending in my application, I was convinced that I could do the work as well as anyone, and that I could make practical improvements in some of the methods and somewhat improve the lot of those appointed to die. This last consideration finally decided me.

I made application to the Sheriffs of London and Middlesex in September, 1883. There were some 1400 applicants for the post, but after waiting some time I received the following letter intimating that I was one of the few from amongst whom the final choice was to be made: —

*London.*

The Sheriffs of London and Middlesex will be at the Old Bailey on Monday next, the 24th instant, at 2 o'clock p.m., for the purpose of seeing the selected applicants for the post of Executioner.

If you (as one of those selected for consideration) are disposed to attend at the above time and place you are at liberty, at your own expense, to do so.

*19th September, 1883.*

*To Mr. J. Berry.*

Of course, I kept the appointment, was duly examined, amongst some nineteen others, and was told that the chosen executioner would be communicated with.

My action in applying for the post was not at all in accordance with the wishes of my relatives, who did everything they possibly could to prevent my obtaining it. Some of my friends and neighbours wrote, either through solicitors or personally, to the sheriffs. Certain members of my own family petitioned the Home Secretary to dismiss the application, on the ground that if the appointment was given to me, a hitherto respectable family would be disgraced. I believe that it was mainly in consequence of these representations that I was passed over, and the post given to Mr. Bartholomew Binns. Upon myself the opposition had an effect that was not intended. It made me devote considerable thought and care to the details of the work of an executioner, and made me determine that if ever the opportunity again offered I should do my best to secure the work. During the four months that Mr. Binns held the appointment I had consultations with some eminent medical men, and when, much earlier than I expected, a new executioner was wanted, I was very well grounded in the theory of the subject. It was in March, 1884, that the magistrates of the city of Edinburgh wanted a man to execute Vickers and Innes, two poachers. The Sheriffs of London and Middlesex gave me a recommendation, and I addressed the following letter to the Magistrates of Edinburgh: —

***March 13th, 1884***

**52, Thorpe Street, Shearbridge,**

**Bradford, Yorkshire**

To the Magistrates of the City of Edinburgh.

Dear Sirs,

I beg most respectfully to apply to you, to ask if you will permit me to conduct the execution of the two Convicts now lying under sentence of death at Edinburgh. I was very intimate with the late Mr. Marwood, and he made me thoroughly acquainted with his system of carrying out his work, and also the information which he learnt from the Doctors of different Prisons which he had to visit to carry out the last sentence of the law. I have now one rope of his which I bought from him at Horncastle, and have had two made from it. I have also two Pinioning straps made from his, also two leg straps. I have seen Mr. Calcraft execute three convicts at Manchester 13 years ago, and should you think fit to give me the appointment I would endeavour to merit your patronage. I have served 8 years in Bradford & West Riding Police Force, and resigned without a stain on my character, and could satisfy you as to my abilities and fitness for the appointment. You can apply to Mr. Jas.

Withers, Chief Constable, Bradford, also to the High Sheriff for the City of London, Mr. Clarence Smith, Mansion House Buildings, 4, Queen Victoria Street, London, E.C., who will testify as to my character and fitness to carry out the Law. Should you require me I could be at your command at 24 hours' notice. Hoping these few lines will meet with your approval. I remain, Sirs,  
*Your Most Obedient Servant,*

*James Berry.*  
*To The Chief Magistrates,*

*Borough of Edinburgh,*  
*Scotland.*

P.S. An answer would greatly oblige as I should take it as a favour.

A brief correspondence followed, and on March 21st I received the following letter from the Magistrates' Clerk:

*City Chambers, Edinburgh,*  
*21st March, 1884.*

Sir,

With reference to your letters of the 13th and 15th instant, I am now directed by the Magistrates to inform you that they accept the offer you have made of your services to act as Executioner here on Monday, the 31st March current, on condition (1) that you bring your Assistant with you, and (2) that you and your Assistant arrive in Edinburgh on the morning of Friday the 28th instant, and reside within the Prison (at the Magistrates' expense) till after the Executions are over.

The Magistrates agree to your terms of ten guineas for each person executed and 20s. for each person executed to your Assistant, with second-class railway fares for both of you, you finding all necessary requisites for the Executions.

I am, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

*A Campbell,*  
*Deputy City Clerk.*

*Mr. James Berry,*  
*52, Thorpe Street,*

*Shearbridge,*  
*Bradford, Yorks.*

P.S. Please acknowledge receipt of this letter immediately. – A. C.

Of course, my reply was to the effect that I accepted the engagement, and although I felt many misgivings between that time and the day appointed for the execution, the work was carried through satisfactorily.

## CHAPTER III

### My First Execution.<sup>1</sup>

On the 21st March, 1884, I received a letter from the Magistrates' Clerk, City Chambers, Edinburgh, appointing me to act as Executioner on 31st March, 1884, at Calton Gaol; and that I was to provide all necessary appliances for carrying out the same. I undertook the duties; and on Thursday, March 27th, 1884, I departed from my home, Bradford, and made my way to the Midland Station, and booked 3rd class for Edinburgh, to carry out the execution of the Gorebridge murderers. I arrived at Waverley Station 4-20 p.m., and I hired a cab to drive me to the gaol. On arrival at the prison I was met at the doors by a good-looking warder, dressed in ordinary prison garb, and very courteous; and on entering the large portal gate, was asked my name, and after entering it down in the prison book, time, etc., he pulled a string, which rang the Governor's bell, and in a few moments I was confronted with the Governor, a very nice gentleman, of military appearance, and very good looking. After passing the usual conversation of the day, and the weather, and what kind of journey I had up from Bradford, he said after such a long journey I should require a good, substantial tea; and as soon as I had washed, and combed my hair, the tea was there, everything that could be desired. I sat down, and quite enjoyed my first Scotch meal in Bonnie Scotland...

[An examination of himself and his apparatus by the Governor, and his own inspection of the scaffold, are then described at length.]... I returned to my room, and stayed in during the daytime. I spent the Thursday night smoking and reading. At 10-0 o'clock p.m. I was escorted to my bedroom, a round house at the back part of the gaol, about 40 yards from the back entrance, a snug little place, and was informed that the last man who slept inside that room was Wm. Marwood, five years previous to my visit. He was then there for the same purpose as myself, but the culprit in his case was a poisoner. The chief warder, whom I spoke to, seemed to touch upon the subject with great reluctance, and said that he felt quite upset concerning the two culprits, and that he hoped they would get a reprieve. I could see in his countenance a deep expression of grief, which was making him look no better for his occupation... I sat me down on my bed after he had gone, locked my door, and could hear the trains depart from the station under the prison wall. I looked out of my window at the mail taking its departure for the South... I then knelt down and asked the Almighty to help me in my most painful task, which I had undertaken to carry out... [The night was much disturbed by the persistent smoking of the chimney.]... At 8-0 a.m. on the morning of the 28th, Friday, my breakfast was brought into my room, consisting of toast, ham and eggs, and coffee... At 10-0 a.m. on Friday morning, 28th March, 1884, I was introduced to the Magistrates and those responsible to see the execution carried out. I exposed my ropes and straps for their inspection, and, after a long and careful investigation of all points, they retired, quite satisfied with their visit. After that we paid another visit to the scaffold; the builders, not having finished the contract, were making a final touch to the new-erected shed to keep the execution private, and so that nobody outside could see. After testing it with bags of cement, same weight as the prisoners, and calculating the length of drop and its consequences, and other details, the committee departed. After, I filled my time walking about the prison grounds, and thinking of the poor men who were nearing their end, full of life, and knowing the fatal hour, which made me quite ill to think about. My meals did not seem to do me good, my appetite began to fall off, nothing felt good to me, everything that I put into my mouth felt like sand, and I felt as I wished I had never undertaken such an awful calling. I regretted for a while, and then I thought the public would only think I had not the pluck, and I would not allow my feelings to overthrow me, so I never gave way to such thoughts again. At 1-0 p.m. my dinner had arrived. I went up to my room, and sat down to

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is taken verbatim from Mr. Berry's note-book. Elisions are marked... – Ed.

pudding, beef, and vegetables, Scotch broth, and Cochrane & Cantrell's ginger ale. At that time I was a total abstainer; and I think it is the safest side, since what I have seen brought on by its sad consequences of taking too much alcoholic liquor... After tea, I had a chat with the warders coming off duty for the day. As they passed through the wicket gate, one remarked, "He looks a nice fellow for a job like that;" another says, "But he has a wicked eye," and he would be sure I could do it... I was left smoking in the lodge with the gate-keeper and one (warder) who stayed behind to see what he could hear me say; but I looked him over, and could see by the look of his face that I was not to say much in his presence, as he was built that way... I was left alone with the gate-keeper, and he looked like a straight, honest man, and he was like myself. He said, "I am glad you never began to say anything in the presence of that man, as he would stop until morning."... Saturday morning, 29th... After breakfast, had another interview with the Magistrates, and made the final arrangements. I tested the scaffold in their presence, with the ropes I was going to use on the Monday morning, with bags of cement, each bag being placed in the same places as was marked for the criminals; Vickers, weighing 10 stones and over, 8 feet (drop); and Innes, 9 stones, 10 feet. One bag represented one, and the other bag the other. I tested the ropes by letting off the traps, and down went the bags, and I got my calculations from that point, after seeing the ropes tested with the weight of cement. They all looked quite satisfied with the results. The rope was of Italian silk hemp, made specially for the work,  $\frac{5}{8}$  inch in thickness, and very pliable, running through a brass thimble, which causes dislocation and a painless death if rightly adjusted... After dining, I had the honour of having a drive in an open carriage (provided by the Governor) for a couple of hours, ... which I enjoyed, after being inside the prison gates since my arrival on Thursday... I gave my friend another night's visit at the lodge gate. We chatted on different topics of the day, and spent a nice, jovial evening together, smoking our weed; when a voice came to the door from a visitor from the offices of the town, that a reprieve was refused, and the law was to take its course, and I had a paper sent, with the words in full, Gorebridge Murderers, No Reprieve, which made me feel as bad as the condemned men for a time. But, what with the jolly gate-keeper, and another of the warders, I drove it out of my mind for a while... I retired to bed as usual at 10-0 p.m., after reciting my prayers, and thinking only another night and I shall be back with my wife and children. Saturday night I was very restless, and I did not feel so much refreshed for my night's sleep, as I was thinking of the poor creatures who was slumbering their hours away, in the prison cell, just beyond where I was laid, thinking of the dreadful fate that awaited them in such a short space of time. Two men, in full bloom, and had to come to such an untimely end, leaving wives and large families. One poor woman, I was informed, her mind was so affected that she was removed to the asylum, she took it so to heart... I retired to my day-room at the front entrance, where I only partook very sparingly of the nice and tempting ham and poached eggs put before me. I spent most of the forenoon looking round inside the prison, while the prisoners was at chapel, until dinner time. My dinner did not arrive until 4-0 o'clock, which is called late dinner, consisting of rice pudding, black currants, chicken, vegetables, potatoes, bread, and the usual teetotal beverages. I tried to make the best of it, but all that I could do was to look at it, as my appetite was gone; but I managed to eat a little before going to roost for the last night... I retired at 10-0 on Sunday, but only had cat naps all night, one eye shut and the other open, thinking and fancying things that never will be, and which is impossible. I was dressed and up at 5-0 a.m.; and felt more dead than alive as I had such a responsible part to play in the programme for the day. I fancied the ropes breaking; I fancied I was trembling, and could not do it; I fancied I fell sick just at the last push. I was nearly frantic in my mind, but I never let them know. 6-0 a.m. arrived. I heard the sound of the keys, clattering of doors, sliding of bolts. Breakfast had to be served earlier than usual. No prisoner allowed out of his cell until all was over. The public had begun to assemble on Calton Hill in groups. 7-0 a.m. arrived. I made my way to the scaffold, made my arrangements secure, and cleared the scaffold shed, the principal warder locking the door, not to be opened again until the procession enters for the great event of the day... At 7-45 the living group wended their way to the prison, and into the doctor's room, ready

for the last scene of the drama. The prisoners were brought face to face for the first time since their conviction. They kissed each other; and the scene was a very painful one, to see mates going to meet their end on the gallows. They were conducted to the room adjoining the doctor's room, and were in prayer with the two ministers in attendance after 8-5. I was called to do my duty. I was handed the warrant, which was made out by the judge who condemned them to die. I then proceeded to pinion the prisoners, previously shaking hands, bidding good-bye to this world. Both men seemed to feel the position very much. The procession was formed, headed by the High Bailiff, the Chaplain reading the litany for the dead. Both the prisoners walked without assistance to place of execution; they was at once placed under the beam on the drop, where everything was done as quick as lightning, and both culprits paid the highest penalty of the law... The magistrates, and doctors, and even the pressmen, admitted that the execution of the two men had been carried out in an humane manner as possibly could be, and that the poor fellows had not suffered the slightest pain in going through the execution; doctors giving me a testimonial as to the skilful way I had carried out the execution. 9-0 a.m., my breakfast arrived; and I was so much affected by the sad sight I had witnessed, that I had no appetite, but just merely drank a cup of coffee; but eating was out of the question.

As this was my first execution, I was naturally anxious to have an assurance from my employers that it had been satisfactorily carried out. The magistrates, the governor, and the surgeons all signified their satisfaction, in the following terms: —

**City Chambers, Edinburgh,**

**1st May, 1884**

We, the Magistrates who were charged with seeing the sentence of death carried into effect, on the 31st March last, on Robert F. Vickers and William Innes, in the Prison of Edinburgh, hereby certify that James Berry, of Bradford, who acted as Executioner, performed his duties in a thoroughly efficient manner; and that his conduct during the time he was here was in every way satisfactory.

*George Roberts, Magistrate.*

*Thomas Clark, Magistrate.*

**H.M. Prison, Edinburgh,**

**31 March, 1884**

I hereby certify that Mr. James Berry, assisted by Mr. Richard Chester, carried out a double Execution in this Prison on this date, and that the whole of his arrangements were gone about in a most satisfactory and skilful manner; and, further, that the conduct of Messrs. Berry and Chester, during the four days that they resided here, has been all that could be desired.

*J. E. Christie, Governor of H.M. Prison.*

*Edinburgh, 31st March, 1884.*

We hereby certify that we have this day witnessed the Execution of Vickers and Innes, and examined their bodies. We are of opinion that the Execution of

these men was admirably managed; and that the Executioner Berry and his Assistant conducted themselves in a cool, business-like manner, to our entire satisfaction; death being instantaneous.

*James A. Sidey, M.D.,  
Surgeon to H.M. Prison of Edinburgh.*

*Henry D. Littlejohn, M.D.,  
Surgeon of Police.*

I fear it seems like self-praise to publish these “testimonials,” but my work is so often maligned in common conversation, that I feel that it is a duty to give the opinions of a few of the men on the spot, who are most competent to judge of the matter. I believe that in every case where I have conducted an execution, the authorities have been perfectly satisfied, and I could produce numerous letters to that effect, but I will content myself with one, from the prison where I have had the greatest number of executions. It is dated a few years ago, but it would be endorsed now, and such testimony is very gratifying to me.

### **Strangeways Prison,**

**11th June, 1887**

During the period Mr. James Berry has been public Executioner he has always given satisfaction at this Prison in carrying out Capital Sentences, and his conduct has been marked by firmness and discretion.

*J. H. Purton, Jr.*

## CHAPTER IV

### My Method of Execution.

## CALCULATIONS AND APPARATUS

My method of execution is the outcome of the experience of my predecessors and myself, aided by suggestions from the doctors, and is rather the result of gradual growth than the invention of any one man.

### The Drop

The matter which requires the greatest attention in connection with an execution is the allowance of a suitable drop for each person executed, and the adjustment of this matter is not nearly so simple as an outsider would imagine.

It is, of course, necessary that the drop should be of sufficient length to cause instantaneous death, that is to say, to cause death by dislocation rather than by strangulation; and on the other hand, the drop must not be so great as to outwardly mutilate the victim. If all murderers who have to be hanged were of precisely the same weight and build it would be very easy to find out the most suitable length of drop, and always to give the same, but as a matter of fact they vary enormously.

In the earliest days of hanging it was the practice for the executioner to place his noose round the victim's neck, and then to haul upon the other end of the rope, which was passed through a ring on the scaffold pole until the culprit was strangled, without any drop at all. After a while the drop system was introduced, but the length of drop given was never more than three feet, so that death was still generally caused by strangulation, and not by dislocation, as it is at present. One after another, all our English executioners followed the same plan without thought of change or improvement, until Mr. Marwood took the appointment. He, as a humane man, carefully considered the subject, and came to the conclusion that the then existing method, though certain, was not so rapid or painless as it ought to be. In consequence he introduced his long-drop system with a fall of from seven to ten feet, which caused instantaneous death by severance of the spinal cord. I was slightly acquainted with Mr. Marwood before his death, and I had gained some particulars of his method from conversation with him; so that when I undertook my first execution, at Edinburgh, I naturally worked upon his lines. This first commission was to execute Robert Vickers and William Innes, two miners who were condemned to death for the murder of two game-keepers. The respective weights were 10 stone 4 lbs. and 9 stone 6 lbs., and I gave them drops of 8 ft. 6 in. and 10 ft. respectively. In both cases death was instantaneous, and the prison surgeon gave me a testimonial to the effect that the execution was satisfactory in every respect. Upon this experience I based a table of weights and drops. Taking a man of 14 stones as a basis, and giving him a drop of 8 ft., which is what I thought necessary, I calculated that every half-stone lighter weight would require a two inches longer drop, and the full table, as I entered it in my books at the time, stood as follows: —

	stones	§	ft.	0	in.
14	"	§	"	0	"
13½	"	§	"	2	"
13	"	§	"	4	"
12½	"	§	"	6	"
12	"	§	"	8	"
11½	"	§	"	10	"
11	"	9	"	0	"
10½	"	9	"	2	"
10	"	9	"	4	"
9½	"	9	"	6	"
9	"	9	"	8	"
8½	"	9	"	10	"
8	"	10	"	0	"

This table I calculated for persons of what I might call “average” build, but it could not by any means be rigidly adhered to with safety. For instance, I have more than once had to execute persons who had attempted suicide by cutting their throats, or who had been otherwise wounded about the neck, and to prevent re-opening the wounds I have reduced the drop by nearly half. Again, in the case of persons of very fleshy build, who often have weak bones and muscles about the neck, I have reduced the drop by a quarter or half of the distance indicated by the table. If I had not done so, no doubt two or three of those whom I have executed would have had their heads entirely jerked off, – which did occur in one case to which I shall again refer. In the case of persons with scrofulous tendencies it is especially necessary that the fall should be unusually short, and in these cases I have at times received useful hints from the gaol doctors.

Until November 30th, 1885, I worked to the scale already given, but on that date I had the awful experience above referred to, which caused me to reconsider the whole subject and to construct a general table on what I believe to be a truly scientific basis. The experience referred to is dealt with in another chapter. The man with whom it occurred was Robert Goodale, whom I executed at Norwich Castle. He weighed 15 stones, and the drop indicated by the first table would therefore be 7 ft. 8 in., but in consequence of his appearance I reduced it to 5 ft. 9 in., because the muscles of his neck did not appear well developed and strong. But even this, as it turned out, was not short enough, and the result was one of the most horrible mishaps that I have ever had. As will be seen from the full report of this case, in another chapter, the coroner exonerated me from all blame and testified to the careful way in which I had done my work; but I felt that it was most necessary to take every possible precaution against the recurrence of such an affair. I, therefore, worked out a table of the striking force of falling bodies of various weights falling through different distances; which table I give on [page 34](#). Working with this, I calculate that an “average” man, of any weight, requires a fall that will finish with a striking force of 24 cwt., and if the convict seems to require less, I mentally estimate the striking force that is necessary, and then by referring to the table I can instantly find the length of drop required. To see how this new table works out we may take the case of Robert Goodale again. As he weighed 15 stones his striking force with a drop of 2 feet would be 21 cwt. 21 lbs., or with a drop of 3 feet 26 cwt. 7 lbs., so that if he were a man of ordinary build the drop necessary would be 2 ft. 6 in. As I estimated from his appearance that his drop ought to have been about one-sixth less than the standard, I should have given him, working on this new table, about 2 ft. 1 in. instead of the 5 ft. 9 in. which was actually given. This is an extreme case, with a very heavy man, but all through the table it will be found that the drop works out shorter than in the first table. For instance, Vickers and Innes, the two Edinburgh murderers previously referred to would have had their drops reduced from 8 ft. 6 in. and 10 ft. to 5 ft. 6 in. and 7 ft. respectively if they had been treated according to the present revised table.

On August 20th, 1891, at Kirkdale Gaol, Liverpool, at the execution of John Conway, an attempt was made to dictate to me the length of drop, and a most unfortunate scene ensued. From

seeing the convict, Conway, I had decided that the drop ought to be 4 ft. 6 in., a little under the scale rate; and I was surprised and annoyed at being told by Dr. Barr, acting, I believe, under authority, that I was to give a drop of 6 ft. 9 in. I said that it would pull the man's head off altogether, and finally refused to go on with the execution if such a long drop were given. Dr. Barr then measured off a shorter drop, some ten or twelve inches shorter, but still much longer than I thought necessary, and I reluctantly agreed to go on. The result, everyone knows. The drop was not so long as to absolutely pull off the victim's head, but it ruptured the principal blood-vessels of the neck.

### **SCALE SHOWING THE STRIKING FORCE OF FALLING BODIES AT DIFFERENT DISTANCES**

Distance Falling in Feet Zero	8 Stone	9 Stone	10 Stone	11 Stone
	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.
1 Ft.	8 0 0	9 0 0	10 0 0	11 0 0
2 "	11 1 15	12 2 23	14 0 14	15 2 4
3 "	13 3 16	15 2 15	17 1 14	19 0 12
4 "	16 0 0	18 0 0	20 0 0	22 0 0
5 "	17 2 11	19 3 5	22 0 0	24 0 22
6 "	19 2 11	22 0 5	24 2 0	26 3 22
7 "	21 0 22	23 3 11	26 2 0	29 0 16
8 "	22 2 22	25 2 4	28 1 14	31 0 23
9 "	24 0 11	27 0 12	30 0 14	33 0 23
10 "	25 1 5	28 1 23	31 2 14	34 3 4

Distance Falling in Feet Zero	12 Stone	13 Stone	14 Stone	15 Stone
	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.
1 Ft.	12 0 0	13 0 0	14 0 0	15 0 0
2 "	16 3 22	18 1 12	19 3 2	21 0 21
3 "	20 3 11	22 2 9	24 1 8	26 0 7
4 "	24 0 0	26 0 0	28 0 0	30 0 0
5 "	26 1 16	28 2 11	30 3 5	33 0 0
6 "	29 1 16	31 3 11	34 1 5	36 3 0
7 "	31 3 5	34 1 22	37 0 11	39 3 0
8 "	34 0 5	36 3 15	39 2 25	42 2 7
9 "	36 0 16	39 0 18	42 0 19	45 0 21
10 "	37 3 22	41 0 12	44 1 2	47 1 21

Distance Falling in Feet Zero	16 Stone	17 Stone	18 Stone	19 Stone
	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.	Cw. Qr. lb.
1 Ft.	16 0 0	17 0 0	18 0 0	19 0 0
2 "	22 2 11	24 0 1	25 1 19	26 3 9
3 "	27 3 5	29 2 4	31 1 2	33 0 1
4 "	32 0 0	34 0 0	36 0 0	40 0 0
5 "	35 0 22	37 0 16	39 2 11	41 3 15
6 "	39 0 22	41 2 16	44 0 11	46 2 5
7 "	42 1 16	45 0 5	47 2 22	50 1 11
8 "	45 1 16	48 0 26	51 0 8	53 3 18
9 "	48 0 22	51 0 23	54 0 25	57 0 26
10 "	50 2 11	53 3 1	56 3 19	60 0 9

I do not know who was really responsible for the interference with my calculation, but do not think that the long drop was Dr. Barr's own idea, as the drop which I suggested was on the same system as he had previously commended, and was almost identical with the drop that would have worked out on the basis of his own recommendation in a letter to the *Times* some years ago. Dr. Barr's letter to me, written in 1884, was as follows: —

**1, St. Domingo Grove,**

**Everton,**

**Liverpool, Sept. 2nd, 1884**

Sir,

In compliance with your request I have pleasure in giving you a certificate as to the manner in which you conducted the execution of Peter Cassidy in H.M. Prison, Kirkdale. I may now report the statement which I gave in evidence at the Inquest, "that I had never seen an execution more satisfactorily performed." This was very gratifying to me.

Your rope was of excellent quality; fine, soft, pliable, and strong. You adjusted the ring, directed forwards in the manner in which I have recommended in my pamphlet, "Judicial Hanging." You gave a sufficient length of drop, considering the weight of the culprit, and completely dislocated the cervical vertebræ between the atlas and axis (first and second vertebræ). I have reckoned that the weight of the criminal, multiplied by the length of the drop, might range from 1120 to 1260 foot pounds, and I have calculated that this *vis viva* in the case of Cassidy amounted to 1140 foot pounds.

The pinioning and other details were carried out with due decorum, I hope, whoever be appointed to the post of public Executioner, may be prohibited from also performing the part of a "showman" to gratify a depraved and morbid public curiosity.

**James Barr, M.D.,**

**Medical Officer, H.M. Prison, Kirkdale**

*To Mr. James Berry.*

A few days after Conway's execution I received a letter from a gentleman in the South of London, shortly followed by a second letter, and as they throw some useful light upon the subject I give them in full – omitting the writer's name, as he does not wish it to be published.

*August 22nd, 1891.*

## **Re the Execution at Kirkdale**

Sir,

As the accident attending the execution on the 20th inst. at Kirkdale may be falsely, and very unjustly, charged to your account, and at the same time be brought forward by a mass of misguided people as a reason for the total abolition of capital punishment, I think the following remarks on the subject of hanging may not be out of place.

Some years ago, Dr. James Barr, medical officer at Kirkdale Gaol, published a letter in the *Times* regarding what he considered the proper length of drop. He said that the length of drop ought to be such as to produce a momentum of 2600 lbs., meaning by "momentum," the convict's weight multiplied by the velocity of his descent at the end of the fall. Now, in estimating the convict's weight, I conceive that you ought to leave out the weight (as far as you can guess it) of his head, because the weight of his head is supported by the noose when the jerk takes place, and, therefore, cannot affect the amount of pull, or strain, on the neck. From what Dr. Barr says regarding the 2600 lbs. momentum, it is easy, by a little mathematics, to deduce the following rule.

To find length of drop in feet, divide the number 412 by the square of the convict's weight of body in stones.

By the above rule I constructed the following table: —

Weight of body without head.		Length of drop.			
	stones	1	ft.	10	in.
15	stones	1	ft.	10	in.
14	"	2	"	2	"
13	"	2	"	6	"
12	"	2	"	11	"
11	"	3	"	5	"
10	"	4	"	2	"
9	"	5	"	1	"
8	"	6	"	6	"
7	"	8	"	5	"

Convict Conway's weight, you are reported to have said, was 11 stones 2 lbs. Leaving 1 stone for the weight of his head, which is perhaps more than sufficient, his hanging weight would be 10 stones 2 lbs, so that a drop of 4 feet and a few inches<sup>2</sup> would have been, according to the doctor's rule, quite enough for him. Regarding the value of the rule, I am, of course, unable to speak; nor do I know, from what I remember of the doctor's letter, that he meant the 2600 lbs. momentum to apply in all cases. Much depends on the convict's build, strength of neck, etc.

*Yours truly,*  
X. Y.

**(Second letter.)**

*August 25th, 1891.*

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<sup>2</sup> The length of drop you, yourself, thought sufficient, as I read in the *Standard*.

## **Re the Execution at Kirkdale**

Sir,

In constructing the table I sent you two days ago, I find that I have made an absurd mistake. It arose from my carelessly taking a stone weight as 16 lbs., instead of 14 lbs., which I beg you to allow me correct. Instead of the number 412, I ought to have given the number 539. The corrected rule based on Dr. Barr's momentum of 2600 lbs. is, therefore, as follows: – Length of drop, in feet, is found by dividing the number 539 by the square of the number of stones in weight of convict's body, exclusive of the weight of his head. Thus, if a convict weighs 11 stones altogether, and we take his head as 1 stone, we have length of drop =  $539/100 = 5.39$  feet (5 ft. 5 in. nearly).

The table, corrected, stands thus: —

Weight of body without head.		Length of drop.			
15	stones	2	ft.	5	in.
14	"	2	"	9	"
13	"	3	"	2	"
12	"	3	"	9	"
11	"	4	"	6	"
10	"	5	"	5	"
9	"	6	"	8	"
8	"	8	"	3	"
7	"	11	"	0	"

In allowing, in the case of convict Conway, who weighed 11 stones 2 lbs., 1 stone for the head, I may be allowing too much; it is a mere guess. If his head weighed 9 lbs., the drop ought to have been 4 ft. 10 in.

*Yours truly,*  
X. Y.

P.S. – A mistake of 3 or 4 lbs. in estimating weight of head makes, you will see, a considerable error in calculating the drop.

It will be seen that this calculation, which does not include the weight of the head in a man's hanging weight, works out the drop to a rather greater length than my own table, but the difference is only small, and I have always found my own table give quite sufficient drop.

## **The Rope**

The apparatus for carrying out the extreme penalty of the law is very simple. The most important item is the rope, which must necessarily possess certain properties if the death of the condemned person is to be instantaneous and painless.

For successful working the rope must, of course, be strong, and it must also be pliable in order to tighten freely. It should be as thin as possible, consistent with strength, in order that the noose may be free running, but of course, it must not be so thin as to be liable to outwardly rupture the blood vessels of the neck.

Before undertaking my first execution I gave careful consideration to the question of the most suitable class of rope, and after trying and examining many varieties, I decided upon one which I still use. It is made of the finest Italian hemp,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch in thickness. Before using a rope for an

execution, I thoroughly test it with bags of cement of about the weight of the condemned person, and this preliminary testing stretches the cord and at the same time reduces its diameter to  $\frac{5}{8}$  of an inch. The rope consists of 5 strands, each of which has a breaking strain of one ton dead weight, so that it would seem unnecessary to test it from any fear of its proving too weak, but the stretching and hardening which it undergoes in the testing makes it far more “fit” and satisfactory for its work than a new, unused rope would be.

It has been said that I use a rope with a wire strand down the centre, but the notion is so ridiculous that I should not refer to it if it were not that many people seem to believe it, and that more than once it has been stated in the newspapers. A rope with a wire strand would possess no possible advantage that I can see, and it would have so many practical disadvantages that I do not think anyone who had studied the matter would dream of using such a thing. At any rate I have not done so, and I know that neither Mr. Binns nor Mr. Marwood ever did. Mr. Marwood used ropes of about the same quality and thickness as my own, while Mr. Binns used a much thicker rope (about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inch diameter after use), of a rougher and less pliable class of hemp.

Until the commencement of 1890 I supplied my own ropes, some of which, however, were made to order of the Government, and I was able to use the same rope again and again. One I used for no less than sixteen executions, and five others I have used for twelve executions each. These are now in the possession of Madame Tussaud. At the beginning of 1890 a new rule was made under which a new rope is ordered to be supplied and used for most of the executions in England, and to be burned, together with the clothes of the person executed (which were formerly a perquisite of the executioner) by the prison officials immediately after the execution. In Scotland and Ireland I still provide my own ropes.

The rope I use is thirteen feet long and has a one-inch brass ring worked into one end, through which the other end of the rope is passed to form the noose. A leather washer which fits the rope pretty tightly, is used to slip up behind the brass ring, in order to prevent the noose slipping or slackening after it has been adjusted.

In using the rope I always adjust it with the ring just behind the left ear. This position I never alter, though of course, if there were any special reason for doing so, for instance, if the convict had attempted suicide and were wounded on the side of the throat, death could be caused by placing the ring under the chin or even behind the head. The position behind the ear, however, has distinct advantages and is the best calculated to cause instantaneous and painless death, because it acts in three different ways towards the same end. In the first place, it will cause death by strangulation, which was really the only cause of death in the old method of hanging, before the long drop was introduced. Secondly, it dislocates the vertebra, which is now the actual cause of death. And thirdly, if a third factor were necessary, it has a tendency to internally rupture the jugular vein, which in itself is sufficient to cause practically instantaneous death.

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