

THRILLING MYSTERY


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DEATH COMES for

The Fires of Hell Poured
Through the Body of
Hartman—but He Vowed
That He Could Not—
Would Not Die!

By
**WAYNE
ROGERS**

*Author of "Disappearing Death,"
"Her Lover from the Grave," etc.*



No human flesh

JOHN EMERSON was dying. Death was in his feverish eyes; in his gaunt and cadaverous face, ashen and contorted with pain. The sable wings were flapping low over the lonely mountain cottage to which he had fled to make his last stand. So low that the chill of their passing seeped into our bones as we paced the death chamber.

And Death had brought with it a terror that was unnerving. Emerson felt it. It mirrored itself in his panicky stare. Sally, his granddaughter, recognized it. Her strained face, her clasped, white-knuckled hands, her restless pacing told how completely it possessed her.

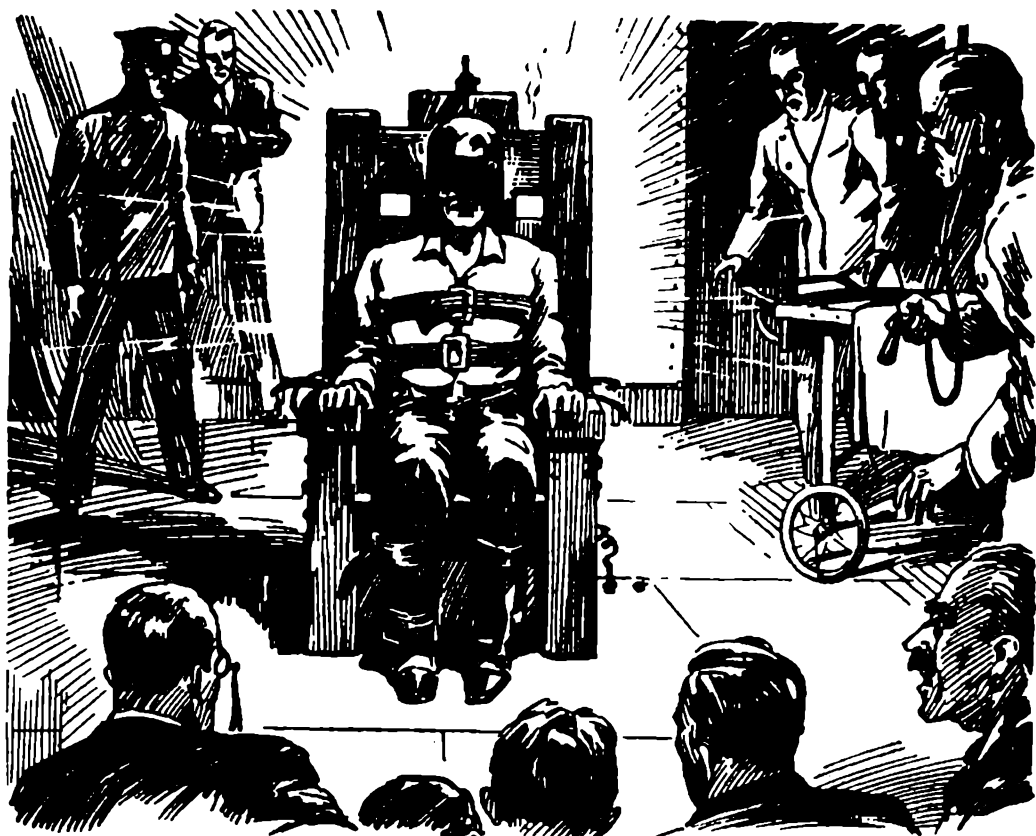
For my part, I tried to deny it. I tried to tell myself that such things could not be. But the terror gripped

me, too; had been with me constantly for two long weeks. It was useless folly to try to deceive myself. I knew that John Emerson was dying; knew that he was being murdered right there before my eyes—by a dead man!

And for two weeks I had known this would happen, and been powerless to prevent it.

I had thought myself a brave man that day, two weeks ago, when I walked into the State Penitentiary execution chamber with the other witnesses. True, I had known fear in my time. That first morning when I went over the top in the grey of dawn, racing toward that sheet of flame that was the German line—I had known fear then. Fear that unnerved me, sent me stalking forward like an

the EXECUTIONER



could stand against such a current of electricity

automaton, hardly seeing or hearing.

Fear, and panic, too. There was that night I stared into the huge muzzle of a forty-five revolver held in the hand of a madman and aimed at my heart. Complete panic had seized me that night—so overwhelming that I crazily made a pass at the gun and knocked it, flaming, out of his hand. That was panic, all right—and the memory of it still brought a shudder.

But terror—that was for weaklings. So I believed that night when I stepped into the execution chamber to watch Harry Hartman die. Curiosity brought me there—and perhaps a vague uneasiness, prompted by my love for Sally Emerson.

THAT curiosity was apparent among the other witnesses, too.

This was no ordinary execution they were about to see. Henry Hartman's defiance had set it apart, given it an atmosphere of the bizarre, almost of the supernatural. Nobody there really expected him to make good those threats, but still . . .

Henry Hartman was a scientist. "The electrical wizard," the newspapers described him. He had been convicted of a diabolically clever murder, a murder in which the unsuspecting victim had electrocuted himself, apparently by accident. But Hartman had made one little slip, and that slip had pinned the crime on him, convicted him and sentenced him to die in the electric chair.

When sentence was passed Hartman had laughed derisively.

"You can't kill me!" he jeered at

the judge. "Your childish electric chair can't harm me! I'll be a free man yet!"

"The wizard who defies death!" the papers shouted—and the witnesses were there to see what would come of that boast when the deadly current hummed through the wires.

They all knew of those threats, and they all knew that years ago Henry Hartman and John Emerson, the State executioner, had been associated, sharing the same experimental laboratory. But they didn't know the things that I knew.

They didn't know the closeness of that association—so intimate that the two men had looked forward to the day when Hartman's son and Emerson's granddaughter would marry and perpetuate their alliance.

Those plans were forgotten when the men disagreed and dissolved their partnership. Later John Emerson accepted his grim position with the State, and heard no more from Henry Hartman until his old-time partner was arrested for murder.

The witnesses knew of those boasts Hartman made in the courtroom, but they did not know of the note the convicted man managed in some devious way to slip out of the Death House the day after he stepped over its grim threshold. Emerson showed me that note.

It read:

Dear John:—

My boast in the courtroom wasn't as crazy as it sounded—though I shouldn't have lost my temper and thrown it in the face of the old fossil on the bench. You're not going to execute me. Everything has been arranged with the examining physician. He will pronounce me dead after you throw on the current the third time. And Albert will claim my body.

All we need is your cooperation, which will be very simple. You will turn on only one-half the ordinary voltage. I can take that without even feeling it. After the third jolt your part will be done. We'll reward you for it fittingly. Please get in touch with Albert and let him know that you will cooperate.

—Henry.

After I read the note, Emerson tore

it into bits and threw them into the fire.

"Perhaps I ought to turn it over to the authorities," he muttered, half to himself, "but it's simpler this way."

"Then you aren't going to—to do anything about it?" I asked.

"Of course not." His answer was matter-of-fact.

"Perhaps—don't you think—maybe it would be better if you withdrew from this execution?" I suggested. "In view of your past association with Hartman?"

"There is nothing personal about this," he said in his emotionless voice. "The State pays me for throwing a switch. It is my duty to do that no matter who may be sitting in the chair at the other end of the wires. That is the business of the State, no concern of mine." And with that his steel trap of a mouth closed inexorably, and I knew there was no use arguing further.

Nor did his attitude change in the slightest degree when the second note came. He showed me that, too, and shrugged his shoulders contemptuously. Its tone was more sinister:

Dear John:—

So you won't listen to reason. Well, let me tell you this: you can't kill me. Your chair may scorch my body, but it can't kill me. Before I am ready to leave this earth I'll take you with me. So, if you want to live, do as you were told.

—Henry.

SALLY tried to argue with him, too, tried to plead with him. He hadn't shown her the notes, but with womanly intuition she sensed that this would be no ordinary execution; she could feel the human drama behind it. But he was deaf to all she could say.

"My chief value to the State is my impersonality," he said with finality. "Once I let personality enter into my work, my usefulness to the State will be gone."

It was the third note that really worried me. Brief and unsigned, it read:

If your own death means nothing to you, remember this: there are others. When you go, you won't go alone.

Sally was the only living relative John Emerson had. She must be the "others"—unless I, her fiancé, were also included in that threat.

So probably it was that vague apprehension on Sally's account that prompted me to secure a ticket to the execution.

There was something more than the usual tomblike quiet in the death chamber when they led Henry Hartman in; there was something intangible but felt unmistakably by all of us. It sent little chilling tingles up and down my spine as I looked at the murderer's sardonic, sneering face.

Calmly, he sat in the death chair while the electrodes were being strapped in place, while the black mask was being placed on his head and over his cruel eyes. Behind a screen in the doorway twelve feet to the left of the chair I could see John Emerson standing before his panel—and, despite his grim stolidity, I could see that his face was whiter and more set than usual.

The guards stepped away from the chair, the warden gave the signal, and the current switched on. The slight, crackling whine of the heavy voltage sounded thunderously in the little room, and a dull red suffused Hartman's skin. Before the sound of the first shock had died away, the second jolt came—forty seconds of it. And Hartman's hands clenched so that the white knuckles threatened to break the skin.

Momentary silence, and again the whine of the twenty-two hundred volts broke out. Silence, and a fourth deadly charge of electricity flashed through the electrodes.

And then I knew what terror is—stark, unnerving, shivering terror, that seems to disembowel you and leave you quaking and helpless. For as I sat straining on the edge of my seat, staring with awe-widened eyes at that figure in the chair, a sneering grin spread over Henry Hartman's white lips and, in the momentary quiet that followed the fourth jolt, a ghastly cackle of triumph broke from his lips!

The terror of the unknown and the

uncanny was livid in our eyes. We looked at one another; and in every mind was that boast Hartman had shouted at the judge:

"You can't kill me!"

Four deadly charges—and he sat there cackling and grinning his hate. Something awful, something unthinkable, was going on in that death chamber. I wanted to get out, to get far away from it—but my eyes returned, fascinated, to that grinning mouth beneath the black vizor.

Again the current snapped on, and now I could tell by the rising whine that the voltage was heavier. For a full minute, by my wrist-watch, it stayed on. Hartman's body strained at the straps—but he still lived! And terror gnawed at the pit of my stomach, sapped my strength, and made me sick.

ONCE more the rising whine, the straining body, the heavy voltage mounting until the din of it seemed to fill the room like the bedlam of a boiler factory. Now the odor of scorched flesh was added to the hell—the man-made hell—of that room. No human flesh could stand against such a current of electricity. . . .

And yet it switched on again and mounted, mounted—God knows how much voltage the executioner threw into those wires before the body of Henry Hartman finally slumped in the straps and was pronounced officially dead.

Beads of perspiration pimpled my face and ran in rivulets down my neck, and my wet clothing clung to me as I followed the other haunted-eyed witnesses out of that chamber. They would never forget what they had seen, but for me the incredible spectacle meant days of worry and nights of torture. It gave new meaning and force to those two threatening notes, and I was horribly afraid for Sally.

This demon, this wizard of electricity, could defy death, could grin in the face of what would have killed any ordinary man—and who could tell what else he might be able to ac-

comply? He was dead, yes—or was he?

The chair had scorched his body, as he had admitted it might, but had it really killed him? Had it killed his spirit—or had he, by some Machiavelian power over electricity, managed to escape from the death chair?

"Before I am ready to leave this earth I'll take you with me!" he had threatened—and, now, with that death chamber scene burned indelibly into my memory, I was ready to believe him!

That's why, when Emerson suggested that we spend a few weeks in his mountain cottage, I approved the idea enthusiastically. He had not been feeling well, anyway, and the change would do him good. Besides, that cottage was miles off the beaten track, in the wilderness above a little country village.

Sally would be safe there. Safe from just what, I did not know, but my uneasiness gave me no rest while she was in the city where danger might so easily approach her from any side.

But Emerson's health did not improve. He became worse. Finally, this morning, we had phoned down to the village for the local doctor. He came, the typical country doctor, with hair that needed trimming, a beard that was twenty-five years out of style, and old-fashioned, silver-rimmed glasses. He listened to Emerson's complaint, nodded his head sagely, and mixed up a bottle of medicine which was to be taken every hour.

Even as I watched him studying his patient and mixing up his nostrum it came to me with strange certainty that this was all a waste of effort. Nobody could prescribe against Henry Hartman, and that was what ailed Emerson—in my heart and soul I knew it.

Somehow, in some devilish way that was known only to fiends like him, he was murdering his executioner there before our eyes . . .

Emerson knew that, too. Earlier in the afternoon, when Sally was out of the room, he had motioned me to

his bedside. His tone was shaky.

"It's Henry Hartman," he whispered, so that his voice might not be heard by her in the other room. "He's coming for me! Last night, after you were in bed, I heard him. He spoke to me here in the dark—told me that my time had come. And that Sally would be next. Take care of her, Gordon. Take her away from here while there is still time. I don't matter—and you can't help me anyway."

BUT of course I would not leave him. Sally never would have consented to go even had I tried to persuade her. Besides, I told myself, the old man's imagination was playing tricks on him. He had been worrying; was feverish, besides. That was it. Dead men didn't come around haunting houses and talking to people.

Fine—if I could have believed it! But even as I argued with myself I saw that sneering grin on Henry Hartman's lips as he sat in the electric chair, a man who should have been dead, and heard the ghastly cackle that broke from his throat. Nervously I looked about me, as if I expected to find him standing at my shoulder.

As night came on the old man's condition became worse. He writhed and moaned and called constantly for water.

"Inside of me—I'm burning up!" he gasped, as I held a glass to his hot lips.

Sally watched with tear-filled eyes, paced the room to the window and looked out into the black night. There was no moon and the sky was starless. Then she came back to the bed and felt his feverish forehead—and gasped softly as a moan of pain was wrung from him and he twisted in torment.

"I can't stand this!" she burst out. "I'm going to call that doctor again. Surely he can do something to stop this. At least he can give him an opiate to deaden the pain."

I knew it was useless, but I let her go into the living room and phone. In a few minutes she was back, her

face discouraged—and the first suspicion of terror in her eyes.

"I can't get him, Gordon," she told me nervously. "The line doesn't answer. There doesn't seem to be any sound on it at all!"

To satisfy her I went out and had a try at it myself. Cranked the handle on the side of the box, shouted into the receiver, held the ear-piece against it—but I could not stir a sound out of it. The line was out of order—or cut!

"Line seems to have gone dead," I told her as easily as possible. "They're probably fixing it and we'll be able to get a call through in a little while."

Sally didn't quite believe that. Her eyes studied mine suspiciously before she turned away and went back into the sick-room. I didn't believe myself. With that same strange conviction I knew that the telephone would not be repaired—that John Emerson was cut off from help from the outside world.

Now it was beginning to storm outside. No rain was falling, but there were peals of thunder and flashes of lightning—especially the lightning. Blinding flashes of it and jagged spears that shot across the sky in front of our windows. That lightning was realistic enough, but the thunder, as I listened to it, did not seem quite natural. Somehow, it did not have the volume, the great depth of tone, which usually characterized the rolling thunderclaps in these hills.

Ruffie, Sally's big white Eskimo dog, sensed something unusual about that storm, too. He paced the cottage nervously, whining and whimpering, and then found a sanctuary under a big settee. Sally tried to pull down the shades, but Emerson insisted that they be left up.

"We can't shut him out that way," he said wearily, and then realized that he had said too much, so he closed his eyes and pretended sleep—until another spasm of pain convulsed him. Sally stared down at his agonized face, and then she ran for the useless telephone.

I knelt beside his bed and forced

another spoonful of the medicine down his throat. He had had the last dose not half an hour ago, but something had to be done to ease this frightful suffering.

As I held him there in my arms he suddenly stiffened and stared, aghast, out of the window. His lips moved but no sound came from them.

AND then I saw—and the chilly hand of terror gripped my heart so that I thought my breath must stop!

Out there, on the edge of the clearing, half hidden by the trees, a ghastly, luminous form was weaving its way in and out through the shrubbery. For a moment the face was turned toward us—and it was the face of Henry Hartman!

But now that face was a sickly blue-grey, and fire played over it, licked around it—not flames, but the leaping, live fire of an electric current!

Henry Hartman had come back from the grave—from the electric chair—to carry out his threat!

Then at last Emerson found his voice.

"I'll go with you, Henry!" he cried, his voice rising shrilly as he fought to get out of bed. "I'll go with you—but leave Sally. She didn't harm you. She never harmed—"

I fought to push him back in the bed, struggled to gag him, to muffle his hysterical outburst. But I was too late. Sally had heard. She stood there in the doorway, her mouth agape, her hand clutching her trembling throat.

Then, before I could stop her, she ran across the room to the window. The luminous figure was just at the edge of the clearing. For one awful moment the sneering, flame-limned face turned fully upon us—and Sally screamed as I have never heard a woman scream before. She swayed on her feet, and I sprang across the room to grab her before she could faint.

But Sally wasn't the fainting kind. She lay in my arms and looked up into my face accusingly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she gasped. "But I should have known. I've sensed it all along. I've seen it in your eyes, Gordon, for the past two weeks—and Granddad hasn't been the same since the Hartman execution. Oh, he never should have done it—he should have listened to me!" Then she caught herself up short. "What is it, Gordon—what does that Thing want? I heard what Granddad said. Has it come for me?"

"Never mind what it has come for," I comforted her, as I held her close and patted her shoulders. There was no sense trying to deceive her; she had heard too much and was too keen to have the wool pulled over her eyes. "It won't get you—won't hurt a hair of your head. Just stay here in the room with me, and keep away from the windows."

Though just how that was going to protect her from the fiend who had been able to laugh at the electric chair, was more than I could have told her. All I knew was that I did not dare to let her get out of my sight.

For a few minutes John Emerson lay quiet, spent from his efforts to fight his way out of bed. Then, once more, his body twisted and squirmed in torment, while groans of mortal agony wrenched from his throat.

"I'm burning up!" he panted. "Burning up—inside!"

But, before I could fill a glass with water and hold it to his lips, he held up his hand for silence. That command was unnecessary, for now we could all hear the sound that had pierced through his hell of pain and reached his consciousness.

It was a whine like that of a dynamo, punctuated by a slight crackling sputter. Gradually the whine rose in volume—and all three who listened to it, spellbound, knew what it was.

"The chair!" gasped the man whose hand customarily threw the switch to set that grim instrument of death in motion.

And the chair was right there in that mountain cottage room of death!

The whine snapped off, then began

again. Forty seconds, by my wrist-watch. A third charge. Then a fourth. A fifth—a full minute this time. A sixth—and the whine had risen in volume so that it filled the room and dinned thunderously in our ears.

FASCINATED, unable to move a muscle, I sat there and listened—and saw the sneering face of Henry Hartman as I had watched it the first time I listened to this hellish whine of death. After this sixth charge there would be a seventh, before—

I looked over at Emerson and saw that he had caught the full significance of that weird death message. He was sitting up in bed now, his arms at his sides to his elbows, then stretched straight out before him on the covers, his hands clenched so that the knuckles stood out stark and white.

"The chair," he whispered through white lips. "It's burning me up—shriveling me! My insides are on fire with the current! One more charge—and then—"

Sally did not wait to hear any more.

"Oh, God!" she cried hysterically. "I can't stand it! We've got to do something for him! I'm going after that doctor!"

"You can't!" I shouted at her as I sprang after her. "Not out there, Sally! Come back here—please, darling!"

But she was deaf to my pleas; she could hear only the agony of her grandfather. Nimbly she sprang across the room, through the doorway, and down the short hallway to the front door. Like a white streak, Ruffie, the Eskimo, raced after her. She threw the front door open and they plunged out together, before I could grab her.

Out into the darkness and across the clearing. And then, with appalling suddenness, the darkness was split by a burst of blinding light. Ruffie leaped into the air, howled terribly, and from head to tail he seemed bathed in a baleful bluish grey light that fairly consumed him.

One moment of horrid brightness; then the smell of burned hair—and blackness. But in that moment I had thrown myself forward in a football tackle. I grabbed Sally around the knees and crashed to the ground with her with such force that the breath was knocked out of her body.

In the next instant I was on my feet, bending over her, lifting her in my arms, and racing with her back into the cottage.

There I propped her up in a chair in the sick-room and held a glass of water to her lips. Emerson was lying back in his bed exhausted, but even as I knelt there beside Sally, that hellish whining began all over again, and the dying man sat bolt upright, taking his place in the dread electric chair.

"You stay here with him, please, Sally," I begged, as she opened her eyes and looked around her. "Don't go out of this house again—no matter what happens. Promise me that."

"But what are you going to do? Where are you going?" she wanted to know.

"I'll only be gone a few moments," I promised. "When I come back I will have put an end to this devilment—or I'll come back with the doctor. You stay here with him."

Then I hurried upstairs, climbed the ladder from the second floor to the attic, and worked my way out of a tiny attic window. From my precarious perch on the roof I was able to grasp a sturdy branch of the big oak that towered above the cottage. Like a monkey, I worked my way, hand over hand, along that branch until I reached the trunk of the tree. Then I felt around in the pitch darkness until I found another substantial branch on the other side of the tree.

Slowly, silently, I began to work my way out along this, until the branch began to dip slightly beneath my weight. I could not go much farther. And so far—

Then I got the break for which I had been praying fervently. Down there, beneath me, and some distance to the left, the flame-limned figure of

Henry Hartman was wending its way through the trees. It was coming in my direction. By moving a bit farther back up the tree, I was immediately over the spot where it should pass.

BREATHLESSLY I waited. It came nearer, nearer. When it was almost beneath me I could dimly see another figure crouched behind it. When that second figure was directly under my feet, I let go—and went plunging downward in the darkness.

With a thud I landed on that dim figure, and we both sprawled on the ground, then scrambled wildly to our feet. But I had the advantage of surprise; I knew what was coming, and the moment I sprang to my feet I launched myself upon him, punching and smashing away with a fury that I had never known before.

I took blows in return, plenty of them, but, oddly, I hardly felt them. Certainly they did nothing to dull my rage or stem the flood of punches which I showered on him. At last I didn't notice the blows coming my way any more—and then I realized that my adversary was limp beneath me. And there was a noise in the tree above me—a noise and a light.

"How did you get down there?" Sally called, and I looked up to see the light almost directly overhead.

"Don't try to come down here; you'll break your neck!" I shouted back at her. "Get back into the house!"

"I—I can't," came plaintively from up in the tree. "I—I'm going to fall!"

And in the next moment I had Sally in my arms while she struggled to pull down her skirt from about my shoulders. With far more sense than I, before following me out onto the roof she had equipped herself with a flashlight.

Now she turned it on my unconscious antagonist—and I stared at the messed-up face of the village doctor. His venomous, hate-filled eyes glared up at me as full consciousness returned to him.

"So—it's you who are behind all this, is it, doctor?" I said as I yanked him to his feet. "Stand still, if you know what's good for you." And while he stood there I took off his belt and bound his wrists securely with it.

"Now we're going back into the house," I told him, "and you're going first—walking right in front of me," as I saw the flicker of triumph momentarily light up his eyes. "If you know what's good for you, you'll lead the way to your apparatus and turn off the power in those wires."

Meekly he turned and led the way farther into the brush, to where he bent over an electrical contact box and some wires. He pressed a switch and there was a little *phht* of disconnecting power.

"That's better," I nodded, as I grabbed him by the elbow and led him toward the cottage. We had to climb through the heavy wire which was stretched three strands deep around the clearing. "What did you do, connect it up with some near-by high-tension wires?" I asked him, but he preferred to ignore the question.

We were barely through the wires when an indignant spluttering began at another point on the edge of the clearing.

"What kind of a crazy mess is this?" a querulous voice demanded, a voice that sounded oddly familiar to me. "First I'm knocked out and tied up all day. Then, when I manage to get loose and come up here, I get messed up in this thing!"

Sally turned her light toward the voice, and there, trying to get through the wires, was the village doctor!

At the same moment my prisoner decided it would be a good time to depart, but I had him by the collar before he had taken two steps. Then we helped the second doctor through the wire. He, too, gaped when he saw his double staring at him.

But only for a moment. Then he flew at the prisoner, and his hands fastened in the beard and pulled vigorously. It ripped away in his hands,

to reveal a clean-shaven face beneath the spirit gum. Then he grabbed the prisoner's hair and yanked again. That came away much more easily, and disclosed a sleek brown thatch beneath the mop.

Now it was Sally's turn to stand there mute with amazement. Then the spell was broken.

"That's—that's Albert!" she sputtered. "Albert—Albert Hartman, Gordon!"

"**S**O-O-O-O!" I whistled, and looked down understandingly into the raging, hate-filled eyes of Henry Hartman's son. "That explains lots of things that have puzzled me. Now let's get inside and see how your patient is, doctor."

The house was in darkness and we had to pick our way in by the aid of Sally's flash. But by the time we reached John Emerson's bedside it was too late to do anything for him. He was dead, lying on the floor beside the bed; and clutched in his hand was the reading lamp that had stood on the table beside him.

Evidently he had grabbed it to steady himself as he got up and had fallen with it. The fixture was badly smashed and the wires had short-circuited.

"Could the shock he got from that lamp have killed him, doctor?" I asked, as we bent over the still figure on the carpet.

"No—not the electricity; that wouldn't be strong enough," the physician said, as he concluded his examination. "But the shock stopped his heart. This man seems to have been under a terrific strain. Besides, this inhuman devil you've caught was feeding him hydrochloric acid—a dose strong enough to burn his stomach out. That would not have produced death for several days. It was the shock from the short-circuited current that killed him."

John Emerson, the executioner, had died with the whine of the chair in his ears, the fire of the current in his stomach, and the bite of it in his muscles. And somewhere, I knew,

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Death Comes for the Executioner

(Concluded from Page 68)

the evil spirit of Henry Hartman was chuckling ghoulishly over his demise.

We found the dummy, rigged with electric wires and coated with phosphorus, that Albert Hartman had used to simulate his father, and we found the blasting powder and the fireworks he used for his storm effects. Found also the loud speaker unit which he had installed in the wall of Emerson's bedroom so that he could imitate his father's voice over it and could transmit the sound of a dynamo.

Yes, the younger Hartman had gone to considerable trouble and expense to avenge his father—and to pave his own way to the grim chair.

How did his father manage to defy the voltage that would have killed any other man? That is a question which only he could have answered—but by continual application one can inure one's self to the effects of electricity the same as many other things. Hartman had almost made himself immune to the deadly current—but not quite.

In the clear light of day it all figures out simply enough—but never, until my dying hour, will I forget the sneering grin on the lips of the man who could not die. Nor the feel of enervating, paralyzing terror as it steals down sickeningly into one's vitals!