

# WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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*An Electrocution, Vividly Described  
By An Eye Witness*

# THE CHAIR

By DR. HARRY E. MERENESS

*Former Physician at Sing Sing Prison*

**D**R. HARRY E. MERENESS, who wrote this realistic description of an electrocution, was attending physician at Sing Sing Prison for six years, and during that period he attended, in his official capacity, sixty-seven executions in the Electric Chair—a record that has never been equaled. Among the many noted executions he witnessed were those of Lieut. Becker of the New York Police Department and the four gunmen in the Rosenthal case. Prior to their death, he attended the prisoners in the condemned cells.

“The average prisoner, approaching the moment of execution,” says Dr. Mereness, “is in a mental haze or wild delirium produced by the fear of death. In two instances, however, this was lacking. Both men, after being strapped in the chair, said: ‘Good-by, Dool!’”

**T**HE MINUTE HAND on my watch indicates 5:44 a. m. I am standing in a direct line with the chair.

My gaze is directed to the left side of the room and down a short, narrow, heavily-walled corridor that forms the communication between the condemned cells and the execution chamber. There are a number of guards standing quietly about, and on my right, back of a rope stretched across the room, sit the witnesses.

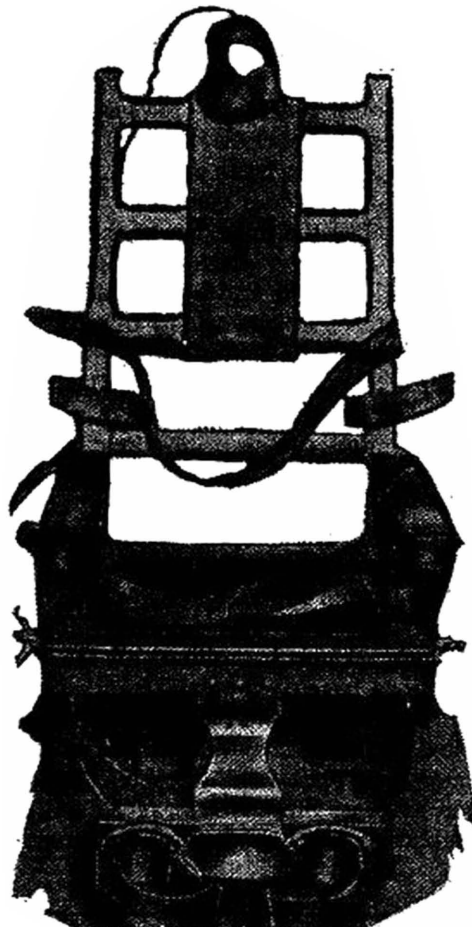
There is a tension in the very air of the chamber. Absolute quiet prevails. A few seconds pass, eternally long they are.

Then comes a sound—a muffled “Good-by, all.” The sound reaches the ears of the witnesses, and involuntarily they straighten up on their stools; there is some scuffling of feet, and one witness, possibly a trifle more nervous than the rest, clears his throat. Everyone is now keenly alert.

I hear the chant of the priest—the response of the condemned man—the low, quavering and broken response, “Have mercy on me.”

The little procession now enters the corridor. I see the condemned man—stocking-footed, and with his right trouser leg flapping, grimly ludicrous, for it has been slit up to the knee in order to facilitate the application of the leg electrode. He is between the deputy warden and his assistant, each supporting an arm as they slowly enter the death chamber.

At the sight of the fateful and fatal chair, the condemned man involuntarily



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shrinks back, but the guards are prepared for this, and their hold becomes a little firmer. There is no halt in their step, and but five paces away, inanimate, portentous and ominous—the chair!

After the first sight—after that sharp, quivering intake of breath—the gaze of the condemned man shifts about the

room. His expression haunts one. You feel that it is both all-seeing and unseeing. The fear of death—a definite emotion—is here portrayed in a fashion that but few have beheld. There is utter finality in that look:

His eyes rest upon you. You feel that he sees you, but that you are simply one of the images in the general make-up of the last picture that is conveyed to his brain. There is no recognition in the glance—just a vague, hopeless and apparently vacant stare, but one which you feel discerns the sharp outlines of the persons and objects in the room, without recognizing features or details.

To me, that quick survey of his surroundings, that final glance of the unfortunate being on the very threshold of his meeting with his God, is the most harrowing of all the gruesome details connected with the administration of man-made Law's decree.

My watch indicates 5:45 a. m. The condemned man is seated in the Chair. The guards work quickly, two at either side and one at the head of the Chair. The arm straps are buckled fast, the leg straps next, then the face strap, which has an opening for the chin, and the upper part of which mercifully blindfolds the eyes.

The cap, a soft, pliable thing made of a fine copper mesh and lined with sponge, which has been moistened in salt water, is placed upon the head and moulded to fit its contour. To a binding-post on the cap is adjusted the heavy wire that conveys the terrific current from the dynamo in a distant part

of the prison. To the bare right leg, another electrode is applied and connected up.

A full minute has elapsed since I heard the "Good-by, all." The guards have completed their task. My notes now read: "Entered 5:44:10. Chair and strapped 5:45:00."

"Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world have mercy on me," chants the priest. And: "Have mercy on me," comes the broken, almost inaudible and inarticulate response.

I retain my position, note-book and watch in my left hand. I am standing on the right side of, and in the same direct line with, the Chair. The Chair and its occupant, the electrician and myself, form a right angle. I occupy the angle, for at the ends of the lines, which make up that angle, are the two things that demand my undivided attention—the electrician and the condemned. From my point of vantage I can see them both. My eyes are on the condemned man.

I feel the eyes of the electrician upon me. I have a new, bright yellow pencil—freshly sharpened. It is quite necessary for my notes. I hold it vertically on my note-book, and watch the occupant of the Chair. The overwhelming mental tension, coupled with the knowledge of the proximity of death, has a fearsome reaction upon the Chair's victim. With each rapid inspiration, there is a slight elevation of the shoulders, and as expiration takes place the shoulders sag. This is the very instant I have awaited—the lungs are practically free from air. I dip my pencil quickly from the vertical toward the horizontal.

There is a sudden *click*, the body in the Chair straightens, and from the mouth comes a low, sibilant *hiss*; the straps creak, and you feel that if the straps should break the body would be catapulted over the rope and amidst the witnesses.

For ten seconds the high current of eighteen hundred and fifty volts and eight to nine amperes is on; then, for forty seconds, the voltage is dropped to two hundred.

During this period the body sags perceptibly; at the end of forty seconds the current is again increased, and the body again straightens and strains against the straps. After the final ten seconds of the fatal minute, the current is switched off.

The body in the Chair actually shrinks before your very eyes! I step up to the Chair; a guard tears open the shirt and bares the chest. As I place my stethoscope over the heart I am conscious that the body is intensely hot. I know from experience that the heat generated by the rapidity of the passage of the current has raised the temperature from sub-normal to between 120 and 130 degrees.

I hear a racing, tumultuous *rat-a-tat-tat*—possibly I can count the heart beats. I lift the face strap, and with thumb and forefinger separate the lids. The eyes are glazed, but the pupils are small. I feel the great arteries in the neck. I continue to get a pulsation that tells me that the vital forces have not yet ceased.

My notes now read: "First contact—one minute—5:45:10—5:46:10."

I step off the rubber mat and nod to the electrician; the current is again thrown on, this time for five seconds. When I now listen over the heart, I am reminded of a clock that is running down; the heart beats are fainter—they become slower—they commence to skip—I fail to feel the pulsation in the neck—there is a heavier glaze over the eyes—the pupils, small and contracted a moment before, are now widely dilated. The head rests on the shoulders, and the face is directed toward the chandelier with its many lights, but there is no reaction of the pupil as the bright light strikes the eye—it remains wide and big. The muscles of the face are set, and saliva drools from the angles of the mouth.

I again place my stethoscope upon the chest, but no sound reaches my ear. I listen for five—for ten—for twenty seconds. There is nothing; all the vital reactions have disappeared.

Physicians among the witnesses are invited to listen; they take their time, for there is no reason for hurry now. After the last one finishes I make a final examination. It is as before—nothing.

My notes now state: "Second contact—5 seconds—5:47:00. Pronounced dead at 5:52:00."

I turn toward the Warden and say, "I pronounce this man dead."

The law has been obeyed.

The general attitude of tenseness is relieved. The guards quickly unbuckle the straps and carry the body to the autopsy room, and after placing it upon the stone-topped table begin to remove the clothes. The hum of conversation becomes general. The witnesses are departing.

I commence the autopsy, feeling that my report will be, "Autopsy upon the body of—No.—, convicted of murder, first degree and today executed at this prison, showed all organs and tissues to be normal."

As I begin my long sweeping incision, the thought always strikes me: "This must also be done because it is the Law," and the invariable question comes, "Is it really the Law, or is it to insure the carrying out of the Law?"

In other words, if the Chair fails, the post mortem succeeds.

THERE is little left to tell. The evening papers will state that "So-and-so, convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to death, was electrocuted at Sing Sing Prison early this morning." They will rehearse the grewsome history of the crime and will tell how the murderer, with firm step, entered the execution chamber at 5:44:10 a. m., and was strapped in the chair at 5:45:00 a. m.

These details are quite correct. I can vouch for them, for I let the reporters take my notes, which are official, and they copy the data and embody it in their stories.

They invariably dress up the "first contact," however, so their stories read about like this, "At 5:45:10 Warden Blank threw the switch, pressed the button, or dropped his handkerchief, as a signal" (it is always one of these three).

Well, I'm rather glad that they credit it to the Warden, and I really feel better that I and my new, bright yellow pencil, freshly sharpened, have been overlooked.