

¶He has legally killed more persons than any other man living—

THE EXECUTIONER

This is the most revolting success story we have ever read. Yet as long as we have capital punishment we hope we will have executioners like Robert Elliott. For he has spent his life devising the scientifically perfect death—the death which met Hauptman, Sacco and Vanzetti, Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray, and many others.

THE white-walled room was as silent as a sepulchre.

A youth, barely out of his 'teens, was about to die for murder—the murder of his mother. The chair, where those who kill must pay the penalty society demands, was ready for him.

They brought him in, sickened, chattering; with eyes that saw nothing, with a brain numbed by fear. They strapped him to the seat of death, and left him there. All save one. A thin little man, with silver hair and bony hands, remained beside the boy. Deftly his long fingers made certain that the mask which covered the white face and hid the bulging eyes was secure.

Then he stepped to the wall. One hand went into his hip pocket; the other reached for the switch. . .

Green lightning flashed. . . and death!

The thing that was a boy lurched, but the straps held it fast, though they creaked. It turned purplish-red.

The current sizzled and sputtered.

The great clock downstairs ticked off the seconds, one, two, three. Outside a nightbird called, and the leaves rustled on moon-bathed trees.

The boy in the chair slumped, and died.

Then the lights in the death chamber were dimmed. A score of nervous men, witnesses, reporters, attendants, mopped cold sweat from their brows, and with trembling hands signed a big book, to certify that they had seen a boy put to death because he killed.

While they wrote their names, a slim, shadowy figure, with silver hair, coat collar pulled about his throat, a little black bag clutched in his bony fingers, shuffled from a gangway to a

waiting car. He looked to the right, and left, and slammed the door behind him. In his pocket was a crisp check for \$150.

The car roared away into the night.

Bob Elliott was an easy-going sort of a youngster when he took up the study of electricity more than two score years ago. Those with whom he spent most of his private life today say that "around the house he hasn't changed a bit," despite the macabre career which he has chosen.

He will talk for hours about his trade as an electrician, of the progress of electrical science, or about back-yard gardening. But stories of executions are taboo, except among those who are close to Elliott—and they are few.

Like most normal youngsters, Bob showed an intense interest in things mechanical. He took notes on everything electrical, and he watched electric lighting become commonplace, instead of a luxury. He saw electricity revolutionize every-day life.

It was a tragedy of the death house, the first crude electrocution, which drew the young electrician to the gruesome business of taking a life for a life. It was this tragedy which brought upon him the strange urge to make a life study of electrocution, to make death in the

electric chair easier, speedier, more merciful.

Bob Elliott has read over many times the newspaper accounts and penal records of the world's first electrocution, a horribly bungled job, which tortured the victim to death.

It happened in Sing Sing prison in 1890. It set the course of Bob Elliott's career.

New York's legislature decided to substitute the electric chair for hanging. The business of hanging in the county jails, with crowds of curious looking on often in carnival spirit, was outmoded the lawmakers agreed. Further, there was a growing revolution against the fact that too frequently the gallows "fans" actually indulged in something akin to hero worship of those who were condemned.

Electrical experts had suggested that a chair could be built which would carry the current into the body of its victim and cause instantaneous death. Several chairs were tried out, and it finally was decided the time was ripe to substitute this form of execution for hanging.

Elliott was a gangling youth then, that night the first man was put to death in the chair.

The victim was William Kemmler.

He had eloped with Tillie Ziegler, the wife of another.

They lived together for several years in Buffalo. One night, in 1889, they quarreled. Kemmler told the woman he was tired of her. She became hysterical. He left home. For days he pondered his predicament. Then he decided to put an end to his amatory problem with an axe.

All New York was shocked by the bloody crime.

The night of August 6, 1890, the trembling Kemmler was led through the little green door into the new chamber of death for the "awful experiment."

Fumbling hands strapped the fright-stunned man into the chair. At a signal, the current was turned on. The thing in the chair plunged forward, and "rocked." The straps creaked. There was a crackling sound as the current drove through. For fifteen minutes the electricity coursed the body.

Then the electrode at the head was removed. The men in the death chamber went sick at what happened next.

"Look! My God, look, he's alive!" someone screamed.

Sure enough, the man's breast was heaving. Those who had courage enough to look upon the ghastly spectacle thought they saw a straining at the straps, as though the agonized victim were trying to free himself.

A purplish foam covered the lips and was spattered over the leather headband.

Convinced the man was alive, officials, physicians, everyone in the chamber lost their wits. There were startled cries and orders that the current be turned on once more. There were signals only half-understood. The men at the switchboard in the next room seemed glued to their places.

When they finally were made to understand what had happened, they acted promptly. The switch handle could be heard as it was pulled back and forth, breaking the deadly current into jets.

The rigor of death came in the next split-second! There was an odor of burning flesh and singed hair. For a moment, a blue flame played about the base of the victim's spine. The body turned red.

One of the witnesses crumpled to the floor. No one turned to aid him. Eyes were fixed on the man in the chair, where the blue lightning played.

Another witness lost control of his stomach and tried to get out of the room. Cold sweat beaded every face. The current sizzled for four minutes more. Then it was shut off.

The thing in the chair was still. Kemmler was dead at last.

The Business of Killing

WHEN the details of this agonizing scene became known, press and public condemned the new method of capital punishment; opponents of capital punishment saw fresh justification for life imprisonment to replace the death penalty.

But the defenders of the new law said it would succeed and be effective. Among them was Elliott, the young electrician, who told himself that electrical science could perfect this method of carrying out the law.

In many of his moments alone he found himself surrendering to the problem of the electric chair, how it could be "improved" to the point where its victims would die more mercifully. Capital punishment would be a thing as lasting as mankind, he told himself. Capital punishment was here to stay.

The young electrician studied every detail of subsequent executions. He pondered the mistakes made in all of them, and he decided what he should have done under the circumstances. Finally he felt that he had mastered the business of the "perfect death" for the criminal condemned. He kept his eye on Sing Sing.

John Hubert, a grim, studious man, was the electrocutioner.

One victim after another was sent to death by Hubert. Then one day his identity became known. His name appeared in the headlines. He was overwhelmed with threats, threats against his kinfolks, against his home, against himself.

When John Hubert let it be known that he was about to quit, eight hundred men sought his place, among them an electrician named Bob Elliott.

Elliott was chosen not only because he already was known as an electrician of unusual ability, but chiefly because Sing Sing authorities learned that this man had devoted years to study of the very job to which he aspired.

Elliott did his first "job" well. There were other executions, all of them shrouded in secrecy, all knowledge of them kept from his children. Only Mrs. Elliott knew what was at the crux of the journey when her husband suddenly was called away on an "out of town assignment."

Then at breakfast one morning Elliott sat across the table from his young daughter. He opened a newspaper and peered at an inside page. The front page faced the child. There was a black headline across the page. It told about an execution. And there were two pictures—one of

the youth who had died, and the other of Elliott. The caption:

"His Tenth Victim."

"Daddy!" the child exclaimed, as she pointed to the headlines. She began to cry.

Bob Elliott, the "cold-blooded executioner," took his daughter in his arms, and kissed her. He dabbed his eyes with his handkerchief.

Elliott's next execution, several weeks later, was his "worst." His steel nerves served him well, but the picture of his child and the realization that she knew at last that he was killing for the law, haunted him.

But he went through with the job, and another and another.

The other states were watching him. The legislatures of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Massachusetts voted to abandon hanging for the chair, and in each state, Elliott was chosen as the best fitted for the job of executioner. Their agents reported that they found where Elliott officiated, the victim died more quickly, "mercifully."

Scientific Death

ELLIOTT never publicly has expressed himself regarding execution by lethal gas, the firing squad, the axe, or the guillotine, but he has said that both electrocution and the noose will be

improved upon in the executions of tomorrow.

The executioner admits to the paradoxical statement that perhaps, in a measure, his work is in vain, so far as the march of homicide is concerned.

"I don't believe it does any good. Yet, I suppose we have to have it. Somehow, society, or the state, or whatever you care to call it, gets satisfaction, or revenge, when it puts a murderer to death. It's just something we seem to need. But we keep on having murders just the same."

Then he unraveled some more of his strange philosophy.

"Now you take, for instance, some of the others who have tried a hand at this business. Well, the results weren't pretty to see. According to my system, these people never suffer. Now, they don't suffer, because I keep my head about me. I work scientifically. They never know when the current hits them."

What has happened behind the closed doors of his workshop, how he made his experiments to bring his work so close to perfection, only Elliott knows. But it is probable that in the secrecy of his own studies thousands of imaginary men and women have gone to their deaths, without suffering, without torture, speedily.—*L. W. Sheridan, from the Book Digest.*