

# Deans of the Death Watch Tell of Sing Sing's Most Tragic Hour

SING SING'S EXECUTION CHAMBER. (SHOWN BY ARROW) WHERE ELECTRIC CHAIR IS LOCATED ADJOINING DEATH-HOUSE AND EXERCISE-YARD WALL BEHIND WHICH CONDEMNED PRISONERS TAKE THEIR HALF-HOUR'S DAILY EXERCISE.

SOUTH-EAST CORNER OF THE YARD WHERE DEATH-HOUSE IS LOCATED AND INSIDE VIEW OF OUTER WALL OF PRISON

SING SING'S DEATH HOUSE WHERE MURDERERS AWAIT EXECUTION

## Weird and Thrilling Incidents That Marked Last Days of Many Famous Murderers Are Recalled by Three of the Prison's Veteran Guards

By EDWARD T. KAVANAUGH.

WEIRD and thrilling have been some of the experiences of George Meserole and two other veteran Sing Sing keepers, lately retired, with numerous murderers, famous or infamous, during many years they were on the death watch over the prison's cells set apart for prisoners awaiting execution.

Meserole, whose keen eyes for twenty-six years kept a lookout over those closely guarded cells, is only now unfolding some interesting stories of what has gone on in there. John Derrenbacher, who kept vigil over the death cells nine years, and Alexander Van Wart, who did relief duty there for a similar period, have likewise elected to talk. With official consent of Warden Edward V. Brophy they feel at liberty to give their reminiscences. Many of the episodes described have never before been written.

**Meserole's Famous Charges.** Meserole had by far the longest deathhouse experience and came in contact with its most celebrated inmates, such as Albert T. Patrick accused of the murder of William Rice, the millionaire, whose sentence was finally commuted; Roland Molinoux, first convicted and later acquitted of the murder of Mrs. Katherine Adams; D. Samuel Kennedy, charged with the murder of Dolly Reynolds, who was afterward retried and discharged, and Charles Becker, police lieutenant, who was convicted for the murder of Roosevelt, the gambler. These and other distinguished prisoners were entrusted to Meserole's keeping. Two hundred condemned persons, including three women, have been received in his time.

Standing between a condemned murderer facing death in the electric chair and his freedom, the watchman's task in the condemned cells is a ticklish one. A murderer condemned to die has nothing to lose by killing his guard to make a getaway. The temptation to attack his guard is, therefore, obvious. Yet none of these three keepers ever received even a scratch, nor had a suicide or escape on his tour of duty. Yet they have guarded scores of dangerous murderers. Other guards have had murder, suicide and escapes on their shifts.

**Comedy and Tragedy.** Both comedy and tragedy figure in these three veterans' adventures. For example, Meserole well remembers the day in 1916 that Hyman Liebman, who threw his two children out of a window and killed them in New York, stabbed suicide. He pretended, in staging an insanity plea, to have swallowed poison. When Dr. Amos O. Squire got to work on his wits and tried to stomach pump, it soon drew the truth, as well as the harmless vinegar he swallowed, out of him. Liebman shrieked and begged for mercy as the doctors pumped away, and had to confess he was falling so they would stop the pump. Then, when the pathetic side there was the procession of seven hearse up to the prison front door on the eve of the execution of Vincent Calli and six other slayers in Warden Kennedy's time. This was the largest number ever executed in one batch.



GEORGE MESEROLE, WHO GUARDED SING SING'S DEATH-HOUSE TWENTY SIX YEARS

tric apparatus for the first electric execution arrived at the prison. New York State had just passed a law substituting the electric chair for the hangman's noose. There had never been an electric execution and everybody was prospecting as to who would be the first person electrocuted and whether he would be killed without conscious suffering or tortured to death.

On October 30, 1889, Warden Brush received Charles McElvaine, aged twenty, the first person sentenced to the electric chair. He had slain Christian Lucca in Brooklyn. There had been no deathhouse built then. So McElvaine was placed in a cell on the upper floor of the hospital building and kept in solitary confinement. On December 5, 1889, work of building the deathhouse was begun. It was to be, virtually, a prison within a prison.

Derrenbacher saw Thomas Pallister, a prisoner, helping to build it. By an odd turn of events, this same prisoner was later convicted of murder and lodged, two years later, in the prison death cells himself. He was never executed. He cheated the chair by escaping.

**Deathhouse Soon Crowded.** Soon as the deathhouse was finished McElvaine became its first occupant. Derrenbacher was his first guard there. He would keep watch over the condemned murderer eleven hours a day. McElvaine had not the exclusive use of the deathhouse long. On New Year's day Shebeck Juglio, a Japanese, was received from Manhattan for killing Seaman Constan, a Japanese sailor.

Then came Joseph Wood, who killed Charles Ruffin, a laborer on the new Croton aqueduct at Kingsbridge, followed a few weeks later by Harris Smiler, who shot Mary Dralney, one of his three bigamous wives, and then by James J. Slocum, a baseball player, who beat his wife to death.

There was room for only four in the original deathhouse, so Smiler was placed in the hospital loft. Keeper Fagan, on watch there, fell asleep one night while on duty. Principal Keeper James Connaughton, a rigorous disciplinarian, discovered him in the midst of his nap. He rebuked and suspended Fagan immediately. Next came Nicola Trezza, the murderer who was afterward saved by Gov. Flower, who commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.

In addition was built to the deathhouse so it could accommodate eight men. On his shift Derrenbacher alone in the deathhouse watched six murderers. As they were cramped badly in the brick cells, Meserole was assigned by Connaughton in 1891 to take each murderer to the death chair a half hour a day for exercise. McElvaine, of a nervous nature, often bored Meserole and the other keepers by scratching his cell bars in filing his finger nails or using his bunk sheet to swat flies with.

**Horse Used to Test Chair.** As the time drew near for the first execution, Warden Brush wished to test the killing capacity of the new contrivance. So on Nov. 23, 1890, a horse was taken from the prison stable and fastened to the death chair in a room adjoining the condemned cells, where Derrenbacher was on duty. The keepers fastened a hood over the horse's head, as they do now over the cranium of a murderer, and tied the steed fast to the chair.

order of his long prison career on July 7, 1891, the day of the first executions. The whole prison was astir and all the murderers in the deathhouse were in a frenzy. Outside a morbid mob lined the hills overlooking the prison and the streets looking to it.

Warden Brown had pledged all who would have access to the condemned cells and the death chamber to secrecy. Newspaper reporters were not allowed to see the execution (they had been allowed to witness hangings) but the warden put out armed sentries and kept them off the prison property entirely. He had a cordon of guards form a "dead line." Sentries paced back and forth with rifles to overawe the crowd and shoot anybody who might attempt to slip through the line. The warden, for going to such pains, was forever afterward called "Deadline" Brown.

However, Brown arranged a code of signals to let reporters and others know when each of the four prisoners to be electrocuted was dead. He selected a white flag for Slocum, a blue flag for Smiler, a black flag for Wood and a red flag for Juglio. When each man was dead his flag was to go up the halyards on the roof of the warden's residence. So the thousands awaiting outside the prison riveted their gaze on the flagpole.

Derrenbacher was told to get Slocum ready first. He hid the unfortunate fellow good-by and about noon Slocum was taken on the death march to the execution chamber a few yards away. State Detective James Jackson and Keeper Sylvester McNeal quickly strapped him in the chair. The electrodes were jammed down on his head, the mask drawn over his face, and Dr. Carlos Macdonald, the alienist, signalled the executioner to pull the switch. The current shot on, Slocum lunged forward and tugged at the straps. The first shock had left him unconscious, but another was given him to make death certain. Slowly went the white flag up the halyards



ALEXANDER VAN WART, RELIEF OFFICER IN DEATH-HOUSE NINE YEARS

outside. The mob realized the new experimental electric device had done its gruesome work and that Slocum was the first to go.

Derrenbacher then got Smiler ready, bid him good-by and saw him led off to the supposedly "sick" man. As he opened the cell door for Wood, shook his hand and bid him good-by. Finally Derrenbacher unlocked the cell of Juglio. Because the Japanese was a powerful and brutal man the prison authorities feared trouble from him. So they left him until the last, Juglio, however, surprised them. He nodded good-by to Derrenbacher, walked erect to the chair and went to his death as stolid as an ox.

Derrenbacher remembers how bravely McElvaine faced the chair. "He walked upright and quickly," said the warden, "and squared down in the chair and said: 'Let'er go!'"

The prison deathhouse was shy two murderers when Derrenbacher reported for work the morning of April 21, 1893. During the night Pallister and

offered to liberate Carlyle Harris, the famous murderer of pretty Helen Patia, his jilted sweetheart, and two other slayers, but these men expected executive clemency and refused to go. Later two bodies were found in the Hudson River attired in prison uniforms. The prison officials identified them as those of Pallister and Roehl. There was a bullet hole in each. The officials concluded the two murderers quarrelled as to whether they should risk a trip in the small dory they stole across the rough river in the raging storm or turn back, and that they shot each other fighting for possession of the boat.

Harris, however, did not get reprieved. Derrenbacher told him on the morning of May 8, 1893, that the Governor had refused to reprieve him and that he had better prepare to die at noon.

Shortly afterward he saw Harris slip something into his mouth and hastily swallow it. Derrenbacher informed Warden Durston and on approaching his cell the warden noticed Harris looked rather dazed.

He ordered the cell unlocked. But Harris had forestalled such a move. He had stuffed the keyhole with wads of paper and the key could not be forced into the lock. So keepers ran for hammers and other tools and began smashing and ripping the lock off the cell door. When they got it open Harris had swooned on the bed.

He had taken a powerful dose of drugs his mother was thought to have smuggled to him with intention of killing himself. Physicians waiting to see him executed forced medicine down the prisoner's throat and soon restored him to consciousness. Keeper McNeal was then stationed in the cell with him and sat beside him until Derrenbacher opened the door and Harris was taken to his doom.

Mrs. Harris had sent a casket to receive the body. On the cover Warden Durston discovered under the

name of the deceased the words: "Murdered by the State of New York." He ordered the plate ripped off before he would surrender the body.

Matthew Johnson, another murderer, prior to being electrocuted February 26, 1894, plotted to kill Derrenbacher. He had already taken three lives, admittedly, so, naturally, he thought there was a bullet hole in each. The officials concluded the two murderers quarrelled as to whether they should risk a trip in the small dory they stole across the rough river in the raging storm or turn back, and that they shot each other fighting for possession of the boat.

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## History of Electric Chair, Desperate Breaks for Freedom, Murders Within Prison and Attempts at Suicide Figure in Reminiscences

body was found cut up, was a shirt button. The manufacturer of the button and the sale of the shirt was traced, the body identified as Golden-suppe's and Thorn and the woman arrested. Thorn was electrocuted Aug. 1, 1898. "He walked like a major," said Van Wart.

Van Wart escorted to the chair Adrian Braun who killed his wife in Sing Sing prison's visiting room. Braun is the only person ever imprisoned in "murderer's row" before indicted or brought to trial.

As soon as the crime was committed Warden Sage ordered State Detective James Jackson, who witnessed the murder, to lock Braun up in the deathhouse. He was later tried, convicted and sentenced to death in White Plains and returned to the deathhouse. He died May 29, 1899.

**Saved By Another's Confession.** Meserole and Van Wart recall Edward Wise, who was in the deathhouse for a murder which a man on his death bed in England confessed he and not Wise had committed. Scotland Yard detectives notified the authorities here and Wise's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. John L. Sullivan, prisoner, later interceded to get Wise out of prison.

Meserole was a deathhouse guard the eventful morning Antonio Ponton was going to the chair on January 7, 1916. He had killed Miss Bessie Kromer, a Schenectady school teacher. Just as Principal Keeper Fred Dorner was taking Ponton out of his cell for the walk to the chair with Father William E. Cahlin, his spiritual adviser, Joseph Hill, a burglar and "trusty," tried to escape from the main prison. Ponton was thrust back in his cell and the door locked. The deep silence in the death chamber where Dr. H. E. Meserole, Prison Secretary Daniel J. Hickey, other officials and witnesses were waiting for the execution, was broken by gruff shouts of keepers, the screaming of convicts and the sound of flying feet. Hill was up on the roof, about to drop off to freedom, and the guards were chasing him. Dr. H. E. Meserole was recaptured the guards returned to the execution scene. Ponton was again taken out, and this time shouted off in the chair.

**Guard Killed By Prisoner.**

Meserole was stationed in the condemned cells over Orestes Shillitani. An hour after he went home one summer night in 1916, the young murderer induced Keeper McCarthy to open his cell door. He pulled out a hidden revolver, shot McCarthy fatally and wounded Keeper Bullard. Unarmed the keepers were helpless. He locked them up in cells with the wounded guard's keys, shined over the exercise yard wall and got out into the walled yard of the prison. Doffing his clothes he scaled the river front fence and swam out into the Hudson and around the walls to shore. As he was nude he did not get far. The warden's men saw the alarm and the fugitive was retaken a half mile away. He was put to death soon afterward.

While working alongside Meserole, Keeper John J. Kennedy in the summer of 1915 snatched a strong sword two feet long Antonio Mangano, an Erie county murderer, was weaving in his cell, away from him. Talking wads of cotton batting, given him by Dr. Charles Farr to bathe a sore eye, the prisoner finally secreted a sufficient quantity to make a rope to commit suicide. Meserole was a match for both an excellent cord, but had his trouble all for naught. Later on the courts gave him a new trial and he escaped the chair by due process of law.

In 1909 two murderers in a suicide pact hung themselves at the same time. Meserole was a match for both. In fact, since the death cells were established, thirty years ago, only one murderer ever cheated the law by suicide. Angelo Leggio frustrated the guards and hung himself with some of his clothing on January 13, 1914 when Professor George W. Kirchy was the prison warden.

## Quaint Recollections of Drink and the Drama

By HAROLD SETON.

SHAKESPEARE has intimated that the province of the stage is to "hold the mirror up to Nature." Therefore his plays, first published by two actors of his company, are supposed to be reflections of the life of his time. Coming down through the plays of Congreve, Wycherley and Farquhar, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, to the plays of Sydney Grundy, Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones, all of these authors refer to drink and drinkers, either in a comic or a tragic manner, to point or adorn a tale. But now that prohibition has come upon us and hard stuff is no longer expected to exist, scenes of intoxication on the stage will presumably be taboo.

This leads us to recall various instances in which thespians have been called upon to simulate inebriety, and some of these recollections are quaint and curious. For instance, it may surprise and shock the present generation, which only knows Maude Adams as *Cinderella* and *Peter Pan*, perhaps even as the heroine of "What Every Woman Knows," "Quality Street," and "The Little Minister," to learn that one of her first big hits was made in 1892 in "The Masked Ball," in which, as leading lady to John Drew, she was represented as having imbibed too freely!

Case!" by Clyde Fitch, she had thrilling scenes of intoxication.

In another Russian play, "Redemption," produced last season, John Barrymore gave a vivid portrayal of debauchery and drunkenness, thereby gaining recognition as one of the foremost actors of the day. By a curious coincidence, in "The Jest," which followed "Redemption," Lionel Barrymore had a drunken scene and he proved himself quite as expert a delineator of dipsomania as brother John, with whom he shared stellar honors.

A few seasons ago, in "My Lady's Dress," by Edward Knoblock, Mary Boland, in one of various episodes into which the piece was divided, played a Russian peasant besotted with drink, finally deserting a sober husband for a drunken lover.

William Faversham has more than one stage dissertation to his credit. Years ago, in "The Conquerors," by Paul Potter, he, as a Prussian officer while drunk, insults a French gentleman, played by Viola Allen. Mr. Faversham's tipsy scene in "Lord and Lady Algy" always "brings down the house."

R. C. Carton, who wrote "Lord and Lady Algy," decided that one good turn deserved another, so introduced further intoxication into "Lady Huntworth's Experiment," in which *Lady Huntworth*, played by Hilda Spang, becomes a cook in order to support her drunken husband, played by the late Jameson Lee Finney. During the past season Miss Spang appeared in support of William Gillette in "Dear Brutus," in which piece the star is represented in the first act as being in a semi-maudlin condition.

In Mrs. Fiske's great success, "Toss of the D'Urbervilles," she was supposed to have a drunken father, and in her subsequent triumph, "Becky Sharp," she was supposed to have a drunken husband. Mrs. Fiske then produced "Salvation Nell," the first scene of which was in a low beer saloon. During the progress of the play the heroine changed from a scrubwoman to a Salvationist and redeemed a drunken husband. "Salvation Nell" was the first play of Edward Sheldon, written while he was an undergraduate at Harvard University. One of his later pieces, "The Song of Songs," provided Irene Fenwick with scenes showing her first in the midst of a carousal in a public restaurant and then propped up in bed "the morning after."

Years ago Marie Bates, character actress, whose dramatic gifts have been developed through long association with the management of David Belasco, made a hit as *Aunt Rose* in "Zaza," constantly crying for some stimulant for her "weak heart."

In "The Case of Becky" Frances Starr had an unusual role as the victim of an unscrupulous hypnotist, the villain's power over her finally being weakened by plying him with wine before counteracting his influence.

Allice Fletcher played a drunken woman in "Two Little Vagrants," which had a long run at the American Theatre, the urchins being played by Minnie Dupree and Jessie Busley. This melodrama by George R. Sims was adapted from a piece popular in Paris. May Irwin introduced humorous episodes of intoxication in several of the farce comedies with which she amused a former generation, and people always applauded when the portly lady lost her balance and fell on the floor.

Anna Held was partial to "drinking songs" and in "Papa's Wife" and "The Little Duchess" displayed considerable ability as a delineator of conviviality. Furthermore, she permitted Charles Bigelow, for several seasons a member of her company, to give somewhat similar exhibitions.

Leon Errol has amused New Yorkers, and more recently Londoners, with his tripping tricks, his mirth-provoking methods being slightly reminiscent of the above mentioned Charles Bigelow, late lamented.

Harry Conner of "A Trip to Chinatown" fame, introduced impressions of inebriety into several farces; Charles H. Hoyt finding that audiences were amused by tubulous characters on the stage.

Thomas G. Seabrooke was at one time a popular star in comic opera, and year after year reappeared as the bacchanalian ruler of "The Isle of Champagne," gaining fame and fortune during his tours from coast to coast. At the same period Frank Daniels gained applause through similar presentations, and at a somewhat later date Richard Carle started staggering about the stage, to the accompaniment of hand clapping from the other side of the footlights.

James T. Powers, Raymond Hitchcock, Frank Moulton, De Wolf Hopper, Jefferson de Angellis and many other stars of comic opera portrayed at one time or another varying degrees of inebriety and "drinking songs" and clinking goblets were part and parcel of these performances.

One of the characters in "Little Johnny Cohan," an early success of George M. Cohan's, was a fellow who staggered on and off the stage from time to time, but never said a word. Nevertheless, a hit was made. Broadway appreciating a novelty. A few seasons ago Mr. Cohan produced a piece called "Hit-the-Trell Holiday," apparently suggested by the antics and activities of Billy Sunday. As acted by Mr. Cohan's brother-in-law, Fred Niblo, the title role was highly diverting.