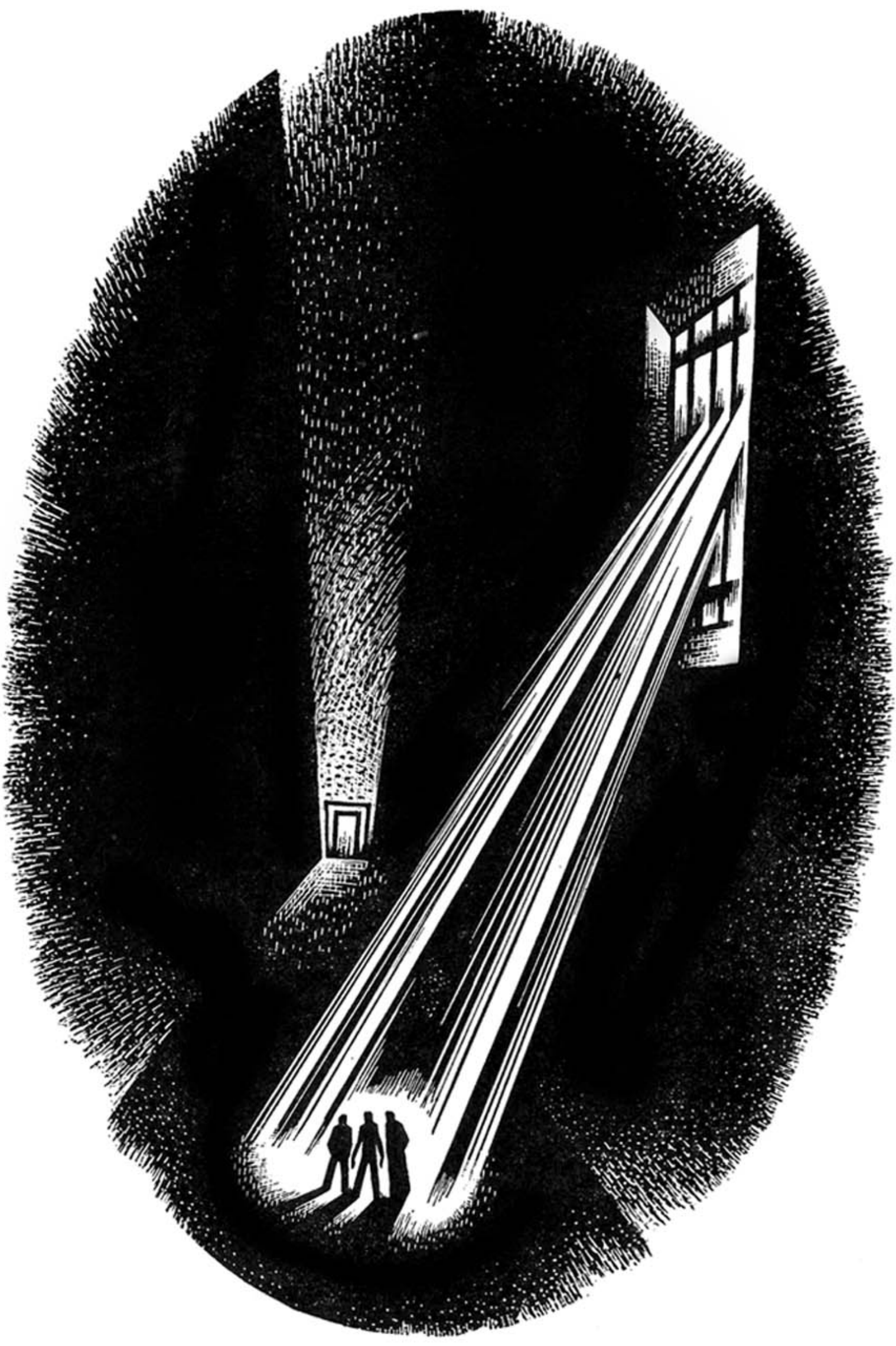
God Walked to the Electric Chair



BY JAMES R. ADAIR

"Although my life will be taken from me, my soul is going to rest with God in Heaven. That will be my next home, and I am so happy that I am ready to go."

I was reading my morning paper, and those words had caught my eye. They were the words of a murderer, condemned to die in three days. The killer, 23-year-old Ernest Gaither, Jr., had given a farewell interview to reporters—a sensational interview in the form of advice to other young "tough guys."

"Any fool can use a gun to get what he wants," Gaither had said. "But it takes a man with guts to get a job and work for what he wants."

And then that last line: ". . . *and I am so happy that I am ready to go.*"

That interested me. A condemned man happy! As editor of a young people's religious weekly, I sensed a story—and that afternoon, with my friend Ken, also a magazine editor, I went to the Cook County, Illinois, jail to visit Ernest Gaither. A guard took us to the top floor and into an almost deserted cell block. After shutting off a blaring radio, he unlocked a series of doors and took us to the prisoner's cell. Another uniformed man sat outside, reading a magazine. Lying on his bunk, a Bible at his side, was the killer, a rather

short, beefy Negro. Seeing us, he got up and, tugging at his belt, came to tell us his story.

His story wasn't very pretty. Ernest had launched his life of crime at the age of 16, bossing a stick-up gang. His record included armed robbery, participation in a Chicago park murder, and an escape from a reform school which later resulted in a penitentiary sentence. After nearly five years, he was paroled June 7, 1946.

Then, on February 9, 1947, he cooked his goose for all time. That night he and two others held up Max Baren, 49, in his liquor store on Chicago's West Side. There was a shot. The storekeeper slumped to the floor. The trio escaped with $300; later Ernest was arrested in Atlanta for murder and returned to Chicago, where he was tried and sentenced to die.

There was an evident calmness about Ernest all through our little talk. When he said he was happy and didn't mind talking about death, I winced. If I were in his place, could I talk about it like that? I glanced at Ken, and he was silent, his eyes on the floor. Ernest's guard, I noticed, had closed his magazine and was listening.

But now on his bunk and leaning one hand near the bars, the doomed man began to talk about the amazing change that had come over him:

"I guess I was an atheist up until last March," he spoke slowly, quietly. "And then a woman of my own race—Mrs. Flora Jones, of Olivet Baptist Church—urged me to attend a religious service being held here for prisoners.

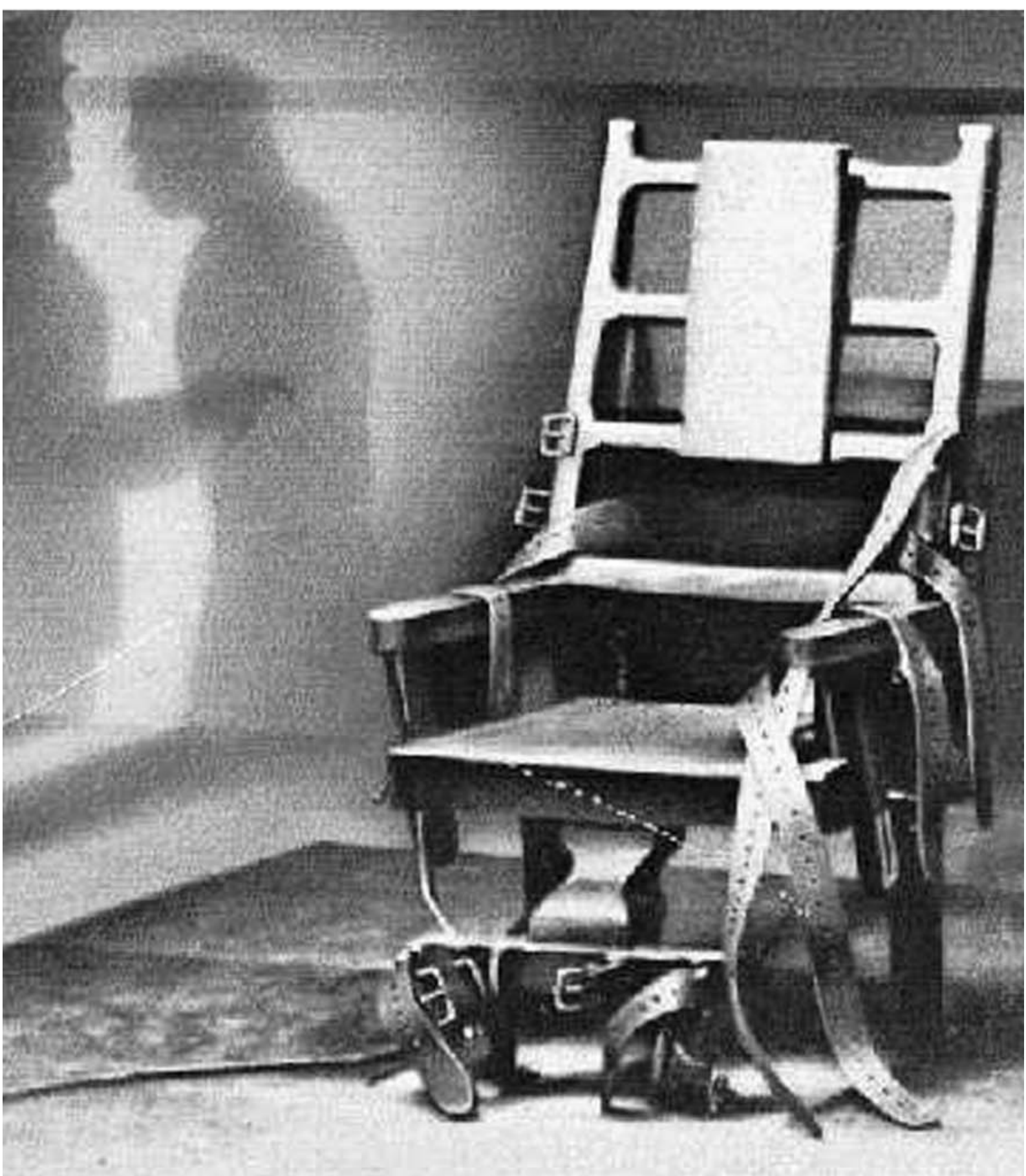
"I was playing cards at the time. I laughed and told her I had no use for religion. 'Why,' I said, 'I don't even believe there's a God.' I went on playing cards, the woman still talking with me through the bars. Actually I felt so evil, that I didn't want to think about God. So I tried to ignore her.

"But suddenly something she was saying stopped me cold. 'If you don't believe in God,' she called, 'just try this little experiment. Before you go to sleep tonight ask Him to awaken you at any time He wants you to know Him!'

"That kept ringing in my ears as I played cards. So that night before I went to sleep, I mumbled, 'God, if You're real, wake me up at 2:45.'

"Outside it was cold. Windows

Ernest Gaither, Jr.



were frosted on the inside. I slept soundly for several hours, then my sleep became restless. Finally I awoke and rubbed my eyes. I was warm and sweating, although the cell was cool. All was quiet except for heavy breathing of sleeping prisoners and the snoring of a man in the next cell. Then I heard footsteps echoing down the dimly-lit corridor outside my cell. It was the guard making his regular check. As he was passing, I stopped him. 'What time is it?'

"He looked at his pocket watch. 'Fifteen to three—'

"My heart took a crazy leap. 'That—why that's the same as 2:45, ain't it?' I stammered, remembering my experiment with God.

"The guard grunted, then passed on. He didn't see me climb from my cot for my first real talk with God. I felt that a big burden had rolled off my chest when I climbed back on the cot a few minutes later."

Both Ken and I marveled at Ernest Gaither's miracle. But, as in the case of most of God's miracles, somebody offered an explanation. On our way out a well-meaning guard casually remarked, "There have been plenty like him. It's just an act. Thinks he'll get out of going to the chair. He'll crack when they come for him."

He closed the cell block and turned on the radio again. Was this the usual thing with prisoners, I wondered, or was the guard wrong in his cold analysis?

Next morning I learned I'd have to wait for the answer. The governor had granted Ernest a stay of execution until October 24.

On October 22 I went to see him

again. Again the guard clicked off the radio, but this time called Ernest to the door of the cell block. I waited as the doomed man shuffled from his cell, hitching up his trousers, the same trousers which less than 35 hours from then would be sheared above the knees for his last mile.

Ernest smiled when he saw me. His handclasp was firm; his story still full of faith—not faith that he'd be saved from the chair, but that God would go with him. Somehow he still didn't act like a doomed killer.

But during our visit, something he said made me realize just how real—and near—this thing was. Calling to a guard who had come in, Ernest asked anxiously, "Did you tell Warden Sain what I asked you?" There was a firmness in his voice—this man was something special to him. For a moment I wondered if Ernest had found a friend who was helping him escape the chair.

The uniformed man swallowed hard. "Yes, Ernest," he said hesitantly, "I—that is, I will." After we watched the prisoner shuffle back to his cell, the guard whispered: "He wants me to walk to the chair with him. I hate to like everything, but I can't refuse a guy like that."

On my way out I talked a moment with Warden Frank G. Sain, the big, soft-spoken man whose jail has become a model prison. He told me of another condemned man, who suddenly became raving mad upon entering the death chamber, ripping off his hood and fighting savagely as the chair seemed to reach out for him.

"It takes more than just courage to walk calmly to ones death," he emphasized. "It takes *something more.*" And, as I left, I wondered if Ernest really had found that *something more*. He'd been a coward all his life, hiding behind a gun to get what he wanted.

He was to go to the chair at midnight on Thursday, the next day. In the late afternoon, when guards brought him cornflakes and cream —one of his favorite dishes—he pushed it aside. The guards looked at one another. Was he cracking? When people are scared they usually don't feel hungry.

"Thanks, but I'll eat it when I come down tonight."

In the spotlessly clean death cell

later in the evening, Ernest ate his cereal and passed the time with several guards, who had come to keep his mind off the midnight journey. But as time—Ernest's time—ran out, the things they said became the strained and meaningless things you say when you really don't know what to say.

But then came the last hour. Somehow it was like a funeral service, with the corpse taking active part. Everybody wanted to cry, except the man with an hour to live; he wanted to sing and pray. A white minister and a Negro chaplain joined him in reading and quoting Scripture. With eyes lifted upward, the prisoner repeated passages from the 23rd Psalm. There was a special emphasis on the fourth verse:

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me."

Outside, the mourners—now nearly a dozen strapping guards—listened reverently, some wet-eyed. Then someone suggested a song. Ernest said he knew "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder," and a moment later corridors rang with music as the Negro's high tenor sounded above the off-key voices of his guards. Where death waited, there was more of a feeling of God's being there.

After two other songs, the men came with clippers and cut the hair off the man with the tenor voice.

Two minutes before midnight the closing prayer was offered. Hearts thumped crazily as Ernest began softly: "God, I used to hate these guards. Now, God, I love 'em—O God, I love everybody now." His voice echoed in the near-by death chamber as he prayed for those whom he'd wronged, then for his mother, that she wouldn't suffer for his sins. "And, Lord," he concluded, "I'm not going to die of electrocution—I'm just going to sit in the chair and go to sleep . . ."

At midnight a black hood was slipped over his head, the cell door was thrown open, and Ernest Gaither took his last walk. The guards at each elbow were noticeably nervous. The prisoner sensed it.

"What are you shaking for, fellows?" he asked quietly. "I'm not afraid." The guard whom he'd asked to walk with him was silent and looked straight ahead.

Ernest Gaither, Jr.

The 75 witnesses watched uneasily as the hooded figure took his place in the big black chair, accentuated against a stainless steel floor. He waited calmly as unsteady hands strapped him in. Then there was a delay of two minutes—hours it seemed—as an attendant worked feverishly on a defective electrode. Any hint of Ernest's emotion was hidden beneath the mask.

At 12:03 a. m. the first of three electrical shocks flashed through his body. The hooded figure lifted and dropped. Then, with the second jolt, the body heaved higher. The final shock lasted longer. There was a flash of smoke as flesh cooked for a moment.

Ernest Gaither, Jr., who had learned too late the consequences of living by the gun, had paid the highest penalty exacted by the State of Illinois.

But somehow Ernest isn't remembered so much as a killer. Rather, he's remembered as the man who wasn't afraid to die.

A veteran guard was analyzing it shortly after the execution: "It must have been courage—Ernest, I believe, was determined to be the bravest of any to sit in the chair." Then he paused a moment, a little in embarrassment. After all, guards are supposed to be "tough guys" themselves.

"No," he admitted slowly. "That wasn't it, either. It was more than courage. It was more like Ernest said it would be . . .

"God went with him, tonight."

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