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# 33 Years in a Living Tomb



## Jesse Pomeroy. America's Man in the Iron Mask, Has Learned Languages and Sciences

**B**ARRED from human companionship, from the light of the sun and the pleasant visions of a budding earth, there has lived in a six-by-six cell in the Massachusetts state prison for thirty-three years a man whose fate surpasses in tragedy that of any of the tragic prisoners of fiction.

Imprisoned when a child of 14, this man has lived a death in life, seldom speaking an articulate word, never smiling, always as grave, as solemn, as sad as the white-faced ones we put away in tombs.

Because his spirit has not departed, his story is all the more mournful, and in all the annals of criminology there is no case where the weight of the law's hand has been heavier than in that of Jesse Pomeroy. It remained for the twentieth century to give a modern setting to the story of "The Man in the Iron Mask," and to exceed the Bastille in long-continued imprisonment.

Pomeroy was sentenced to be hanged in September, 1874, when 14 years of age. He was a child—incapable, degenerate, irresponsible—but the law held him as guilty as if he had been a man of intellect and mature years. His sentence was finally commuted to a life imprisonment that was to be "solitary." And so it has been.

Since the day of his trial the judge before whose tribunal he stood, the attorney general and district attorney who prosecuted him and the Governor who commuted his sentence have died. The population of the country has increased 30,000,000; telephones, electric lights, electric trains and thousands of new inventions have changed the nation's mode of life; yet of all that this man knows nothing. For thirty-three years he has existed in a living tomb.

Yet, in mental capacity at least, he has advanced during that time. From an incorrigible child, he has developed into a serious, intelligent man; he has read 8000 books; has learned six languages; has acquired a knowledge of the history of the world, and for the last few years has worked on a drama based on the classic tragedies of the Greeks, in which he will figure as the hero suffering under the displeasure of the gods.

"For Man's grim Justice goes its way,  
And will not swerve aside;  
It slays the weak, it slays the strong,  
It has a deadly stride;  
With iron heel it slays the strong,  
The monstrous paricide!"

"I know not whether Laws be right,  
Or whether Laws be wrong;  
All that we know who lie in jail  
Is that the wall is strong;  
And that each day is like a year  
A year whose days are long."  
—"The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

**J**ESSE POMEROY! In the minds of those who can remember, the figure of this murderous newsboy may still stand as a terrible example of childish criminality. Before he was 13 years old Jesse Pomeroy was arrested charged with torturing his boy companions. He was sent to the Reform School in Westboro in September, 1872, and was pardoned less than two years later.

Not long after his release, he murdered a little 5-year-old girl, cruelly, brutally killed her and buried her body in the cellar of his father's store.

This was in February, 1874. Shortly after-

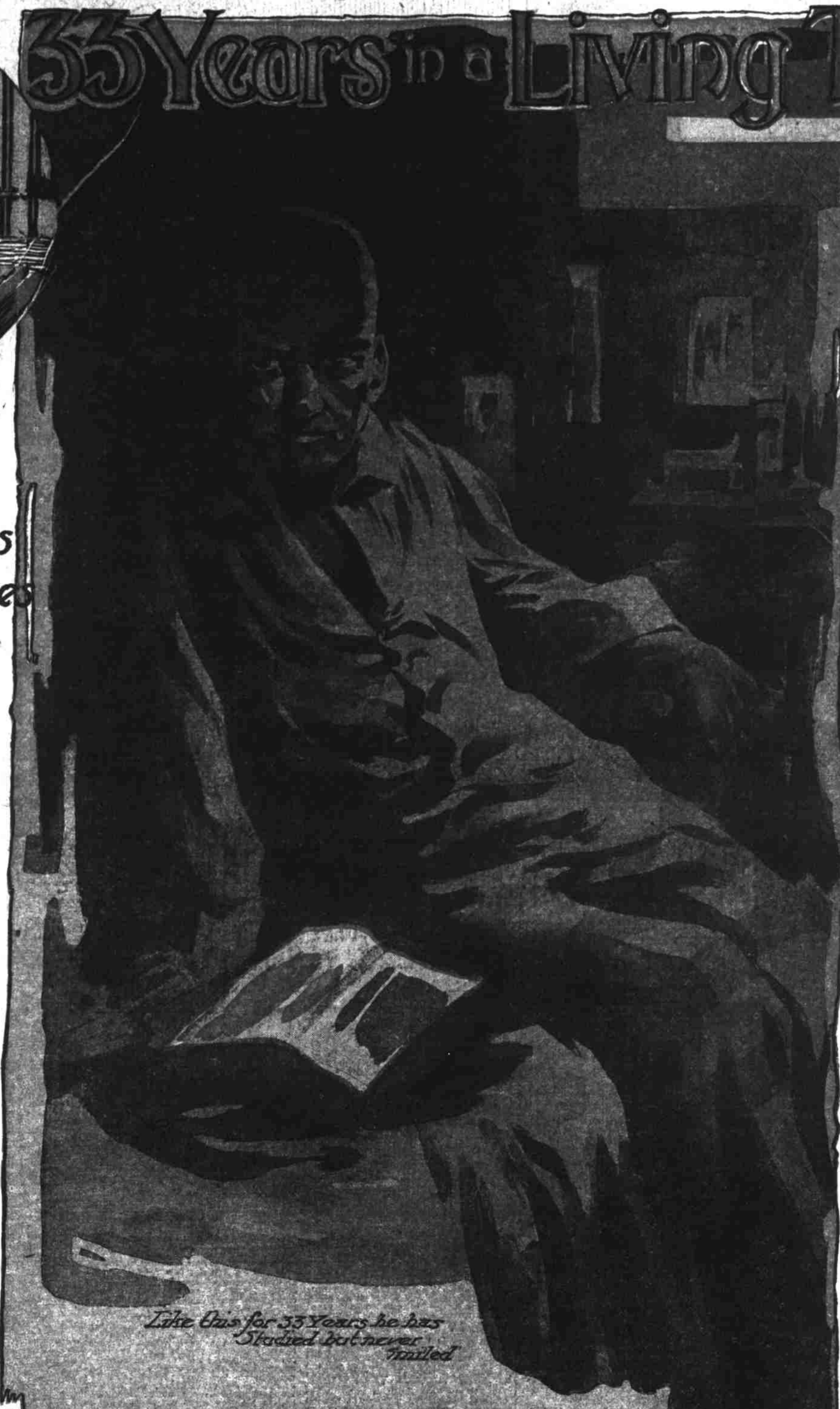
ward he killed a 5-year-old boy in South Boston—a murder of such horrible details that the people who read it were sickened.

Yet this murderer, painted with lurid colors

at the time and since, was a mere boy, 14 years old, with a weak brain, a desire in his nature to slay, to torture, to destroy.

By the law he was held responsible. Of those

mysterious influences which implant strange and unnatural impulses in immature hearts the law took no cognizance. The child was sentenced to be hanged six months after his arrest.



Like this for 33 years he has studied but never smiled



West Wing of Charlestown Prison where Pomeroy is confined

This, in brief, is the story of the crimes of Jesse Pomeroy, who became in thousands of minds a type of inhuman cruelty and childish perversion; a monster to whom was to be shown no pity.

A defense of insanity was made before the Supreme Court, but the New England conscience saw nothing of a mitigating nature in the immaturity of the state's prisoner. Governor Rice, however, after hearing a review of the extenuating circumstances of the case, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment.

Life imprisonment, solitary imprisonment—the worst death dealt by the law!

The punishment has been carried out. From a child this unfortunate creature has developed to a man. Within the four dark walls of his cell his nature, according to a favored few who have been permitted to visit him, has matured and softened.

Evil seeds that existed in the soil of his childish mind have perished. Rare flowers of thought have arisen there, born of communion with the writers who have been his sole companions.

### MIND HAS GROWN NORMAL

Today Jesse Pomeroy, the few who know him say, might take his place in any community, and his abilities would accrue to society's benefit.

His mind, it is declared by his friends, is sane, clear and perfectly normal. He has acquired a wonderful and exhaustive education. The bitterness which rose to such overwhelming intensity some years ago, when he tried to escape by causing an explosion of gas in his cell, has passed away.

Pomeroy, however, has refused steadfastly to receive religious consolation. To his indictment of society, even the good prison chaplain is unable to reply.

"If the God you people worship," he says in his sad way, "is so forgiving and so loving, His worshippers could not be so cruel to me."

His is the modern plea of Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon":

"My limbs are bowed, though not with toil,  
But rusted with a vile repose,  
For they have been a dungeon's spoil,  
And mine has been the fate of those  
To whom the goodly earth and air  
Are banned and barred."

No such transformation of character as his, however, has ever been witnessed in the annals of penology. Often in his cell Pomeroy can be heard by the cautious keeper murmuring of a green forest and of a little home in the woods, far from the world, where he may live under God's sky and breathe God's pure, sweet air.

To those who have advocated his release he has confided the wish of his life—to live on a little farm in New England, to look upon the sky before he dies and know that society forgives his crime. But society does not, cannot forget; they were too horrible, too utterly repulsive to all that is humane.

Even today, as thirty years ago, the name of Jesse Pomeroy is proscribed. Visitors to the Cherry Hill prison at Charlestown are never taken to his cell. Inquiries about him long ago were met by such silence that finally no one came to inquire about him and he was forgotten. Only the recent appeal of the Society for the Promotion of Criminal Anthropology recalled public attention to this forgotten prisoner.

What does he look like now? What does he think? How does he spend his time? What has been the psychological influence of the prison upon him during his adolescence and passing into mature manhood? He is now 47 years of age.

The "Man of the Iron Mask" spent five years in the Bastille; before that he was imprisoned about twenty years. But here is a man who has been alone "with himself and God" for thirty-three years.

### REALLY ANOTHER BEING

When Frank H. Gile, secretary of the American Society for the Promotion of Criminal Anthropology, presented the petition against keeping Pomeroy longer in solitary confinement, he declared that this man was not the child who killed his playmates, but was now another being, a man of learning and education, a soul which has been purged by suffering, a face which has grown beautiful behind its mask of stone.

Governor Guild, however, decided that the prisoner must remain in his lonely cell. Pomeroy's were not ordinary crimes, he thought, so an extraordinary punishment was not too severe.

In the words of the poet Jesse Pomeroy's sentiment are expressed, better, he says, than he could express them himself:

"But this I know, that every Law  
That men have made for Man,  
Since first Man took his brother's life  
And the sad world began,  
But straws the wheat and saves the chaff  
With a most evil fan.

And "never a human voice comes near  
To speak a gentle word;  
The eye that watches through the door  
Is pitiless and hard;  
And by all forgot we rot and rot,  
With soul and body marred."

A visit to Jesse Pomeroy would be interesting and instructive. The officials of Cherry Hill allow few persons to see the man, they refuse to tell anything about him, and every effort is made to keep him in his grave and forgotten.

One of the members of the society which has worked in his behalf was allowed to see him some time ago.

There is a wing on the east side of Cherry Hill prison. It is doorless, and is reached only through a dark, narrow corridor from the interior of the jail. There are no windows, only small apertures near the roof for ventilation.

In the main building are rows of cells, well lighted with narrow slit-like windows in the

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