THE IVORY QUEEN.

By NORMAN HURST.

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Continued from First Page

You'd be too happy if I took you. Live on till you fear me more. Then I'll strike. But I cannot seek death. Life is nothing to me, and yet there's my son Astray. I feel I am mad. I almost hate him because he reminds me so much of her.

Twelve years since I last opened my diary. Twelve years ago my hand touched these pages and I bade goodby to gloom—bade goodby to gloom when it was yet to become blacker than ever.

I remember it as though it were but yesterday—remember that she was looking over me as I wrote, her arm upon my shoulder. I had nothing more to write then. Every day would have been the same, all happiness, and that reads so feeble when set down in black and white. Misery becomes intensified. The writing makes it colder and harder.

Then Astray was born. I loved him then, perhaps because she did. Now I have no love for any one, only for the past. My heart is filled with hatred—a hatred deep and bitter, that will keep me alive until it is satisfied. Here at The Grange we were happy and wanted nothing more.

Business called me again to Paris. If I did not go, I would lose a fortune. I remember now how she clung to me and begged me to let it pass, but man is human, after all, and human nature says, "Get money," and I went—went and was discovered. I knew it. I saw the man start. He spoke to me. I recognized his voice and he mine. I was back in the past, and the past was alive again.

I dared not go back to America, but went to London, shadowed every step of the way. The past ever with me, alive again. Then I wrote to her. Her first thoughts were for her boy, not for herself, not for me. I write it because I know it. Perhaps I am jealous of my own son. Well, I'm getting hard and cold now. What if I am? She sent him to a place of safety, parted with him, a little mite who could scarcely speak, in case the evil minded gang should do him injury. She said at The Grange—said there because I commanded it, because I said that no one knew we were married and the time would come when the gang would tire of watching me, and finally I very stealthily prepared to join her in Norcombe.

No stranger she wrote me had appeared in Norcombe. I grew confident again. What I had thought was shadowing I told myself was imagination. I grew careless, and then—I write it firmly—then I murdered her, I murdered her!

Throwing aside all thought, I paid a flying visit to America and saw her in Norcombe—saw her for the last time.

I went again, arrived to find the house deserted, only a lying telegram of yesterday upon the table:

Come to Chicago by the 10 o'clock train.
JOSIAH.

She had gone, and that is ten years ago. Ten years I have spent in searching—searching in vain—and I have come home now to await the end.

The boy, my boy, I have brought to The Grange—brought him here five years ago—and now I live for him only.

[Again there was a blank page in the diary.]

THE GRANGE, June, 1894.—I am calmer than I have been for years. I am revenged—a life for a life. I set out for Paris, not this time to hunt for her, but to demand the Scriptural forfeit, a life for a life. I gloat over it, only I'm mad now. They call me Mad Marsden in the village and shrink as I pass. How they'd shrink if they knew all! I have killed him, murdered him, stabbed him! It wasn't wrong. "A life for a life"—there's my excuse, the excuse I'll shriek to my judges; a command—a command from the Scriptures, "A life for a life." He and his gang killed her, and I am revenged. He was getting old, and so am I. We were both young when we first met, and now he is dead—dead by my own hand. He shrank back when first we met. He saw his doom in my eye. He could use the knife, and so could I. I think I laughed as I felt that blade go straight to its mark. I suppose I am mad, but I'm revenged.

To Paris and back in a month. What luck to have met him as I did! More than a year ago since Astray left—left because I would tell him nothing of the past. He was always asking what mystery there was about his life, always flying into a passion because I would not tell him all. I was a fool to let him know there even was a mystery, and he's a fool not to see in my every action I try to guard his life. I should like to see him once more—see him and tell him he can marry the girl he wants to. I've been hard and cold ever since the day my wife was lured away. I've oppressed every one till I'm hated by all. They don't think old Marsden was ever young.

Jan. 11, 1896.—Astray has been and gone. He came back after two years to be good friends, and we have quarreled again.

He has gone—gone for good, I suppose, this time. He did not plead as he used, but stood above me and demanded to know who he was and who his parents were. He little knew he spoke to his own father, and I would not tell him—why I know not, but after my death he will know all. The ivory queen, as I have told him all his life, will reveal the secret. The ivory queen he has sworn he will not touch until I am in my grave. Why don't I tell him all? Because I'm mad perhaps—perhaps because I cannot bear another, even my own son, to share my misery. If he knew, his soul would go out in pity to his mother. I am glad, for I should be jealous even of that. Fool, no: I feel softer. A better light breaks in upon me after these years of misery. I understand now why I have kept this secret, why I will keep it to my grave and past the grave to eternity. I might have found sympathy in my son years ago if I had obeyed the promptings of my heart, but for his sake I have kept it to myself. He shall never know. Let him live his life happily with the girl he has chosen. Tonight I bury the past; tomorrow I will begin afresh. I have yearned to recognize him as my son all these years. Tomorrow the parchment in the ivory queen shall be destroyed, and I will tell him his mother died, invent some story why I could not recognize him before, and all will be well.

Tonight I bid my book goodby forever. I dare not read its pages. Let them die. Tonight I place it where it has been hidden for years—place it there and forget it.

Tomorrow I shall awaken in a new life. Astray, my son, and his wife that is to be shall brighten the last years of my life. I feel happier and brighter in the thought of what will be. Goodby to the past, to my diary and its horrors, goodby—

Let me think of her with softer memories of how she lived. For Astray's sake I want to live now—I want to live!

J. M.

And there the diary ended.

CHAPTER IX.

HERBERT DARRENT VISITS PARIS.

Three days had passed since Darrent had pored over the secret pages of Josiah Marsden's diary. He had spent the time in working back upon his clews, trying to find a different set of circumstances to fit into the story of the diary, and so bring about Astray Marsden's release.

That he was innocent now he felt assured. And yet would the law accept the diary as a complete refutation on Astray's behalf of the crime for which he was now condemned to death? It seemed to Darrent so wild, so out of place in this nineteenth century, that a man should be dogged all over Europe, followed to America and practically hunted to death by a secret society of which he knew nothing, so out of place in life, only suited for the pages of a sensational novel.

He had had a lengthy interview with the authorities, but they had not been overcome with the idea of any miscarriage of justice having taken place and had asked if every morsel of evidence had not pointed to the guilt of Astray Marsden. The case had been so evident, so obvious, and yet improbable as it read there might perhaps be some truth in the diary. Justice did not seek a victim, but wanted the guilty man. If he were not Astray Marsden, then Darrent had permission to use the short time at his disposal to find the man, and justice would be satisfied. To Darrent, who now earnestly believed in the innocence of Astray Marsden, it was a fight between himself and the law. He had obtained the necessary permission to see Astray whenever he chose to do so and now sat watching him as he read the pages of Marsden's diary. Astray finished his reading and laid the diary down with a sigh.

"A fearful story," he exclaimed, with a deep sigh, as he finished the last page. "Then he was my father?"

Darrent nodded his head.

"Hounded through life, hounded to death because he would not do the biddings of a gang of assassins! It's terrible, too terrible to believe—my mother lured away and murdered, my father, stabbed in his own house, a defenseless old man, for what? Bloodthirstiness alone. But I will be revenged. We know now where to seek for the assassins, where to look for the hand that struck that fatal blow. In the remnants of that gang we shall find my father's murderer. That diary must release me from the condemned cell, and my life shall be devoted to the search. I will never pause until I have brought the man who struck that blow to justice. I swear it. It is in Paris we shall have to look. In Paris we will seek until some chance clew helps us to attain our object. When shall I be set free? When can we start?"

"I shall start today."

"Good, and I will follow when they have released me. How is it possible that such a murderous society could exist? What are its objects? What are its secrets that, after years and years of waiting, it yet took its revenge?"

"My dear Marsden," Darrent replied calmly, "Paris is even now the hotbed of such societies and was more so when your father was there. It is full of secret associations, French, Russian, German and every other nationality. Your father unfortunately became suspected, and they never forget."

"Then go, Darrent. Lose no time, and I will follow when I am released."

Darrent rose to his feet and placed his hands on Astray's shoulders.

"You're so full of your father that you have forgotten your own peril," he remarked.

"My own peril!" Astray exclaimed.

"Yes; the authorities do not look on that diary as a complete establishment of your innocence. Mind you, I think you will be reprieved, but unless I can discover more I'm afraid your actual release is a long way off."

"But it proves I am innocent."

"It does not go far enough. I leave for Paris to get more evidence, to test what is set down in this diary and then to bring the chosen member of this gang to justice, and so obtain your release. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. The law does not want to lose its grip of its victim

"Back at last, Darrent!" he exclaimed.

unless another is placed ready for its vengeance. I will not detain you. Go."

With a hearty handshake, a promise that "all would yet be right," Darrent left Astray Marsden and made his way to New York en route for Paris.

Over a month passed before Herbert Darrent was back in Norcombe. He asked at the police station for the address of the woman who figured in the case as the housekeeper of Josiah Marsden and, learning it, made his way to the cottage, which he left in about half an hour with a very satisfied look upon his face.

Next morning Astray was aroused from his apathy by the entrance of the detective and in a moment was on his feet and gripping his hand.

"Back at last, Darrent!" he exclaimed excitedly. "I thought I should be done for before you returned. Tell me at once, have you found him?"

Darrent shook his head, and Astray sank back into his seat.

"Then you have been unsuccessful?"

"Not altogether," Darrent replied, "but things have turned out very differently from what I expected. I reached Norcombe yesterday afternoon and visited the woman, Margaret Gadsden, who acted as your father's housekeeper. You remember?"

Astray nodded his head.

"That visit was to settle the last point in connection with my journey to Paris. Look at the page of the diary headed June, 1894, and you'll see what it says: 'I set out for Paris, not this time to hunt for her, but to demand the Scriptural forfeit. I have killed him!'"—

"Enough, enough!" Astray cried. "That is the part of the book that haunts me. He died a murderer, murdered."

"I have killed him," Darrent calmly continued, "murdered him!"

Herbert Darrent paused impressively and, leaning toward Astray, said, "That is not true."

"What!"

"Your father had not been half a dozen miles away from Norcombe during the last ten years. His mind was unhinged. He yearned for that man's life until, in his dreams, he killed him; that is all. I have told you this first, and now I will deal with my visit to Paris. This was the clew I started upon, this entry in the diary:

"'Nov. 25, 1871.—Her father discovered shot dead in Paris this morning. I dare not tell her. Who will be the next? What is this nameless gang? What is their purpose? I dare not stop here.'

"To me it was obvious that that was the first step in the solution of the mystery and an easy one. The records of the French police put me in possession of the whole of the facts connected with that murder, but they turned out to be very different from what I had anticipated. A man, Maurice de Lanez, was discovered shot dead, but"—Darrent again paused—"there was no mystery whatever.

"Maurice de Lanez caught his cashier red handed in theft and sent for the police, but before they had time to arrive the man turned on him, shot him dead and fled.

"He was captured next day on the outskirts of the city, tried, condemned and guillotined. He died confessing that his sentence was a just one, for Lanez had been the best of masters. There was no other record of a murder of a man named De Lanez in that year or any other year."

"But the mystery?"

"There is no mystery."

"The assassins?"

"There are no assassins and never were."

"The gang?"

"There is no gang."

"My brain reels. I cannot understand. What does it mean?"

"Listen. On Oct. 8, 1871—I am indebted very much to chance for ever having been able to put this peculiar affair together—a party of students were carousing in a top floor room in a house in one of the worst quarters of Paris. They were a devil may care lot, and one or two were wanted by the police, not for anything very serious, mind you—for a drunken brawl, perhaps, or a little overexuberance after a students' ball. The gambling was at its height when suddenly they heard the sound of a man rushing up stairs. The light was extinguished, and they held their breath and waited. Then the man burst into the apartment—an Englishman."

"Yes, yes; go on."

"Well, I told you they were a harebrained crew, an ingenious lot of practical jokers, an irresponsible set of scamps, and one had a brilliant idea to fool the Englishman. He told it to his comrades, and it was hailed with a suppressed roar of merriment. They were to pretend to the stranger that he had broken into a solemn conclave of a secret society. Make him take his chance with them and draw for a life. Do you follow the story?"

"I begin to understand. Go on."

"Your father was that man, Astray, and his disposition was as yours is now—unable to face danger. As you made a mistake and fled from your accuser, he made a mistake and dared to defy them. He accepted their proposal and drew for the life of a woman. They began as a joke; they carried it on to teach him a lesson."

"Brave men."

"If he had refused to carry out the scheme and dared them to take his life, the light would have been turned up, and he would have discovered that the cold barrel against his temple was only a short poker and would have been invited to spend the evening with the lightest hearted lot of scamps in Paris. But he did not defy them; he agreed to their plans."

"Or pretended to." Any man would have done the same.

"So they kept up the joke. One or two were well connected, and they introduced him to a good set of people, and a pretty girl was chosen for the victim, a girl so gentle that they knew the blackest hearted, foulest minded brute could not have raised a finger against her. Then they sent him notes and letters urging him to do the deed."

"Murdering him by inches," Astray cried, trembling with suppressed rage. "Goading him to despair. A good joke! They must have been a merry crew indeed! Go on. What more?"

"There is no more. Presently they tired of their joke. The girl left Paris, so did your father, and the whole affair only became a good after dinner story—how they fooled the Englishman."

"But the tracking through Europe?"

"Your father's imagination only. It never existed. This is the cruel point, the pitiless part of that practical joke. Can't you imagine the feelings of a man who thought he was being shadowed through Europe; that the day must inevitably come when a sharp thrust would end his life? In every shadow he saw an assassin, in every face a spy. The fear was always in his mind that perhaps he would not see that evening's sun set; that he had entered upon his last day. Kept from the woman he loved for fear of carrying danger to her, always on the alert, always suspicious, always with the fear of death hanging over him, to a sensitive man there could be only one ending. He lost his reason, lost it hopelessly on the day he heard of your mother's death."

"Of her death?"

"Yes, her death. She died suddenly and lies buried in a country churchyard in a small Michigan village, the churchyard of the village where he hid her from the fear of their enemies."

"But the abduction told in the diary?"

"That account was written after her death. She was not abducted. He sent her away himself. Haunted by the dread of assassination, they lived apart after his visit to Paris, he going to the Michigan village once or twice in six months for a day. I heard this part of the story from one of the clergymen of the village. Your mother fell ill and died suddenly, very suddenly. No one knew where to send for your father, and she was buried.

"Two days after a telegram came to your mother asking her to come to Chicago. No answer could be sent, and so they waited for him. The rector broke the news to him and has since repeated the story to me, told me how your father listened without a word, walked to the churchyard, gazed at the grave without a tear and then returned to the house and found the telegram which he had himself sent the day before.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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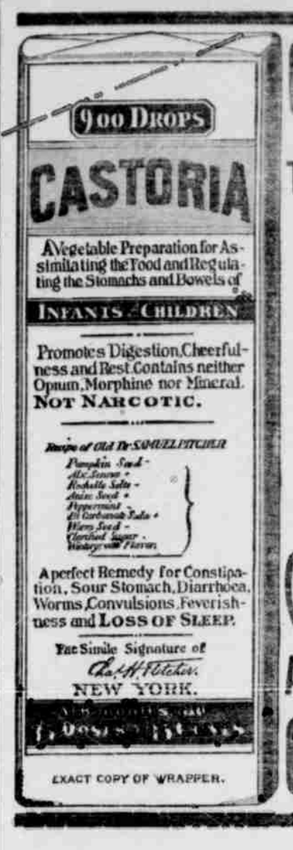

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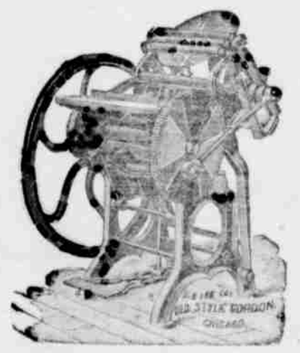

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