

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

## The Experiences of a Work House Director

On a summer day in 1881, I was summoned to the telephone: –the new mayor of Cincinnati proved to be at the other end of the wire, and his question was, “Will you accept the offer of Director of the Work House?” – Stunned by such an unexpected query, I craved a few hours consideration; but was answered that several were clamoring for the place, and an immediate answer was required. My evil genius was certainly at hand to prompt reply given in the next two minutes, – that I would accept. And thereby hangs a tale I will now unfold. For from that fatal hour I have been undone, and my peace of mind which should pass all understanding in every properly conditioned heart, has been a stranger to my home, my office, my inmost consciousness.

My idea in the two minutes given me for reflection, was that it was a good chance to do something for Cincinnati in a line that certainly needed attention; and that it was best to seize the golden opportunity at once. But how often have I since wished that I had let the city and the opportunity alike go on their own way undisturbed rather than endure the miseries of a Director's position, trying to reform hopeless deformity. Had there been reasonable grounds for it, I should long ago have concluded that the mayor aforesaid secretly cherished the desire to punish me as one of his enemies by the appointment. But this could not be, for having had an active hand in his nomination and election, as a genuine reformer, and being on terms of intimacy with him, the quaint, old, and unknown maxim that we all enjoy a secret delight in the miseries of our best friends, could not well apply to the mayor. – And besides, had he not declared at the time that he wanted to give me the place because it was the best thing at his command? If he spoke the truth, Heaven help the holders of his other offices!

So the appointment was made, confirmed in due time by the Council, sufficiently commented on by a free and enlightened press, and the appointee was sworn in, and led as a lamb to the slaughter. My boyish impressions of the good man Howard visiting the poor in European prisons, of Little Dorrit and her old father in the Marshalsea, and the wonderful history of their captivity as drawn by the skillful hand of Charles Dickens, and of the immortal prisoner of Chillon, whose “hair was gray, but not through years, nor grew it white in a single night, as men's have grown through sudden fears,” – all came crowding in upon my memory with singular intensity as I drove out to the first Directors' Meeting, and for the first time crossed the threshold where so many thousands had bidden to hope an eternal farewell.

The Work House, as you well know, is on Colerain Avenue, two miles north of the city proper: a grand, gloomy, and peculiar pile of buildings, in fact, but in appearance as you drive up in front, beautiful, and imposing. The grounds embrace 26 acres. A large, well-kept park lies in front, full of trees and flowers, with a sparkling fountain playing in the center, by which the incoming prisoners are driven as they enter upon duration vile, that they may fully realize the beauties of the world they are to leave for a season for the

world's good, and so increase their sense of punishment; while, as they enter the somber portals, the last thing they can see is the flag of the free for floating from the tall mast by the fountain. The banner floats on with its stars and stripes, while the prisoner thenceforth displays stripes of another kind.

Alighting from the carriage, we passed through a motley crowd of the friends of prisoners waiting for a chance to apply for pardons, – for it was Pardon Day. In a comfortable office, the other four directors and attending officers were gathered around a huge table; the walls were lined with interested spectators. The affable superintendent introduced the new member. Order was called, and the pardon machine commenced to grind. If misery loves company, it would find plenty of it there, for soon began to pass, as in review, and array of petitioners for clemency toward relations and friends more motly than Falstaff's volunteers; and sometimes more piteously eloquent than the plea of Judah before the Royal Joseph in Egypt for his young brother Benjamin.

Such a variety of reasons for clemency; such lucid explanations of seemingly villainous conduct, and such promises for future amendment were made, that it seemed the only proper thing to do was to follow Napoleon's example at the Bastille: – batter down the prison doors and turn all the inmates loose at once. Much did I marvel then and there the apparent hardness of heart of my veteran Associates, and their indisposition to believe anything said by their suppliants in favor of the subjects of their appeals. But looking back now over five years of personal experience with this class, I see that the iron-hearted men were right, and have in truth been compelled to follow closely in their footsteps myself, and to reluctantly conclude that quite a heavy per cent of the population of large cities must of necessity be kept securely locked up to prevent them raiding upon the honest majority.

The prison question has during those five years been discussed and ventilated in a wonderful manner in the National Prison Convention and otherwise, and greatly needed reforms have been inaugurated. But nothing has been done that checks the ever-increasing stream of vicious humanity that daily pours out to that Work House, or improves the moral quality of a habitual criminal class. But little can be done out there in this latter direction. The material is unpromising and the facilities are poor indeed. Efforts in that behalf must be made by humanitarians in the homes of the classes who must frequent the prison, and upon individuals themselves wherever found.

In so far as time for reflection upon their misdeeds is concerned, in the mighty solitude of the cell, they have ample opportunity; but this and the Religious Services of Sunday are about the only influences in their favor out there. Prior to the year 1870, all the prisoners from the police court were accommodated in a small concern on the Lick Run Turnpike about three miles west of the city. The chain gang was then in its glory, and could often be seen working on the streets of the city without causing any comments. Machine politics of to-day did not then exist, coupled with its component parts, – a knuckling to the criminal class and winking at its crimes, in order to use that class on election day, and of necessity always trying to defeat the ends of justice by seeking to release the prisoner from the sentence. All this has fearfully increased the number of admissions to the prison, for crime always is fostered by diminishing the certainty of its proper punishment.

Then, too the war had its influence in lowering the standard of morals all over the country, and the hard times that have of late years prevailed, have often driven men to commit offenses such as petty larceny, which in prosperity they never would have thought of doing. But the most potent influence of all in filling that Prison, is intemperance, which has been fearfully augmented since our hill-top resorts have been established until now, 75 per cent of all commitments are directly traceable to excessive stimulation. Undoubtedly we have become a tough city in this respect, and a class of young men and women has grown up who have not the fear of the law before them, who are slaves of self-indulgence, and who are constantly being sent out for their crimes, are ever increasing in their evil tendencies, and grow hardened in vice by their constant association with criminals. These influences, and the natural growth of the city, have produced such a change that this Prison, completed in 1870, at a cost of about \$1,000,000 including the 26 acres of land, and then deemed both extravagant and unreasonably large, is now unable to hold all prisoners committed, except by placing two men in a cell in some 80 instances, a condition which should never exist in a civilized community. At present there are about 750 inmates, –570 men and 130 women: the largest number that has ever been there at once. The proportion of the sexes is always about 4 to 1. Their sentences have a wide range in severity, – from ten days to three years: but be light or be of heavy, nobody is satisfied; they all want to get out, and that speedily.

Like Sparrowgrass's new dog who scratched the first hour on the house door to get in, and the next hour to get out, these people are never content except a few outcasts who in cold weather actually break into the Work House in order to get food and shelter. But this is a small matter compared with the persistent attacks of their friends upon the Directors in their behalf. The prisoners are detained within the walls, and so can not get at the Board, but no known invention has been sufficient to interpose a successful barrier to the assaults upon a defenseless director by a prisoner's friends. We read much of the poor and friendless; but my observation is that such of the poor as belong in the criminal classes have no lack of friends; and the greater the rascal, the greater the is the number of his friends.

And a strange feature of this business is that these active and persistent friends of prisoners are by no means confined to the lower classes, but are also found among men who would resent promptly the interpretation that they had anything in common with the subjects of their intercession, and who affect to belong to the best classes of society. Outsiders can have no idea of the fearful bore inflicted upon the victimized Directors by this never-ceasing clatter for clemency. You enter your office in the early morning, and find the persistent friend awaiting your arrival. You may think him there in order to retain you in some important matter; be not deceived. No matter how ingeniously he dissembles, in his opening sentences, you soon discover that his plan is to persuade you that some fearful wrong has been committed upon and not by his friend who languishes no doubt properly, behind the Work House bars. Or as you meet some old friend on the street, who seems unusually interested in your health, business, and family; but who in the end embitters your existence by urging the immediate release of some person whom you believe ought to remain, under the penalty of having the aforesaid prisoner and all his friends brand you as an inhuman monster, the rest of your natural life, and slaughter you at the primaries, should you ever presume to run for office.

Again, you return to your humble home at night, grateful that at last you are relieved from the inevitable annoyances of the city, only to find a vigilant bummer roosting on your doorstep to continue the grievance, or a woman who has kissed the Blarney Stone waiting in your house with three or four small children to harrow your soul with her tearful description with the misery she and they undergo at home because of the unreasonable detention of her liege lord; whereas in most cases she has been the chief witness in sending the aforesaid husband to merited punishment.

It is amazing how profound an ignorance is often found among the friends of prisoners as to the Director's duties on this question. It is often the case that some poor woman will, with evident innocence offer a small sum of money to a Director to help on her husband's case, and seem amazed at its refusal. I once closely questioned one of this class as to her ideas on the subject, and found that, among others, she had been told by her spiritual advisor that she could do nothing in that line without money. How could I blame her after that? Even men who certainly ought to know better often seem surprised that a Director will not join them in signing a petition for the release of some friend, – apparently forgetting or ignoring the fact that he was to be one of the judges to sit upon the merits of that same application. This pardon question is the bane of the position of Director. Were it not for that, the office might be readily endured, – nay, even be desirable; but as it is, no device for punishment ever exceeded its range of possibility even in the fancy of the immortal author of the Inferno. And the evil is increased by deceptions and impositions practiced upon you by those whom you have a right to believe and repose confidence in, but who are carried away by their sympathy or party zeal, or else willfully misrepresent the facts. Then, if a mistake is made, the opposition press opens its batteries and impugns the motives of the Directors and their moral sense, and proceeds to demonstrate that they ought to exchange places with the prisoners in the interests of justice, and calls upon all good citizens to treat them with scorn and contempt.

The popular notion that the position of Director is one of vast political influence, is due simply to the fact that many men who have great power in the politics of cities, are bums; that they are liable to be sent out for misdemeanors; that their presence in their ward toward election time is always desired by their political friends, and that therefore the Directors having the power to return them to their beats, are of necessity great men in the sight of all their friends. Thus the Director becomes in some sense a very influential personage: on the other hand, the opposition leaders and press comment without regard to truth or merits, upon the high handed outrages that they affect to see perpetuated on every pardon day. Meantime, the true good element in Society takes alarm as it is wont to do very easily, and believes something awfully wicked is being done, and so join hands and heart with the crafty politician in raising the hue and cry. Thus the poor Director is “damned if he does, and damned if he don't,” by the two extremes of society, and at the same time bastinadoed quickly as he runs the gauntlet by the opposition political party, ever prompt to seize an opportunity.

The remedy lies in legislation or legal construction that shall remove the pardon power from the directors, in all State cases, and leave it in the Governor upon recommendation of the judge who gives the sentence, and in increasing the Police Courts from one to two, so that persons charged with offenses can have a decent trial, which is now often

impossible from the conditions that exist. Scores of cases have not over five minutes time given them; and the helpless victim scarcely has faced his judge before he hears the familiar formula “30–50” fired at him from the bench, and is hustled off in the “Black Maria” to a prisoner's cell.

What can be expected in the way of real justice when from 20 to 60 cases are heard every forenoon, usually in 3 hours. Of course many mistakes are made, and a careful sifting of evidence often proves this; but meantime the man or woman has been stigmatized, – marked for life; and perhaps wholly innocent, has yet been compelled to mingle with villains and submit to all the indignities of prison life, with no other redress than to sue some misinformed or malicious policeman upon a \$1000 bond, which is too often found to be mere straw.

A great city should be just to all classes; and in order to do that, should provide sufficient courts to properly and fairly hear every case. We have to thank God no infamous Jeffreys is up on the bench, but should see to it that his infamous sentences are not sometimes almost realized by the insufficient sifting of testimony that is induced by lack of time of the court.

The Directors are appointed by the Mayor for a term of five years, one dropping out annually, and serve without compensation; thus giving the city perhaps \$1000 in each per annum in time and brain work. Their only compensation is a square meal and free ride on meeting days, and the imprecations of the average citizen; and the imprecation aforesaid is but little less irksome, because based upon misinformation. They hold at least two meetings per month, and often several more; and have absolute control of the establishment and all inside its limits. Its maintenance costs about \$60,000 per year, one third of which is received from prison labor, and the balance from the tax funds, as allotted by the Tax Commission annually.

The prisoners labor under two contracts: one with the Bromwell Brush Co., employing from 100 to 200 men; and one with the Eclipse Sewing Machine co. from 70 to 100 men, –both having about seven years to run, at 30 to 40 cents per day for each man. And a large force works in the stone quarries and grading contracts on the hills east of the works, and great quantities of broken stone are annually sold; while many of the women also work at brush-making, and clothing for the prisoners. In fact, every body is compelled to work and in so far as possible, and each man is allowed 75 cents per day in working out his fine and costs. Under a late law, prisoners from adjoining counties and towns are received, for whom 40 cents per day for board is paid, by the authority sending them; and they of course are made to work like the rest.

The actual present cost of maintenance is about 30 cents per head per day, all told. They are given plenty of wholesome wheat and corn bread, soup, potatoes, cheap meats, and coffee without sugar or milk, three meals when working, and two for such as do not work. Guards with loaded pistols and rifles preserve order over the squads, while at work. Twenty manage the 600 men readily. They sometimes have to shoot and wound runaways, but very seldom kill. Punishment out there consists in lower rations, chains and ball to the leg, and solitary confinement in the dungeon, with half light, a plank for a bed, and rations of bread and water; and in desperate cases, men have had their hands tied

up over their heads before they would behave and go to work. A strange and discouraging fact is that about 75 percent of the prisoners are regulars, and keep returning, mostly for repeating the same offenses. It would seem that a sort of spell holds them under its influence, powerless to resist: but they are too often willing captives. On Sunday mornings the entire crowd is compelled to attend religious services in the chapel, which are maintained by volunteers from the clergy and laity, as there is no chaplain but a salaried organist and singer whose leading is largely followed by such prisoners as can sing at all; and in a favorite melody they make considerable music of an inferior sort. They form an interesting study as seen from the platform, – a veritable gathering of that class of sinners who were specially cared for by the divine Teacher went upon earth, and who now, as then, are still susceptible to the eloquent voice of compassion and sympathy when skillfully directed at them. Speakers are always reminded that the audience can't leave, and exhorted to deal gently with them.

The first time I ever spoke there, there was a high partition between the men and women, directly in front of the speaker's stand, and the effect upon the speaker was most singular. It seemed certain that his mind was in two sections; one side addressing the man and the other the women at the same moment. This fence was speedily removed, and the women seated in the rear, which was found to be in every way an improvement.

Many of the inmates become exceedingly cunning in adopting all sorts of devices to avoid work; but none is so common as feigning sickness, and a considerable part of the medical officer's duty is to detect these rascally subterfuges. Of course an iron-clad discipline has to be, and is strictly enforced over such a population as this, and any attempt at cheating is speedily suppressed.

It is a sad commentary upon our city and our civilization that over 700 of its population are steadily within these prison walls, besides those in the Jail, and in the State's Prison at Columbus, and in the Reform Schools, and it may well be asked whither are we drifting amid all the actual and alleged development and improvement of the Nineteenth Century. It is a question that will bear study: and the more you study it, the more difficult is found its solution. The annual conventions of managers of prisons and charities have for six years thrown a blaze of light upon the subject. But it is only the commencement of a mighty work which should be kept up by people who have the time and qualifications to follow it. It has been said that it is often the fate of a soldier to be not only killed in battle, but to have his name misspelled in the home dispatches, so that even his measure of glory is withheld from his mourning family. And so is the director of this or any other public institution, in the management of which political considerations are allowed to become factors, – will find at the end of his term that, although he is truly conscious of having always acted like the good old Bayard, without fear and without reproach, yet, after his official demise as during its existence, he is considered “an improper person,” in the estimation of many of his former friends, and one who would betray the interests of society for a mess of pottage; and all because there are two great political parties, and the unfortunate Director cannot possibly please the leaders of both of them, nor his opposition Editors.

The only remedy is an absolute one. Make the Board of Directors non-partisan, and enforce the doctrine of civil service reform among the officers. But there is at least one

consideration in the premises. Amid all the corruption and rascality and deviltry in Hamilton County institutions and politics during a few years past, not a whisper of dishonesty or swindling has been breathed about the Work House management. Political enemies, grand juries, experts, and even newspaper reporters have alike searched in vain and the retiring Director, like the dying martyr of old, pointing to the eternal emblem of his faith to which he dies faithful, can say to his conscience and his fellow citizens, "There is the trust committed to our care, we return it unharmed by any act or omission of ours.

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