

(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*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Dorothea L Dix

There may be those upon whom mere physical suffering not their own, awakens no sense of compassion; whose sense of or concern for bodily pain is limited to the pulling of their own teeth or the twinges of their own nerves. If there be such they are not moved by the story of the Andersonville Pens, the black hole of Calcutta, or the ordinary stories of shipwreck or mine disaster. But, it is hard to conceive of the soul so self-centered and indifferent as to be unmoved by even a little consideration of the condition of one whose mind is under continuous torture, with no respite and no escape by the ways of philosophy, religion, sympathy or other resources ever open to a sane mind.

History is full of instances of the triumph of the human mind, active with hope, imagination and genius, over pain of body that almost began with life and only cease with death; Pope, Carlisle, Heine – indeed, Miss Dix herself, readily suggest themselves as instances. But when to the nightmare of a disordered mind is added the torture of the diseased, outraged and neglected body, the cup of human misery has indeed been filled.

The legislature of the state of Ohio paid last year, out of general fund \$671,400 for the current expenses for the management for that year of the six hospitals or asylums provided for the indigent – insane of the state.

If any tax-payers should desire to locate the responsibility for such an expenditure upon any one person, he might succeed in tracing it back with tolerable accuracy to the work of one woman, Dorothea Lynde Dix.

While I apprehend that the name of Dorothea Dix is distinctly associated in the minds of most people at the present day with philanthropy in a broad and perhaps a vague sense, I am inclined to doubt that there is universal, or even very general credit given to her for the specific department of charity to which she devoted the most of her life and effort; in which she accomplished the most medical reforms, and the most permanent results, and with which her name should properly be most closely identified.

At any rate, disclaiming any attempt at the difficult task of imparting to this club anything it does not know, it is my present purpose to seek to divert by a brief look, at some of the leading incidents in the life of this admirable woman, whose name heads this paper.

She was born in 1802 at Hampton, Main, and died in 1887 at Trenton New Jersey, in the full possession of all her faculties; but curiously enough and, with a certain fitness, in apartments in the Hospital for the Insane, which she had many years before caused to be built and maintained by the State of New Jersey.

Her father was a shiftless improvident man, who devoted what little time he gave to labor

of any kind, to that of issuing tracts, professedly for the salvation of the souls of his fellow men; so that it resulted, or at any rate, it happened, that he almost entirely failed in making natural provision for his family sufficient to keep their souls and bodies together.

Miss Dix's mother seems to have been a woman equally weak with her father, and without force of character. So that one is at a loss to account, in the child of such parents for the unselfishness, ambition, indomitable will and executive power which marked, in so eminent a degree the subject of this sketch. She seems to have become aware, when about twelve years old that there was something different in her parents, and that her future could claim no assistance from them. In these days, when unthinking and irresponsible infancy is apt to be prolonged into early manhood and womanhood, it is difficult to realize the serious sense of responsibility and mature planning for the future, which took possession of this girl at twelve years of age.

The further conviction grew upon her that her brothers, one ten and one eleven years younger than herself, would in time have to look to her for their education. She therefore left her father's house, which was then in Worcester, Massachusetts, and went to her grand-mother, who lived in Boston; and there she set about fitting herself as a teacher.

Subsequently, upon the failure of her health, she entered the family of William Ellery Channing as governess to his children. From association with him she probably derives certain religious or rather moral notions, which largely influenced her subsequent career.

Her early religious training both under her father and grand-mother, had been in an atmosphere of Calvinism, in which the paramount importance of saving one's own soul tended rather successfully to exclude all considerations for the welfare of rest of mankind. Under the Unitarian or humanitarian influence and teaching of Channing her sympathies for humanity expanded. The two opposite notions here suggested had always been to a large extent exclusive of each other, so that in proportion as her Calvinism abated, her respect for the dignity of man, and the value of humanity developed.

The central idea and ambition of her life to devote herself in some way to the good of her fellow creatures, now took permanent possession of her. In what way this was to be accomplished had not yet taken form.

Her immediate purpose however was to devote herself to such years of teaching as might secure for her means sufficient not only to carry forward and complete the education of her younger brothers, but also provide her with a living income for the prosecution without financial embarrassment of her philanthropic plans. She returned to Boston from the West Indies where she had been with the Channings, opened and successfully carried on a school for girls; and before she was thirty had accomplished her financial ambition.

It was at this time, by an accidental circumstance that she got a view of the condition of the lunatics behind the bars of the East Cambridge Jail. It changed the latent forces of her nature and gave direction to the work of her life which she thereupon began.

Before entering upon a recital of the steps by which she accomplished a revolution in the methods of the treatment of the indigent insane, it may be well to consider the general subject of early notions as to insanity as effecting or accounting for the barbarous ideas on the subject prevailing in Massachusetts in 1841.

Calvinism had crossed the Atlantic with the Puritans, and had been from time to time, mightily reinforced by accessions from Scotch Presbyterianism. Starting from the premises found or thought to be found, in the Bible, the Calvinistic syllogism had logically deduced the proposition that humanity, vile in itself, was especially marked with God's displeasure and curse when visited with any form of lunacy or madness. "The Lord shall smite thee with madness" Deut.xxviii.28.

To care for the insane, to attempt to better their condition or mitigate their sufferings, was plainly, by inexorable logic to array one's self against the divine will and order of things; so that callous indifference to the welfare of those whose minds were unhinged, from whatever cause, was readily reconciled with the favor, nay, even with the encouragement from religious sources.

The syllogism is easily traceable. The disease of the Epileptic was called "Morbus divus" the "divine" or "sacred" disease; and in the old books is plainly stated to be a special infliction of God, manifesting the presence of an evil spirit or devil.

The maxim "Furiosus solo furore punitur" (Co Littl 247b) is evidently derived from Psalm CVII – verse 17 "Fools because of their transgression and because of their iniquities are afflicted."

And even as late as the Lord Mansfield's time, it is laid down, in the case of Brock[shaw] or Hopkins, Lofft [1743] that "any man may commit a person who under visitation of God, is a lunatic furiously mad."

So in the King James version of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Chap. 17. Verses 14, 15 and 18 "and when they came to the multitudes, there came to him a certain man kneeling down to him and saying, Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic, and sore vexed, for of them he falleth into the fire, and often into the water." (This would seem to have been a plain case of epilepsy, or falling sickness, which like measles succumbs in many cases to medicine and curative treatment, as our friend Coppack, of the Longview Asylum, well knows.)

But it is recorded in the 18th verse as follows, "And Jesus rebuked the devil and he departed out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour."

Thus we see the idea of lunacy as resulting from the presence of a devil in the body of the lunatic to be a notion rooted in the major premise of orthodoxy, persons so afflicted were said to be "possessed." Satan was supposed to dwell in their bodies and torture them.

This superstition lasted through the Middle Ages as one of its most terrible forms of ignorance manifesting itself during the 17th century, (chiefly in Scotland) and belief in

witchcraft impelling a religious and otherwise exemplary people to acts of inconceivable barbarity in the burning of thousands of miserable beings whose only claim to being witches lay in unbalanced minds, resulting from physical disease inherited or acquired. The poor bodies of these wretches the church relentlessly tortured as hated tenements of devils and heresy.

The Gen. assembly of Presbyterian divines in 1643 formally declared its belief in witches and witchcraft. My authority for this statement is a book entitled: "The History of the Church of Scotland from the establishment of the Reformation to the Revolution "

by George Clark D. D.,

Minister of Lawrence Kirk

3 vols. Edinburgh

Printed by George Ramsey and Company for Peter Hill
the Archibald Constable & Co.

An aggregation of names so suggestive of oatmeal porridge and the bagpipes as fairly too entitle one to regard the statement of the history as an admission. The author says Vol 3.70., speaking of the acts of Presbyterian Assembly, "the reality of witchcraft does not appear to have been for a moment doubted, they who were guilty of it were represented as assailed by the devil, the causes of his victory over them were gravely detailed; punishment of the unhappy beings who were suspected was earnestly recommended and evidence is incidentally furnished of the shocking cruelty with which they were treated. It was enacted that when they should be apprehended honest and decent persons should be appointed to watch them, because if left alone they were in danger of destroying themselves. That is, of escaping by the shocking crime of suicide from the insult, the torture, and the death, which they knew it was vain to hope that by any proof of innocence they could avoid."

The benignant minister of Lawrence Kirk who wrote these words adds: "it is melancholy to dwell upon such instances of intellectual degradation which aggravated human wretchedness and strewed the path of life with imaginary horrors." Indeed it was properly left for a Scotch poet to exclaim from the heart of Scotland "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn." Witchcraft and the horrors of burning and torture of suspected witches, passed away before the eighteenth century was very old.

But the core of the superstition still remained and orthodoxy still pointed to the imbecile, the lunatic or the epileptic as an outcast, blasted by God's anger, from whom all God-fearing men and women should withhold sympathy or succor.

From the belief that the body of an insane person was an accursed thing under ban and outlawed, it naturally resulted that the natural instincts of petty inhumanity opposed no protest of mercy on behalf of the lunatic against the infliction of physical torture. To have forged an iron collar about the chafing neck of the mad-man by which he might be securely fastened to a chain of suitable tether and weight was sufficient to cause the logical Christian of former days to feel sure he had discharged his duty to his suffering brothers that he freeze to death, or starve to death, or be consumed by fever or vermin,

were utterly irrelevant considerations. Surely if by the miraculous dispensation of God, the maniac's reason had been darkened, to the same miraculous power therefore should piety leave the problem of returning light and peace to his mind and body.

With this in mind, we will be better able to understand the possibility of the existence of the horrors that appalled Dorothy Dix when she began her investigation in 1841 in the midst of a people that claimed to be civilized, to say nothing of Christian. Perhaps I can no better close this subject than by quoting from page one of Ray's "Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity."

"In addition to the obstacles to the progress of knowledge respecting other diseases, there has been this also in regard to insanity, that being considered as resulting from a direct exercise of Divine power and not from the operation of the ordinary laws of nature and thus associated with mysterious and supernatural phenomena above our comprehension; inquiry has been discouraged at the very threshold, by the fear of presumption, or at least of fruitless labor. To this superstition we may look as the parent of many of the false and absurd notions that have prevailed relative to this disease, and especially of the reckless and inhuman treatment once universally bestowed on its unfortunate subjects."

Such then was the condition of feeling as to the insane in 1841 when Miss Dix began to probe beneath the surface.

The first revelation was in the East Cambridge Jail, where she found sane and insane, innocent and guilty herded together in filth wretchedness, and abject misery. Thereupon she visited, taking copious notes and the testimony of her own eyes, every jail, almshouse, and asylum in Massachusetts, examining the condition and manner of treatment to the insane.

Upon the publication of what she had seen, the newspapers attacked her, asserting that her disclosures were not true.

After finishing her canvas of the state institutions, she wrote a memorial addressed to the legislature of Massachusetts. Similar memorials, based upon the results of like personal investigation, she addressed to many state legislatures and to Congress thereafter. That address to the Legislature of Massachusetts will serve as an example of her method; and as it is in my judgment a good sample of plain and forceful statement, I give it, or parts of it, here.

"Gentlemen: about two years since, leisure afforded opportunity, and duty prompted me, to visit several prisons and alms houses in the vicinity of this metropolis..... Every investigation has given depth to the conviction that it is only by decided, prompt, and rigorous legislation that the evils to which I refer and which I shall proceed more fully to illustrate, can be remedied. I shall be obliged to speak with great plainness, and to reveal many things revolting to the taste, and from which my woman's nature shrinks with peculiar sensitiveness. But truth is the highest consideration. I tell what I have seen, painful and shocking as the details often are, that from them you may feel more deeply

the imperative obligation which lies upon you to prevent the possibility of a repetition or continuance of such outrages upon humanity..... If my pictures are displeasing, coarse, and severe; my subjects, it must be recollected, offer no tranquil, refining or composing features. The condition of human beings reduced to the extremist state of degradation and misery cannot be exhibited in softened language, or adorn a polished page.”

“I proceed gentleman briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens; chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience.”

Then followed extracts from her notebooks of what she had seen in the towns and cities of Massachusetts, giving the name and details of each lunatic, brutally neglected; mercilessly beaten, chained day and night and year after year in darkness, hunger filth and cold, till death should come kindly to the rescue.

Select-men and alms house keepers denounced the memorial as sensational and slanderous lies. However in spite of this, and much opposition in the legislature, in combating which she had the assistance of Dr. Channing – Horace Mann, John G. Pelfrey, and Dr. S. S. Harve the last named happening to be a member of the legislature, the Memorial was referred to a committee, whose report, endorsing the truthfulness of the Memorial, was followed almost immediately by legislation enlarging the hospitals and improving the methods of care for the indigent insane of the state according to Miss Dix's suggestions.

From Massachusetts, she proceeded to Rhode Island where she had like success. In Little Compton Rhode Island she found a lunatic named Ahram Simmons whose condition she thus describes.

“His prison was from six to 8 feet square, built entirely of stone, sides, roof and floor, and entered through two iron doors, excluding both light and fresh air, and entirely without accommodation of any description for warming and ventilating. At that time the internal surface of the walls was covered with a thick frost, adhering to the stone in some places to the thickness of half an inch, as ascertained by actual measurement. The only bed was a small sacking stuffed with straw, lying on a narrow iron bedstead, with two comfortables for a cover. The bed itself was wet, and the outside comfortable was completely saturated with the drippings from the walls, and stiffly frozen. Plus, in utter darkness, encased on every side by walls of frost, his garments constantly more or less wet, with only wet straw to lie upon, and a sheet of ice for his covering, has this most dreadfully abused man existed through the past inclement winter. His teeth must have been worn out by constant and violent chattering for such a length of time, night and day.

Should any person in this philanthropic age be disposed from motives of curiosity, to visit the place, they may rest assured that traveling is considered quite safe in that part of the country, however improbable it may scene. The people of that region profess the Christian religion, and it is even said that they have adopted some forms and ceremonies which they call worship. It is not probable, however, that they address themselves to poor

Simmons's God. Their worship, mingling with the prayers of agony which he shrieks forth from his dreary abode, would make strange discord in the ear of that Almighty Being, in whose keeping sleeps the vengeance due to all of his wrongs.”

Then she turned her attention to New Jersey; and by her appeals to the legislature secured a large public appropriation, with which she superintended the construction of a state asylum at Trenton, where no provision had been made for the care of the insane.

In all of these measures there went hand in hand, with the construction or enlarging of accommodations for the insane, a further and more radical reform in the matter of the care and method of treatment of the patients. The new departure was in the direction not only of applying intelligent kindness, sympathy, encouragement, amusement and instruction of the intellects of these poor creatures, but also of systematically nourishing and doctoring their bodies on scientific principles, upon the heretical theory that mental derangement was due to physical infirmity or disease of brain or body, and that in the cure of the latter the former would find relief.

In other words she, applied in its largest sense, the new, and yet old, maximum “mens sana in corpore sano.”

To follow her through New Jersey and Pennsylvania, from Pennsylvania to New York and thence to Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Maryland would perhaps involve much repetition. It would certainly prolong this paper beyond a reasonable limit.

In every one of these states she personally conducted her assaults upon their respective legislatures, dislodging various degrees of antagonism from prejudice, selfishness and ignorance. She traveled alone from state to state and from place to place, over rough and dangerous roads, at all seasons of the year, with a bodily health never at any time robust, often prostrated with exposure and hard work. Up to 1845 and she had traveled more than ten thousand miles, had visited eighteen state penitentiaries, three hundred county jails and houses of correction, and more than five hundred alms houses and other institutions, hospitals and houses of refuge.

The labors of Miss Dix with the legislatures of all of these states, consumed about nine years of her life; but during this same period, she took occasion to visit Nova Scotia and New Found Land; and there finding the same neglect and vicious treatment and neglect of the insane poor, she brought about with the assistance of friends she made in these provinces, reforms as marked as she had wrought in the United States.

She became a persistent lobbyist at Washington, and got an appropriation from Congress for the establishment of an Asylum for the insane of the Army and Navy at Washington. Not only this but she selected and negotiated the purchase of the site for the asylum, where it now stands at the junction of the Potomac River and its East Branch.

This was in 1852. She had already in, 1848, submitted a memorial to Congress seeking a

grant of five million acres of the public lands for the relief and support of the indigent insane of the states.

While engaged in lobbying for this bill, it seems that Miss Dix occupied a particular alcove in the library at the capital which Congress appropriated to her use. There she met and talked with members of the Senate and the House upon the subject she had in hand. At the first session, the bill after passing the House, was deferred in the Senate, and no progress made. At the next session Miss Dix submitted for the second time her memorial to Congress this time asking for ten million acres instead of five. The bill passed the Senate thirty-six to sixteen. This time it was the House that delayed action on the bill until the session was over.

Again, in this session of 1854 she resumed work with Congress, and succeeded in obtaining the passage of her bill by both the House and the Senate. In the midst of congratulations that poured in on her from every side upon this final success of her long and patient efforts at Washington, she was suddenly stunned by the news that President Franklin Pierce had vetoed the bill. The ground upon which he placed his veto, namely that it was in excess of the powers of Congress to attempt to provide for the indigent insane outside of the limits of the District of Columbia, was a good deal criticized at the time by good constitutional authority, and was the subject of a great deal of discussion, which some of the older members of this club may remember, whether right or wrong, the veto was a grievous blow to Miss Dix.

Presently she turned her back on this country and set sail for England. There, after a short time devoted to rest and recuperation she made an investigation of the condition of the insane poor in Scotland, which revealed a state of barbarous neglect and wide-spread misery that shocked her, though accustomed, as she was, to the sight of suffering. She had not been long engaged in the investigations, going from place to place, and from poor house to poor house in Scotland, before she began to be abused in the newspapers and by the officials in charge of the institutions the horrors of which she was bringing to light. She was called the "American invader", and of course, the pious Scotchmen learning that she was a Unitarian, launched at her the old anathema, the weight of which fall[s] weaker and weaker as civilization progresses, that she was a "heretic."

Dr. [Lake] in his history of the insane in the British Isles says of the year 1855, which was the year Miss Dix made this visit to Scotland "the state of the insane in Scotland at this time was as bad as it could be.

At this period a well-known American lady, Miss Dix, who devoted her life to the interests of the insane, visited Scotland, and the writer had the opportunity of hearing from her own lips, on her return from philanthropic expeditions, the narration of what she saw of the cruel neglect of the pauper lunatics in that country."

Miss Dix made her way from Scotland to London, where she appeared before Sir George Grey, the Home Secretary, and laid before him the condition of things she had found among the indigent insane in Scotland, and so effectively, that on April 9th 1855, a Royal commission issued to certain distinguished lawyers and physicians, "to be Her Majesty's

Commissioners for the purpose of inquiring into the state of lunatic asylums in Scotland.” After two years the commission made its report to Parliament, confirming the truth of the representations made to the Home Office by Miss Dix as to the brutal treatment of the insane in Scotland. Upon the discussion that followed in Parliament one member characterized the report of the commissioners as “one of the most horrifying documents he had ever seen, it was a state of things which they could not have before believed to prevail in any civilized country, much less in this country, which made peculiar claims to civilization, and boasted of its religious and humane principles”

Another speaker said, the commission was entirely due to Miss Dix's exertion, “No one,” he said, “could read the report of the commission with out feeling grateful to that lady for having been instrumental in exposing proceedings which were disgraceful to this or any country.”

Finally, on August 25, 1857, an act passed and became a law, entitled “An Act for the regulation of the care and Treatment of Lunatics, and for Provision, Maintenance and Regulation of Lunatic Asylums in Scotland.” From Scotland Miss Dix visited the Channel Islands, where after finding the care, or rather the neglect, of the indigent insane to be according to the old inhuman methods, she secured the passage of a Government measure for the building of an insane asylum on the island of Jersey to be conducted on proper principles.

Before she returned to the United States she went to the continent. A personal interview she had at Rome with Pope Pius XI, during which she laid fully before him the need of reforming the insane asylum at Rome, not only obtained an attentive consideration of the case she made against the Roman Asylum, at which the pope seemed to be greatly shocked, but secured through him the purchase of a tract near the Villa Borghese for the erection of a new Asylum on the most approved plan.

She visited other places in Europe and everywhere left her influence of reform upon the treatment of insanity. Then she returned to the United States where, shortly after the beginning of the Civil War, she entered the military hospitals as a nurse. At the close of the war she resumed her labors in the interests of the insane; and, before disabling sickness and old age eventually took her, she had reached out towards Japan in the prosecution of her special philanthropy.

About ten years ago her health completely broke down, and the managers of the New Jersey state asylum for the insane which, as I have said, had been created and sent in operation by Miss Dix, invited her to accept comfortable rooms provided for her in the asylum buildings. There she spent the closing years of her life, and died at the advanced age of eighty-five.

Her biography was never written until it was undertaken to or three years ago by Francis Tiffany, of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

There could be no more striking or convincing confirmation of the modesty and shrinking

from what is commonly known as fame, which characterized Miss Dix throughout her entire life of public service, than the difficulty which her biographer had in accumulating material sufficient even to fill out a brief sketch of her life. Although her personality is impressed upon numberless charitable institutions throughout the country, and indeed, the civilized world, which took either their form of management or the beginning of their existence, from her efforts, yet she so successfully succeeded in suppressing the advertising of her name, that the casual historian of the subject of insanity might almost pass her by without a word of recognition. To use her own language in a letter written in 1851, replying to a communication from one engaged in writing a book on the lives and characteristics of "Distinguished Woman" and applying to Miss Dix for data from which to "write her up" for the book in question Miss Dix says: "I feel it right to say to you frankly nothing could be undertaken which would give me more pain and serious annoyance which would so trespass on my personal rights, I am not ambitious of Memorial distinction; and notoriety is my special aversion. My reputation and my services belong to my country. My history and my affections are consecrated to my friends. I confess, that giving unnecessary publicity to women, while they yet live, and to their works, seems to me singularly at variance with the delicacy and modesty which are the most attractive ornaments of their sex."

In carrying out in practice the notion here expressed, Miss Dix had, throughout her long life, so carefully effaced her footprints all over the civilized world and into close and confidential communication with the greatest men of her day, that the only data, outside of the Acts of Parliament and the resolutions of legislatures, that Mr. Tiffany, her biographer, has had to guide him, have been derived from personal recollections of her friends and private correspondence by him laboriously collected.

The date and place of her birth seem to have eluded so shrewd an editor as John Fiske, for in Appleton's Cyclopedia of American Biography published in 1888 under Mr. Fisk's editorship, Miss Dix is said to have been born in 1794, at Worcester, Massachusetts; a date and place many years and many miles from the truth.

The days of canonizing the names of women for their works on earth, has gone with the age of miracles. Still, among those who like Abu Ben Adham love their fellow men, her name, though a heretic as she was may, on the last day, lead all the rest.

James Wilby

February 7, 1891