2. Dorothea Dix Succors the Insane (1843)

In 1840 there were only eight insane asylums in the twenty-six states. The overflow, regarded as perverse, were imprisoned or chained in poorhouses, jails, and houses of correction. Schoolteacher Dorothea Dix—a frail, soft-spoken spinster from New England who lived to be eighty-five despite incipient tuberculosis—almost single-handedly wrought a revolution. Filled with infinite compassion for these outcasts, she journeyed thousands of wearisome miles to investigate conditions and to appeal to state legislatures. Despite the powerful prejudice against women who were outspoken in public, she succeeded in securing modern facilities with trained attendants. Her horrifying report to the Massachusetts legislature is a classic. In the following excerpt, where does she lay the blame for the existing conditions?

I must confine myself to few examples, but am ready to furnish other and more complete details, if required. If my pictures are displeasing, coarse, and severe, my subjects, it must be recollected, offer no tranquil, refined, or composing features. The condition of human beings, reduced to the extremest states of degradation and misery, cannot be exhibited in softened language, or adorn a polished page.

I proceed, gentlemen, 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!

As I state cold, severe facts, I feel obliged to refer to persons, and definitely to indicate localities. But it is upon my subject, not upon localities or individuals, I desire to fix attention. And I would speak as kindly as possible of all wardens, keepers, and other responsible officers, believing that most of these have erred not through hardness of heart and wilful cruelty so much as want of skill and knowledge, and want of consideration.

Familiarity with suffering, it is said, blunts the sensibilities, and where neglect once finds a footing, other injuries are multiplied. This is not all, for it may justly and strongly be added that, from the deficiency of adequate means to meet the wants of these cases, it has been an absolute impossibility to do justice to this matter. Prisons are not constructed in view of being converted into county hospitals, and almshouses are not founded as receptacles for the insane. And yet, in the face of justice and common sense, wardens are by law compelled to receive, and the masters of almshouses not to refuse, insane and idiotic subjects in all stages of mental disease and privation.

It is the Commonwealth, not its integral parts, that is accountable for most of the abuses which have lately [existed] and do still exist. I repeat it, it is defective legislation which perpetuates and multiplies these abuses.

Danvers, November. Visited the almshouse. A large building, much out of repair. Understand a new one is in contemplation. Here are fifty-six to sixty inmates, one idiotic, three insane, one of the latter in close confinement at all times.

Long before reaching the house, wild shouts, snatches of rude songs, imprecations and obscene language, fell upon the ear, proceeding from the occupant of a low building, rather remote from the principal building to which my course was directed. Found the mistress, and was conducted to the place which was called "the

2Old South Leaflets (Boston: Old South Meeting House, 1904), vol. 6, pp. 490–491, 493–494, 513, 518–519.
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home" of the forlorn maniac, a young woman, exhibiting a condition of neglect and misery blotting out the faintest idea of comfort, and outraging every sentiment of decency. She had been, I learned, "a respectable person, industrious and worthy. Disappointments and trials shook her mind, and, finally, laid prostrate reason and self-control. She became a maniac for life. She had been at Worcester Hospital for a considerable time, and had been returned as incurable." The mistress told me she understood that, "while there, she was comfortable and decent."

Alas, what a change was here exhibited! She had passed from one degree of violence to another, in swift progress. There she stood, clinging to or beating upon the bars of her caged apartment, the contracted size of which afforded space only for increasing accumulations of filth, a foul spectacle. There she stood with naked arms and disheveled hair, the unwashed frame invested with fragments of unclean garments, the air so extremely offensive though ventilation was afforded on all sides save one, that it was not possible to remain beyond a few moments without retreating for recovery to the outward air. Irritation of body, produced by utter filth and exposure, incited her to the horrid process of tearing off her skin by inches. Her face, neck, and person were thus disfigured to hideousness. She held up a fragment just rent off. To my exclamation of horror, the mistress replied: "Oh, we can't help it. Half the skin is off sometimes. We can do nothing with her; and it makes no difference what she eats, for she consumes her own filth as readily as the food which is brought her." . . .

The conviction is continually deepened that hospitals are the only places where insane persons can be at once humanely and properly controlled. Poorhouses converted into madhouses cease to effect the purposes for which they were established, and instead of being asylums for the aged, the homeless, and the friendless, and places of refuge for orphaned or neglected childhood, are transformed into perpetual bedlams . . .

Injustice is also done to the convicts. It is certainly very wrong that they should be doomed day after day and night after night to listen to the ravings of madmen and madwomen. This is a kind of punishment that is not recognized by our statutes, and is what the criminal ought not to be called upon to undergo. The confinement of the criminal and of the insane in the same building is subversive of the good order and discipline which should be observed in every well-regulated prison . . .

Gentlemen, I commit to you this sacred cause. Your action upon this subject will affect the present and future condition of hundreds and of thousands.

3. T. S. Arthur’s Ten Nights in a Baroom (1854)

T. S. Arthur, an ill-educated New Yorker, became the moralist author of seventy books and countless articles. His lurid Ten Nights in a Baroom was the Uncle Tom’s Cabin of the temperance crusade, and second only to Uncle Tom’s Cabin as the best seller of the 1850s. Endorsed by the clergy, it was put on the stage for an incredible run. Although the author was a foe of saloons, he was not a teetotaler; and he consistently advocated temperance by education rather than prohibition by legislation. In his famous novel, Simon Slade’s tavern ("Sickle and Sheaf") is portrayed as the ruination