

On a cold day in March of 1841 a tall, handsome woman named Dorothea Dix was asked to teach Sunday school in a Massachusetts jail. While at the jail she discovered that insane persons were also kept there—locked in a cold, damp cellar. The visit was a great turning point in Dorothea's life. She pledged to help those she had seen and others like them. It was a pledge that made her one of America's greatest reformers.

Dorothea Dix was forty years old when she visited that Massachusetts jail. Before then she had led a varied, but for the most part quiet, life. As a young child Dorothea had traveled about a great deal with her parents. Her father, a wandering preacher, moved from town to town delivering his sermons wherever he could. Dorothea's help was enlisted to hand out religious pamphlets during his services. But the nomad's life was hard on the youngster, and, at the age of twelve, Dorothea went to live with her grandmother in Boston. The elderly woman was stern and very old-fashioned. She saw to it that Dorothea had the best education possible, and she insisted that the girl grow up to be a "proper lady."

Though the old woman provided for all Dorothea's material needs, she gave the girl little love or affection. And Dorothea was often very lonely. Perhaps it was this loneliness that led Dorothea into teaching where she could share her energy and ideas with others. Or perhaps she taught because teaching was considered one of the few respectable careers for women in those days. Whatever the reason, Dorothea devoted the early years of her adult life to teaching and traveling.

It wasn't until that visit to a Massachusetts

jail in 1841 that Miss Dix knew what she must do. Her visit to the jail made her realize how badly the insane needed help. There were only a few scattered hospitals for the mentally ill. Most of these people were kept in jails or boarded out to anyone who would take care of them. Aware of their suffering, Dorothea decided that she would help the insane.

Miss Dix began her crusade for reform by visiting jails throughout the state of Massachusetts. In every jail she visited, the mentally ill were kept and cared for worse than animals. Even the mildly disturbed were treated like hardened criminals. In a detailed notebook of her visits, Miss Dix told of a man chained in a tiny, dark, frost-covered room. She told of others who were chained and beaten.

In 1843 Dorothea Dix presented a report of her findings to the Massachusetts State Legislature. In it she wrote:

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, and lashed into obedience.

The report caused an uproar. There were many who wished to quiet Miss Dix. But she had important supporters. Hundreds read her report in the newspapers. The state legislature was forced to act. Very soon two hundred rooms were added to the small state hospital for the mentally ill that existed in Massachusetts.

After her success in Massachusetts, Dorothea Dix went on to establish New Jersey's first hospital for the insane. She then continued her

crusade throughout the United States. Her visits were not pleasant and often demanded great courage. In one dungeon the keeper begged her not to approach a man in chains, claiming that the man would "tear her limb from limb." Dorothea ignored the warning. She went to the man gently, calling him by name. Instead of flying into a rage, the man wept. Dorothea ordered him washed and put in a clean room. Two months later that "dangerous lunatic" was doing useful tasks around a state hospital.

Dorothea Dix taught the entire world a lesson. The mentally ill were not dangerous beasts. They were human beings who needed care like other sick people. They needed doctors and nurses and hospitals. Amazingly enough, Dorothea Dix taught the world this lesson without ever becoming well known herself. She made friends with people of importance and wealth to obtain the support she needed. Dorothea Dix did not want fame; she wanted reform.

During the Civil War Dorothea took some time out from her work for the insane. She served as the superintendent of nurses for the

Union army. Many who worked with Miss Dix complained, for she was very strict and demanding. One of the nurses under her command was Louisa May Alcott. She described Dorothea Dix as a kindly soul, but stern.

After the war, Dorothea continued to make demands on herself and on others. She visited the hospitals she had helped establish. Many times her visits were unannounced so that she could accurately judge the conditions in each hospital. Until the age of eighty she continued to travel throughout the world to encourage reform in the treatment of the insane. She also led the crusade to improve prison conditions and the treatment of criminals.

Finally, at the age of eighty, Miss Dix retired. For five years she lived in a room set aside for her at the New Jersey hospital she had established. Then, in 1887, Dorothea Dix died. She had spent her life in the service of those who could not help themselves, and she had asked nothing for herself. Dorothea Dix earned her place in history as one of the greatest reformers of the nineteenth century.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. **The turning point in Dorothea Dix's life came when she was asked to**
 - A visit an insane asylum
 - B live with her grandmother
 - C teach Sunday school in a jail

2. **Until she was twelve years old, Dorothea Dix**
 - A traveled with her parents
 - B lived in a small town
 - C traveled in Europe

3. **While she lived with her grandmother, Dorothea**
 - A received a good education
 - B was very lonely
 - C Both A and B

4. **In 1841, most of the mentally ill were kept in**
 - A hospitals for the insane
 - B jails
 - C private homes

5. **Miss Dix submitted a report of her findings about the mentally ill to**
 - A Congress
 - B the president
 - C the Massachusetts State Legislature

6. **When Miss Dix quietly approached a man kept chained in a dungeon, he**
 - A wept
 - B laughed hysterically
 - C struck her

7. **Miss Dix carried out her reforms mainly through the support of**
 - A newspapers
 - B people of importance and wealth
 - C lawmakers

8. **As superintendent of nurses for the Union Army, Miss Dix was**
 - A strict and demanding
 - B tireless but tolerant
 - C gentle and compassionate

9. **Miss Dix continued her work until she reached the age of**
 - A ninety
 - B eighty
 - C seventy-two

10. **Miss Dix's greatest achievement was**
 - A proving that women are as able as men
 - B reforming the treatment of the insane
 - C winning fame and fortune

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