

## Publisher's Note

*Defining Documents in American History* series, produced by Salem Press, offers a closer look at important historical documents by pairing primary source documents on a broad range of subjects with essays written especially for the series by a diverse range of writers. This established series includes thirty-one titles that present documents selected to illuminate specific eras in American history—*The Civil War* through the 1950s, for example—or to explore significant themes and developments in American society—*Political Campaigns, Candidates & Debates; Secrets, Leaks & Scandals*; and *Supreme Court Decisions*.

This set, *Defining Documents in American History: Prison Reform*, offers in-depth analysis of sixty-one documents, including letters, memoirs, book excerpts, speeches, court rulings, legal texts, and legislative acts.

The material is organized under six sections:

- **“Prisons” without Wardens, Walls, or Cells** begins with the Transportation Act of 1717 and concludes with newspaper reports of the shoot-out at the OK Corral.
- **Antebellum Prisons and Prison Reform** includes descriptions and evaluations of the two prison styles of the era: the Auburn (at Sing-Sing and Dannemora) and Pennsylvania Systems (at the notorious Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia).
- **Prisons & Prison Reform in the Late Nineteenth & Twentieth Centuries** considers various social and moral concerns, including the treatment of the insane in Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House*; the Declaration of Principles, National Prison Congress; and the Attica Manifesto and Declaration to the People of America.
- **Prisons & Prison Reforms in the 1990s and Twenty-first Century** marks the emergence of Supermax Prisons and includes the Announcement of Second Chance Pell Pilot Program and Department of Justice Letter on the FIRST STEP Act.
- **Wartime Incarceration and Punishment** begins with the Civil War and *Fourteen Months in American Bastiles* and moves through World War II and An Interview with an Older Nisei, and ends with the Executive Summary of the Fay Report.
- **Race, Ethnicity, and Imprisonment** considers The Indian Policy in Its Relations to Crime and Pauperism and The Convict Lease System.

These documents provide a compelling view of how and why the current prison system in the United States came to be from the point of view of the prisoners themselves, the social reformers who tried to develop the best possible system—some with the goal of punishment and some with the goal of rehabilitation—, and the government with its vested interest in securing the safety of its citizens.

### Essay Format

Each Historical Document is supported by a critical essay, written by historians and teachers, that includes a Summary Overview, Defining Moment, About the Author, and Document Themes. An important feature of each essay is a close reading and analysis of the primary source that develops broader themes, such as the author's rhetorical purpose, social or class position, point of view, and other relevant issues.

Each section begins with a brief introduction that defines questions and problems underlying the subjects addressed in the historical documents. Each essay also includes a Bibliography and Additional Reading section for further research.

### Appendixes

- **Chronological List** arranges all documents by year.
- **Web Resources** is an annotated list of websites that offer valuable supplemental resources.
- **Bibliography** lists helpful articles and books for further study.

### Contributors

Salem Press would like to extend its appreciation to all involved in the development and production of this work. The essays have been written and signed by scholars of history, humanities, and other disciplines related to the essays' topics. Without these expert contributions, a project of this nature would not be possible.

## Editor's Introduction

From the earliest days of Britain's colonies in North America debate and discussion have flourished over the punishment and confinement of criminals. This collection of over sixty historical sources from the eighteenth century to the present aims to provide scholars, students of history, and general readers with windows in to the roots of questions with which Americans continue to struggle. What shall be done with criminals? What are the goals of imprisonment? What does our manner of imprisonment say about us as a society? The documents in this collection cannot hope to provide definitive answer. Rather, the words of Americans of the past will often demonstrate that the questions with which we have grappled have changed very little over the past three hundred years.

In the beginning of Europe's encounter with North America, convicts had been part of the creation of settlements and, eventually, colonies. This collection's first section, "Prisons" without Wardens, Walls, or Cells, begins with the legislation promoting the transportation of convicts from Britain to the American colonies to work as servants. The establishment of the colony of Georgia by General James Oglethorpe and his fellow founders sought to provide a new start for a different kind of "criminal"—debtors who were crowding prisons in the mother country. This section also includes objections to these programs, including the residents of Georgia who did not want to be treated as criminals, and free inhabitants of other colonies, such as Benjamin Franklin, who objected to the disruption and potential violence that accompanied transported felons. As the United States "colonized" the trans-Mississippi west in the late nineteenth century, the lack of infrastructure required alternatives to long-term imprisonment. Posses and deadly force were often used when no alternative seemed available.

As the United States won its independence, local and state governments had the ability and resources to examine, their methods imprisoning criminals, establish new ones, and refine those efforts. This collection addresses the first half of the nineteenth century—Antebellum Prisons & Prison Reform—with documents that track two major trends of the time. The first is the development of the penitentiary system, exemplified by the Pennsylvania system and the Auburn system. The other trend examined through the documents is the place of prison reform efforts within the wider context of the re-

form movement of the time, encompassing topics such as care for the mentally ill as well as improving the treatment of prisoners in penitentiaries. This section also documents examples of the growth of government and private oversight of prison facilities and personnel.

Following the Civil War, the penitentiary systems that had been established earlier in the century came under scrutiny as the facilities aged and became increasingly crowded. The earlier impulse that the penitentiary should be a place where convicts can improve themselves in preparation for a successful and functional return to society persisted. The section on Prisons & Prison Reform in the Late Nineteenth & Twentieth Centuries illustrates the transition from the Gilded Age attempts at prison reform that focused, largely on the traditional methods of imbuing convicts with a sense of morality derived from instruction in the Christian religion. As the twentieth century dawned, there was a gradual but steady movement away from a strictly religious-based instruction in prisons to a more balanced approach that emphasized literacy and job skills. This section takes us to the late twentieth century, and the growth of the prisoners' rights movement, with lawsuits against state prison systems and, unfortunately, increasingly violent and disruptive riots in some prisons.

The documents in the Prisons & Prison Reform in the 1990s and Twenty-First Century section demonstrate new and different crises that emerged after the 1980s. As the twentieth century drew to a close, an increasing public demand for a "tough on crime" approach to criminal justice and imprisonment. Reductions in prison education, mass incarceration, and extensive use of solitary confinement or "administrative segregation" have provided with prison reformers and government officials with a new set of challenges that still, in many ways, mirrored concerns that had existed since the nineteenth century. As in the previous section, we see further examples of the federal court system as well as the executive and legislative branches stepping in to provide additional oversight, guidance and reform to incarceration.

The final two sections, Wartime Incarceration and Punishment and Race, Ethnicity, and Imprisonment break away from a strictly chronological approach. The status of prisoners of war has changed over the centuries from the American Revolution to the Global War on Terror. In Wartime Incarceration and Punishment are vivid

accounts of life and death on a British prison hulk in the eighteenth century, discussions of the conditions under which prisoners of war had to survive in the Confederate prison camps of the Civil War and, from the opposite perspective, the plight of political prisoners who were too public about their support for the Confederacy. How did wartime make criminals of citizens with a stroke of a

Presidential pen, and how were they treated? Race, Ethnicity, and Imprisonment presents accounts of the treatment of a number of racial and ethnic minorities and includes discussions of situations that, while not involving literal prisons or penitentiaries, features legal and physical restrictions on individuals' movements and liberty.

## ■ *Ten Days in a Mad-House*

**Date:** 1887

**Author:** Nellie Bly

**Genre:** Book excerpt

### Summary Overview

Nellie Bly's *Ten Days in a Mad-House* was published in book form in 1887, collecting her writing for the *New York World* newspaper. Bly's reporting was an audacious undercover operation in which she went undercover at the Women's Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island in New York. *Ten Days in a Mad-House* told the story of Bly's successful attempt to convince fellow residents of a boarding house that she was mentally unbalanced, and then to keep up that presence throughout the process of being examined and committed to the asylum. Her investigation and reporting on what she experienced at the Women's Lunatic Asylum uncovered a remarkable range of abuse and neglect. It also revealed troubling stories of the ways in which women found themselves imprisoned in the asylum despite no discernible mental disorder. The excerpts presented here details some of those stories as well as Bly's account of her participation in a grand jury investigation into the conditions at the asylum.

Bly's account is emotional and moving but not melodramatic, and her determination that her efforts contribute to the attempts to correct the dangerous errors and abuses she experienced and witnessed place *Ten Days in a Mad-House* firmly in the emerging journalistic trend of muckraking (see "Defining Moment" below) and addressed issues not only the treatment of mental health disorders but also broader issues of women's legal and personal rights and liberties.

### Defining Moment

Mental health treatment had been an ongoing concern of reformers in the United States and Europe throughout the nineteenth century. Psychology was, in many ways, in its infancy during this time and institutions like Bly investigated were not always staffed with experts who were fully informed about the latest treatments and standards of care. Reformer Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) had worked for the establishment of mental hospitals after witnessing mentally ill men and women imprisoned in jail as though

they were criminals. The establishment of separate asylums, however, was not a cure-all. Social and legal issues surrounding mental illness complicated matters, with some states authorizing the commitment of women to insane asylums on the testimony of their husband or father, rather than on the judgment of a physician or psychologist.

*Ten Days in a Mad-House* is part of the "muck-raking" journalism tradition that became prominent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These journalists worked to uncover corruption, unsafe working conditions and, as we see from Nellie Bly's work, abuses taking place within mental health facilities like the Women's Lunatic Asylum. One purpose for this exposure was to engender public support for reform of these institutions, and the improvement of the condition of those dependent on the services or employment provided by those institutions. Muck-raking journalism was, itself, part of the larger Progressive Movement, an umbrella term for an array of initiatives organized to reform institutions and to correct social ills. Investigative journalism, like Bly's, was one tool that reformers could use to persuade not only the public, as mentioned, but also elected officials to take action.

### Author Biography

Journalist Nellie Bly was born Elizabeth Cochran on May 5, 1864, outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Later, Elizabeth and her family would move into the city in 1880. In 1884, she read a letter to the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* titled "What Girls are Good For," in which the author argued that women were fit only for motherhood and that a Chinese-inspired practice of killing infant girls would save them from their "pointless futures." The letter inspired Elizabeth to write a response in which she argued that the condition of women—particularly working class women who struggled to support their families was due to deep-seated inequalities between men and

women and that women should be granted opportunities that were in line with their abilities.

The letter earned her a job at the paper and it was here that she received her pen name, Nellie Bly. Bly applied her skills to topics such as conditions women faced in factory work, but editors reassigned her to topics that were considered more appropriate for women such as gardening and fashion writing. She left Pittsburgh to work as a correspondent in Mexico—she was forced to leave when she was threatened with arrest for criticizing the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Diaz.

In 1887, Bly moved to New York City, eventually landing a position with the *New York World*. It was here that

she was assigned to the undercover investigation of the Women's Lunatic Asylum. Her reports were published as *Ten Days in a Mad-House*. She followed that success with an attempt to travel around the world in less than eighty days, beating the fictional record established in Jules Verne's novel. She completed the trip in seventy-two days. After marrying Robert Seaman in 1895, she took a hiatus from journalism and became the president of her husband's company, Iron Clad Manufacturing Company. During this time she was granted several patents for inventions such as the stacking garbage can. During World War I, she returned to journalism, reporting from the Eastern Front. She died in 1922.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

### Chapter I: A Delicate Mission

On the 22d of September I was asked by the World if I could have myself committed to one of the asylums for the insane in New York, with a view to writing a plain and unvarnished narrative of the treatment of the patients therein and the methods of management, etc. Did I think I had the courage to go through such an ordeal as the mission would demand? Could I assume the characteristics of insanity to such a degree that I could pass the doctors, live for a week among the insane without the authorities there finding out that I was only a "chiel amang'em takin' notes?" I said I believed I could. I had some faith in my own ability as an actress and thought I could assume insanity long enough to accomplish any mission intrusted to me. Could I pass a week in the insane ward at Blackwell's Island? I said I could and I would. And I did.

My instructions were simply to go on with my work as soon as I felt that I was ready. I was to chronicle faithfully the experiences I underwent, and when once within the walls of the asylum to find out and describe its inside workings, which are always, so effectually hidden by white-capped nurses, as well as by bolts and bars, from the knowledge of the public. "We do not ask you to go there for the purpose of making sensational revelations. Write up things as you find them, good or bad; give praise or blame as you think best, and the truth all the time.... I went away to execute my delicate and, as I found out, difficult mission.

If I did get into the asylum, which I hardly hoped

to do, I had no idea that my experiences would contain aught else than a simple tale of life in an asylum. That such an institution could be mismanaged, and that cruelties could exist 'neath its roof, I did not deem possible. I always had a desire to know asylum life more thoroughly—a desire to be convinced that the most helpless of God's creatures, the insane, were cared for kindly and properly. The many stories I had read of abuses in such institutions I had regarded as wildly exaggerated or else romances, yet there was a latent desire to know positively.

I shuddered to think how completely the insane were in the power of their keepers, and how one could weep and plead for release, and all of no avail, if the keepers were so minded. Eagerly I accepted the mission to learn the inside workings of the Blackwell Island Insane Asylum....

I succeeded in getting committed to the insane ward at Blackwell's Island, where I spent ten days and nights and had an experience which I shall never forget. I took upon myself to enact the part of a poor, unfortunate crazy girl, and felt it my duty not to shirk any of the disagreeable results that should follow. I became one of the city's insane wards for that length of time, experienced much, and saw and heard more of the treatment accorded to this helpless class of our population, and when I had seen and heard enough, my release was promptly secured. I left the insane ward with pleasure and regret—pleasure that I was once more able to enjoy the free breath of heaven; regret that I could not have brought with me

some of the unfortunate women who lived and suffered with me, and who, I am convinced, are just as sane as I was and am now myself.

But here let me say one thing: From the moment I entered the insane ward on the Island, I made no attempt to keep up the assumed role of insanity. I talked and acted just as I do in ordinary life. Yet strange to say, the more sanely I talked and acted the crazier I was thought to be by all except one physician, whose kindness and gentle ways I shall not soon forget...

#### Chapter VIII: Inside the Madhouse

As the wagon was rapidly driven through the beautiful lawns up to the asylum my feelings of satisfaction at having attained the object of my work were greatly dampened by the look of distress on the faces of my companions. Poor women, they had no hopes of a speedy delivery. They were being driven to a prison, through no fault of their own, in all probability for life. In comparison, how much easier it would be to walk to the gallows than to this tomb of living horrors! On the wagon sped, and I, as well as my comrades, gave a despairing farewell glance at freedom as we came in sight of the long stone buildings. We passed one low building, and the stench was so horrible that I was compelled to hold my breath, and I mentally decided that it was the kitchen. I afterward found I was correct in my surmise, and smiled at the signboard at the end of the walk: "Visitors are not allowed on this road." I don't think the sign would be necessary if they once tried the road, especially on a warm day.

The wagon stopped, and the nurse and officer in charge told us to get out. The nurse added: "Thank God! they came quietly." We obeyed orders to go ahead up a flight of narrow, stone steps, which had evidently been built for the accommodation of people who climb stairs three at a time. I wondered if my companions knew where we were, so I said to Miss Tillie Mayard:

"Where are we?"

"At the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum," she answered, sadly.

"Are you crazy?" I asked.

"No," she replied; "but as we have been sent here we will have to be quiet until we find some means of escape. They will be few, though, if all the doctors, as Dr. Field, refuse to listen to me or give me a chance to prove my sanity." We were ushered into a narrow vestibule, and the

door was locked behind us.

In spite of the knowledge of my sanity and the assurance that I would be released in a few days, my heart gave a sharp twinge. Pronounced insane by four expert doctors and shut up behind the unmerciful bolts and bars of a madhouse! Not to be confined alone, but to be a companion, day and night, of senseless, chattering lunatics; to sleep with them, to eat with them, to be considered one of them, was an uncomfortable position. Timidly we followed the nurse up the long uncarpeted hall to a room filled by so-called crazy women. We were told to sit down, and some of the patients kindly made room for us. They looked at us curiously, and one came up to me and asked:

"Who sent you here?"

"The doctors," I answered.

"What for?" she persisted.

"Well, they say I am insane," I admitted.

"Insane!" she repeated, incredulously. "It cannot be seen in your face."

This woman was too clever, I concluded, and was glad to answer the roughly given orders to follow the nurse to see the doctor. This nurse, Miss Grupe, by the way, had a nice German face, and if I had not detected certain hard lines about the mouth I might have expected, as did my companions, to receive but kindness from her. She left us in a small waiting-room at the end of the hall, and left us alone while she went into a small office opening into the sitting or receiving-room.

"I like to go down in the wagon," she said to the invisible party on the inside. "It helps to break up the day." He answered her that the open air improved her looks, and she again appeared before us all smiles and simpers.

"Come here, Tillie Mayard," she said. Miss Mayard obeyed, and, though I could not see into the office, I could hear her gently but firmly pleading her case. All her remarks were as rational as any I ever heard, and I thought no good physician could help but be impressed with her story. She told of her recent illness, that she was suffering from nervous debility. She begged that they try all their tests for insanity, if they had any, and give her justice. Poor girl, how my heart ached for her! I determined then and there that I would try by every means to make my mission of benefit to my suffering sisters; that I would show how they are committed without ample trial.

Without one word of sympathy or encouragement she was brought back to where we sat.

Mrs. Louise Schanz was taken into the presence of Dr. Kinier, the medical man.

"Your name?" he asked, loudly. She answered in German, saying she did not speak English nor could she understand it. However, when he said Mrs. Louise Schanz, she said "Yah, yah." Then he tried other questions, and when he found she could not understand one word of English, he said to Miss Grupe:

"You are German; speak to her for me."

Miss Grupe proved to be one of those people who are ashamed of their nationality, and she refused, saying she could understand but few words of her mother tongue.

"You know you speak German. Ask this woman what her husband does," and they both laughed as if they were enjoying a joke.

"I can't speak but a few words," she protested, but at last she managed to ascertain the occupation of Mr. Schanz.

"Now, what was the use of lying to me?" asked the doctor, with a laugh which dispelled the rudeness.

"I can't speak any more," she said, and she did not.

Thus was Mrs. Louise Schanz consigned to the asylum without a chance of making herself understood. Can such carelessness be excused, I wonder, when it is so easy to get an interpreter? If the confinement was but for a few days one might question the necessity. But here was a woman taken without her own consent from the free world to an asylum and there given no chance to prove her sanity. Confined most probably for life behind asylum bars, without even being told in her language the why and wherefore. Compare this with a criminal, who is given every chance to prove his innocence. Who would not rather be a murderer and take the chance for life than be declared insane, without hope of escape? Mrs. Schanz begged in German to know where she was, and pleaded for liberty. Her voice broken by sobs, she was led unheard out to us.

Mrs. Fox was then put through this weak, trifling examination and brought from the office, convicted. Miss Annie Neville took her turn, and I was again left to the last. I had by this time determined to act as I do when free, except that I would refuse to tell who I was or where my home was....

#### Chapter XII: Promenading with Lunatics

I shall never forget my first walk. When all the patients had donned the white straw hats, such as bathers wear at Coney Island, I could not but laugh at their comical appearances. I could not distinguish one woman from another. I lost Miss Neville, and had to take my hat off and search for her. When we met we put our hats on and laughed at one another. Two by two we formed in line, and guarded by the attendants we went out a back way on to the walks.

We had not gone many paces when I saw, proceeding from every walk, long lines of women guarded by nurses. How many there were! Every way I looked I could see them in the queer dresses, comical straw hats and shawls, marching slowly around. I eagerly watched the passing lines and a thrill of horror crept over me at the sight. Vacant eyes and meaningless faces, and their tongues uttered meaningless nonsense. One crowd passed and I noted by nose as well as eyes, that they were fearfully dirty.

"Who are they?" I asked of a patient near me.

"They are considered the most violent on the island," she replied. "They are from the Lodge, the first building with the high steps." Some were yelling, some were cursing, others were singing or praying or preaching, as the fancy struck them, and they made up the most miserable collection of humanity I had ever seen. As the din of their passing faded in the distance there came another sight I can never forget:

A long cable rope fastened to wide leather belts, and these belts locked around the waists of fifty-two women. At the end of the rope was a heavy iron cart, and in it two women—one nursing a sore foot, another screaming at some nurse, saying: "You beat me and I shall not forget it. You want to kill me," and then she would sob and cry. The women "on the rope," as the patients call it, were each busy on their individual freaks. Some were yelling all the while. One who had blue eyes saw me look at her, and she turned as far as she could, talking and smiling, with that terrible, horrifying look of absolute insanity stamped on her. The doctors might safely judge on her case. The horror of that sight to one who had never been near an insane person before, was something unspeakable.

"God help them!" breathed Miss Neville. "It is so dreadful I cannot look."

On they passed, but for their places to be filled by more. Can you imagine the sight? According to one of the physicians there are 1600 insane women on Blackwell's Island.

Mad! what can be half so horrible? My heart thrilled with pity when I looked on old, gray-haired women talking aimlessly to space. One woman had on a straight-jacket, and two women had to drag her along. Crippled, blind, old, young, homely, and pretty; one senseless mass of humanity. No fate could be worse.

I looked at the pretty lawns, which I had once thought was such a comfort to the poor creatures confined on the Island, and laughed at my own notions. What enjoyment is it to them? They are not allowed on the grass—it is only to look at. I saw some patients eagerly and caressingly lift a nut or a colored leaf that had fallen on the path. But they were not permitted to keep them. The nurses would always compel them to throw their little bit of God's comfort away.

As I passed a low pavilion, where a crowd of helpless lunatics were confined, I read a motto on the wall, "While I live I hope." The absurdity of it struck me forcibly. I would have liked to put above the gates that open to the asylum, "He who enters here leaveth hope behind."...

It was not long until the dinner hour arrived and I was so hungry that I felt I could eat anything. The same old story of standing for a half and three-quarters of an hour in the hall was repeated before we got down to our dinners. The bowls in which we had had our tea were now filled with soup, and on a plate was one cold boiled potato and a chunk of beef, which on investigation, proved to be slightly spoiled. There were no knives or forks, and the patients looked fairly savage as they took the tough beef in their fingers and pulled in opposition to their teeth. Those toothless or with poor teeth could not eat it. One tablespoon was given for the soup, and a piece of bread was the final entree. Butter is never allowed at dinner nor coffee or tea. Miss Mayard could not eat, and I saw many of the sick ones turn away in disgust. I was getting

very weak from the want of food and tried to eat a slice of bread. After the first few bites hunger asserted itself, and I was able to eat all but the crusts of the one slice....

I have described my first day in the asylum, and as my other nine were exactly the same in the general run of things it would be tiresome to tell about each. In giving this story I expect to be contradicted by many who are exposed. I merely tell in common words, without exaggeration, of my life in a mad-house for ten days. The eating was one of the most horrible things. Excepting the first two days after I entered the asylum, there was no salt for the food. The hungry and even famishing women made an attempt to eat the horrible messes. Mustard and vinegar were put on meat and in soup to give it a taste, but it only helped to make it worse. Even that was all consumed after two days, and the patients had to try to choke down fresh fish, just boiled in water, without salt, pepper or butter; mutton, beef and potatoes without the faintest seasoning. The most insane refused to swallow the food and were threatened with punishment. In our short walks we passed the kitchen where food was prepared for the nurses and doctors. There we got glimpses of melons and grapes and all kinds of fruits, beautiful white bread and nice meats, and the hungry feeling would be increased tenfold. I spoke to some of the physicians, but it had no effect, and when I was taken away the food was yet unsalted.

My heart ached to see the sick patients grow sicker over the table. I saw Miss Tillie Mayard so suddenly overcome at a bite that she had to rush from the dining-room and then got a scolding for doing so. When the patients complained of the food they were told to shut up; that they would not have as good if they were at home, and that it was too good for charity patients....

*Source: Bly, Nellie. Ten Days in a Mad-House. New York: Ian L. Munro, 1887.*

## GLOSSARY

**“a chiel amang’em”:** a child among them

**aught:** anything

**chloral:** chloral hydrate, a drug used as a sedative

**consolation:** comfort

**laudanum:** medication containing opium

## Document Analysis and Themes

### Chapter I: A Delicate Mission

In this opening chapter, Bly explains how she came to going undercover in the asylum and conveys the sense that her editors were skeptical of her ability to carry out the assignment. Her job was to report things accurately rather than sensationally. Bly describes how she acted “the part of a poor, unfortunate crazy girl” to gain entry into Blackwell’s Island Insane Asylum but emphasizes that once she entered the asylum she did not keep up the pretense of mental illness.

### Chapter VIII: Inside the Madhouse

The chapter begins with Bly recounting her conversation with Tillie Mayard, who was committed to the asylum despite having no discernible illness. Bly recounts Maynard’s attempts to convict asylum officials that she had suffered from a physical ailment rather than a psychological one. Her struggle inspires Bly to use her reporting to ultimately help the women in the asylum if possible. Bly also tells the story of Louise Schanz, who could not respond to the questions because she spoke no English. Bly makes the point that a suspect in a criminal investigation would be given far more opportunity to defend him- or herself compared to those sent to the asylum.

### Chapter XII: Promenading with Lunatics

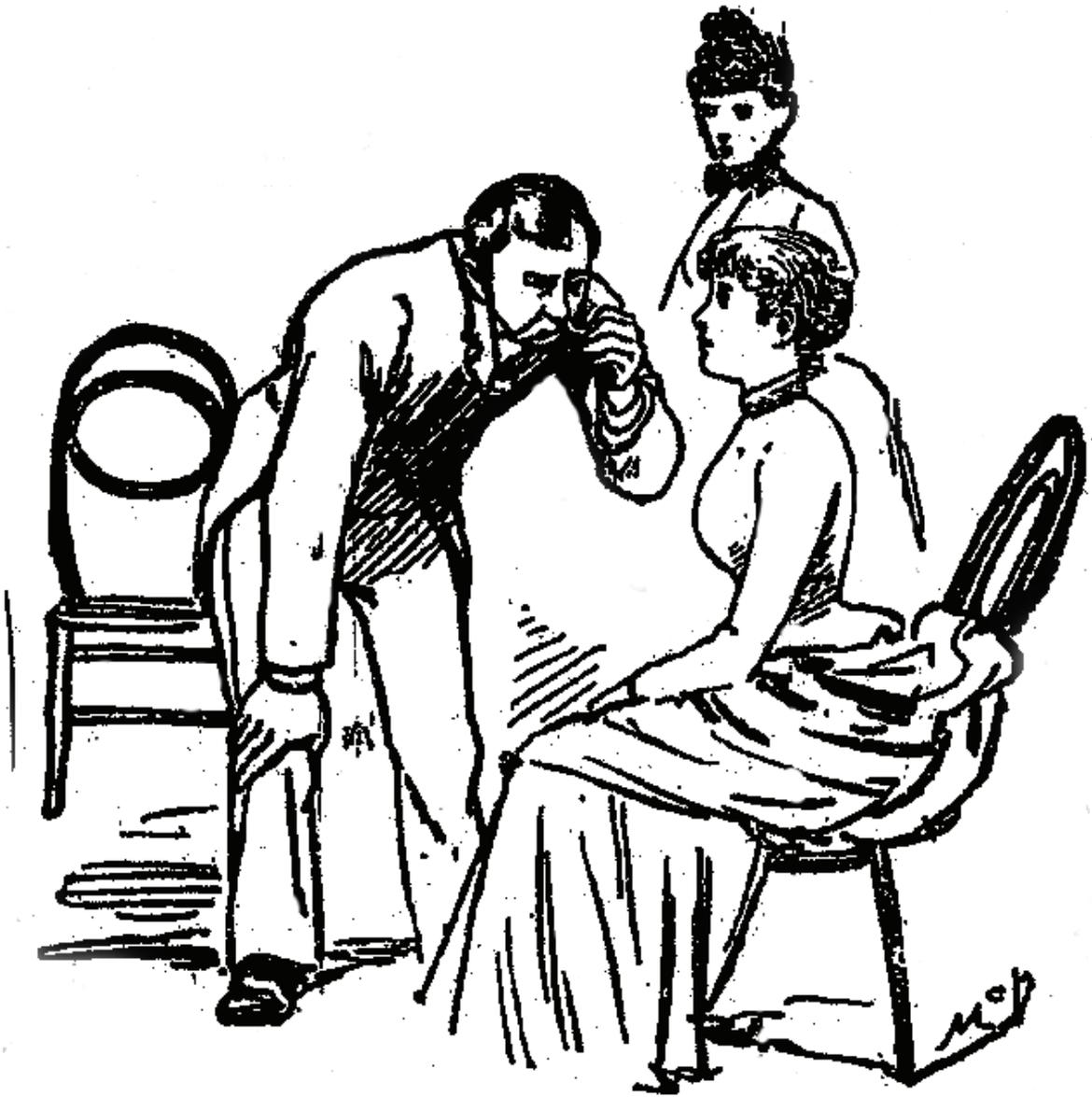
In this chapter, Bly describes the vision of dozens of inmates/patients shackled together, with some claiming to have been beaten and all appearing filthy. Her reference to wishing to place the motto “He who enters here leaveth hope behind” at the gates of the asylum is a reference to Dante’s *Inferno* and echoes the slogan placed over the gates of Hell. She also describes the food provid-

ed to patients which was spoiled or otherwise inedible. For example, the meat served was not only spoiled but so tough that those without teeth could not hope to eat it. The patients were allowed no eating utensils, and Bly describes the “savage” manner in which they had to eat, an example of her characterization of the asylum patients being treated like animals rather than people. Patients who refused to eat were punished. Bly also describes the ways in which the food prepared for doctor and nurses was far superior than that provided to the patients.

One of the most important issues that emerges in these excerpts from Bly’s account is the incredible lack of agency, or control over their own lives and situations, that women experienced in the nineteenth century United States. While the lack of scrutiny of the patients who were committed to the asylum comes through in a number of the stories that Bly tells here, most striking are those in which women have been placed in the asylum for reasons that are profoundly unrelated to mental or physical health. Sarah Fishbaum, whose husband had her committed for having “a fondness for other men than himself” and Louise Schanz, who could find no one who understood her German speech are just two of examples of the casual manner in which a woman’s own will and words counted for very little in this world.

That fact makes Bly’s own words and actions in attempting to bring public attention to the plight of women in the asylum all the more striking. While only a woman could have been given the job of infiltrating a woman’s asylum, Bly’s investigative skill and deft use of language presented here not only affected those who read the account of her investigation but also, to however slight a degree, influenced attempts to improve the conditions of treatment for those suffering from mental illness.

—Aaron Gulyas



**AN INSANITY EXPERT AT WORK.**

*An insanity expert at work*

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