

Nellie Bly

Remarkable Story of the Successful Female Reporter

One hundred years ago, if you were a girl, nobody even thought of asking you what you wanted to be when you grew up. Women were expected to stay at home. When Elizabeth Cochrane decided in 1885 that she was going to be a reporter, she knew she would have to fight for herself as well as for all the people whose stories she wanted to tell.

Elizabeth was a born reporter. Her father, who was a judge in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, sent her around as his scout when he had a case to decide. She talked to the people involved (1) and tried to find useful information that might not turn out in court. Judge Cochrane trained Elizabeth to think for herself and to draw up reports on what she had learned.

When her father died, Elizabeth's six brothers wanted her to be an old lady's companion or a children's governess. But she liked adventure. She decided to make her own plans.

In Pittsburgh's main newspaper, the *Dispatch*, Elizabeth read an editorial called "What Girls Are Good For?". It said that women had "inferior - brains" and should stay at home where they would not be in men's way.

Elizabeth boiled over. Inferior brains indeed! She would show that editor.

She wrote a furious answer to the *Dispatch* but didn't sign it. Her anonymous letter was so good that George Hadden, who had written the editorial, thought it had been sent by a man. He wanted someone with so much talent to work for his newspaper.

In an advertisement, Hadden offered a job to "the gentleman who wrote a letter to the Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, criticizing our editorial". When the gentleman turned out to be Elizabeth, he nearly refused to see her. Luckily, Elizabeth was as good a talker as she was a writer. Even though she was only eighteen, it was obvious that she had talent, ideas, and courage. Hadden knew he was taking a risk, but he hired ³ her.

Because women in those days were not supposed to do anything so unladylike as work for a newspaper, Hadden decided to protect Elizabeth and her family by giving her a pen name. He chose "Nellie Bly", the name of a Stephen Foster song everyone was singing at the time.

And it wasn't long before Nellie Bly the reporter was as well known as the song. Nellie wanted to help the poor and downtrodden ⁴, and she fought for them with her pen. She went into the slums⁵ and wrote about the horrible conditions there: dirt, sickness, and suffering. She went into tenements and factories and wrote angrily about landlords and factory owners who let people live and work in cold, dark, rat-infested rooms. The people of Pittsburgh who read her articles began to get angry, too.

¹ **to involve** — вовлекать

² **inferior** — низший (по положению), стоящий ниже

³ **to hire** — нанимать

⁴ **downtrodden** — угнетенный

⁵ **slum** — трущоба

Stephen Foster (1826 - 1864) American songwriter remembered for his many popular songs known to most Americans such as *Oh Susanna* and *Camptown Races*.

Next, Nellie had the idea of pretending she needed a job. She went to work in one of the darkest and coldest factories she could find. Her fellow workers were half-blind, shivered¹ with cold, and often fainted² from having to stand and twist wires as quickly as they could for twelve hours a day.

The story Nellie wrote about this factory made its owners so angry that they threatened to ruin Hadden's newspaper by pulling out all their advertisements. Hadden asked Nellie to write about music and art, instead of slums. He hoped she would settle down.

But Nellie did not want to settle down. She decided to work in New York instead.

"Why go to New York?" Nellie's family asked her. The answer was simple. New York had the biggest, most important newspapers in the country.

Nellie had been drawn into the lives of the poor people whose stories she told in her *Dispatch* articles, stories of suffering and hardship met with quiet strength and sharing. Nellie decided to give these people voices.

But she soon found that it was not so easy to speak up for others when she couldn't be heard herself. The New York newspaper publishers were so big and important that they didn't have to listen to her. For weeks Nellie looked for a job.

Finally, in desperation³, she decided to stand outside a publisher's door until he took notice of her. This was a bold⁴ move, and she boldly chose the greatest and most important editor of all, Joseph Pulitzer of the *World*.

For three hours she stood outside his office. At last, impressed by her determination, the managing editor let her in to see Mr. Pulitzer.

Nellie knew she had to talk quickly and talk well. She remembered that Hadden had decided to hire her because she had interesting new ideas and courage to carry them out.

Joseph Pulitzer (1847 — 1911), an American newspaper publisher who provided money for the prizes. **Pulitzer Prize** one of the eight prizes given every year for newspaper writing (journalism) and for literary achievement.

¹ **to shiver** — дрожать

² **to faint** — падать в обморок

³ **desperation** — отчаяние

⁴ **bold** — смелый

She told Pulitzer, "I have a good idea for a new story. I'll find out what Blackswell's Island for the insane⁵ is really like, from the inside".

"How?" said Mr. Pulitzer.

Nellie gulped. "I'll have to pretend that I'm insane, too".

By pretending she had lost her memory, Nellie found it was easy to get to Blackswell's Island. It was not so easy to stay there. Before she went, she had been afraid of how the real patients would treat her, but she soon found she had more to fear from the cruel and careless nurses.

After lining up with all the other patients to be washed in the same tin tub of dirty, ice-cold water, she was dressed in a thin slip marked LUNATIC ASYLUM⁶. Shivering, she ate her poor meals. Ten days after a lawyer from *the World* came to rescue⁷ Nellie. She had seen so many suffering patients and ignorant nurses that she was almost sick herself. But she rushed home and sat down and wrote a whole series of articles.

Her opening story, "Behind Asylum Bars", took up almost the entire front page of the newspaper. This was the first time anyone had thought of writing an **I-was-there story** about such an important subject. Everyone was so interested in what Nellie had to say that *the World* had to print thousands of extra copies that day. Nellie felt proud, but she was even prouder when the city raised a large sum of money for better food, better clothing and better nurses at Blackswell's Island.

This was only the beginning. Nellie pointed the way for many other reforms and rescued countless people from misery and injustice in the factories, jails⁸, and workhouses. Whenever she discovered that someone had become rich and powerful by cheating and stealing⁹, she didn't hesitate to write about it.

"Don't hire a small, pretty girl if you have something to hide", people joked. "She may be Nellie Bly, and then you'll be in trouble".

⁵ **insane** — душевнобольной

⁶ **lunatic asylum** - сумасшедший дом

⁷ **to rescue** — спасать, вызволять

⁸ **jail** — тюрьма

⁹ **to steal** — красть, воровать

When Nellie wanted to relax, she wrote articles that made people laugh. Even these stories came out of her own experience. Dancing in a chorus line was almost as hard for Nellie as going to Blackswell's Island, but she and her readers had fun.

One evening, curled up by the fire with a popular new book, Nellie had the most exciting idea of all.

She was reading *Around the World in Eighty Days* by the French writer Jules Verne. She smiled at the hero, Phileas Fogg, and his idea of going around the world in two months and two weeks just to prove it could be done. Then she laughed.

It was a good idea. Why shouldn't somebody really go around the world in eighty days?

Joseph Pulitzer agreed with Nellie. The publisher saw his chance to increase the newspaper's circulation and to show all the world what America and Americans can do. Nellie took only two dresses with her for the whole trip. On shipboard a gentleman who had nineteen trunks himself asked her to marry him because he admired a woman who could travel with just one bag and who didn't think about clothes all the time.

Nellie's route was slightly different from Phileas Fogg's, partly because she stopped in France to meet Jules Verne and have tea with him. She finally arrived back in New York Harbour after 72 days, 6 hours, 11 minutes and 14 seconds. A small monkey she had found in Singapore sat chattering on her shoulder. Nellie was the biggest story of the day in newspapers throughout the world. Her own paper's front page headline proudly announced, "Father Time Outdone!"

But her best story was what she made out of her own life. She showed that the pen really is mightier than the sword - and she led the way for women into journalism. Nellie had become a part of history, a legend in her own time, because she had new ideas and the courage to carry them out.

(From the magazine CRICKET, after the story by Polly Carter)

Phileas Fogg the main character in the book *Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne. Phileas Fogg is an Englishman who travels around the world and has many adventures.

Ex. 1 Read the sentences and translate them:

1. Because women in those days were not supposed to do anything so unladylike as work for a newspaper, Hadden decided to protect Elizabeth and her family by giving her a pen name.
2. Nellie had been drawn into the lives of the poor people whose stories she told in her *Dispatch* articles, stories of suffering and hardship met with quiet strength and sharing.
3. After lining up with all the other patients to be washed in the same tin tub of dirty, ice-cold water, she was dressed in a thin slip marked LUNATIC ASYLUM.
4. Nellie pointed the way for many other reforms and rescued countless people from misery and injustice.
5. She showed that the pen really is mightier than the sword and she led the way for women into journalism.

Ex. 2 Answer the questions on the text:

1. How had Elizabeth Cochrane got an experience of interviewing people and finding useful information before she became a journalist?
2. What made Elizabeth write a furious letter in the *Dispatch*, Pittsburgh's main newspaper?
3. Why did the editor of the *Dispatch* think he was taking a big risk hiring Elizabeth?
4. What pen name was chosen for Elizabeth and why did she have to sign a pen name on her articles?
5. What were the topics Nellie Bly wrote on?
6. How did Nellie get a job at the *World*? What idea did she suggest?
7. What were Nellie's impressions about Blackswell's Island for the insane?
8. In what way were Nellie's articles helpful to those whom she tried to defend?
9. What gave Nellie Bly the idea of going around the world?
10. Why did Nellie Bly become a sensation herself?

Ex. 3. Give your opinion about Nellie Bly as a reporter. What qualities of character helped Elizabeth Cochrane to work successfully in a field where no woman had ever tried to?

Ex. 4. Prove that she was a good reporter.

Work for a newspaper seemed to be unladylike in those days.

Ex. 5. What do you think were the reasons for that opinion? Are there many women in journalism nowadays? Why do you think the situation has changed?

Ex. 6. "The pen is mightier than the sword". Do you agree? Why or why not?