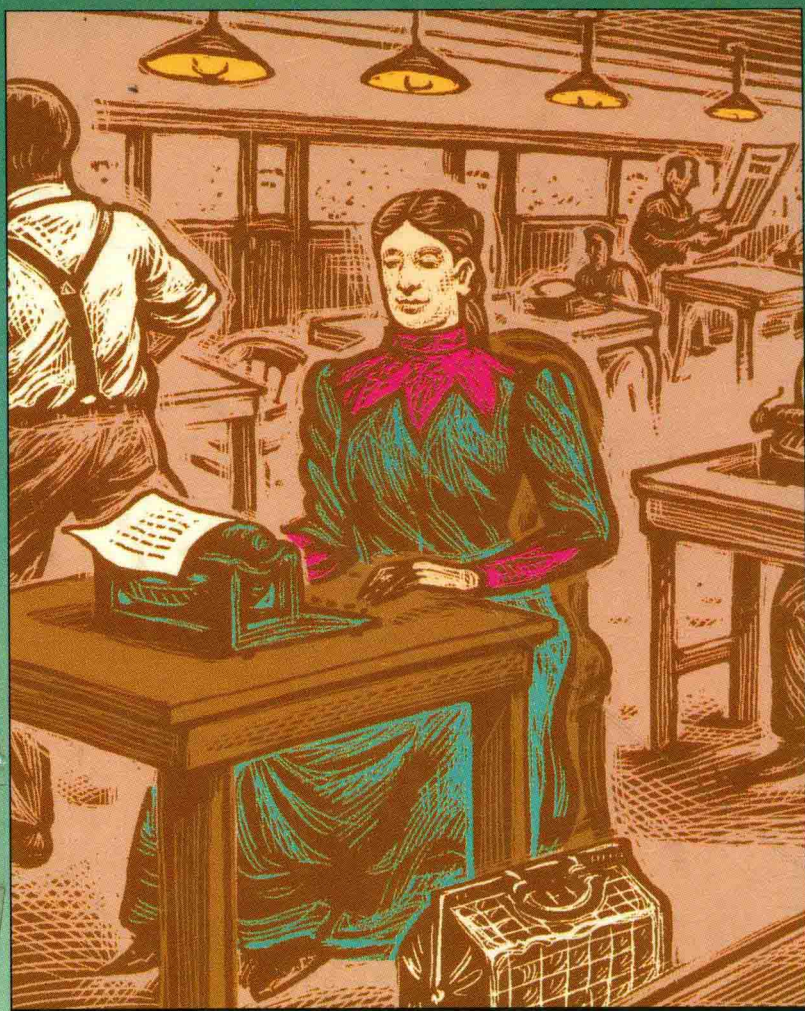


FAMOUS FIRSTS

AMERICAN CULTURAL LITERACY

FIRST WOMAN OF THE NEWS

Marcia Schneider



S R A

Macmillan/McGraw-Hill

First Woman of the News

**By
Marcia
Schneider**

A CPI GROUP Book
from
SRA

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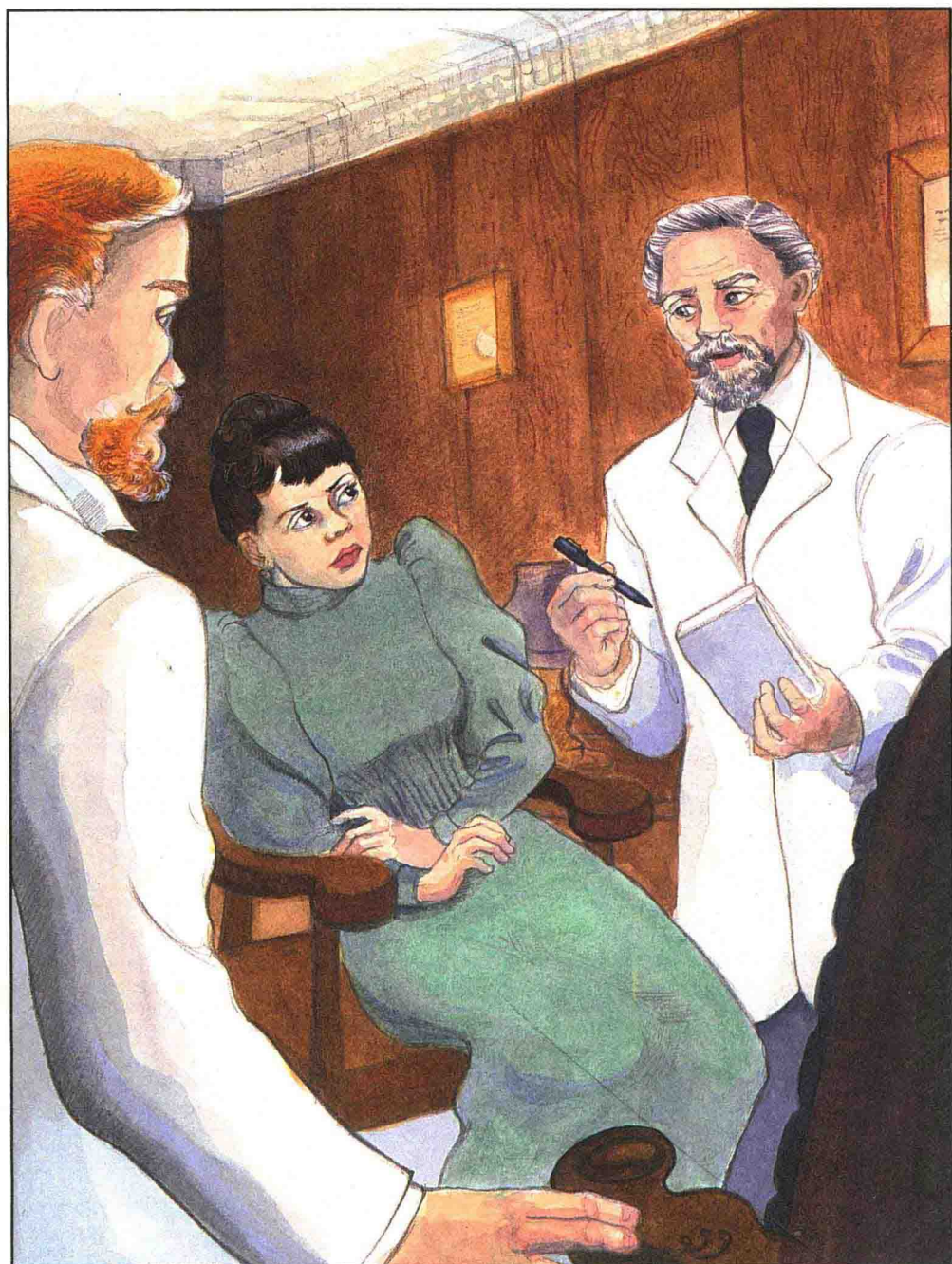
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Nellie's strange behavior led her to be examined by doctors and declared a "hopeless case."



Locked Away

Hopeless! A hopeless case. That was the doctor's finding. With those words, it seemed that Nellie's fate was sealed. She was to spend the rest of her life right on Blackwell's Island, locked away in this huge, grim hospital. Hardly a stone's throw from Manhattan, this place seemed a world away.

The doctor said she had *Dementia with delusions of persecution*. Nellie knew what that meant. She was insane! And she was in a hospital for the insane poor.

If no one had been watching her, Nellie would have danced a jig. She'd done it! She had first convinced a judge, then a doctor, then another doctor, that she was insane. What a story this would be! Now the world would have a firsthand report about Blackwell's Island. She would reveal everything that went on here. She would write about the inferior care patients were given, and how badly they were treated. She would report it all, just as she experienced it. The story would appear in the *New York World*, the newspaper published by

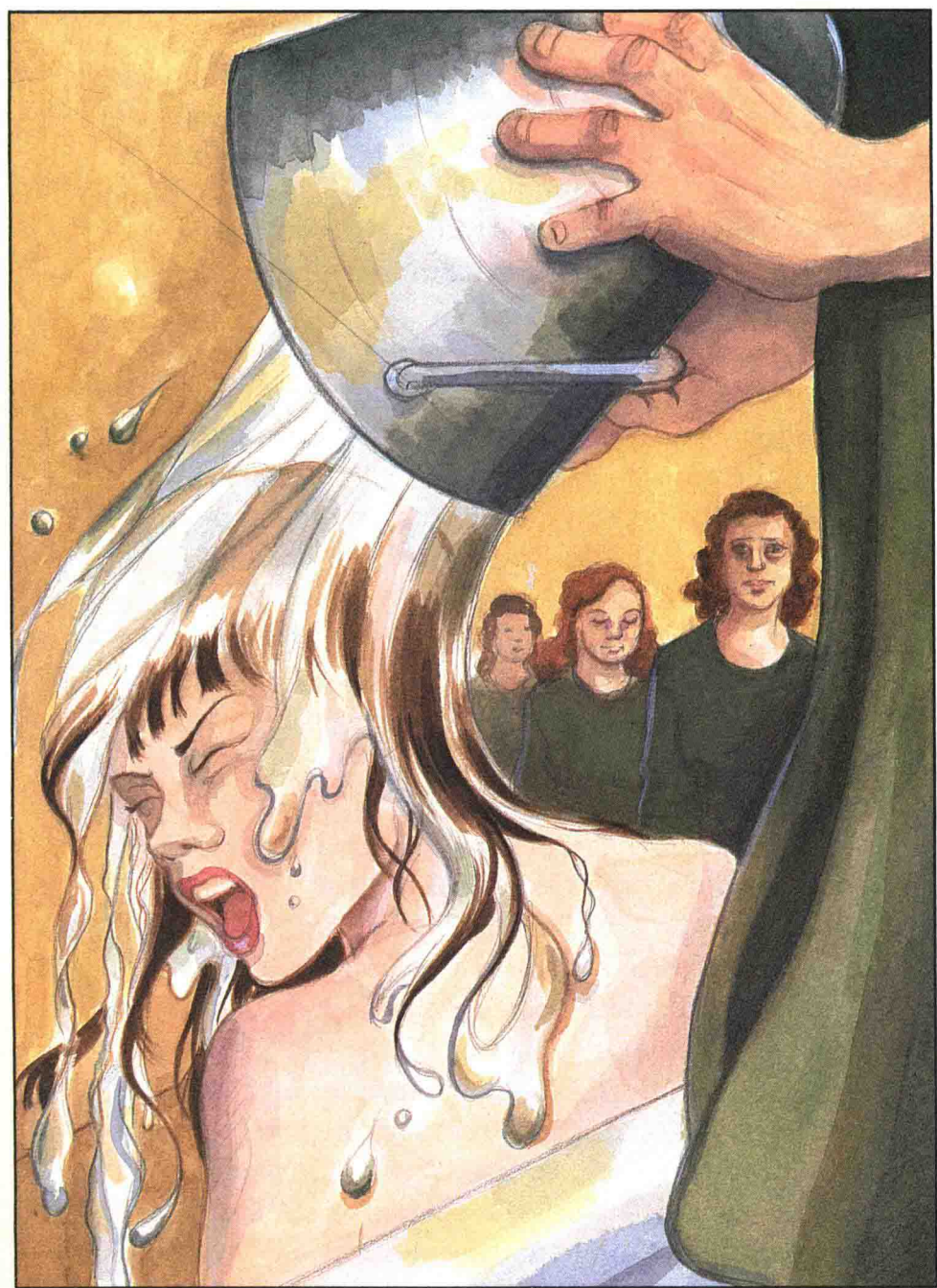
Joseph Pulitzer. Then perhaps some changes for the better would be made on Blackwell's Island!

That is, she would write the story if she could. It had been one thing to get onto Blackwell's Island, to be committed to the hospital. It would be another thing to get out. Could she trust the newspaper to rescue her when the time came? After all, she hardly knew Pulitzer and John A. Cockerill, the *World's* managing editor. And they were the only people who had the power to free her and who knew she was sane. Would they really get her out after a week, as they had promised?

Nellie had work to do. Dressed in the shapeless gown worn by all patients, she went to the dining hall. The food, what little there was, was revolting — stale, spoiled, unappetizing in every way. Nellie could not force herself to eat.

After dinner Nellie and the other new arrivals were marched off for baths. One at a time, they were stripped of their clothing, forced into a tub, and scrubbed roughly by an inmate. The room was not heated. The water was not warm. And it wasn't changed as one person after another was bathed in it. Nellie objected, but her protests were drowned out as three pails of icy rinse water were poured over her head. Shaking with cold and anger, Nellie was dried with the same towel used to dry the women before her. Her hair was combed with the same comb. She could see that some of the women had skin diseases. Some had head lice.

Still damp and cold, Nellie was given a flannel



After being bathed in a tub of dirty water already used by other women, Nellie was rinsed with buckets of icy water.

slip to sleep in. She noticed another shivering patient who was already sick. Nellie asked a nurse to give the feverish woman a warmer nightgown. The reply chilled Nellie to the bone. "We don't have nightgowns here. This is charity," the nurse sneered. "Don't expect any kindness here, for you won't get it."

There was nothing Nellie could do. Soon she was in bed, locked in a room with barred windows. Fear stole over her. Had she made a mistake? Could she survive here, sane, for a whole week?

Nellie Bly, reporter, had done many hard-hitting undercover stories for the Pittsburgh *Dispatch*. She had made a name for herself in Pittsburgh for her crusading articles. She had exposed powerful people who preyed on the weak and less fortunate. She had gotten inside stories by posing as victims. No woman — or man — had done that kind of reporting before. But few people in New York knew of her. And, to the doctors and nurses in this madhouse, she was Nellie Brown, madwoman.

The next day, Nellie began learning the hospital routine. Patients scrubbed their own rooms and the nurses' quarters. They washed the nurses' laundry. If there was no work to be done, they were made to sit on hard benches, without speaking, for hours at a time. In good weather, they were taken outside, to walk for exercise. There they were joined by patients from the section of the hospital for the most seriously disturbed inmates. Nellie watched, horrified, as they slowly walked 'round



That night, locked in a room with bars on the windows, Nellie feared she might not survive the week and keep her sanity.

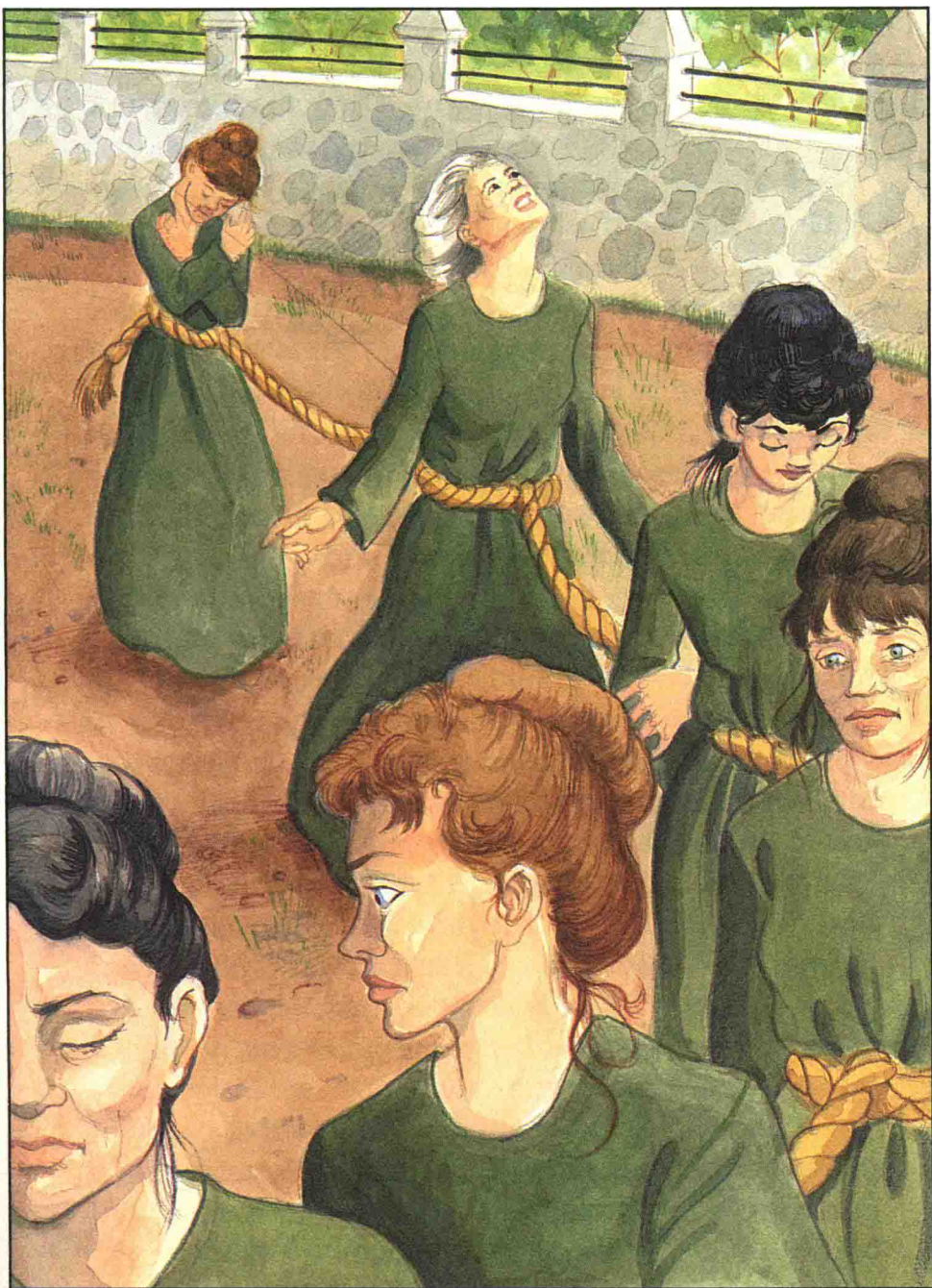
and 'round the yard, in single file, chained or roped to one another. Many were battered and bruised. It was said that attendants — the people who were supposed to care for them — had injured them.

Nellie vowed that everything she saw would come out in the story she would write for the *World*.

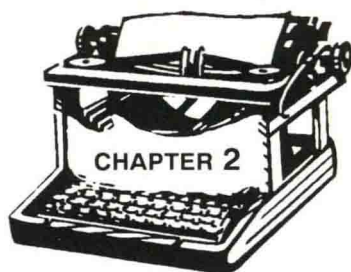
As Nellie got to know the inmates, she became convinced that some of them were not insane at all. She thought they might have been committed by mistake, or had been sent to the hospital by uncaring relatives.

Once someone had been declared insane and sent to Blackwell's Island Hospital, there was slim chance of release. Doctors spent little time with the patients. In 1887, no one knew much about mental illness. The cause was not known. It couldn't be cured. And the best treatments were yet to be found. But Nellie believed all patients deserved to be treated with kindness, and there was little of that there.

Time passed much too slowly. After a while, Nellie lost track of the date. She felt she had been on the island longer than a week. Her fear returned. Had she been deserted? She knew she couldn't get away without help. She had been behaving and talking like a perfectly sane person ever since she arrived on the island. She had pleaded with the doctors to test her sanity, to let her go. They smiled at her, calmed her — and ignored her pleas. She was trapped — unless the newspaper rescued her. Nellie tried thinking only happy thoughts. And waited to be freed.



Tied together for their exercise, the women slowly walked in circles around the yard.



How It Began

She hadn't always been called Nellie Bly. When she was born, in 1864, her name was Elizabeth Cochran. But soon she became known as Pink, or Pinky, from the color of the clothes her mother dressed her in. She was also called Lizzie. These nicknames were kept by her family long after the rest of the world knew her as Nellie Bly.

Elizabeth spent her early years in Cochran's Mills, a small town in Pennsylvania. Originally called Pitts Mills, the town had been renamed for Elizabeth's father. Although he had begun as a poor working man, by the time Elizabeth was born he was a wealthy and important leader of the town. He owned lots of land, the general store, and the gristmill. He was also the postmaster and, in time, he became a lawyer and a judge.

When Elizabeth was five years old, the family moved to the nearby town of Apollo. For a year, the family led a contented life. Then her father died, and Elizabeth's mother had her hands full.

Elizabeth was a spunky child. Although she

was small and frail looking, she enjoyed the rough-and-tumble play of her brothers. Anything the boys did, she tried to do as well as or better than they.

Elizabeth's father had encouraged his children to be curious, and to learn as much as they could by reading. Her mother also encouraged them to use their minds. Elizabeth went to boarding school when she was 15, but she stayed less than a year. Back home, she would spend hours at a time reading and writing in the family library.

Like many a teenager then and now, Elizabeth thought her name was too plain, too dull. So she added an "e" to her last name, and she became Elizabeth Cochrane.

When Elizabeth was 20, she and her sister and mother moved to Pittsburgh. Elizabeth was delighted. For years she had longed to live in a more exciting place. Besides, the family's money was running low. She was sure she could find work in Pittsburgh. Perhaps she could even sell some of the stories and articles she had written over the years.

Elizabeth soon found that wanting and needing work is quite different from finding a job. In Elizabeth's day, most women of 20 were married or soon would be. Those who were not had few ways to earn money. They could become governesses for children or companions to elderly women. Often, they remained at home. Elizabeth didn't care for any of these options. Elizabeth wanted a career!

To be sure, some advances were being made by