

Performance rights must be secured before production. For contact information, please visit [the information page for Two Hours In A Madhouse](#)

**TWO HOURS IN A MADHOUSE:
An Evening with the Notorious Nellie Bly
by Gary L. Blackwood**

(Lights up on a stage that is empty except for a huge upright wardrobe trunk. Nellie is either inside the trunk or, if that's not feasible, concealed behind it. The trunk also contains a wide variety of clothing and other props that Nellie will use in the course of her "lecture")

O.S. VOICE:

Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Nellie Bly. (She doesn't appear. Several beats) Miss . . . Nellie Bly!
(NELLIE emerges from inside the trunk or behind it, wearing a broad, mischievous, and appealing smile. She smiles a lot; it's a technique she sometimes uses to make outrageous or insulting remarks easier to swallow. Dialogue in quotes is done in the manner and accent of that particular character. Major, recurring characters are also represented by period costumes taken from the trunk)

NELLIE:

Hello. I'm Nellie Bly. There's no need to look so surprised. Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're saying to yourself, "She's a lot *smaller* than I expected." People often tell me that when they meet me for the first time. When I was covering the State Democratic Convention, one of Boss Tweed's men said to me "What?! Are *you* Nellie Bly? The *real* Nellie Bly? Why, bless me. I would never have thought such a little thing as you could have done all things you've done. I imagined you must be as big as John L. Sullivan!"

Well, of course whether or not I'm the *real* Nellie Bly depends on which Nellie Bly you had in mind. If you were expecting to see the racehorse, I'm afraid you're going to be very disappointed. And if you came here thinking you would meet the young woman who inspired Mr. Foster's song . . . well, as you see, I don't have the right skin color for that. No, I'm the Nellie Bly who had herself committed to a madhouse and who traveled around the world faster than Phileas Fogg and who

boxed with James J. Corbett and invented the steel barrel and . . . well, I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll talk about all those things and more in the course of the evening.

But before I begin (uncomfortably) I feel as though I should . . . I won't say "apologize". Apologies are the food of the humble mind. And though I've been accused of many things, I have *never* been accused of being humble. Just let me say, I *regret* having to charge admission to these lectures of mine. I have always had great sympathy for the working people, and I know that the admission fee may be more than they earn in an entire day. I would prefer to speak for free. But the truth is . . . (laughs) I'm sorry, I was just thinking that there's one other thing of which I have never been accused, and that is, of being a slave to the truth. But I have turned over a new leaf. You see, for the past several years, I have listened to a great number of lies being told to me and about me, and I have resolved that, from now on, I will do my best to tell only things that are true. Or at least mostly true.

And the truth is that I cannot afford to speak for free. The truth is, I find myself practically penniless. Ah, I see I've surprised you again. I can hear you murmuring among yourselves: "Didn't I hear that she was married to a millionaire who left her all his money, and his business to boot? How could she possibly be penniless?" Well, technically, I suppose I'm not. I do have assets of a sort: I own a house in New York City—though it is in imminent danger of being repossessed. And I do own my late husband's iron foundry—which is, unfortunately, bankrupt.

But, on the debit side, I am obliged to pay a fine of \$6,000 dollars for contempt of court—in addition to being threatened with a jail sentence--and I am being sued by my lawyer for another \$25,000 in legal fees. So you see, it's not assets that I lack. It's *money*. We all like money. There are men who like money so much that they took most of mine. I wanted to title this lecture "How I Was Robbed of Two Million Dollars," but my tour manager talked me out of it.

"Miss Bly--" (She holds up a finger in a "one moment" gesture, pulls from the trunk a hanger with a man's shirt and vest. She hangs it on one corner of the trunk, gazes at it a second, then sticks a hand mirror in the top of the hanger to represent a face.) "Miss Bly, as important as your financial situation may be to you, I'm afraid it will hold very little interest for our audience. We agreed that

you would talk about your newspaper career, and specifically about your incarceration"--don't you love it when they use big words like *incarceration*-- "your incarceration in the insane asylum, and about your celebrated journey around the world."

But Mr. Manager, why on earth would these people want to hear about events that happened twenty years ago? "Because, Miss Bly, they were *exciting* and *interesting*." Well, Mr. Manager, I happen to think that my recent troubles are quite interesting, and they've certainly been exciting. There are times when I can hardly contain myself. "I would not have used the word exciting. I think perhaps a more accurate word would be *depressing*."

All right, Mr. Manager, have it your own way. It'll be the Madhouse and the Celebrated Journey, then; we must keep the audience happy. Speaking of which, I am happy to see so many female faces out there. Some of the things I have to say will upset you men, but I feel confident that the women will sympathize and agree with me. If you do, ladies, please feel free to applaud at any point, or whistle, or whatever you wish. And men, please feel free to say "Boo" or "Bah", or "Rubbish", or whatever men say when they're putting women in their place. It won't hurt my feelings, I assure you. I've heard far worse, believe me, especially in these last two years or so.

But of course you don't want to hear about that, do you? It's too *depressing*. So. I shall talk about my newspaper career.

(She returns the suit to the trunk, keeps the mirror close at hand. She lowers a hinged door on the trunk that will serve as a desk) Now, I've pledged myself to be as truthful as possible, so I must confess that it was not twenty years ago that I was committed to the insane asylum on Blackwell's Island. It was in fact twenty-*five* years ago. If your head for figures is like mine, I'll just tell you--it was 1887. I was twelve years old at the time. Well, really. There is such a thing as being *too* honest, don't you agree? Ladies, I was counting on the applause and whistles. (applause, whistles, we hope) Thank you, ladies. I believe I heard a few men in there, too.

In order to explain why I had myself *incarcerated*, I need to go back a bit farther than twenty-five years--before I became Nellie Bly, in fact. When I took my first job with a newspaper, the

Pittsburgh *Dispatch*, I was calling myself Elizabeth Jane Cochrane, which was the name I was born with. Well, more or less. I did add an E to the end of Cochrane; it just looked better that way. But no one actually called me Elizabeth Jane. I was known by the rather curious appellation of *Pink*; something to do with a dress my mother put me in when I was a baby. It wasn't considered proper for women reporters to reveal their identities, so the editor always chose a pen name for them, something that was, "neat and catchy" —Bessie Bramble, Fannie Fern, Jennie June, that sort of silly thing. Well, when I got my first byline, the editor apparently had Mr. Foster's song stuck in his head. (She takes out a ukulele, sings)

Nelly Bly, Nelly Bly
 Bring de broom along.
 We'll sweep de kitchen clean, my dear
 And hab a little song.

We women reporters were not expected to do the sweeping, of course, but neither were we considered on the same level as the men. We couldn't be trusted to cover the *real* news; our *emotions* might get in the way somehow. Well, after nine months of writing dull, meaningless drivel about fashion, society, gardening, and so on, I'd had enough. I went (puts on a small sombrero from the trunk) to Me-hico, a country that was still considered exotic, mysterious, a bit dangerous. It wasn't an assignment; it was my own idea. But the *Dispatch* published everything I wrote about my experiences there. And then they sent me back to writing about weddings and women's headwear. (takes off sombrero) One day in March of 1887, instead of handing in a story, I simply left the editor a note, it said, *I am off for New York. Look out for me.*

There were half a dozen major newspapers in New York, and I pounded on the doors of every one; their response was always the same: "We have more women than we want already. And women are no good anyway." After four months of this I was down to my last few dollars. In desperation, I went to Mr. Pulitzer's paper, the *World*. (Pulls a stool from the trunk, uses it to represent the newspaper office) They tried their best to keep me out of the sacred precincts, but I said: I have an important subject to propose, and if the editor will not see me, I will take it to some other paper!

Once again, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that my important proposal was to commit myself to a madhouse. Well, it was no such thing. My idea was to travel to Europe and

return steerage class, to see what it's like for those thousands of poor immigrants who wash up on our shores each year. Well, that sounded too expensive. The editor suggested instead that I spend a week (alarmed) in the insane ward at Blackwell's Island—which of course would only cost the *city* money, not the newspaper.

(Takes out and hangs up an editor's vest and shirt with sleeve protectors. Using the mirror for a head again, she sticks a walrus mustache on it) "I'm not asking you for any sensational revelations. You're to write about things as you find them, good or bad; just make sure it's the truth. It'll be a bit of an ordeal, I'm afraid. Do you think you have the courage for it?" Mr. Cockerill, I had the courage to confront half a dozen grumpy New York newspaper editors who didn't want to be bothered. This should be a lark. "Well, then, do you think you can feign insanity well enough to fool the doctors at the asylum?" It shouldn't take much to convince them. Men are inclined to think that we women are all a bit unbalanced, anyway, aren't they? "Perhaps so, Miss Bly. Perhaps so. Just one thing. I worry about that chronic smile of yours; you don't want to look as if you're having a good time, do you?" I shall smile no more, Mr. Cockerill. (Starts to put away the clothing, hesitates) Wait; I suppose I should ask: Assuming that I do get myself locked up there . . . how do I get them to let me out again? "Oh. I'm . . . not just sure at this point. But we'll think of something." Ah. Well, that's a comfort. (Puts away the clothing, retains the mirror)

I've always considered myself, if not a gifted actress, at least a good mimic. But I'd never had a chance to observe anyone who was insane—well, unless you count my stepfather, Jack Ford. Even when he was sober, which wasn't often, he was no prize; when he had a few drinks in him, there was no telling what he might do. He carried around a loaded pistol (uses the mirror as a pistol), and on two different occasions he tried to shoot my mother with it; the second time, she fled from the house with us in tow. Well, he nailed the doors and windows shut (the mirror becomes a hammer) and refused to let us back in. My brother and I finally convinced her to divorce him. I think that seeing how helpless my mother was, how dependent she was on him, and yet how she hated it, that was what made me so determined to provide for myself, to rely only on myself.

Once I entered the insane asylum, I would certainly have no one else to rely on. If I played my part properly, they would all be convinced I was crazy. I had read in books that the insane have staring

eyes, so I opened mine as wide as possible and stared unblinking at my own reflection. (Stares in the mirror) The sight was not reassuring. When I thought of what was to come, my face at least took on a very anxious look (ditto), which might be mistaken for lunacy. I also read snatches of improbable but chilling ghost stories, so that when the dawn came, I felt in a fit mood for my mission.

(She dons a straw boater and a shawl) I thought it best to find lodging in a boarding-home for working girls; I knew that, if I could make a house full of skittish women think I was mad, they would never rest until I was put away somewhere. How I tortured those poor girls with my ravings. One said she'd had a hideous nightmare in which I came rushing at her with a knife in my hand. After only one night of this, they sent for the police.

That very afternoon they put me on the boat for Blackwell's Island, along with three other patients. Miss Tille Mayard (Pulls a working woman's dress from the trunk) had been a chambermaid. "Then when me health gave way, I was sent to the Sisters' Home for treatment, but mey nephew couldn't pay my expenses there—he was out of work, you see—and he had me sent here." Is there anything wrong with you mentally? (Nellie takes out a notebook and begins jotting in it.) "No; the doctors have been asking me many curious questions and confusing me, but there's nothing wrong with me brain." You do know that only insane people are sent here? "Yes, I know that; but I'm unable to do a thing about it. The doctors won't listen to me. The more sane I talk, the more convinced they are that I'm crazy."

Above the entrance gate was the motto "While I live, I hope." A more fitting motto would have been the one Dante put over the gates of Hell: "He who enters here leaves all hope behind." At first, things seemed, if not pleasant, at least tolerable; we were made to wait in a sitting room that had an old fashioned square piano. Miss Tillie Mayard asked whether I played. Oh, yes; ever since I was a child. "Oh, Miss Brown--" for that was the name I was calling myself-- "play something for us, won't you!" Gladly.

(She drapes a scarf with a piano-key pattern across the desk top, sits on the stool, pretends to play) Well, I never touched a piano that was so out of tune. When I complained to the nurse, she laughed.

“What a pity. We'll have to get one made to order for you.” I began to play “Home, Sweet Home”—perhaps not the best choice; it made every one of us dreadfully homesick and melancholy. I tried to switch to something more cheerful, but all I could think of was “Rock a Bye Baby.” Every patient within earshot, and even the nurses, gathered around the piano, as though starved for some scrap of beauty, however small.

Miss Tillie Mayard took up a spot right next to me and began to sing. “Rock a Bye Baby on the treetop, when the wind blows the cradle will rock.” I never heard it sung so beautifully. Before I could play more, the head nurse appeared, a Miss Grupe, who had hard lines around her mouth. (Pulls out a nurse's uniform) “That's enough of that! Get away from here!” And she closed the piano with a bang. (Snatches the scarf and bangs the desk top shut)

Our supper consisted of a piece of bread with rancid butter, a saucer containing five prunes, and some pinkish-looking stuff that the patients called tea. Afterward Miss Grupe ushered us into a chilly bathroom where we were forced to undress (Takes off her hat and shawl, puts her notebook and pencil aside, climbs into the trunk) and climb into a tub of icy water. An attendant scrubbed me quite roughly, dumped three buckets of water—icy, of course—over me. (climbs out) They put me, still dripping wet, into a flimsy flannel slip labeled with the words “Lunatic Asylum, Blackwell's Island.” Imagining what an absurd picture I must present, I was unable to control myself. I burst into roars of laughter.

But for Miss Tillie Mayard, it was no laughing matter. Imagine plunging that sick girl into a cold bath when it made me, who have never been ill, shake like a person with the ague. (climbs in trunk, as Tillie) Miss Mayard was as thin as a rail from her illness, and most of her hair had fallen out. “Please, would you mind scrubbing me more gently? My skin is sore.” But Miss Grupe had no mercy. (climbs out, becomes Miss Grupe) “Shut up, or you'll get it worse.” (feigns a slap)

My sleeping room was nearly as cold as the bathroom, and they gave me only a single blanket, (sits on stool, uses the shawl as her blanket) specially designed so that, when I pulled it up, it left my feet bare, and when I pulled it down my shoulders were exposed—and as we've established, I am not a large person. Very civilly I asked Miss Grupe for another blanket. “You are in a public institution

now. This is charity, and you should be thankful for what you get.” But the city pays to keep this place up, and pays people to be kind to the unfortunates who are brought here. “Well, you don't need to expect any kindness here, for you won't get it.” May I at least have my notebook and pencil? They help me to remember things. “What is there to remember? Every day is the same as the one before and the one after. Now shut up.”

She was right. The days were so monotonous that I nearly lost track of how long I had been there. Most of the time we sat on hard benches with nothing to do but whisper among ourselves--mostly about the awful food, the unrelenting cold, and the cruel treatment. A delicate lady named Mrs. Cotter told me a chilling story of abuse. “I thought I saw my husband coming up the walk, and ran to meet him; for this the nurses beat me with a broom handle and jumped on me, injuring me internally so that I shall never recover. They took hold of my ears and beat my head against the wall, and they pulled out my hair by the roots, so it will never grow in again.”

Now, of course, a crazy person may say all sorts of outrageous and paranoid things, but she showed me the wounds. I have no doubt that she was as sane as I am—or as I was then. In recent years, my sanity has been brought into question a time or two; sometimes I question it myself. But Mrs. Cotter was not the only inmate to be put there unjustly. Two foreign ladies, a German and a French one, were there only because they couldn't speak enough English to make themselves understood. Another young woman, sick and penniless, had applied to be sent to the poorhouse, and had been taken to the island instead.

How my heart ached for these women. I determined that I would do everything in my power to help my suffering sisters, that I would show the world—not just the newspaper, but the world at large--how many women are locked away without a decent trial or examination. Sarah Fishbaum, a pretty young Hebrew woman, revealed that the only reason she'd been committed was because she showed a fondness for other men besides her husband. If that's the definition of insanity, there's no asylum large enough to contain all the lunatics. The nurses liked to tease Sarah by asking which of the young doctors she fancied, and urged her to make advances toward them. She did, too--particularly toward Dr. Ingram, the assistant superintendent.

She pulls out a vest and shirt, with a doctor's coat over it) Well, she did have good taste. Dr. Ingram was a tall, well fashioned and attractive man—and single, too—with a more sympathetic manner than most of the staff. He often paused to say a few kind words to this patient or that one. In all modesty, I believe he spoke more to me than to anyone. I think now that, even in those first days, he suspected me of being . . . something other than what I purported to be.

The sitting room was so cold that everyone complained of it—except the attendants, of course; they had warm underclothing and coats. One woman who was blind and easily seventy years old, kept wailing, “Oh, what are you doing to me? I am cold, so cold. Why can't I stay in bed, or have a shawl?” Miss Grupe approached her, and I thought at first she was going to comfort her. Instead, she ran her cold hands over the old woman's face and down the neck of her dress, and laughed as she did it.

Finally I could stand it no longer, and asked to speak to Dr. Ingram. I told him how we were suffering from the cold, and he called in Miss Grupe. “Nurse, please see to it that the patients are given some warmer clothing.” (Puts on the shawl) Afterward Miss Grupe accosted me, and her mouth looked even more grim than usual. “I warn you--if you make a practice of telling tales to the doctors, it will go hard with you.” How much harder can it be, Miss Grupe? She actually smiled, though it was not a pleasant sight. “Oh, it can *always* be harder, Miss Brown.”

A few days later, Dr. Ingram called me into his office again. He took my pulse—which I admit quickened when he took my hand—and he examined my tongue and my eyes. “Miss Brown, you do not have the appearance of a lunatic.” Nor do many of the women I have talked to, Doctor. And yet here we are. “Oh, I didn't realize you were qualified to make a medical diagnosis.” I am not. But I am qualified to listen, and they've told me some distressing stories of how they came to be here. Perhaps you should listen to them, too, Doctor. “Hmm. Perhaps you're right. I see Miss Grupe has provided you with warmer clothing.” Well, it's not much, but it's better than nothing, I suppose. “Let me see your tongue again, Miss Brown.” Whatever for? “I didn't notice the first time how unusually *sharp* it is.”

I'm sorry, but if the women here won't speak for themselves, someone must speak for them. Which reminds me; I've noticed that the doors to our rooms are always locked at night. "Yes?" Well, think what would happen if there were a fire, Doctor. "In such an event, the nurses are expected to open the doors." But you know they wouldn't; they'd save themselves, and most of these women would burn to death. "No doubt you're right. But what can I do? I offer suggestions until my brain is tired, and what good does it do? Tell me, what would *you* do?"

Well, call me insane, but I would put in a system that unlocks all the doors with a single crank. I had seen such a system when I was doing a story about the new penitentiary in Pittsburgh, but I could hardly tell him that. "There's only one place I know of where they have those locks, Sing Sing Prison. Tell me, Miss Brown, did you ever do time in Sing Sing?" Didn't they tell you, Doctor? I'm a notorious axe murderer. He took my hand again, as though to feel my pulse, which was now doing double time. "What are you, *really*, Miss Brown?" It was all I could do not to tell him the truth, but it would have meant the end of my mission. I am an unfortunate woman who has been dealt a losing hand, Doctor, and who just needs a little help and kindness, like most of the women I have spoken to.

There were women on the island, of course, who were dangerously demented but they were housed in a separate building. I saw them being taken for a walk one day, fifty or so of them in single line, all wearing wide leather belts fastened to a long cable. They made up the most miserable collection of humanity I have ever seen. Every so often one of them would pause and eagerly pick up a nut or a colored leaf that had fallen on the path. But they were not permitted to keep them. The nurses always compelled them to throw away their little bit of God's comfort.

The patients in our hall were no danger to anyone. Some of them held conversations with invisible companions—rather like the ones I've been having here. One middle-aged woman had a crumpled scrap of newspaper, from which she continually read the most wonderful stories I ever heard--better than anything I could hope to write. Others repeated the same mantra over and over, like the blue-eyed Irish girl who shouted at unpredictable intervals, day or night, "I am damned for all eternity!" There were still others whose lips were sealed in a perpetual silence. They merely stood gazing

through the bars at the buildings of New York which were like a mirage; they seemed so near, and yet heaven is not further from hell.

Miss Tillie Mayard, who had been mentally sound when she arrived, had gone rapidly downhill. She had trouble sleeping and wouldn't eat enough to keep a mouse alive. At first she sang every song she could think of, to keep her spirits up, but Ms. Grupe ordered her to stop. She began suffering from a peculiar delusion; she thought that I was trying to pass myself off as her, and that all the people who called to see Nellie Brown were really there to see her. I tried to reason with her, but it was impossible; finally I just avoided her, not wanting to make things worse.

When my ten days was nearly up, I began to worry that Mr. Cockerill had forgotten about me, that I might have to engineer my own escape; how I might do that, God only knew. I was reluctant to confess that I was a newspaper reporter; the staff would not have looked kindly upon my efforts to reveal their shabby and sometimes shocking secrets. But on the tenth day, a lawyer, a Mr. Hendricks, turned up and announced that friends of mine were willing to take charge of me, and that was all that was needed.

Sadly I said farewell to the women I had befriended. I had looked forward so eagerly to my release, and yet when it came, I found it painful to part with them. For ten days I had been one of them; it seemed selfish, almost cruel, to leave them to their sufferings. I had a sudden Quixotic desire to stay and do what I could to help them. But it lasted only a moment.

The first installment of my series, *Ten Days in a Madhouse*, appeared in the *New York World* in October, 1887. It created a sensation. Two weeks later, I was back on Blackwell's Island—this time with members of a Grand Jury. Needless to say, the staff had made an all-out effort to turn the place into a very model of cleanliness and compassion. I asked to see those women who had seemed so sane, for I knew they would corroborate my story. But they had all mysteriously disappeared; some had been released, others transferred. In some cases, the nurses simply denied that such a person existed. The only one left who could tell the truth was poor Tillie Mayard, and she was now so demented that nothing she said made any sense. Luckily, the Grand Jury believed

me. On the strength of my story, they asked for an additional one million dollars to improve conditions in the city's insane asylums . . . and they got it!

The following week, Dr. Ingram came to the newspaper office and took me out to dinner. (Removes the doctor's coat back in the trunk, leaving the shirt and vest) He looked very different in an ordinary suit—even more handsome, I believe. I'm sure I looked rather different too, than I did as Nellie the Lunatic, in my flimsy gown, with my nose dripping and my hair all tangled. Dr. Ingram certainly seemed to like my appearance. He kept staring at me. You know, Dr. Ingram-- “Call me, Frank, please.” All right, then, Frank. You know, that sort of unblinking stare is a sure sign of insanity. “Oh, you're playing doctor again, are you? I must tell you, Nellie, I knew all along that you were not really insane.” And I knew all along that those other women were not. I hope that, if any of them are still there, you will see to their welfare. “Of course I will. Your stories have made an enormous difference, Nellie. The asylum even plans to install a new locking system—the kind you saw during your stretch in Sing Sing? I hope now that you're at liberty you won't go on an axe-murdering spree.” Well, I may do a hatchet job on a few more of the city's institutions. “Well, if you do, please be careful. I'm afraid you've made a number of enemies already.” Pooh. I don't care about that. “Well, I do. I care a great deal, in fact.”

The madhouse pieces were so popular that they were published in book form, and made me a tidy sum — enough so I could rent a decent apartment and bring my mother there to live. But not enough to let me give up the newspaper profession. Not that I wanted to, not just then, anyway. I still felt I was doing something worthwhile. But Mr. Pulitzer was less interested in the good my stories were doing than in the number of papers they were selling, so not all my assignments were quite as heroic. I did pass myself off as an unwed mother, to expose the practice of baby trafficking, and as a maid, to report on unscrupulous employment agencies. But I also (holds up a chorus girl skirt) investigated life upon the wicked stage as a chorus girl in a blessedly forgotten show called “Amazon March.”

I was a spinster so desperate for a husband that I applied to a matrimonial agency. Not really, you understand. It was only another role. In reality, I had no time for a husband; I didn't even have time

to see Frank Ingram as often as he seemed to want me to. Well, I wanted it, too; but at that point my career seemed more important than my love life.

My “stunts,” as Mr. Pulitzer insisted on calling them, were so successful that he hired several other girl reporters and put us in competition, to see who could pull off the most sensational stunt. I couldn't help being resentful - we women had a hard enough time of it, having to compete with the men. We should have been a sisterhood, not a pack of cutthroat rivals.

Oh, dear. I've promised to be truthful, haven't I? I suppose I have to admit, then, that there was a certain amount of professional jealousy, especially toward a certain (takes out an elegant dress) Elizabeth Bisland. Miss Bisland was a (Southern accent) “Southern belle--formerly literary editor of the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*”. *The Journalist* magazine called her “the most beautiful woman in metropolitan journalism.”

Well, I didn't consider Miss Bisland a serious rival, of course. She wasn't a real reporter, just a book reviewer. When they wanted some shoddy practice exposed or some shady politician investigated it was me they called upon. I became so notorious that the humor magazine *Puck* printed this warning: (picks up a page from a magazine) “When a charming young lady comes into your office and smilingly announces she wants to ask you a few questions regarding the possibility of improving New York's moral tone, don't stop to parley. Just say, 'Excuse me, Nellie Bly,' and shin down the fire escape.”

Eventually, of course, the public grew weary of our increasingly pallid stunts. Instead of rising as it had been, circulation began to decline. (takes out editor's costume) The editors went into a huddle and racked their brains for some stunt sensational enough to staunch the hemorrhage of readers. I had never had any shortage of ideas, and sometimes Mr. Cockerill used them, but he had emphatically turned down the one idea I thought was pure genius.

It came to me a year earlier, when I was feeling overwhelmed by the demands of my job, and the demands of Frank Ingram, and the responsibility of providing for my mother as well as my sister Kate and her daughter. I had also begun to suffer from, sick headaches--as a result of the stress, I'm

sure. It occurred to me that there was a story here: I could consult various doctors and write about my experiences, which I did. And seven different physicians gave me seven different diagnoses, from dyspepsia to *malaria*.

Oh. I made it sound as though *that* was the idea of genius, didn't I? No, no. I have a better grasp than that of what will make people buy a newspaper. No, you see, the thing was, I was feeling overwhelmed as I said, and I thought, "Oh, I wish...I wish I was at the other end of the earth!" And then I thought, "Well, why not? I need a vacation. Why *not* take a trip around the world? I might do it, too, if I could afford the time. If I could make the journey as quickly as Phileas Fogg, I'd do it."

I'm sure you're aware of Mr. Verne's outrageously popular novel whose hero circles the globe in eighty days. Well, technically eighty-one; if you recall, he gains a day by traveling west to east. I pored over the timetables of steamship companies and discovered that it was possible to do it in even less time, perhaps as little as 75 days. I could not have been more pleased with myself if I had discovered the elixir of life.

Mr. Cockerill was not quite so pleased. "It's impossible. In the first place you're a woman--" Oh, you've noticed. "--and you would need a protector. And even if it were possible, you'd need so much baggage that it would delay you at every turn. Besides, you speak nothing but English." *No es verdad, Senor. Habla espanol.* "There's no use talking about it, Miss Bly; it's not a bad idea, but it needs a man." Yes, people are always saying that about single women, too. Very well, get yourself a man and start him, and I'll start the same day, for some other newspaper, and beat him. "I believe you would. Well, let me give it some thought."

He gave it quite a lot of thought--about a year's worth. I went on to other projects and forgot all about my proposal. Then one evening Mr. Cockerill summoned me to his office. I assumed I was to be scolded for something, as I often was. "I have a question for you, Miss Bly." Yes? "Can you start around the world the day after tomorrow?" If Frank Ingram had been there to take my pulse, he would have been astounded, but I managed to keep my calm. I can start this minute, if you like.

“No, we'll put you on the *Augusta Victoria*, which sails for England on the 14th—if you can be ready.” I'll be ready.

The next day I went to Ghormley, the fashionable dressmaker. I want a dress by this evening. It must be of a fabric that will stand constant wear for three months. “Very well.” He said it as though he got such requests every day of the week. I also bought a heavy Scotch ulster for warmth (takes it from the trunk, dons it) and a “very English” deerstalker cap of the sort worn by Mr. Sherlock Holmes in the *Strand* magazine. (dons it, too, uses the mirror as a detective's magnifying glass)

I suppose you've been thinking all along that *this* (pats the trunk) is the trunk that accompanied me on my Celebrated Journey. No. If one is traveling for the sake of traveling, and not to impress one's fellow passengers, one doesn't need such a lot of baggage. *This* (takes out a handbag just 16 in. wide and 7 in. high) was the one and only bag I carried. Ironic, isn't it, that one needs more luggage to do a little lecture tour than to travel around the world? But *packing* that bag was, I assure you, the most difficult undertaking of my life.

I managed to cram into it (she shows as many of these items as possible) two traveling caps, three veils, a pair of slippers, a complete outfit of toilet articles, ink stand, pens, pencils, copy paper, pins, needles and thread, a dressing gown, a tennis blazer, a small flask and drinking cup, several changes of underwear, (Gives the men in the audience a mischievous look, wags a finger at them in a “naughty, naughty” gesture) a liberal supply of handkerchiefs and fresh ruchings—*and*, most bulky and uncompromising of all, a jar of cold cream. That jar was the bane of my existence. It seemed to take up more room than everything else put together, and was always getting into just the place that would keep me from closing the bag. The newspaper provided me with 200 pounds in gold coin and Bank of England notes, which I carried in a chamois skin bag around my neck, along with a special passport signed by Secretary of State James G. Blaine.

Lately, I had been seeing a good deal of another James--Mr. James Metcalfe, the drama critic for *Life* magazine. (pulls out shirt/vest for Metcalfe) Well, seeing him as much as my schedule allowed, which was not all that often, and now I would abandon him entirely for nearly three months. “I don't like losing you for that long, Nellie, nor do I like the thought of you nosing about

in strange foreign lands where anything might befall a woman traveling on her own.” There will be no shortage of men aboard those ships, James, and I expect they will see to it that nothing too dreadful happens to me. “Well, that’s another thing; they may take care of you all too well. Look here, at least take a revolver with you.” Yes, and then if those men get too fresh with me, I can always shoot them. James, I appreciate your concern, but I’m a firm believer that if we greet the world with a cheerful and open heart, it will greet us in the same way. Besides, there’s no room in my satchel for even a one-shot derringer.

My heart was neither very cheerful nor very open the next morning. I have never been an early riser (yawns). And I have never been very good at goodbyes. (Puts up James, takes umbrella from the trunk) I gave my dear ones a hasty kiss and then rushed out, trying to overcome the hard lump in my throat. A few of my friends were at the pier to see me off. (Uses the umbrella as the rail of the ship) When the *Augusta Victoria* began to move, taking me away from all I knew, my heart felt as if it would burst. I would be gone only seventy-five days—with any luck—but it seemed an age. The world lost its roundness and became a long distance with no end.

These thoughts didn’t linger for very long; I had more pressing matters to think about, such as keeping down the little bit of breakfast I had eaten. I did my best to ignore the queasiness, and was succeeding fairly well, until someone asked in an interested, friendly way, “Do you get seasick?” That did it; I flew to the railing and . . . gave vent to my feelings. For some reason, when it comes to seasickness, other people are always very unsympathetic. When I turned around, wiping the tears from my eyes, they were all smiling. One man said sneeringly, “And she’s going around the world?”

The trip across the Atlantic took seven days out of my seventy-five. When we docked at Southampton, the London correspondent of the *World* was there to meet me. “Mr. and Mrs. Jules Verne have sent a letter asking whether you will stop in France to see them.” Oh, I should like that very much! We took a train to Folkestone, a boat across the channel, another train to Amiens, and a carriage to the home of Mme. and M. Verne. I felt as any woman would under the circumstances—I wondered if my face was travel-stained and if my hair was tossed. But I quickly forgot my untidiness, for they welcomed me as if I were a cherished friend.

I'm embarrassed to say that I found myself thinking just what you were thinking when I appeared: He's a lot smaller than I expected. His celebrity had led me to expect a giant, but he was exactly my height. We spoke about America and about travel in general but most about the novel that had inspired my journey. (Through the following, she takes out a dowel rod, which she hangs from the trunk, then a world map, which she unrolls and hangs on the rod)

As a reporter, I was gratified to learn that he had stumbled upon the idea while reading a newspaper article. The author of the piece had done some calculations showing that, according to steamship tables, if a person timed it right, he—or *she*--could travel around the globe in . . . (gestures to the audience, who say “80 days!”) Yes, 80 days. I told M. Verne that, according to my calculations, it could be done in 75. Naturally, I didn't tell him what a poor head I had for figures.

M. Verne led me to a large map and asked me to show him the route I was taking. *Mais oui, M'sieur*. (using umbrella as a pointer) New York to London, then Calais, Brindisi, Ismailia, Aden, Colombo, Singapore, Hong Kong, Yokohama, San Francisco, and back to New York. (French accent) “Why do you not go to Bombay, as my hero Phileas Fogg did?” Because I am more anxious to save time, than to save a young widow. M. Verne found this amusing. “Somewhere along the way, perhaps you will save a young widower.” I smiled with a superior knowledge, as fancy-free women always will at such insinuations. If it's not impertinent, I should like to see your study before I go.

If I had been surprised by M. Verne's appearance, when I saw his study I was struck speechless; it was so modest and bare. There was a flat-topped desk with a little pile of white paper, a bottle of ink, and one penholder. There was a chair at the desk, and a low couch in the corner, and in that room with those meager furnishings, Jules Verne wrote the books that have brought him everlasting fame. Since I have vowed to be truthful, I admit I felt a twinge of envy. I wondered whether I might ever earn some small degree of fame myself—for being something more than just a “stunt girl.”

Before I left, we drank a toast to the success of my undertaking. “Good luck, Nellie Bly.” Though there was genuine goodwill in his words, there was something else, too. I think he doubted that I could actually do it.

I might have seen more while traveling through France and Italy if the train's windows had been clean. It was cold in the sleeping car, too, so I went to bed early. (pulls down one edge of map, uses as a blanket) The berths were provided with only one blanket, and as I lay there shivering, I thought of my ten days in the madhouse. Our trip to Brindisi was nearly as uncomfortable and possibly even more boring. Just a week earlier, bandits had attacked the train and I thought, with regretful envy, that at least it had given those passengers something to make their blood circulate.

After I boarded the boat for Ismalia, it occurred to me that I really should wire a story of some kind to the *World*. The train guard helped me find the cable office; I told the clerk I wanted to send a cable to New York. “New Yorrk-a? Where is-a New Yorrk-a?” It took so long to sort things out that, by the time we stepped outside, the whistle on the steamship was blowing. My boat! It's leaving without me! “Can-a you run?” Yes! He grasped my hand and we headed down the dark street with a speed that would have startled a deer. When we emerged on the docks, I saw that the boat for Alexandria had *sailed*.

(long pause, takes off ulster) I trust all this is interesting and exciting enough for you. And now, according to the terms of my contract, I am entitled to a fifteen-minute break, to refresh myself. You may refresh yourselves as well, and when we return I will take you the rest of the way around the world. (Exits)

ACT II

(Lights up. Nellie enters, looking mischievous) The year after I returned from my Celebrated Journey, I tried to embark on a career as a writer of serialized novels. Though I was less than successful, I did learn one valuable trick of the trade. In order to keep your audience wanting more,

at the end of each installment you must leave your hero or heroine hanging from a cliff, either literally or metaphorically.

I did my best to follow that rule this evening. Before the intermission, you will recall, I was on the docks at Brindisi, watching the ship for Alexandria sail off without me. What you perhaps don't recall is that I was not *going* to Alexandria. My destination was Ismailia, and that ship had not sailed. I was saved. How many of you were fooled by my cheap trick? Truthfully, now. You must admit, though, I did tell you the facts; I just told them in a way that made you think what I wanted you to think. Well, that's what newspapers do, isn't it?

A few days out of port, I began to notice that I was receiving more attention than usual from the young swains aboard, most of them British. When I asked an Englishwoman whether her countrymen had some particular penchant for American girls, she confessed there was rumor going around that I was an eccentric heiress, traveling about with little more than a hairbrush and a bankbook. Sure enough, a bit later one of the young men approached me. "I've been traveling constantly since I was nine. I've always resisted the temptation to marry, for I assumed I would never find a woman who could travel without an absolute mountain of trunks and bundles. I've noticed that you make do with but a single bag, and I have concluded that you would be the ideal traveling companion." And how many bags do you make do with, sir? "Nineteen—unless they happen to lose one or two." Nineteen?! No wonder he wanted a woman who could travel light.

When I was not turning down proposals of marriage, there was little to do. That suited me; I was glad for the chance to do nothing for a change but lounge about on the deck in the daytime and, in the evening, make my way into second-class and listen to the music made by the passengers there, which was better than anything first class could offer. I believe it did me much good; the sick headaches that had plagued me became fewer and farther between. I found it a great relief to be on the sweet blue sea, free from the worry and tussle for life that we are daily faced with on land. For a while, I had no sense at all of being engaged in a race against time, I was only drifting, living for happiness and not for gain.

Though I had no desire for a husband, I had no objection to a companion, and there were times when I shared my space at the rail (uses umbrella) with some momentarily pleasant fellow or another, only half hearing his words as they came to me mingled with the sound of the ocean. One sweet, dusky night I watched another couple who stood close together, his face bending close to hers, clasping her hand to his heart, and I felt a little sympathy for them, wrapped as they were in that, delusion that makes life heaven or hell, that forms the foundation for every novel, play, or story. I watched until a noisy new arrival wakened the woman from her blissful oblivion, and scarcely waiting for him to kiss the hand he held, she rushed away into the darkness. I sighed again and, taking another sip of my lime squash, turned back to my companion.

I was forced to change cabins in the middle of the voyage, for the one next to me contained a family with two young children. (sits on stool, uses shawl as blanket) As I have said, I am not an early riser, if I can help it, and to have my sleep disturbed makes me as grumpy as a bad dinner makes a man. Well, the first thing each morning the fond father had a habit of calling, in the loudest and phoniest voice in the world, “Good morning; how are papa's darlings this morning?” “Good morning, papa!” “What does the moo-moo cow say, my treasure? Tell papa what the moo-moo cow says.” No reply. “Come, darling, tell papa what the moo-moo cow says!” If he had done it once, or twice even, I might have endured it, but when this happened for six weary mornings in a row, I could contain myself no longer. “For heaven's sake, baby, tell papa what the moo-moo cow says, and let me get to sleep!” A silence followed that was heavy with indignation. When I finally dozed off again, I dreamed of being chased by babies astride cows with crumpled horns, straight horns, no horns at all, singing in a melodious cow-like voice “Moo! Moo! Moo!”

I arrived at Singapore on December 18th, with only 40 days remaining of my allotted time. It was too dark to enter the harbor so we couldn't begin loading and unloading until the next day. What an agony of suspense and impatience I suffered that night. Those wasted hours might mean entire days lost if I got to Hong Kong too late to catch my ship for Yokohama. (opens umbrellas as sunshade) In the morning I wired another story to the *World*, then tried to visit a Hindoo temple but was denied that privilege because I was a woman. I demanded to know why my sex should exclude me from a temple, just as, in America, it confines me to side entrances of hotels and other strange and

incommodious things. The only answer I got was “No, no; no mudder.” “I’m *not* a *mother!*” I was so indignant that my companions burst into laughter, and after a while I joined in.

Later we stopped at the home of our carriage driver and met his pretty little Malay wife. At the door of their house was a dear pet monkey. (takes out a sock monkey) Does the monkey bite? “No, no, monkey no bite.” Well, he certainly couldn’t when being held by the throat. I had resisted the temptation to buy a young boy at Port Said, and smothered the desire to buy a Singalese girl at Colombo, but when I saw the monkey, my willpower melted. I bargained for him, and I got him. I thought that, since I was named after a character in a song, I could do the same for him. I called him McGinty. (picks up uke, sings):

Mister Patrick McGinty, an Irishman of note
 (gets the audience to join in)
 Came into a fortune, so he bought himself a goat.
 Said he, “Sure, of goat’s milk I mean to have my fill!”
 But when he got his Nanny home, he found it was a Bill.

When we finally set sail for Hong Kong, the sea was so rough that nearly everyone suffered from *mal de mer*; it was especially hard on my poor McGinty, who was confined to the hold. (puts monkey in trunk) I asked one of the stewardesses to check on him. When she returned much later, her arm was bandaged from the wrist to the shoulder. What on earth did you do? “I did nothing but scream, Miss Bly. The monkey did the rest.” I’m very sorry; I was assured that “monkey no bite.”

The storm raged for so long, and so fiercely, that a rumor went around saying there was a Jonah on the ship. Some of the sailors were convinced that it was the monkey, and I was asked whether I would consent to having poor McGinty thrown overboard. A little quarrel ensued between the forces of superstition and those who sympathized with the monkey. Someone mentioned hearing that ministers were also considered Jonahs. Well, we had two ministers on board, so I said calmly that if they were thrown off I would say nothing about the monkey. That was the end of the discussion.

Many of the passengers shut themselves up in their cabins, but I felt as if I were smothering there. (sits on chair) I sat on deck watching the terrible swell of the sea, which was the most beautiful

thing I ever saw. One man who had been overly attentive to me became dreadfully seasick and, as heartless as it seemed, I couldn't muster much sympathy for him.

Some of the other men tried to discourage him by taking away all the deck chairs in my vicinity, but it mattered little to my seasick suitor. He curled up on a rug at my feet and lay there in all his misery, gazing up at me. "I am sorry for my appearance, Miss Bly. You don't know how nice I can look. If you would only stay over in Hong Kong for week, you would see." Indeed, such a phenomenon might induce me to stay there for a month. I tried to rid myself of him by telling him I was engaged, to the ship's chief officer, but that seemed only to increase his devotion and his desperation. "Tell me, Miss Bly, do you consider life worth living?" Yes, life is very sweet. The thought of death is the only thing that makes me unhappy. "You don't understand it, that's all. I could take you in my arms and jump overboard, and before they knew it, we would be at rest." I began to be a bit alarmed. Well, but you can't tell, can you; it might not be restful at all. "I assure you, death by drowning is a peaceful slumber, a quiet drifting away. I'll prove it to you." And he seized the arms of my chair, as though meaning to drag me to the rail. For the first time, I found myself wishing I taken the revolver offered me by Mr. Metcalfe.

Fortunately, just then my purported fiance, the chief officer, appeared and slapped the fellow heartily on the back. "Well, well, what a pretty love scene!" I sprang from my deck chair and took his arm. Come, my dear, let's go below! When I told him what had occurred, he wanted to clap the man in irons, but I begged him not to. I was careful, though, never again to go on deck alone and unprotected.

Well, in spite of the monsoon, the ship did make it to Hong Kong—incredibly enough, two days before it was due. Still, I wasted no time in getting to the Steamship Company to see when I could leave for Japan. "May I ask your name, Miss?" It's Nellie Bly. "Ah. I'm sorry to tell you, Miss Bly, that you are going to be beaten." Beaten? Why? What have I done? I could think of no crime I'd committed, unless it was to own a biting monkey, or to shout at a Hindoo priest. "You misunderstand me, Miss Bly. I mean that you are going to lose." Lose? What do you mean? "Aren't you involved in a race around the world?" Yes, I am; but I'm only racing against time." "Time? No, I don't believe that was her name." Her? "The other woman; she's going to win. She

left here three days ago.” What other woman? “Didn't you know? The day you left New York, another woman started out, planning to make the trip in *seventy* days.” Are you certain? My editor would not arrange a race without advising me. “She was not sent by your newspaper, but by *Cosmopolitan* magazine.” Do you recall her name? “Elizabeth . . . something.” Bisland. “That's it.” So, she wasn't content to be “the most beautiful woman in metropolitan journalism;” she wanted to be the fastest, as well.

“I'm afraid there's no chance for you, Miss Bly. The next ship to Yokohama is in five days, and you're sure to have a slow passage across the Pacific this time of year.” Though my confidence was in tatters, I still had my dignity. I promised my editor that I would go around the world in seventy-five days, sir, and if I accomplish that, I shall be satisfied. If someone else wants to do the trip in less time, that is their concern. I am not racing with anyone but the clock and the calendar.

I was, of course, lying through my teeth. The idea had been mine from the beginning, and I detested the fact that others were trying to steal my thunder, and might well succeed. One thing that did not concern me was the possibility that Miss Bisland might write more compellingly about her journey. I had read her prose, when she was working for the *World*, and it had not improved. (takes out a newspaper clipping) Here is a description penned--with purple ink, no doubt--when she was on the train across South Dakota: (Southern accent)

...a dusky amethyst radiance filled the sapphire bowl of the sky, quenching the stars one by one as it rose, and when the sun showed over the world's edge the cup was brimmed, and the pale moon shone faintly in its depths, like the drowned pearl of the Egyptian queen.

Now I ask you. And, despite the fact that she was engaged to a Mr. Charles Wetmore, she described the male travelers she met even more luridly than she did the landscape:

The men, from captain to cook, are fine creatures. Their physical vigor is superb—such muscles! Such clear ruddy skins, white teeth, and turquoise eyes. They are flat-backed and lean-loined; they carry their huge shoulders with a lordly swagger.

(fans herself with the clipping) During my interminable five days in Hong Kong, I saw no men who quite matched that description, but there were a good many young businessmen from Europe and

America, and they were handsome, jolly, and good natured; they had their own fine homes, with no one but servants to look after them. Think of that, and let me whisper, “Go East, young women!”

On December 28, I boarded the *Oceanic*, bound for Yokohama, and celebrated New Year's Eve on the high seas. We sang “Auld Lang Syne” with glasses in hand and on the last echo of the good old song toasted the death of the old year and the birth of the new. 1889 was ended, and 1890 begun, with all its pleasures and pain. Whether my new year was more pleasure or pain would be decided in the next twenty-seven days.

I later learned that, on New Years Eve, Miss Bisland was in Ceylon. (points to map) On January 7th, the day I left Japan, she was aboard the *Brittania*, headed for the Suez Canal. On January 16th, she went ashore at Brindisi and took a mail train for France. I was somewhere in the Pacific, being buffeted by a gale. On the 18th, she caught a steamship for New York. My ship was still somewhere in the Pacific, being tossed about like a toy by the wind and waves.

The chief engineer was keen to get me to San Francisco on time. “I had me boys paint a motto above the ship's engines. It says *For Nellie Bly we'll win or die.*” That's very sweet of you. Win or die--I share those sentiments. If I fail, I will never return to New York. I would rather go in dead and successful than alive and behind time. “Don't speak that way, Miss Bly. I'll do everything in me power to help you. I've even been praying, and I haven't said a prayer in years.” I appreciate your efforts, sir, but I'm afraid it's hopeless. “Don't be so disheartened, Miss Bly. Take my word for it, you'll be in New York at least three days ahead of time. Come on, smile for me now, just once.” (she forces a smile)

Though I didn't know it, of course, the most beautiful woman in metropolitan journalism was encountering heavy seas, too; under normal conditions the Atlantic crossing took only seven days, which would have put her in New York on the 25th. Luckily for me, the conditions were even worse than those encountered by my boat. Despite the wild weather, the *Oceanic* dropped anchor in San Francisco on the 21st, a day ahead of schedule.

I thanked the chief engineer and the captain profusely. A hopefulness I had not felt for many days, now crept back, only to be dashed again when the doctor came running up, his face pale as death, and whispered something to the captain. "My God, the bill of health was left behind in Yokohama. No one can go ashore until the next ship from Japan brings it to us." How long will that be? "Two weeks." Well, then, I'll just have to cut my throat, for I couldn't endure sitting here, in sight of San Francisco, for two entire weeks. "Please don't do anything rash, Miss Bly. We'll make another search for it." And they found it, safely lodged in the doctor's desk drawer.

(picks up her bag, umbrella, monkey) Some newspapermen in a tugboat came out specially to pick me up. As McGinty and I headed for shore, the doctor leaned over the rail (umbrella) of the ship. "Miss Bly! Miss Bly! I haven't examined your tongue! You can't land until I've examined your tongue!" Very well. (sticks out her tongue) "I see no sign of smallpox! Proceed!"

But now I had a new concern. Heavy snowfall in the Sierras (points) had blocked the mountain passes, putting a stop to all railroad traffic. My despair knew no bounds. And then that obstacle, too, was swept away, as if by magic. The *World* had arranged for a special train to take me on a more southerly route, and its engine, the *Queen*, was the fastest on the Southern Pacific line. It was aptly named, for, riding in its handsome sleeping car, I felt more like a queen than a simple little stunt girl.

My train journey was one maze of happy greetings, congratulatory telegrams, flowers, and wild hurrahs. They say no man or woman in America ever received ovations like those given me during my flying trip across the continent. I was glad to be made so welcome, but truthfully I didn't feel as if I had done anything so wonderful--nothing that could not have been done by any woman with the right amount of pluck, energy and independence.

When we neared the goal, I was told to jump to the platform the moment the train stopped at Jersey City, for that would officially mark my return. The station was packed with people; when I stepped down, a yell went up, and the cannons at Fort Green boomed. I took off my cap and yelled with them--not because I had gone around the world in seventy-two days, but because I was home again.

And what of our beautiful Southern belle? Well, thanks to the nightmarish weather, which sent more than one boat to the bottom, Miss Bisland's ship, instead of taking seven days for the crossing, took almost twelve. She arrived in New York on January 29th, well ahead of Phileas Fogg, but four days behind me. (pats dress sympathetically, hangs it up)

One interviewer asked me what I would do now. I expect to go back to work again. I must do something to earn a living. And I suppose I will go on working, until I fall in love and get married. But the truth was, I felt a bit like Alexander the Great, who wept, because there were no more worlds, to conquer. What story could I possibly conceive of, that would rival a voyage around the world? (rolls up map, returns it and dowel rod to trunk)

And as for falling in love and marrying . . . well, the newspaper had an astonishing number of letters waiting for me, and a good half of them were proposals of marriage, but I took none of them seriously. Dr. Ingram and I had long since settled on being friends; my future with him would have been doomed in any case, for in 1893, he died of a heart attack, at the age of 33. (puts up Ingram's outfit)

My newfound celebrity did not sit well with Mr. Metcalfe. James was a bit old-fashioned; he felt it somehow undignified for a woman to have her name and likeness displayed everywhere. It was a bit much, I admit. There was a Nellie Bly board game and a Nellie Bly song—quite different from Mr. Foster's (picks up ukulele, sings):

With an umbrella and a grip
 She gave her friends the slip
 Far across the deep blue sea.
 It was a pleasant trip
 For her grip was not *la grippe*,
 Consequently she was happy as could be.

I appeared on advertisements for headwear, and on trade cards issued by various companies; (takes out advertising card) this one is for Schenck's Mandrake Pills which purport to Cure All Bilious and

Liver Complaints: “ 'Oh, Fogg, goodbye,' said Nellie Bly. It takes a maiden to be spry, to span the space 'twixt thought and act, and turn a fiction to a fact.”

Thanks to my journey, the *World's* circulation figures had never been so high, and yet I received not one cent in the way of a bonus, nor did they increase my salary, which was paltry compared to that of the male reporters. If the paper valued me no more than that, then they could do without me. My account of the trip had been published as a book, so I could afford to take some time off.

(Dons a housecoat) Oh, I had no intention of leading a life of leisure. The truth was, I had always had a secret desire to write something more significant than newspaper stories, and meeting M. Verne had kindled that desire. Of course, I was not so foolish as to imagine that I could make myself into another Jules Verne or Charles Dickens. But I thought I might aspire to the likes of Frances Hodgson Burnett. If I could do half as well as she, I would never need to do another stunt, or report on another fashion show or gardening club.

My first effort was called *New York by Night*—an appropriate title, since that was when I did all my writing. During the daytime, our apartment was far too chaotic to think, let alone write, occupied as it was not only by my mother, my sister, and my niece, but also by a dog, a parrot, and of course McGinty. I couldn't bear to keep him caged but each time I let him out, he wreaked havoc; during one memorable fling, he managed to break every dish in the place, and most of the teacups.

Writing novels proved to be a very different task from writing newspaper stories. Always before, I had hard facts to work with—actual events, and actual people who spoke actual words; now, suddenly, I had to make it all up. In desperation, I consulted my friend Walt McDougall, who had illustrated many of my stories. “It's simple. You just have the hero or the heroine fall into a pit of snakes, you see, and then you go on putting them in similar scrapes week after week, until they either get married or take out accident insurance.”

But of course it wasn't that simple at all. Within a year I had fallen into the most frightful depression that can beset a mortal. The doctor said it was my blood that was responsible and confined me to bed. We rented a farm in White Plains, and I began spending my weekends there,

and my mood and my health gradually improved. Unfortunately my ability to create compelling characters and dialogue and plot did not.

Three years after I left the *World* in high dudgeon, it managed to lure me back; with the promise that I would be given worthwhile stories to write. No more stunts, no more fashion shows. One of my first assignments was to cover the Pullman Strike in Chicago. I went there intending to denounce the rioters and bloodthirsty strikers, but before I had been there half a day, I was the most bitter striker in town. They were not firebrands or anarchists or murderers; they were quiet, peaceful men who had suffered beneath the heel of the most heartless employer I ever saw, and I will never forgive President Cleveland for sending in troops to crush them.

That was one of the few really important pieces I wrote. Before long I was back to exposing spiritualists and interviewing a tramp who slept in the Astor mansion, and sparring—literally!--with James J. Corbett. I actually knocked him down and gave him a nosebleed; he claims I delivered an illegal blow with my elbow, but I maintain it was a right cross.

For some time, the Chicago *Times-Herald* had been wooing me, but I had resisted, not wanting to abandon poor Mr. Metcalf again—for, despite our differences, we had gone on seeing each other. I think that, during my three years of flirting with poverty and depression, I had become more like his picture of the ideal woman—housebound and rather helpless. When I became the old, plucky Nellie Bly again, he lost interest and took up with a winsome widow named Edith Dowling. (swats his outfit, hangs it up) And so I took up with the *Times-Herald*, which wanted a girl with pluck, and didn't care that she was nearly thirty-one years old.

The romance did not last long. To tell the truth, I was growing a bit weary of being plucky, and of being the provider for so many family members. I wished that someone would provide for me, for a change. It was during this “moment of weakness” that I met Robert Seaman (pulls out costume); with him, I embarked on a whole new journey that brought me to where I am now and left me high and dry.

Ah, but I forgot, you don't want to hear about all that, do you? Or do you? What do you say, ladies and gent-- No, never mind; you gentlemen won't like this part much. Ladies? What about it? Would you like to hear how I managed to marry into a fortune, and then lose it all? Good! (Or, alternatively, Well, I'll tell you anyway) Don't worry, gentlemen, I'll keep it brief, even though it has the makings of another *Bleak House*--if only *I* were another Mr. Dickens.

Robert was twice my age, so some of the newspapers—and even some of my friends--were convinced that my marrying Robert was another stunt, my attempt to top my Celebrated Journey. Robert's relatives assumed that I must be some sort of gold digger with my eyes on the Seaman fortune. But the truth—and I have sworn to tell it—is that I was after neither a fortune nor a sensational story. I just wanted a congenial companion, one who would care for me—in both senses of the word—and accept me as I was, and not expect me to fit his idea of what a woman should be.

In order to escape his relatives, we went to Europe. Well, that wasn't the only reason. Robert's health had been failing, and we thought a change of scene would help, which it did. Unfortunately it was not good for the health of his business, the Iron Clad Manufacturing Company. The man we left in charge, a Mr. Cleveland—no relation to the president--managed to sink the company into a quagmire of debt.

Mon Dieu! I cried—we were in Europe, after all-- He runs your company the way the *other* Mr. Cleveland runs the government! It's obvious that neither man has ever managed a household. I have no head at all for figures, and yet I supported myself, my mother, my sister, my niece, and my brother's wife and children, without ever once going into debt. “Well, my darling, perhaps I should have put *you* in charge of the foundry.” Surely I could have done no worse than your Mr. Cleveland. “No doubt you're right. I'll tell you what. When we get back home, I'll appoint you president.” Of the United States? “Not a bad idea, but I meant the president of Iron Clad.”

And to my surprise, he did it. Well, why not? People are always saying that something or other—a trip around the world, for example—needs a man, but I'd proven them wrong, and I was determined to do it again. Since I was new to the business world, Robert hired a young financial wizard named

Edward Gilman, who had been a major in the army. What Robert forgot was that, if wizards can work magic, they can also make things disappear.

Though I was not any sort of wizard, there was one thing I was very good at—promoting myself—and I used that skill to promote my company. I had advertising cards made up featuring a photograph of myself, only slightly retouched, and these words: “The Iron Clad factories are the largest of their kind and are exclusively owned by NELLIE BLY the only woman in the world personally managing industries of such magnitude.” Impressive, isn't it? And it worked. I not only dragged the company out of debt, I quadrupled its sales. It wasn't entirely due to my self-aggrandizing business card, of course; I patented an entirely new product—the steel barrel—and taught the American public to use it. I'm sorry, I didn't have room for one inside the trunk.

I also completely reorganized and renovated the factory. I threw out the old steam engines and oil lamps, and got the whole place running on eee-lectricity. I abolished the unfair system of piecework and put all the workers on salary. I built them a recreation center, I brought in lecturers and entertainments, established a medical clinic, even started a company baseball team.

The only part of the factory I did not poke my nose into was its account books. (picks up a ledger) I left it all to Major Gilman and his fellow wizards. And that one bit of carelessness completely undid all the good things I had accomplished. (claps it shut) If Robert had been his old self, he might have seen the trouble coming. But since our return from Europe he had gone downhill again. In February of 1904 he was run down by a horse and wagon. A month later, he died. (hangs up Seaman costume)

Though Iron Clad was doing a land-office business, there never seemed to be any money on hand. I spoke to Mr. Gilman about the problem. “You don't understand how a business works. In order for it to grow, it needs regular infusions of capital.” Now, in my own defense, I was not quite as stupid and trusting as I may sound; I had suspicions that something was amiss, and I hired an auditor to go over the books. Well, all right, I *was* stupid; the accounting company I hired was one recommended by Major Gilman. Of course their diagnosis was that Iron Clad was in the best of health.

Major Gilman was not. In 1910, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Several days after he died, the auditor came to see me. “Now that the Major can threaten me no longer, Mrs. Seaman, I can tell you the truth. You have been surrounded by a lot of rogues and scoundrels, and the worst of them was E. R. Gilman. He has been paying his debts with your money. In addition, the chief cashier has forged your name on dozens of checks.” But surely they were small amounts. “I’m afraid not. I would estimate the losses at roughly half a million dollars.”

In May, 1911, the US District Court declared the company bankrupt. What upset me most was not the fact that I was robbed, but the fact that suddenly I was being regarded as a bungler who had gotten in over her head. “There, you see, that’s what comes of letting a woman run things.” But some of the country’s largest banks and businesses have been victims of embezzlers. Instead of branding me as a failure, why did they not look at all I had accomplished? I had proven what a woman can do in actual, practical, cold and hard business. And did men help me? Oh yes--as wolves might help rabbits. It was not enough that my company was drained of its lifeblood and left for dead; now there are packs of lawyers and creditors picking at its carcass.

During my ten days in the madhouse, one of the inmates I met was a little old German woman named Matilda. She had once been well off, but had lost all her money and it had driven her insane. She would talk into the steam heaters, or climb onto a chair and call out through the bars, cursing and railing at the lawyers who had taken all her funds and her property. I have no intention of following in her footsteps. As I have said, I never cared much for money anyway—not for my own sake, at least.

Someone once told me that I had a million dollar smile. I wish that were true, for then I’d sell it to the first buyer. But I wouldn’t let the lawyers get their hands on it. I would become the greatest benefactor in the world. I would hire scientists to find a cure for cancer; I would create a city for the blind, where they wouldn’t need to see, and a school for soldiers maimed in the wars, where they could learn a new, and peaceful trade, and a whole string of day care centers to help mothers who have no choice but to work for a living.

But I rather suspect that my smile is no longer worth what it once was. I'm afraid it's become a little strained and shopworn. Still, every now and again I dust it off and try it on. For I don't want to become known as a growler or a crank. There's no use being disgruntled and dissatisfied over our lot in life. Knowing how to coax some measure of happiness out of any circumstance, under any conditions—that is the acme of wisdom and the triumph of genius. That may not be *exciting* or even very interesting, but it is, true, and I promised to give you the truth.

Even my recent troubles have had some happy consequences. Though they have caused me physical and mental strain that would have broken down a strong man, they have kept my name in the public eye. I am still the notorious Nellie Bly, and when my day in court is over, I plan to return to the newspaper business, and perhaps have a column of my own in which I will go on telling the truth, to an even larger audience. And so I say to you what I said to my colleagues at the *Dispatch*, when I left for New York, all those many years ago: “Look out for me.”

(Lights down)

Performance rights must be secured before production. For contact information, please visit [the information page for Two Hours In A Madhouse](#)