

sample chapter from

**MAKING HEADLINES
A BIOGRAPHY OF NELLIE BLY**

by

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CHAPTER ONE EVERY BIT A LADY

Who is this Nellie Bly?

That was the question people were asking from the moment the mysterious writer's name first appeared in a Pennsylvania newspaper, the *Pittsburg Dispatch*, in 1885.

The article said people should have the right to get a divorce. In the nineteenth century, that was a controversial opinion. No wonder the readers wondered about the author.

It can't be a real name, they said—it's a pen name like Mark Twain or Fanny Fern. The writer must have borrowed it from Stephen Foster's verses, since Nelly Bly is a character in one of his songs.

It can't be a woman, declared a great many men. Everyone knows women aren't capable of writing that well, and they don't have logical minds. Obviously, the article was written by a man using a woman's name.

No one guessed the truth. It was not a man who stirred up all this fuss, and it was not the middle-aged women's rights activist in bloomers that others imagined, either. Nellie Bly was just eighteen years old, and she was a lady.

In the 1880s there were dozens of rules for ladylike behavior. A lady, girls were told, had her name in the newspaper only three times in her life—when she was born, when she married, and when she died. A lady did not call attention to herself by trying to invade territory men had staked out as their own. She was not to think of becoming a doctor or a lawyer, or of visiting an office, club, or tavern.

At the same time, however, women who believed they were just as good as men had begun to organize against the old ways. They did go to college and obtain jobs. They spoke out in public, and even dared ask for the right to vote. The women's suffrage movement had begun to gain strength.

Nellie Bly was not a suffragette; she never actively worked for women's rights. What she did was quieter. She paved the way for future generations of women in journalism, challenging them, by example, to make successful careers for themselves in the newspaper world.

Nellie Bly is best remembered for her trip around the world as a newspaper reporter—a journey that beat the speed record of Jules Verne's fictional character, Phileas Fogg. By 1890, anyone with luck and determination could have broken Fogg's eighty-day record. Nellie Bly received more attention during this trip than a man would have because it was very unusual for a woman—especially a charming, ladylike woman—to be so daring.

Determination was one of Nellie's trademarks from the beginning, as was being secretive about her private life. As a result, most of her childhood is a mystery. Even her true date of birth is not known. In later years she said she was eighteen when she first walked into a newspaper office. If so, she was born in 1867, but other records show she was born in 1865.

Nellie Bly started life with the name Elizabeth Cochran. She was born in Pitts Mills, Pennsylvania, just northeast of today's Pittsburgh. Except for one year at a

boarding school, she was educated at home by her father, Michael Cochran. He was a self-made man, and his independent spirit greatly influenced his young daughter.

Cochran started out as a laborer and mill-worker. Then he bought the mill where he worked and all the land around the big farmhouse that was the family home. Eventually he owned so much land that he changed the name of the town to Cochran's Mills. He was the postmaster for a time, and a justice of the peace, and finally became associate judge of Armstrong County.

Elizabeth's mother, Mary Jane Kennedy, was Mr. Cochran's second wife. She stayed at home, raised her stepsons and her own children, kept house, and dressed her daughter in pink gingham dresses that earned Elizabeth the nickname Pinky.

Elizabeth's family eventually included ten children. She had three brothers of her own and three half brothers. In a family with so many boys, Pinky Cochran developed a fiercely independent spirit. She fought hard to "stand up to the boys," no matter how many times they challenged her. Yet as Pinky grew up, she learned to dress and act as a young lady did in that time and place.

In the nineteenth century, mothers taught their daughters to be ladies—and that meant dressing modestly. Skirts swept the ground, and blouses and jackets had long sleeves and high necklines trimmed with lace. Underneath were layers and layers of undergarments—only the most daring wore Amelia Bloomer's "bloomers," which were long, loose trousers. Ladies wore hats and gloves whenever they went out, which wasn't very often.

Since most establishments were for men only, there weren't many places for women to go. Ladies were supposed to stay at home, do needlepoint, and care for the children.

Girls were told that ladies did not use certain common words. They were not supposed to say "sweat" or even "perspire." A lady "glowed." A lady would not refer to legs—her own were hidden by her long skirt, and she was supposed to pretend they didn't exist. Also, she did not curse or use bad language of any kind.

Pinky Cochran was raised to be every bit a lady, but when her father died, she had more to think about than clothes and manners. A lady who had no father to support her had only three choices in the 1880s: to get married, to live as a poor relation on the handouts of another member of the family, or to find a way to earn money herself.

Soon after her father's death, Pinky Cochran (she added the final *e* to her name) and her mother moved to Pittsburg, which did not add the final *h* until 1911. Mrs. Cochran wasn't used to fast-paced, expensive city life. Gradually, she spent almost all the money her husband had left the family, and there was barely enough left for food and shelter. Elizabeth Cochran had little choice but to find a job, and she was determined to do so. The welfare of her family depended on it.