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PEOPLE & EVENTS

TEACHER'S GUIDE



NELLIE BLY SONG

NELLIE'S BOOK

Nellie's Madhouse Memoir

It started as a dare. "New York World" managing editor John Cockerill suggested an outlandish stunt designed to attract readers, while testing the journalistic mettle of the intrepid Nellie Bly. Bly would pose as an insane woman and allow herself to be committed to Blackwell's Island -- New York City's notorious asylum. What resulted was a searing exposé that got the attention of reformers and readers alike.



Nellie Bly's Madhouse expose amazed and shocked New Yorkers.

Assuming the identity of Nellie Brown, an indigent immigrant from Cuba, Bly gained entry to the institution. Her keen observations provide a haunting account of her brief, but harrowing, stay.

"...As the wagon was rapidly driven through the beautiful lawns up to the asylum, my feelings of satisfaction at having attained the object of my work were greatly dampened by the look of distress on the faces of my companions. Poor women, they had no hopes of a speedy delivery. They were being driven to a prison, through no fault of their own, in all probability for life. In comparison, how much easier it would be to walk to the gallows than to this tomb of living horrors! On the wagon sped, and I, as well as my comrades, gave a despairing farewell glance at freedom as we came in sight of the long stone buildings."



Bly intended to explore the asylum through the eyes of a patient.

"...I wondered if my companions knew where we were, so I said to Miss Tillie Mayard: 'Where are we?' 'At the Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum,' she answered sadly. 'Are you crazy?' I asked. 'No,' she replied; 'but as we have been sent here we will have to be quiet until we find some means of escape. They will be few though, if all the doctors, as Dr. Field, refuse to listen to me or give me a chance to prove my sanity.' We

were ushered into a narrow vestibule, and the door was locked behind us. In spite of the knowledge of my sanity and the assurance that I would be released in a few days, my heart gave a sharp twinge."

"...Timidly we followed the nurse up the long uncarpeted hall to a room filled by so-called crazy women. We were told to sit down, and some of the patients kindly made room for us. They looked at us curiously, and one came up to me and asked: 'Who sent you here?' 'The doctors,' I answered. 'What for?' she persisted. 'Well, they say I am insane,' I admitted. 'Insane!' she repeated, incredulously. 'It cannot be seen in your face.'"

"...'Nellie Brown, the doctor wants you,' said Miss Grupe. I went in and was told to sit down opposite Dr. Kinier at the desk. 'What is your name?' he asked,

without looking up. 'Nellie Brown,' I replied, easily. 'Where is your home?' writing what I said down in a large book. 'In Cuba.' 'Oh!' he ejaculated, with sudden understanding -- then addressing the nurse: 'Did you see anything in the papers about her?' 'Yes,' she replied, 'I saw a long account of this girl in the "Sun" on Sunday.' Then the doctor said: 'Keep her here until I go to the office and see the notice again.' He left us, and I was relieved of my hat and shawl. On his return, he said he had been unable to find the paper, but he related the story of my *debut*, as he had read it, to the nurse. 'What's the color of her eyes?' Miss Grupe looked, and answered 'gray,' although everybody had always said my eyes were brown or hazel. 'What's your age,' he asked: and I answered, 'Nineteen last May.'"

"...Then he wrote my fate in the book before him. I said, 'I am not sick and I do not want to stay here. No one has the right to shut me up in this manner.' He took no notice of my remarks, and having completed his writings, as well as his talk with the nurse for the moment, he said that would do, and with my companions, I went back to the sitting room."

"...This examination over, we heard someone yell, 'Go out into the hall.' One of the patients kindly explained that this was an invitation to supper. We latecomers tried to keep together, so we entered the hall and stood at the door where all the women had crowded. How we shivered as we stood there! The windows were open and the draught went whizzing through the hall. The patients looked blue with cold, and the minutes stretched into a quarter of an hour. At last one of the nurses went forward and unlocked a door, through which we all crowded to a landing of the stairway. Here again came a long halt directly before an open window."



Charles Dickens had visited Blackwell's Island -- but left in a hurry.

"...While they stood there I thought I would not relish supper that night. They looked so lost and hopeless. Some were chattering nonsense to invisible persons, other were laughing or crying aimlessly, and one old, gray-haired woman was nudging me, and with winks and sage noddings of the head and pitiful uplifting of the eyes and hands, was assuring me that I must not mind the poor creatures, as they were all mad."

"...The table reached the length of the room and was uncovered and uninviting. Long benches without backs were put for the patients to sit on, and over these they had to crawl in order to face the table. Placed close together all along the table were large dressing-bowls fixed with a pinkish looking stuff which the patients called tea. By each bowl was laid a piece of bread, cut thick and buttered. A small saucer containing five prunes accompanied the bread. One fat woman made a rush, and jerking up several saucers from those around her emptied their contents into her own saucer. Then while holding to her own bowl she lifted up another and drained its contents at one gulp. This she did to a second bowl in shorter time than it takes to tell it. Indeed I was so amused at her successful grabbings that when I looked at my own share the woman opposite, without so much as by your leave, grabbed my bread and left me without any. Another patient, seeing this, kindly offered me hers, but I declined with thanks and turned to the nurse and asked for more. As she flung a thick piece down on the table she made some remark about the fact that if I forgot where my home was I had not forgotten how to eat. I tried the bread, but the butter was so horrible that I could not eat it."

"...I turned my attention to the prunes and found that very few of them would be sufficient. A patient near asked me to give them to her. I did so. My bowl of tea was all that was left. I tasted, and one taste was enough. It had no sugar,

and it tasted as if it had been made in copper. It was as weak as water. This was also transferred to a hungrier patient, in spite of the protest of Miss Neville. 'You must force the food down,' she said, 'else you will be sick, and who knows but what, with these surroundings, you may go crazy. To have a good brain the stomach must be cared for.' 'It is impossible for me to eat that stuff,' I replied, and, despite all her urging, I ate nothing that night."

"...I could not sleep, so I lay in bed picturing to myself the horrors in case a fire should break out in the asylum. Every door is locked separately and the windows are heavily barred, so that escape is impossible. In the one building alone there are, I think Dr. Ingram told me, some three hundred women. They are locked, one to ten in a room. It is impossible to get out unless these doors are unlocked."



The women's asylum on Blackwell's Island was a grim and forboding place.

"...Just as the morning began to dawn I went to sleep. It did not seem many moments until I was rudely awakened and told to get up, the window being opened and the clothing pulled off me. My hair was still wet and I had pains all through me, as if I had the rheumatism. Some clothing was flung on the floor and I was told to take what I got and keep quiet by the apparently head nurse, Miss Grady. I looked at it. One

underskirt made of coarse dark cotton goods and a cheap white calico dress with a black spot in it. I tied the strings of the skirt around me and put on the little dress. It was made, as are all those worn by the patients, into a straight, tight waist sewed on to a straight skirt. As I buttoned the waist I noticed the underskirt was about six inches longer than the upper and for a moment I sat down on the bed and laughed at my own appearance. No woman ever longed for a mirror more than I did at that moment."

"...We were sent to the bathroom, where there were two coarse towels. I watched crazy patients who had the most dangerous eruptions all over their faces dry on the towels and then saw the women with clean skin turn to use them. I went to the bathtub and washed my face at the running faucet and my underskirt did duty as a towel."

"...Before I had completed my ablutions a bench was brought into the bathroom. Miss Grupe and Miss McCarten came in with combs in their hands. We were told to sit down on the bench and the hair of forty-five women was combed with one patient, two nurses, and six combs. As I saw some of the sore heads combed I thought this was another dose I had not bargained for."

"...Oh, that combing! I never realized before what the expression 'I'll give you a combing' meant, but I knew then. My hair, all matted and wet from the night previous, was pulled and jerked, and, after expostulating to no avail, I set my teeth and endured the pain. They refused to give me my hairpins, and my hair was arranged in one plait and tied with a red cotton rag. My curly bangs refused to stay back."

"...After the housework was completed by the patients, and as the day was fine, but cold, we were told to go into the hall and get on shawls and hats for a walk. Poor patients! How eager they were for a breath of air; how eager for a slight release from their prison. They went swiftly into the hall and there was a skirmish for hats. Such hats!"

"...We had not gone many paces when I saw, proceeding from every walk, long lines of women guarded by nurses. How many there were! Every way I

looked I could see them in the queer dresses, comical straw hats and shawls, marching slowly around. I eagerly watched the passing lines and a thrill of horror crept over me at the sight! Vacant eyes and meaningless faces, and their tongues uttered meaningless nonsense. One crowd passed and I noted, by nose as well as eyes, that they were fearfully dirty. 'Who are they?' I asked of a patient near me. 'They are considered the most violent on the island,' she replied. 'They are from the lodge, the first building with the high steps.' Some were yelling, some were cursing, others were singing or praying or preaching, as the fancy struck them, and they made up the most miserable collection of humanity I had ever seen."

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

"...People in the world can never imagine the length of days to those in asylums. They seemed never ending, and we welcomed any event that might give us something to think about as well as talk of. There is nothing to read, and the only bit of talk that never wears out is conjuring up delicate food that they will get as soon as they get out. Anxiously the hour was watched for when the boat arrived to see if there were any new unfortunates to be added to our ranks. When they came and were ushered into the sitting-room the patients would express sympathy to one another for them and were anxious to show them little marks of attention."

"...At first I could not sleep and did not want to so long as I could hear anything new. The night nurses may have complained of the fact. At any rate one night they came in and tried to make me take a dose of some mixture out of a glass 'to make me sleep,' they said. I told them I would do nothing of the sort and they left me, I hoped, for the night. My hopes were vain, for in a few minutes they returned with a doctor, the same that received us on our arrival. He insisted that I take it, but I was determined not to lose my wits even for a few hours. When he saw I was not to be coaxed he grew rather rough, and said he had wasted too much time with me already. That if I did not take it he would put it into my arm with a needle. It occurred to me that if he put it into my arm I could not get rid of it, but if I swallowed it there was one hope, so I said I would take it. I smelt it and it smelt like laudanum, and it was a horrible dose. No sooner had they left the room and locked me in that I tried to see how far down my throat my finger would go."

"...I always made a point of telling the doctors I was sane, and asking to be released, but the more I endeavored to assure them of my sanity, the more they doubted it. 'What are you doctors here for?' I asked one, whose name I cannot recall. 'To take care of the patients and test their sanity,' he replied. 'Very well,' I said. 'There are sixteen doctors on this island,

and, excepting two, I have never seen them pay any attention to the patients. How can a doctor judge a woman's sanity by merely bidding her good morning and refusing to hear her pleas for release? Even the sick ones know it is useless to say anything, for the answer will be that it is their imagination.' 'Try every test on me,' I have urged others, 'and tell me am I sane or insane? Try my pulse, my heart, my eyes; ask me to stretch out my arm, to work my fingers, as Dr. Field did at Bellevue, and then tell me if I am sane.' They would not heed me, for they thought I raved."



Bly submits to an examination by an asylum doctor.

"...The insane asylum on Blackwell's Island is a human rat-trap. It is easy to get in, but once there it is impossible to get out. I had intended to have myself committed to the violent wards, the Lodge and Retreat, but when I got the testimony of two sane women and could give it, I decided not to risk my health -- and hair -- so I did not get violent."

"...I had, toward the last, been shut off from all visitors, and so when the lawyer, Peter A. Hendricks, came and told me that friends of mine were willing to take charge of me if I would rather be with them than in the asylum, and I was only too glad to give my consent. I asked him to send me something to eat immediately on his arrival in the city, and then I waited anxiously for my release. It came sooner than I had hoped. I was out 'in line' taking a walk, and had just gotten interested in a poor woman who had fainted away while the nurses were trying to compel her to walk. 'Good-bye; I am going home,' I called to Pauline Moser, as she went past with a woman on either side of her. Sadly I said farewell to all I knew as I passed them on my way to freedom and life, while they were left behind to a fate worse than death. 'Adios,' I murmured to the Mexican woman. I kissed my fingers to her, and so I left my companions of hall 7."

"...I had looked forward so eagerly to leaving the horrible place, yet when my release came and I knew that God's sunlight was to be free for me again, there was a certain pain in leaving. For ten days I had been one of them. Foolishly enough it seemed intensely selfish to leave them to their sufferings. I felt a Quixotic desire to help them by sympathy and presence. But only for a moment. The bars were down and freedom was sweeter to me than ever."

"...Soon I was crossing the river and nearing New York. Once again I was a free girl after ten days in the madhouse on Blackwell's Island."

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