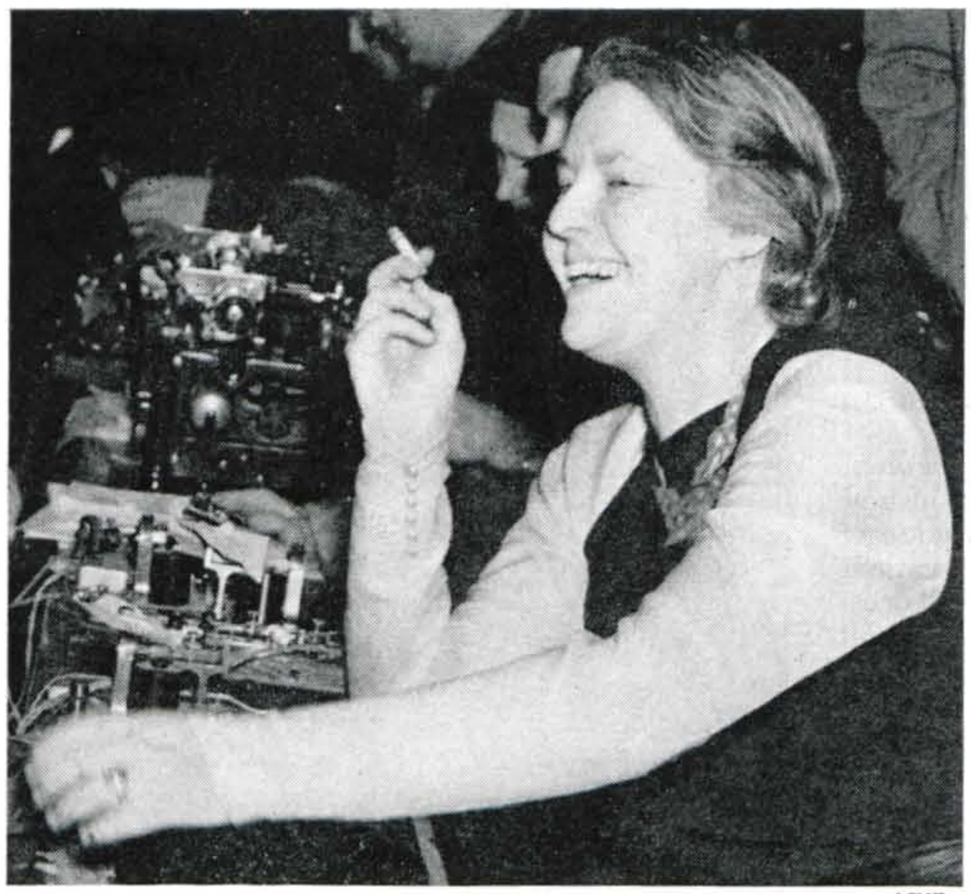
PAPER DOLLS

By STANLEY FRANK and PAUL SANN

What happens when 8000 reporters march out and 8000 girls march in? Masculine growls in the city room prove that the ancient prejudice still stands—but on a weakening foundation.



ACME

Columnist Dorothy Thompson never asked favors of male rivals when she was an ace European correspondent.

PRESS ASSOCIATION

Ishbel Ross was one of the best reporters New York ever saw.

THE management of the Shelby, North Carolina, Daily Star, having been given proper pause by the pitfalls lurking in New York to ensnare a Southern belle fresh out of college, finally decided the cause of journalism had to be served by sending Miss Catherine Bailey, the new sports editor, to report the World Series last October. Miss Bailey was given an expense account, an admonition to do good and a warning against wolves, whereupon the management pointed her northward and sat back to await its lady expert's interpretation of baseball and the queer customs of the natives.

A crowd of 68,676, including Shelby's championship Junior Legion team, presently saw the first series game, but Miss Bailey sent her paper no dispatch. The following day, Morton and Walker Cooper, the Cardinals' brother battery, defeated the Yankees a few hours after they had learned of their father's death, a dramatic situation supposedly made to order for the tender touch of a lady chronicler. Still no word from Bailey.

Holt McPherson, managing editor of the Star, began to think of the several fates, some worse than death, that might have befallen his representative, and got on the long-distance telephone. After several hours, he finally located Miss Bailey with unmistakable sounds of revelry in the background. With the charm and courtesy characteristic of the old South, McPherson asked what the hell, what about the stories.

"Why, Mister Mac," Miss Bailey said coyly, "there hasn't a thing happened worth writing about."

Mr. Mac's reaction was identical to that of Joe Croom, editor of the Okmulgee, Oklahoma, Daily Times, the busy night he discovered his all-girl staff draped over the office windows and listening dreamily to a serenading sextet of town gallants. He made feeble, fluttering passes at the air and mumbled wordlessly to himself. This series of related gestures is practically a ritual performed at least once a day in every newspaper shop throughout the country. The war has crumbled old, formidable barriers against women in the newspaper business, thereby confirming the morbid suspicions of editors that it is not man's destiny to be happy.

Editor & Publisher estimates that more than 8000 men reporters have gone into the armed forces in the last two years, and they have been replaced almost entirely by women. This figure does not include thousands of new copy boys, some of whom have lovely legs and wear peekaboo blouses. Dozens of small dailies and weeklies are staffed by females exclusively; a male addition to a paper has become such a rarity that Editor & Publisher ran, in October, the following headline: MAN JOINS STAFF.

Women have invaded such hitherto inviolate masculine precincts on newspapers as finance, politics, sports and the police beat. Paper dolls are reading copy, working on the rewrite desk, taking pictures. They are covering riots, crimes of purple passion, train wrecks, fires and suicides without swooning. Much to the astonishment of the misogynists who work alongside them, the paper always appears on time, it is reasonably free of errors and there has not yet been a deluge of libel suits or indignant readers canceling their subscriptions.

Some excellent reporting is being done by women and some sisters in the lodge are exercising their right to ask scatterbrained questions and to go native with unprofessional behavior that is embarrassing to colleagues on the same assignment. All things considered, the recommendations in favor of newspaperwomen outweigh the objections against them, but the ancient prejudice still holds firm. Managing and city editors are suffering the dames under protest; chivalry impels them to throw the ladies a few words of good cheer and encouragement, but candor compels most editors to admit they will take a dumb man of erratic social habits over a smart gal every time.

The bill of particulars against women reporters is summed up by Walter Lister, managing editor of the Philadelphia Record. *(Continued on Page 93)*

BROWN BROTHERS

Nellie Bly's competence overcame city-room prejudice in the Nineties.

PHOTO-ASSOCIATES

Typical copy desk today. The skirted reporter at the left chats sociably between puffs while two female copyreaders struggle with dispatches and a copy girl does her best.

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"Sloppiness is the one word that covers everything," Lister says. "Too many (a) can't spell, (b) don't ask the right questions, (c) lack imagination, (d) won't get specific information. In short, the gals are inclined to misfire on just the points you would expect a woman's neat, precise, accurate touch to supplement the work of the supposedly careless male. You hear so much about the wonderful women secretaries without whom the captains of industry simply would be lost. These office wives keep the great man's checkbook, remind him of the due date on the billion-dollar contract, buy off the chorus girls, correct his grammar, and so on. I don't know why we don't get some of these wonders in the newspaper business. Maybe the whole thing is a myth."

These criticisms are subject to the usual sweeping exceptions and, frankly, are colored by the intransigent prejudice veteran newspaper guys hold against dames. Walter Bodin, city editor of the Oakland Tribune, swears his beefs concerning the attitude and mannerisms of women are a blanket indictment of the wrecker sex.

"No matter how able they are, all are given to chattering among themselves and with personable male staffmen," Bodin broods. "They are coy and warm by turns; they clutter and clatter endlessly. Every afternoon, just after the home-edition dead line, the local room presents the sight and sound of a meeting of neurotic clubwomen. The atmosphere demoralizes the men. I have to restrain myself violently from installing a samovar and serving tea and ladyfingers at three o'clock. But all I can do is hum God Bless America as tears splash into my highball, and pray fervently for the end of this godless war. Just to make sure I am not becoming insensitive to feminine allure, I asked Joe Sheridan, city editor of the San Francisco Daily News, how he felt about it. He looked at me through pain-stricken eyes and mumbled, 'This must be the penalty I am paying for the crimes of my youth.'"

The most common complaint from editors is that the ladies are as irresponsible as an amorous monkey and have absolutely no sense of the urgency of hot news. One young lady—a competent hand on the rewrite desk of the New York Post—checked in a half hour late one crowded morning and was pretty nonchalant about it.

"I used a new leg make-up for the first time," she explained casually, "and it took me longer to put it on than I figured."

The Eternal Feminine

This same rewrite girl is treasured at the Post for a crack she inspired when Ed Flynn, the city editor, asked her to take a story over the phone.

It was a long yarn and meant using the headset gadget.

"Aw, gee," she said petulantly, "I just fixed my hair, and this will spoil it."

"I suppose," a desk man observed morosely, "we'll have to go out and get ourselves bald lady rewrites."

Sometimes editors must have a nostalgic yearning for the classic excuses offered by men who suffered a slight touch of amnesia regarding hours of work and place of employment: The alarm clock didn't go off; a long-lost cousin suddenly turned up and promptly was seized by a mysterious tropical disease; bus service was disrupted by a dreadful accident and the "interests" covered up all trace of same by burying the victims in quicklime; "I have the grandfather of all hangovers and I am about to die." These evasions strike a familiar gong in bosses who have used the same dodge themselves, but the masculine mind is baffled by a woman's inability to disassociate herself from the trivia of private life when there is work to be done.

The girls think nothing of asking for time off to shop or go to the hairdresser during the peak hours of the day's news. A man cannot comprehend why a woman neglects to report for work just because the mean old laundry failed to return a blouse which is the only thing that will go with an ensemble the other girls in the office haven't seen for two weeks. The girl who explains she is late because she couldn't leave home until galoshes had been found to encase her toeless shoes is likely to give the boss the pitying look reserved for idiot children if he asks why in the world she couldn't wear another pair of shoes. The incidence of one-day pneumonia rises sharply when boy friends are home on furlough.

Beauty and the Beast

Carl Kesler, of the Chicago Daily News, winces when he recalls the time he sent one of his females to cover a convention of beauty operators at a hotel. A few minutes after she left, a press agent dropped into the office with an idea for a story. Kesler had the girl paged at the hotel.

"What is it?" she demanded breathlessly.

"A guy up here has a pretty good angle on that convention ——"

"For goodness' sakes!" the girl gasped indignantly. "I was scared to death when I heard the office was calling. I thought something happened to my family. Don't ever frighten me like this again!"

Another bleat heard frequently from editors is that the ladies create bottlenecks in office routine and impede the promotion of deserving men. Editors have to think twice before giving women late-night assignments and stories that involve too much scrambling or hand-to-hand fighting for news. Some public figures are reluctant to confide in women or have any official truck with them. This attitude was expressed succinctly by Judge Kenesaw M. Landis, the commissioner of baseball, at the last World Series, when Ruth Robertson, photographer for Acme Newspictures, asked the old gent to smile, please.

"I never take orders from women," the judge snapped.

The result is that men who are eligible for the greater prestige and pay of the rewrite desk—the brain and nerve center of a newspaper—have to do overtime legwork on obscure, but indispensable, beats. The men grouse about lost opportunity, the women scream shrilly against the discrimination that keeps them off exciting stories and, in the confusion, the city editor has to step lively to avoid the crossfire of flaming temperaments.

The strangest aspect of the firm prejudice against ladies of the press is that journalism was among the first professions in America to accept women, who have found steady—and sometimes lucrative—employment in it for more than a century. The pioneer was the fabulous Anne Royall, an ignorant, vindictive shrew who once forced President John Quincy Adams to give her an interview by sitting on his clothes while he bathed in the Potomac. Anne made such a pest of herself with gossip and invective that she was arrested as a common scold in 1829. She was found guilty and fined ten dollars, but escaped the ducking stool because she was sixty years old. Undaunted, Anne in 1831 began to publish Paul Pry, a four-page paper devoted to violent abuse of public officials, malicious scandal and indiscriminate charges of corruption, which often were valid. Five years later, she brought out The Huntress, a less rancorous sheet, but Ishbel Ross, the historian of the distaff side of journalism, observes "it always retained the flavor of her strong and eccentric personality." On October 1, 1854,

Anne died penniless, a bitter and unreconstructed rebel throughout her eighty-five years.

The most vivid personalities in women's journalism were the Woodhull sisters, Victoria and Tennessee, who launched Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly in 1870. Their paper was designed to attract attention by scandal, shock and scurrility. Neither had the education or the social-consciousness to run a newspaper, but they had two smart ghosts in Col. James H. Blood and Stephen P. Andrews. The sisters caused a sensation for a time; they invaded Wall Street, and Victoria was nominated for the presidency of the United States by the Equal Rights Party. She failed to poll a single electoral vote. By discussing in print such taboos as free love and prostitution, the circulation of the Weekly rose to a healthy 20,000, but public opinion turned against them when they began to demand $500 for withholding the private histories of prominent ladies of New York. The Weekly suspended publication in 1872, but Victoria revived it a few months later for the express purpose of exposing the affair between Henry Ward Beecher and Mrs. Theodore Tilton. Anthony Comstock had Victoria put in jail, and, when she got out, trapped her on a charge of sending obscene matter through the mails. Victoria beat that rap, too, and went to England, where she married John Biddulph Martin, a banker, and Tennessee became Lady Cook. Tennie died in 1923 and left her sister more than a half million dollars. Victoria died in 1927 at the age of eighty-nine.

The first significant jobs of straight news reporting were done by the famous Nellie Bly, the daughter of a judge in Cochran's Mills, Pennsylvania. Nellie's greatest feat was her round-the-world trip for Joseph Pulitzer in 1890. She made it in seventy-two days, six hours and eleven minutes, beating the elapsed time of Jules Verne's literary flight of fantasy by a week. Essentially a stunt reporter, Nellie impersonated beggars, lunatics, shop girls and Salvation Army lassies to gather her material, which was enormously popular.

Miss Bly's competence and circulation appeal were the springboards which gave women acceptance in the business as something more than necessary nuisances for handling fashions, recipes, society news, advice to the lovelorn and the other trifles on the women's pages. Working reporters, both men and women, recognize spot-news assignments as the only hall mark of the genuine pro, and in the last half century a distinguished list of women have earned respect as first-class craftsmen capable of covering any type of story skillfully and intelligently.

Although Ishbel Ross retired from newspaper work more than a decade ago, her copy in the New York Herald Tribune still is remembered and admired, a pretty remarkable tribute in a town where reputations have no more permanency than yesterday's paper. Mrs. C. A. Bonfils, whose material was syndicated for many years under her maiden name of Winifred Black, was famous as "Annie Laurie" in the San Francisco Examiner at the turn of the century. Another woman who was outstanding in Chicago, Denver, San Francisco and New York was Nellie Revell. In recent years, Dorothy Thompson, Anne O'Hare McCormick and Ruth Finney have written pieces for the ages and, to give the list a once-over-lightly, other expert newspapermen in skirts have been Lorena Hickok, Genevieve Forbes Herrick, Marjorie Driscoll, Grace Robinson, Helen Worden, Maureen McKernan, Emma Bugbee, Irene Kuhn and Julia Harpman, who married Westbrook Pegler.

It still is true, however, that in normal times it was very easy for a newspaper to get along without women on its reportorial staff. The girls write well enough; they have a deft touch on descriptive stories, human-interest yarns and interviews—provided they don't gush over the interviewee. Yet it is rare to see a woman write the lead story on a news break of major importance. Most editors believe women have a constitutional inability to gather up all the loose ends of a complicated story and weave them into a compact, well-rounded piece. In winding up and making with the deathless prose, too many ladies forget the time-proved formula of who-what-when-where-why-how. Their stuff is apt to be another "Johnstown Flood" epic, which

is a classic story of the newspaper business, and may even be true.

On the night of May 31, 1889—so the story goes—an editor had no one in the office but a cub reporter when the first flash of the catastrophe at Johnstown came over the wires. The editor immediately sent the cub to Johnstown and routed out other members of the staff, but by the time they could reach the scene, all communication was closed. For several days the cub was isolated on top of the biggest story of the year. When the telegraph wires finally were opened, the editor waited feverishly for the cub's dispatch telling of the number of victims, the property damage, health conditions in the devastated area, plans for rehabilitation and all other vital information. The stuttering wires at last began to tap out the eyewitness account the entire country was awaiting breathlessly. The story began:

"God sits upon a lonely mountaintop tonight and looks down upon a desolate Johnstown" and went on from there, carrying the reader through several hundred high-powered adjectives and verbs before getting down to the simple, arresting facts.

The editor bounced the following wire into the cub's teeth: "Forget flood. Interview God. Rush pictures."

A few words in defense of the girls should be offered at this time. All the faults found with them can be applied to inexperienced men; editors are prone to forget that the majority of their new paper dolls were secretaries, file clerks, telephone operators, receptionists or copy girls a short time ago. They have been thrown into jobs demanding special technique and know-how without the basic training given men reporters in normal times. Veterans had to serve a long apprenticeship of dreary leg work, and they were promoted slowly as their knowledge of the craft expanded. The girls have been plunged into the whirlpool of news without the breaking-in process that teaches them how to keep their heads above water.

Newspaperwomen further are laboring under strains men do not have to contend with. Many are married and some have young children; there are households to maintain and, if husbands are in the service, there is a constant pressure for money. Under the circumstances, it is understandable that women are unable to divorce themselves from outside interests and obligations during working hours.

Still, women are doing good sound jobs in fields entirely new to them. The Chicago Journal of Commerce has three girls covering the intricate and multitudinous Government agencies in Washington. Mary B. Smith handles the Reno divorce mill for the Associated Press all by herself. The A. P.'s assistant market editor in Chicago is Charlotte Ingalls, who was a switchboard operator before the war decimated the staff. At least twenty Southern papers claim the first lady sports editor in history.

A genuine precedent smasher is Adelaide Leavy, one of the first girl photographers to make good in New York on a major paper or picture service. Robert P. Dorman, general manager of Acme Newspictures, says twenty-nine-year-old Miss Leavy is the only woman he ever has known who can take any spot picture with the assurance that it will come out all right. Miss Leavy is an attractive redhead who makes a point of dressing in the height of feminine fashion, although she wears slacks when she knows a job will require kneeling and climbing. News photographers usually are given a strenuous pushing around from the authorities when they attempt to take action shots of accidents, arrests, fires and such, but Miss Leavy was given a regulation raincoat and helmet by a solicitous fireman when she took a shot of a theater fire from the water-flooded balcony. The fireman said she'd spoil her pretty black-and-white-gingham dress if she went into the theater unprotected.

It pains die-hard newshounds to admit it, but the newspapers would have been in an awful jam in the last two years if women had not been ready, willing and sometimes able to step into vacancies on staffs depleted by the draft. The Associated Press, for example, had

six girl reporters before Pearl Harbor; it now has sixty-five in its ninety-four bureaus. The United Press has approximately 100 girls, or 20 per cent of the staff, scattered among its sixty-one bureaus.

Those men waiting for the day former colleagues are mustered out of the service and all the Johanna-come-latelys are pitched out on their pink ears are whistling up a blind alley. The girls have got their teeth into the business and will not be dislodged easily.

"The last two years have taught me to give more consideration to a woman applicant for a job than I did before the war," says L. L. Engelking, city editor of the New York Herald Tribune. "Women frequently are a lot more difficult to handle than men, but I can't kick. I might have a squawk," he adds thoughtfully, "if I had a staff that was two-thirds female. I'm a tolerant man, but that would be too much."

Deep down in their hard hearts, most editors vibrate on the same wave length with Harry Nason, former managing editor of the New York Post, the first time he saw Sylvia Porter, now that paper's financial editor, wearing her Phi Beta Kappa key.

It was a miniature key, the smallest made, but it was, nevertheless, recognizable as the badge of intellect.

Nason grabbed Miss Porter by the arm and glared at the key. "Dames around a newspaper office are bad enough," he yelped, "but smart dames are going to kill me and the business."