

DON'T JUDGE A BROOKSIE BY HER COVER by Professor A.D. Conrow

Back in 1925, while working in the testing department of General Electric up in Schenectady, New York, some of my friends and I had decided to take a short train trip down to NYC to "take in the sights". Back in the roaring '20s, that could mean just about anything for four bachelors in the Big Apple, so we boarded the train early one morning and were off.

My best friend in those days was a guy named Norm Billingworth, and Norm had a nose for trouble. That is to say he liked getting into it! After taking our lunch inside the newly opened Gramercy Park Hotel, just off of Park Ave., and spending a couple of hours at the city library (for business purposes, of course, so we could write off the trip as a General Electric departmental expense), we headed uptown to see what opportunities the evening would lend us in the big city.

I didn't know it at the time, but Norm had a friend, from back in his college days, that worked backstage at the newly renovated Cosmopolitan Theater on Columbus Circle. So, with Norm's assurance of "good seats" we eventually ended up sitting in the front row of Ziegfeld's *Louie the 14th*. I had heard of Ziegfeld's productions, but the things that I had heard were best not discussed in polite company, and I must admit to being a little nervous, and yet a little thrilled at the same time!

The show was a very dramatic thing, with the latest in theatrical lighting and stage-sets, not to mention breathtakingly beautiful girls of remarkable talent! However, after about the first ten minutes of the show, I noticed that half of the stage went dark and there was more than a little shouting backstage.



Within about a minute or so, the curtains closed and a man came out in front to explain that they had a small technical problem and that the show would soon continue. At that point, an extremely short man came running out onto the stage with a "hook cane" and began to tug at the first man's leg, and proceeded to try to pull him off of the stage. This, of course, created a tremendous thunder of laughter from the audience and the two men began a comedy routine that soon made the audience forget about the technical troubles altogether.

Norm's friend came trotting up the outside aisle at about that time and motioned for Norm to come over to the side to speak with him. I watched the men with considerable attention, and soon Norm was motioning for me to join him. I left Bob and Frank (our other two traveling friends) to watch the comedy routine, and quickly followed Norm down and around to the back of the stage.

Backstage was an amazing sight... not just from a technical standpoint, which it certainly was, but because of the bevy of beauties that I found myself right in the middle of! I was thunderstruck and it must certainly have shown because the girls all started laughing at my stupefied expression, not that they weren't used to that!

"Professor Conrow," said the stage manager, a Mr. Royce, "Norm here says that you are an electrical genius, and what I need right now is an electrical genius. I have just taken delivery of the most newfangled lighting switchboard that any of us have seen, and it is on the Fritz! So get your b*** back here and fix this damned thing." This was followed by a lot of giggling from the girls, not to mention some choice words to motivate me from them as well, which I will not repeat here.

Boy, oh boy, was I under some pressure now, and not too happy that old Norm had gotten me into it. Norm held a flashlight (we more often than not called them an electric torch back in those days), and I began to trace out the DC circuit on the large switchboard. Power input was okay, I could tell by the 460VDC General Electric meter. Main fuse was okay because I was able to see a little spark from the knife switch (often called a suicide switch, because with one little slip you could become part of the circuit), so I knew that current was okay to that point. However, something further

down-circuit must be....

Suddenly I was interrupted by someone tapping me on the back in a most insistent manner. This was considered most unacceptable when a person was operating a switchboard or power-panel, and I swung around to the nuisance... the MOST BEAUTIFUL nuisance that I had ever seen! Standing before me, and wearing little of nothing, in the way of an outfit, was one of the girls from the show.

"Do you have any idea what you are doing?" asked the beauty. I gasped and started to blabber something when Norm stepped over to say, "Of course he does. Hell he practically runs General Electric." This apparently impressed the young girl because she took a step back and sized me up from toe to head and put her hands on her hips and said, "You don't look like a professor, except for the glasses." I was still trying to collect my thoughts when Norm interjected, "Oh don't let Specs here fool you, even though he has a giant brain, he is more trouble than he's worth."



"Trouble, I like trouble." said the woman, and my head began to spin again because I realized that she hadn't taken her eyes off of me once. "Hey Professor, can I watch? I like to watch men while they work." That did it for Norm, and he carefully pulled her around with his arm and said, "Hey Honey, let's let the professor work. He's the shy type and I'm afraid that all the sweat will get him electrocuted." Norm winked at me as he led her away. Ever the lady's man, Norm was in his element around good looking women, but as she floated away from me

she turned and said, "My name is Louise, but YOU can call me Brooksie!"

"Louise," I said to myself with a smile on my lips, "what a beautiful name for a beautiful woman. BROOKSIE, now wait a minute... I know that name." Suddenly I realized that she was Louise Brooks from Cherryvale, Kansas! The local papers back in Kansas had been keenly following the young lady's career from when she became a local dancing sensation, to her departure to NYC. "Wow," I thought to myself.

"Brooksie, you're Louise Brooks! I know you from back in Kansas," I blurted out from thirty feet away. That is all that it took for Brooksie to break away from poor Norm, and come gliding back across the floor to me. Talk about dirty looks; Norm's could have shamed the Pope!

"Okay, Professor, show me what you've got. Let's fix this thing so I can get back out there." What spirit! What beauty! Suffice it to say that I redoubled my efforts and soon located the problem, at the side of the switchboard in the output terminal. The lighting circuit was split into two paths and through two separate fuses to light the stage on the left and right sides. The wire "lug" had not been soldered during the installation of the panel and it was a simple matter for me to crimp the terminal, temporarily, with a pair of pliers that a stagehand quickly produced.

I threw the main switch again, and with a "pop", the lights came back on to the cheers of the crowd just outside the curtain. "You're my hero, Professor," said Brooksie as she kissed her index finger and then pressed it against my lips. I shall never forget that moment because it changed the course of my life from that evening forward. She followed up that act by saying, "I'll see YOU after the show." With that a tall thin man clapped his hands and said, "Okay everyone, we're back on in one minute."

To tell you the truth, Dear Reader, I have absolutely NO idea what the rest of the show was about, nor did I care. I strolled around backstage like I owned the place, and enjoyed the backslapping and free champagne that was offered for my apparent electrical miracle! Mr. Royce wrote out a voucher for me and my three friends to enjoy a free steak dinner the following day at the finest restaurant in town, over at the Ambassador Grill at Park & 51st Street.

After the show, Brooksie found me still backstage, and was breathing heavily

from the final number of the show. She grabbed my hand and drug me back toward the dressing rooms, and said that it would only take a few minutes to change into her "street clothes", which were certainly of much higher quality than most women would find themselves in back in Kansas.

Brooksie and four of her friends (two were other dancers from the show) soon had my friends and I sitting around a table in about the wildest place I had ever been in. In the backroom of this "club" much alcohol was served, and it was soon very apparent that Brooksie had quite a tolerance for Gin. It was called "Bathtub" Gin back in those days, not because it was made in a bathtub, but because that is where it was usually "watered down" such that a person could stand to drink it! Not being in the habit of drink, this professor was soon "three sheets to the wind". I remember Brooksie trying to teach me some Fox Trot dance steps, but not a lot else.

When I awakened, the next morning, I was lying on a couch, fully-clothed, but also fully ruffled from the night before. I had a splitting headache, and someone was saying, "Professor, Oh Professor, Hello Professor. Here are some aspirin. That should help that giant brain of yours," said Brooksie, who had appeared from somewhere, and was just as happy and chipper as if she hadn't had one drop of drink the night before!

That was the beginning of a 20 year relationship, at least that is what I would call it, which caused me more pain than about anything imaginable, yet also caused me to grow emotionally to become the somewhat jaded older gentleman that sets down these words.

Brooksie and I would spend quite a bit of time together in the coming months. She loved to hear about technical things and called me her, "Little Professor". We would visit interesting places around NYC, and Brooksie was determined to "take the hayseed out of me, one way or another." I learned much from Brooksie about how the affluent conducted themselves and their affairs, back in the day. We dined at the finest establishments, and crawled through some of the most outlandish speakeasies in the city. We drank too much, spent too much, and greatly enjoyed one another's company.

In fact, I was so "taken" by Brooksie, that I crafted a special lamp for her that was used on the set of one of her early movies, which was shot over on Long Island. I called the lamp, the "Brooksie Lamp", and

actually made two of them for her. (The first got broken in a fight with some other man when it got thrown across the room.) To this day, I keep my copy of the Brooksie Lamp beside my bed, along with a small bottle of her favorite perfume (Shalimar), which she gave me to remember her by, a long, long time ago.

Brooksie and I would see each other from time to time throughout the late '20s, the terrible '30s, during which time she moved back to Kansas for awhile, and into the 1940s, when she moved back to NYC. When we would first meet again, after months or years apart, it was as though I was the very love of her life. Yet, after a few hours, or days, she would become bored with me, grow restless and change venues without the slightest indication of what shortcomings in character that I possessed, that could not allow her to stay with me for any length of time.

Nonetheless, we had many, many adventures together. I shall write about some of them in a future article in more detail, but suffice it to say that she was brave enough to fly with me in my Old Jenny airplane, which is saying a lot about that little lady. We took great delight in "disappearing from the world", as she called it. It didn't seem to matter what her commitments were to others, when Brooksie was in the mood for adventure, she took full advantage of the opportunity! My favorite memory of Brooksie was when we crash-landed in a farmer's field in Missouri, and walked away, unscathed, down a country lane, all the way into a small, nearby town!

It was years later, when I learned that Brooksie's pattern of behavior was like that, and every single lover she had was eventually treated in a similar manner. As they say, 'Tis better to have loved, and lost, than never to have loved at all, but then they didn't love Brooksie like I did.



