

brigitte

Mack Larue, the doorman, is leaning against the front of the Club 500. The green and red neon aurora of Bourbon Street is flickering across his face. His hands are in his overcoat pockets, his collar turned up against the midnight chill. He is smiling and relaxed, and he does not have to wind out a spiel to get the tourists inside because the Sensation of New Orleans is upstairs and she is pulling them in. A couple stops to ask, "Is Linda dancing tonight?" and Mack nods and opens the door.

Inside the owner, Frank Caressi, is sitting at the front bar, watching the customers. The place is not very big, but it is cavernous by Bourbon Street standards. There are rows of trestle tables stretched out like morgue slabs in front of the stage. In the rear and to the sides, the booths march back in tight, serried ranks. The chairs are jammed together, and there is just enough room on the narrow shelf in front for a drink and an ashtray.

Tinny recorded music is filling the drafty room, and the intermission dancer, Lisa, is moving listlessly around the stage, doing her best to imitate dancing and hoping someone will appreciate the effort. She is a tall doll, and the panels of her blue dress are floating out to reveal a lot of flesh, which is the whole purpose of the operation.

2.

Upstairs, which is through the service bar and up a flight of worn carpeted stairs, is Linda's dressing room. There are three or four people there, sometimes people you would not expect. Like tonight. There are--besides Linda, the Negro maid and Eddie Muller, Linda's hairdresser--a news caster from the television station, Bob Jones, and his date who is a psychiatric nurse. As on almost every night between acts, Linda Brigette is holding court for the people who like to come and talk with her.

Linda is sitting at her dressing table, wearing her between acts uniform, which is a little more than she wears onstage. It is a brief, red dressing gown, which comes down to about mid-thigh when she is standing and rises considerably above that when she is seated. She is working with her nails to cover up the nervousness she feels when she is talking to people.

"I know what you mean about being self-conscious," she says. "I'm bashful. You think that's funny. But after all this time, I have an inferiority complex. When I first started out...well, you know...stripping, I guess I quit a jillion times before I ever got started. Until I got used to it, I'd call up my agent and tell him my Mother was dying or something, so I didn't have to go on. I'd never done any dancing before, and I would have to get loaded before I got up there."

3.

Linda goes on talking, and Bob breaks in with a story, and Corinne, the psychiatric nurse, sits on the studio couch and listens as if she is recording all of this for the master's thesis she is writing. Linda is more communicative than she has been for several weeks since the Big Scandal of New Orleans broke. Her concern is wearing off, because Governor McKeithen has granted her pardon and she is free of legal taint and won't have to go to jail.

"How did I feel when they arrested me?" She puts the question back in the air and thinks about it. "I was scared. Just very scared.....really scared. It was the first time they'd gotten me on a state charge. Oh, yes, I'd been arrested a jillion times before. But all of them city charges, and they'd take us down to city court. Later, the charges would be thrown out and nothing would be done about it. But this was the first time I'd been booked. You know, the whole bit. The booking and the fingerprints. And then they put me in a cell with two other girls I didn't talk to. They kept us there for three hours, and we didn't talk the whole time."

She kept talking, answering questions, this doll-like woman with the quiet, meaningful eyes and fluttering fingers, and it was hard to imagine that she was the scarlet creature who had the puritans in full cry.

4.

But it was and is. Linda Brigette. The Bourbon Street stripper who set New Orleans and a lot of Louisiana on its moral ear. The tiny doll who was arrested for lewd and obscene dancing, who was reprieved four times by the Governor of Louisiana and finally was granted a full and unequivocal pardon.

When the New Orleans newspapers stepped into the case with a heavy editorial foot late this summer, none but the city's racket-busting District Attorney, Jim Garrison, came galloping to her rescue. Linda's pardon, he declaimed, was all his own doing. Furthermore, he said, it would be the worst part of justice to put the girl in jail.

The scandal raged for weeks, and the charges flew like bent bullets in a shooting gallery. Garrison's office had arrested, prosecuted and convicted Linda two years before. Now it was her champion, and the Metropolitan Crime Commission saw very rank implications in the switch about. Aaron Kohn, the commission's director, spoke darkly of organized crime. In a shrill last minute appeal to Governor McKeithen, Kohn warned the Governor he would be "thumbing his nose at the dedicated efforts of our police vice squad" if he let the little dancer off the hook. But the hook was unlatched and Linda was freed of legal clutches the next day.

Yet, the battle provoked by such a small, exotic dancer, was mammoth, and it ended the honeymoon between Garrison and the Crime Commission. Jim Garrison is a big, powerful man, and that extends to his physique as well as his politics. In the face of the Crime Commission's taunts, he drew himself up to his six-foot-and-a-half-foot height, dusted off his rhetoric and answered:

"At no time did any racketeer or person remotely connected with organized crime approach me in this matter. Consequently, unless I myself am now suddenly regarded as a secret don in the Mafia, or as the cat's paw of the eastern mobs, it is a little hard to see just how organized crime is back of my effort to save an unjustly convicted mother of small children from a jail sentence."

Such a declaration sent something more than muted laughter ringing down the streets and alleyways of New Orleans, especially coming from the man who bloodied his spurs on the Bourbon Street Barons and won a national reputation as the moralists' Don Quixote. It was an improvident stance for a politician, and unbelievable for those who do not know Big Jim. There must, his critics shouted, be something unsavory behind all this.

"Nuts," says Larry LaMarca. "Garrison just realized somebody in his office goofed. And he was a big enough man to make it right."

6.

LaMarca is sitting at the bar of the Gunga Den, one of Bourbon Street's oldest watering holes. He is drinking what he usually drinks, which is Coca-Cola, and he is talking quickly and with passion.

"That's the Italian in me," he says. "I get awful mad at times, and I got good and mad when they started picking on Linda. It was politics, because I'd told off a couple of Garrison's assistants. The night they pulled the raid, they told the cops: 'Whoever gets the Gunga Den gets a steak dinner.'"

LaMarca is a fourteen carat contradiction in a city of superb contradictions. He is big bear of a man, dark and looking like he would be double tough, which he can be in the full flush of Latin anger. He is the proprietor of the Gunga Den, a bar which features a continuous showing of unadorned females. In private life, he is a pretty fair amateur artist, an aspiring writer, and the husband of Linda Brigette, whose real name is Georgia Lambert LaMarca.

"Go talk to Linda," he orders. "She can do all right talking for herself. She hasn't got all the brains in the world, but there's one thing you'll find. She ain't no phony."

And she ain't. She is a quiet, diffident mass of ambivalences. As a person, she expresses what Bourbon Street and the flesh shows of New Orleans have become. It is a kind of hypocrisy in reverse with a great show of sin behind which there lurks a quantity of self-conscious rectitude.

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"I do this for a living," she says. "I do it because I want to be in show business. I'd love to be a singer, but my voice is too Southern. I'm going to talk in my next act, and I hate to do it because I have a Southern accent."

That sort of candor can get a girl drummed out of the ranks of female performers; especially the ranks of strippers, whose stars invariably profess a love for literature, a yen for zen, and a personal speaking acquaintance with William Shakespeare. It is, without pretension, characteristic of the no-holds-barred honesty of a beautiful, perfectly formed woman who strips for a living and hates everything but the security it produces.

"I want to get more famous and make more money" is the blunt way she describes her farthest ambition. "I want to get another act and go to Las Vegas. If I go over there, I'll love it. And if I don't go over, I won't like it. But I want to get to the top.

"When I met Larry, he made me a feature act. And then when he wanted me to marry him, he asked me to quit. He said he would marry me if I quit dancing. I told him he'd have a long time to wait."

She reflected, as she often does, by putting an index fingernail to her mouth and pressing it against a front tooth.

"If I get to the top," she said, "I might quit."

8.

The top is not too far away. On Bourbon Street, where stripping is a tough, competitive business, she is the reigning queen and acknowledged aristocrat of the flesh show set. Her looks, her act and the miles of publicity she has received have put her there. On the exotic salary scale, she is half way up a ladder where the top rung carries a price tag of \$3,000 a week. It is not bad take home pay for a country girl who was a ninth grade dropout, who ran away from home when she was fourteen, invaded the sin bins and emerged as unscathed as she is wealthy.

Her early life is such a classic of the kind that it is trite. As she is asked and tells about it, the story emerges at times in a stacatto rush of machine-gunned words. ("I was born in Winnsboro, Louisiana. My father was in business, sort of. He had a farm. My mother died when I was ten, and my grandmother raised me. I had three sisters and a brother. We were poor...we were very poor.") There, she seems to indicate, are the things you obviously want to know, and she tosses them out as if to say: "Here they are, so what?" In other recollections, there is evident pain. ("I've forgotten about those things. I've covered it up. I don't like to think about them. They're gone.")

To listen to Linda is to hear recited in the flesh a startling parallel to the young life story of another American beauty whose name was Norma Jean Baker. In time, it comes to you that there is a strong kindredness among the girls whose beauty and drive lift them out of poverty and set them, however nervously, in the public eye.



9.

Like Norma Jean, Linda was half orphaned. Her mother died of cancer at 27. From the age of 10, Georgia Lambert was buffeted between the earthy country qualities of a kind, old-fashioned grandmother and the hell-raising strictures of a father who could scream about morality but could never quite make a decent living. ("He was very strict. Everywhere I went, he'd send one of my sisters with me.")

Four years of that was enough and, at fourteen, grown to her full four feet, eleven inches, Georgia Lambert wanted to get away. She got away in the normal, often unhappy manner. She ran away and married. Her bridegroom was a good looking, 19-year-old grocery store clerk from Natchez, Mississippi, an old town on the Mississippi River. To Linda, it glittered with big town promise. ("I got married to go to the city. Isn't that a joke?") She was not quite fifteen. ("We got along real well until I got pregnant. It scared him, I guess, and I guess it scared me.")

Her husband joined the Air Force before their son was born, and the frightened, increasingly alienated couple remained married through five more years and another boy. In the meantime, Georgia moved to Baton Rouge, which is similar to many small-town state capitals where motherhood is flourished, sin is condemned, and the law makers engage in a variety of after-hours pastimes. She worked for a while as a movie house cashier until, needing more money, she took a job waiting on tables at a favorite haunt of legislators, the Candlelight Inn.

10.

"They had shows there. You know, shows. Strip shows. I saw Candy Barr there, the real Candy Barr, and she was my ideal. I've never seen a girl built better than she was. One of the reasons I started dancing was that she was my ideal. I guess Candy would try anything, and she had real stuff or she didn't care, and it was too bad she went to jail, but they say she's getting along fine now.

"The band leader and his wife were friends of mine at the Candlelight, and they talked to me about dancing...you know, stripping...I was eighteen by then, and the money was better than I was making waiting on tables, and it was a chance to get around. They called an agent in St. Louis who had several clients he booked, like on a circuit. You know, clubs and theaters. But I never liked the theaters because, to me, they were cheap. They'd whistle and yell and laugh, and I guess I've walked off the stage a jillion times because I'm not putting on a comedy act.

"The first place he started me was Springfield, Illinois, and it was a real joint. I'd get loaded because it was easier to get up there drunk, and sometimes I'd quit for days. It took me a few jobs before I really got to like it, and the first place nearly stopped me. You had to sit with the customers between shows and B-drink. After the first two jobs, I wouldn't work in a place where I had to mix with the customers, and I never have again.

11.

I'm putting on an act, and if I have to make my living pressuring men to buy drinks, you can have it.

"Anyway, I was on the road for seven or eight months. I went from Springfield to Kansas City to Evansville, Indiana, Louisville, Detroit, back to St. Louis and then to Newporte, Kentucky. I came to New Orleans from Newporte."

By then, Georgia Lambert had changed her name to Linda Brigette, the first name from the song she uses as a theme, and the last from Brigette Bardot. Her husband was following her on the circuit, objecting to her dancing and finding himself confronted by the iron, imperious stubbornness which is such a sharp contradiction in the nature of a shy, often painfully insecure girl.

"I didn't want to come here," she remembers of New Orleans. "I'd heard so many bad things about it. I'd heard how rough it was and all. They had mixing at the time, you know, B-drinking, and I was scared of coming here. The agent said, 'Just two weeks. It's just two weeks. Go on.' So I came, and I did six shows a night. It was sort of a rock 'n roll number, different from a regular strip. I was here for two weeks, and I gave notice."

It was one of the few times Linda Brigette was refused what she wanted. She was dancing in the gaudy heart of Bourbon Street at Larry LaMarca's place, the Gunga Den, and the big, tough genial bear would not let her go.

12.

Outwardly, he said what he believed, which was that Linda had the potential of a "feature," and he had the experience to help her push above the run of the \$125-a-week runway dolls. Inwardly, there was something a great deal more. He felt, as most men do, protective about that disarmingly honest little woman whose presence oftentimes male audiences into abject silence. He was beginning to fall in love with her, and it was a relationship which, like so many apparent incongruities, is made in whatever heaven exists for people who get married.

Larry is a persuasive man, and Linda decided to stay. They began working on routines and experimenting with hair colors (she is a natural dark blonde with intensely green-hazel eyes), costumes, posters and promotion. Early in the development period, Linda underwent one of those operations which uplift girls in her profession. Besides a variety of hair dyes, it was the only synthetic aid she ever used. People often accuse her of having had a nose job, but the straight, thin accent to her magnificent face was a natural gift.

Under Larry's direction, Linda perfected the ancient art Salome used on John the Baptist, and over which a lot of men have lost their heads. About four years ago, they thought up the angle which shot her far above the Bourbon Street herd and wound up landing her in jail on two obscenity raps.

"Larry featured me at the Gunga Den, and I did the same act for a long time. I had to get music and a wardrobe--and my wardrobe had to be better than the other girls. Larry and I planned the act--wrote it down--the way I rehearsed it. But it came out different, entirely different, when I got onstage."

She foreswears playing to the audience, and it is true she does not use the direct, flirting words and glances which many girls employ. Like all good performers, she responds to an audience--to the people sitting out there, and they respond to her.

"I can't rehearse. I never could. But I can always work when there are people out there, and I always do the same show whether there are twenty people or three hundred people."

The show she began performing four years ago was a sensation, even to the denizens of the French Quarter, where pretended jade is not a kind of synthetic jewelry. It is a strip, begun in the traditional way, which culminates on a couch with Linda doing what she later told the judge are simply jazz breathing exercises. Those calisthenics are climaxed by a piercing scream, and what she told the court about that scream will stand as a legal milestone on how to shatter a cross-examining district attorney. The record looks like this:

Prosecuter: Now, Miss Brigette, this scream at the end of your act. Does it not have sexual significance?

14.

Miss Bridgeet: No, it's just a way to end the act. They had to have a signal on where to put out the lights, so we used the scream.

Prosecutor: And you contend it has no sexual significance?

Miss Brigitte: That's right. I don't scream during sexual intercourse. I don't believe most people do. Do you?

The shrilly moral, well publicized cleanup drive which put Linda in jail was one of those clamoring political whims which Bourbon Street has learned to expect. The police and a succession of District Attorneys have been raiding the streets off and on for years, and there are those who say with undisguised jaundice and contempt that Bourbon Street is an easier target than other more difficult problems. New Orleans is a welter of unchecked violence. Armed robberies are rife, and the number of homicides, most of them unsolved, has jumped thirty per cent in less than a year. When things get tough and the heat is on, the cynics say, the authorities raid Bourbon Street. It is a neat diversionary tactic.

Three years ago, Linda was doing the couch act at the Gunga Den when the DA's men walked in and ordered her off to jail. There were forty or so other dancers and night club operators picked up that night, charged with violating the state's amorphous obscenity laws, but Linda was the only one who finally went to trial.

15.

The rage to put her in jail was intense, led by the righteous anger of the Metropolitan Crime Commission, which talks and talks about organized crime but never seems to produce anything more tangible than billowing rhetoric blown across the front pages.

Against the noisy background of moralistic preachments and shouted charges, the real reason she ever went to trial is very funny. It was, in fact, the exclusive fault of her husband, Larry LaMarca.

"I screwed up," Larry admits. "Everybody else was let off because there wasn't much case, but I wanted to go to trial so we could beat the thing and be through with it. There was a good judge on the bench then, a guy I thought was honest, so I said, 'What the hell, let's go to court and this this thing over with.'"

Whereupon one of those poisoned darts of fate punctured the plan. The "good" judge died and was replaced by a man who had felt the sting of Larry LaMarca's Italian anger.

"We never had a chance," Larry contends. "Linda was convicted before she ever went to court, and the way they justified the jail sentence was a crime. Before she was sentenced, they came and picked her up again on the same charge, so the judge gave her thirty days, which just doesn't happen very often. When she came up on the second charge, it was cut and dried because of the first one. The next judge gave her another thirty days."

The convictions and the appeals prompted a lot of publicity which, while perhaps hard on the nervous system, may not have been so bad for business. Linda moved down to Frank Caressi's Club 500, where she is now the monarch of the street, while the wheels of justice ground inexorably against her. The Supreme Court turned down one appeal, and the Court of Appeals another. Meanwhile, she was spared from jail by a succession of stay orders from the hand of Governor John J. McKeithen. The last one arrived like the cavalry, in the very nick of time.

By that time, DA Jim Garrison had found the error of his ways and decided Linda was an unjustly accused mother whose incarceration would be a blot upon the conscience of Orleans Parish. His office acted gallantly in her behalf, officially pleading her innocence before the State Pardon Board. While the appeal was pending, the third stay of execution expired.

Larry and Linda were at home that morning, pursuing their divergent morning happinesses in the handsome suburban home they own near the shores of Lake Pontchartrain. Larry was sitting beside the pool, painting, and Linda was sleeping, which she usually does until two every afternoon. There was a knock at the front door, and the housekeeper went to answer. A few steps later she was at the pool.

"Mr. LaMarca," she said, "it's the sheriff."



17.

The deputies were fidgeting on the doorstep, and their message was succinct. Linda's stay was expiring that evening, and they had a cell waiting for her. The air turned quickly and unmistakably blue, because Larry LaMarca was damned if his wife was going to jail. He got his lawyer on the telephone, and that afternoon, the stay of execution was delivered from the Governor's office in Baton Rouge by taxi cab. The newspapers made a lot of the taxi-delivered reprieve when the Great Scandal broke, but Larry says:

"What the hell, it was the only way to get it there in time."

For two weeks, the press was filled with the saga of Linda's impending pardon. The Pardon Board voted to excuse her, but the decision was not unanimous because the trial judges dissented. New Orleans' Metropolitan Crime Commission issued daily statements, importuning the Governor to send the girl to jail, and DA Garrison issued equally strident harrangues, pummeling the Crime Commission and its gadfly director, Aaron Kohn. In the end, the Governor did what he said he would never do. He granted a pardon without a unanimous recommendation from the Pardon Board. He did it, he said, because of the DA's direct intervention. Garrison, his critics wanted everyone to note, was the only politician of prominence who supported the Governor when he ran for office against New Orleans popular former mayor, Chop Morrison.

The city buzzed with the story, and people of less stout stuff might have run for cover. Not Linda. When the Press Club of New Orleans recently staged its annual Gridiron Show, a worthy relative of the Washington politico roast, Linda Brigitte was one of the featured performers. She mounted the stage in the shimmering silver sequined dress which makes her look so much like your daughter at her first recital, walked across the stage and bumped headlong into an actor portraying Governor McKeithen.

"Oh, pardon me," she said, in the good, broad manner of the old burlesque routine.

"Certainly," said the portrayer of the Governor, and the 1,500 people in the audience, including McKeithen, himself, broke up.

Later that evening, Linda met her benefactor for the first time. They were introduced in the Press Club on Chartres Street, but it was Mrs. McKeithen who stole the thunder in this epoch meeting.

"Linda," she said, "you may not realize this, but you and I are both from the same town. My uncle was Dr. Funderburk from Winnsboro, and he brought you into the world."

The Governor, plainly startled, turned to his wife.

"Thank God," he said, "now I've got a reason for that pardon."