

There's Only One

Brooks Brothers



OUTFITTING PRESIDENTS of the U. S. has been almost-routine business during much of the 132-year history of Brooks Brothers, oldest and most famous clothing store in America.

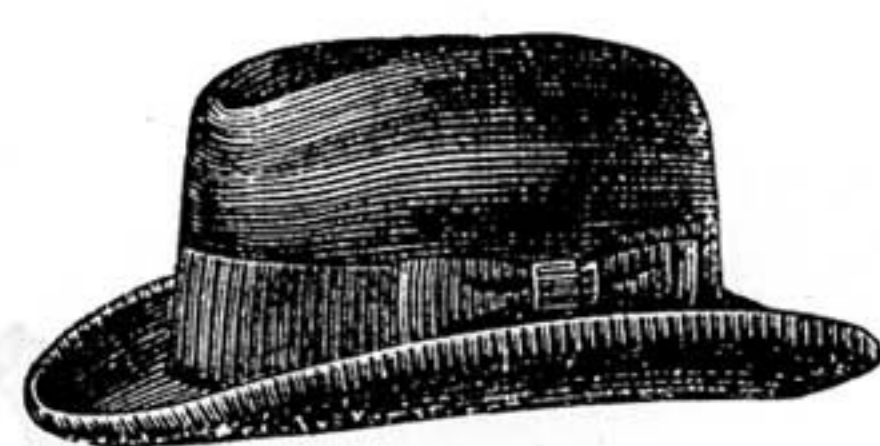
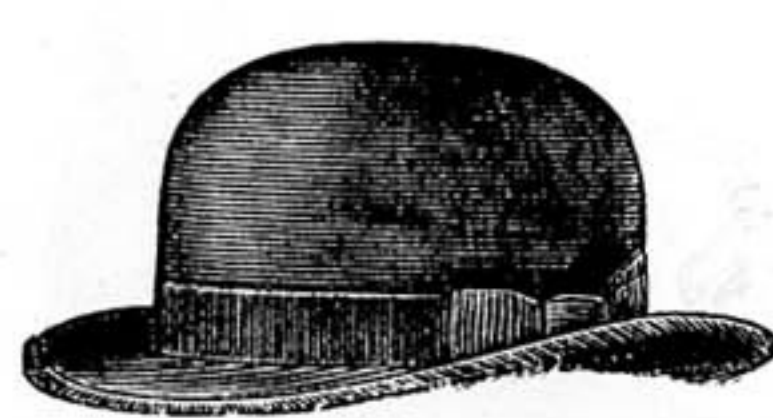
When Abraham Lincoln was shot as he sat in a box of Ford's Theater in Washington, he was wearing a new Prince Albert coat, waistcoat, trousers, and overcoat just delivered to him by the New York firm. When Ulysses S. Grant, Woodrow Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt took their oaths of office, they were attired in new suits fitted by Brooks. When Franklin D. Roosevelt met Churchill and Stalin at Yalta in 1945, the great Navy cape he wore on the 6,000-mile air-sea journey carried the Brooks label.

Founded in 1818 when Manhattan was a seacoast town of less



than 125,000 population, the store has kept some of the country's (and the world's) most noted personages in shoes, socks, pajamas, shirts, ties, hats, and suits. And some—their identity is a well-kept secret—in nightshirts and tasseled caps!

Diplomats and prize fighters, dukes and bankers, Cabinet members and theatrical luminaries stroll every day through the ten-story building on Madison Avenue. The sight of Secretary of State Dean Acheson trying on a new overcoat, or Clārck Gable testing a new pair of shoes, or the Duke of Windsor undecided between a red or green dressing gown causes scarcely a flurry. The reason is simply that the store itself is a national legend, as noted in its own right as any of its patrons.



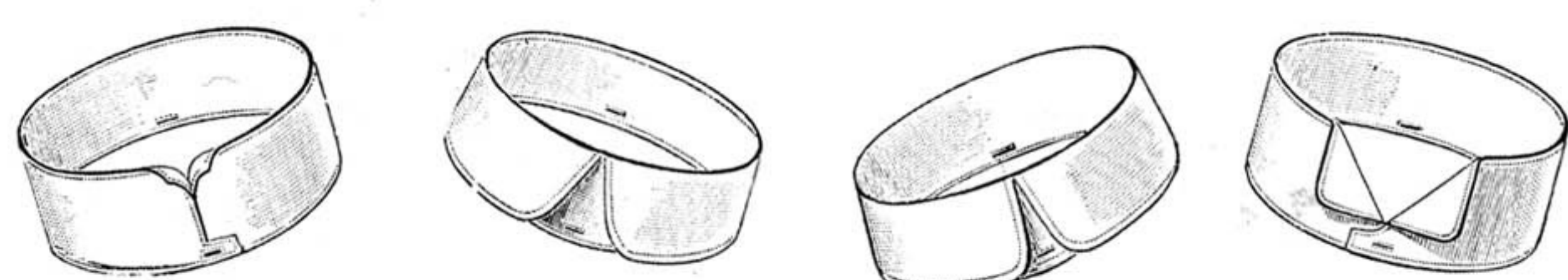
Brooks straddles the nation with two New York stores, branches in Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and a new one opening this month in Chicago. It has its own clothing factory in Brooklyn, a shirt factory in Paterson, N. J., and workrooms on its upper floors where are manufactured its own neckwear, belts, and assorted luggage.

Customers' loyalty to Brooks is rock-ribbed and unswerving. Successive generations of Morgans, Goulds, and Vanderbilts went to school in the store's "prep" fashions, got married in its striped trousers, and presided at board meetings in its business suits.

The firm boasts that no store in the world can match its all-time record for continuous patronage by an individual. John R. Voorhis, for years a Grand Sachem of Tam-



many Hall, got his first long trousers at Brooks when he was ten and never bought a suit anywhere else until he died at 102.



Brooks rewards this loyalty with an equally unswerving devotion to the tradition which has made the establishment an institution. In two of its stores, suits are still piled on long tables as they were in all clothing stores a half-century ago. By far the best individual seller is still the "No. 1 sack suit," a straight-hanging model with no padding in the shoulders or stiffening in the lapels. The style hasn't changed in more than 40 years.

The classic shirt with the button-down collar is still available in pull-over style, although most stores discarded the model long ago. Anybody who wants a nightshirt can get one in a hurry from patterns still carried in stock.

Brooks' clients keep a wary eye on fluctuations of fashion, promptly notifying the management if it steps out of line. One year the store finally got around to eliminating the button behind the collar of the white shirt, originally put there to keep the old-style necktie in place. Old-line patrons quickly spotted the irregularity and wrote indignant letters. Just as promptly, the buttons were replaced for those customers who wanted them.

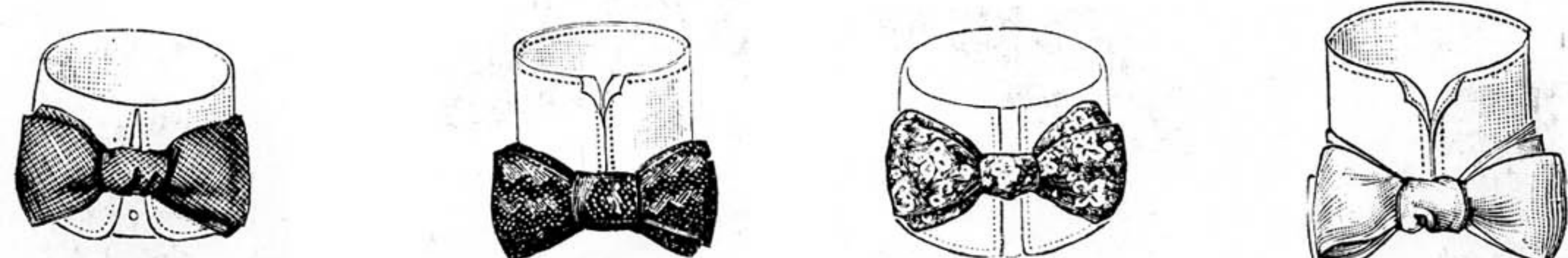
On the other hand, the store is



just as emphatic in its refusal to keep pace with current sartorial fads. Not long ago one of its salesmen showed up for work wearing a hand-painted tie. He was taken to task in the next issue of the Brooks house organ.

“Asked if it were compulsory,” the editor wrote, “the offender replied that a friend gave it to him for Christmas. This did not seem to us to be a complete answer, but we let it go. Perhaps there is nothing to worry about.”

This preoccupation with correctness has continued undiminished throughout the shop’s history, surmounting some distressing moments. John Brooks, son of the founder, had a particularly trying time for nearly three years, caused by no less distinguished a patron than Honest Abe himself.



In 1869, the store moved uptown to Union Square, where Brooks’ paneled office overlooked a statue of Lincoln which had just been set up. The senior partner was dismayed to note that Lincoln’s trousers flopped around his ankles. Every time Brooks looked out the window, his eyes fell upon Lincoln’s metallic sloppiness.

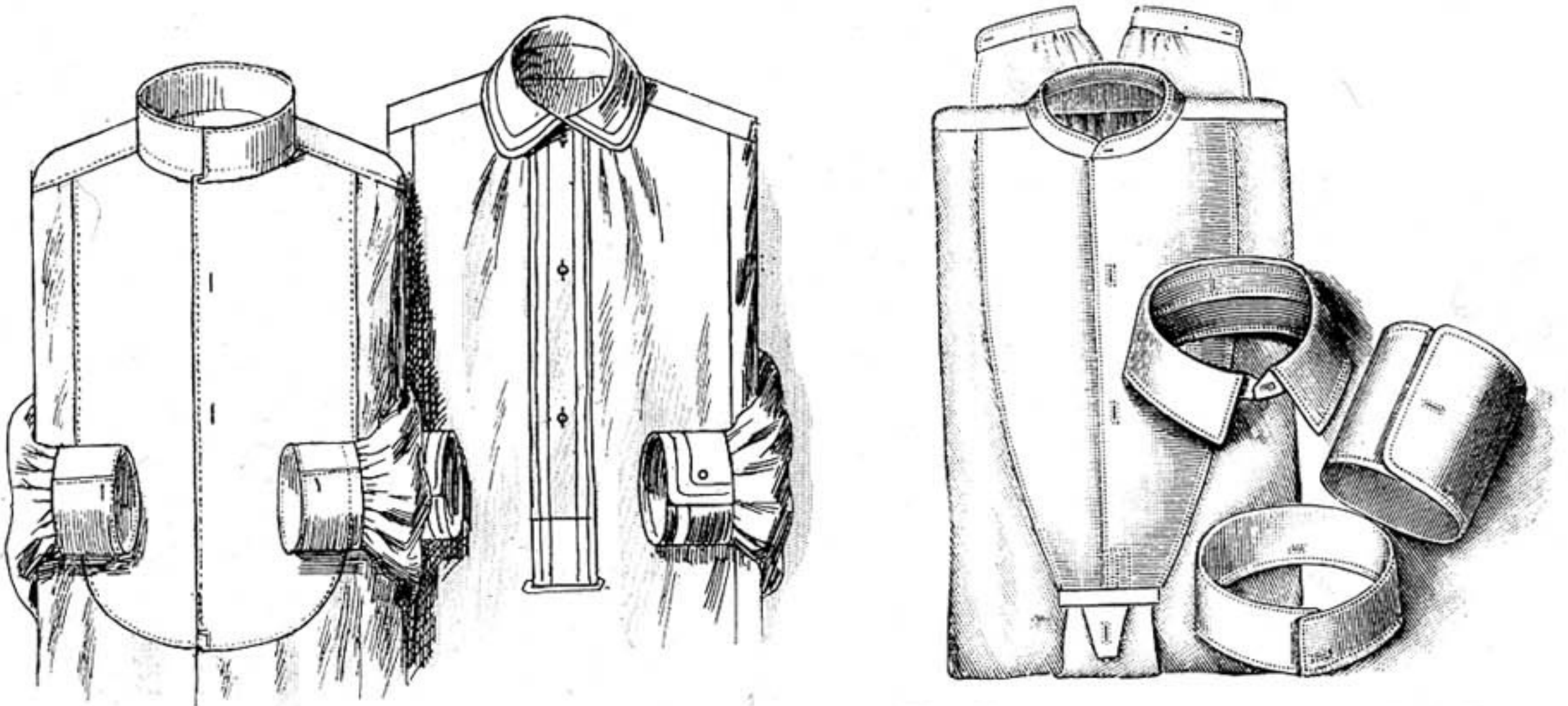
One evening in 1872, a heavy fog descended on the city. Next morning, New Yorkers got a severe jolt when they saw the statue. During the night Lincoln had made an about-face, turning his back to the



Brooks store. When asked about the phenomenon, old John Brooks stared vacantly into space.

But if one generation of Brookses had trouble with a statue, the current one has been luckier. Winthrop Holley Brooks, fourth-generation descendant of the founder and board chairman of the store, inspected all the photographs he could find of the statue of F.D.R., unveiled several years ago in London's Grosvenor Square. Roosevelt was sculptured in the Navy cape, and Mr. Brooks happily reports that he was immensely pleased.

"The lines of the cape, particularly in the back, flow fully and evenly," he says.



BROOKS TRIES to cultivate a "for men only" atmosphere, but it never quite succeeds. Women gaily ignore it and romp through masculine pastures. Frequently, fashions created for men have been seized upon by women, disconcerting the store no end.

The ladies insist on buying men's silk shorts, robes, slacks, shirts, and even boys' parkas for winter wear. Katharine Hepburn is a frequent visitor in the slacks department, and Marlene Dietrich is partial to the dressing gowns. Billie Burke, Katharine Cornell, and Tallulah Bankhead drop by whenever they

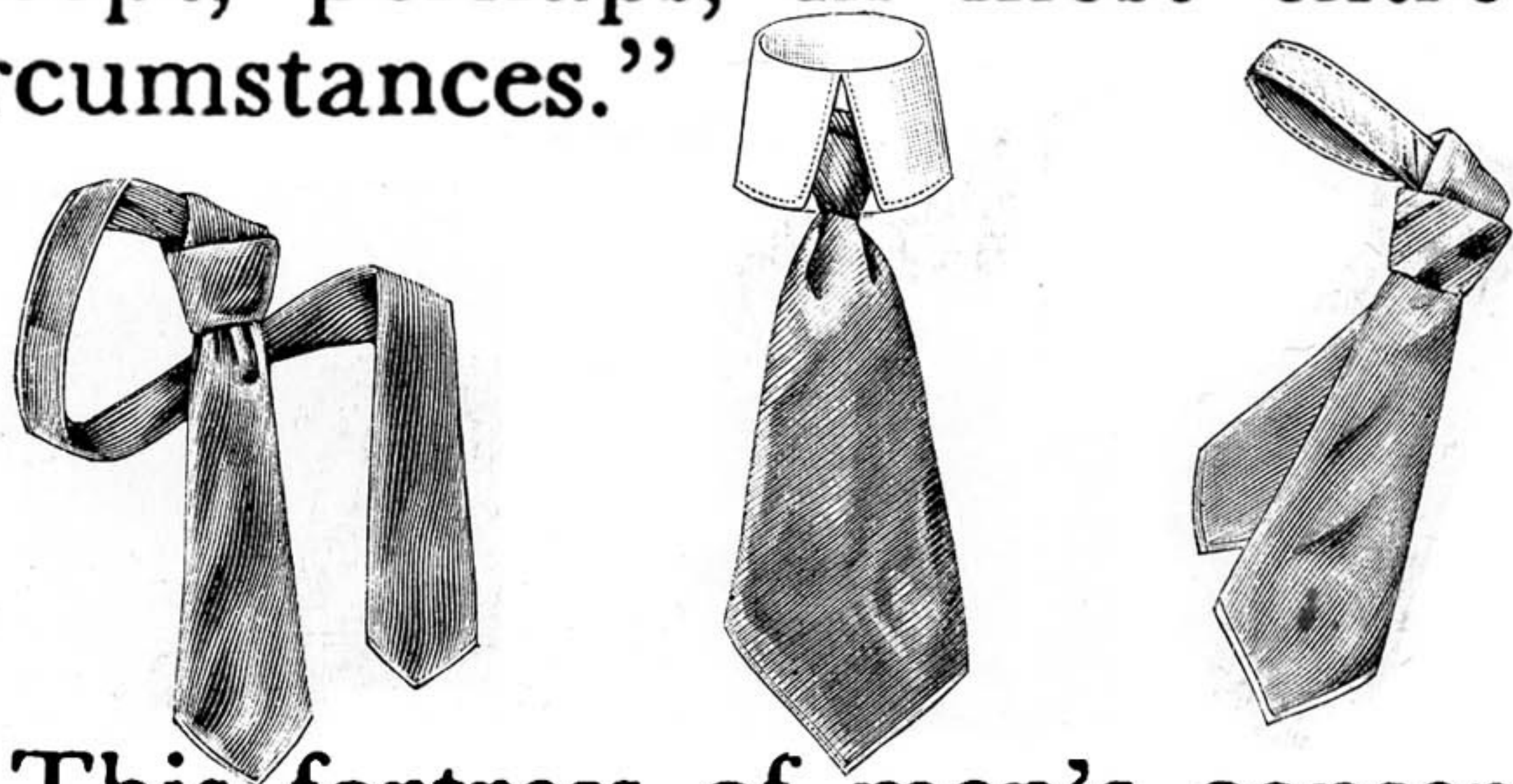


are in town.

For years Brooks had carried a line of salmon-pink shirts for men. Suddenly they struck female fancies and women started borrowing them from their brothers', fathers', and husbands' closets. Then the women who had no males to borrow from invaded Brooks. The store held out for a while but surrender was inevitable. It put out a line of pink shirts for women.

Everyone in the store worried about the situation until it became apparent that Brooks' reputation for conservatism was not going to be damaged. One young woman wrote: "Please send me one of your famous pink shirts. I wear a size 10 dress. I promise to leave the collar open and tuck the tail in."

Another sent her order directly to John C. Wood, president of the store, telling him: "I assure you, Mr. Wood, that the shirt will not be worn haphazardly at any time except, perhaps, in most extreme circumstances."



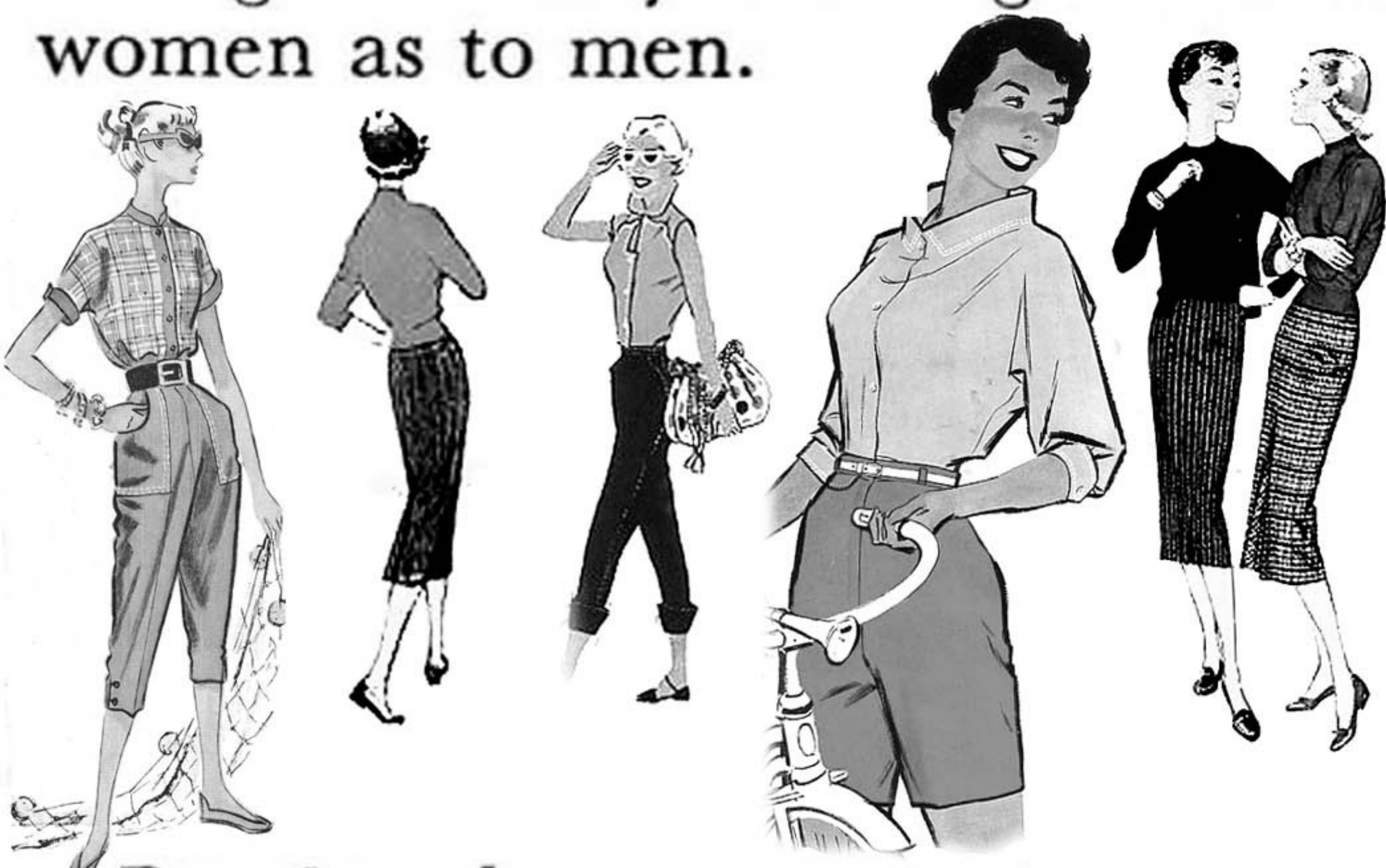
This fortress of men's conservative fashions was also responsible for the adoption by women of the modern trunk-style bathing suits. It happened this way:

Back in the early 1920s, a wealthy man-about-New York invited the chorus of a Broadway musical for a cruise on his yacht. It was a fine



summer day and the girls wanted to go swimming, but had no suits. Their host dispatched a crewman to Brooks to buy a couple of dozen men's bathing suits, trunks and tops.

It was just a gag, but the girls were delighted. They continued to wear them after the cruise. Word got about, and soon Brooks was selling as many bathing suits to women as to men.



Brooks salesmen are career men. There are a half-dozen around who have been with the establishment for 50 years, and fully ten per cent of the 800 employees are members of the Quarter Century Club. The late Horatio Kiernan's 67 years of continuous service is the record to date, followed by the late Frederick Webb, who worked for 65. There have been 15 pairs of fathers and sons in the firm, ten sets of brothers, two sets of three brothers each, and seven pairs of sisters.

Many of the salesmen have outfitted successive members of the same family. It's not uncommon for a customer to bring in his son to get a prep-school wardrobe from the same gentleman who outfitted the father 20 years before.

Each salesman has his own ce-



lebrities who wouldn't think of buying from anyone else. Gable called long-distance from California, waited until William Lyons of the Custom Department was disengaged, and ordered eight suits, four sport coats, and 14 pairs of trousers just before his marriage to the former Lady Ashley. Federal Judge Harold Medina, who presided at the trial of the 11 top U. S. Communists last year, also is a staunch Lyons man.



This friendliness between store and customer sometimes takes odd turns. Nobody is perturbed when the shop hears from a client many years after a sale has been consummated. One man brought in a 30-year-old derby to be renovated. He wandered through the hat department, peering intently at each salesman. Finally he hailed one.

"You're the man who sold me this derby when I was demobilized back in 1919," he said. "Have it spruced up a bit, won't you?"

The story of this fabulous establishment began in April, 1818, when Henry Sands Brooks, then at the mature age of 46, opened the first store at Catharine and Cherry Streets with a capital investment of \$17,000. Brooks immediately struck up a brisk trade with seafaring men who frequented that portion of the city.

Records of the house show that



while old Henry broke with tradition on almost every score when he pioneered in the clothing trade, there was one custom of the times that he followed religiously. Whenever an able seaman purchased an outfit, Brooks, like all other clothing merchants, would reach behind the counter and offer him a deep draught of rum—on the house.

Henry Brooks died in 1833 and the store, now fabulously successful, passed to the control of his five sons, Henry, Daniel H., John, Elisha, and Edward S., the last four of whom adopted the name Brooks Brothers in 1850.



In 1858 the firm opened a branch at Broadway and Grand Street, and while the downtown building continued to operate until 1874, the new home became 'the principal place of business. The cream of the Union Army during the Civil War had their uniforms made at Brooks, among them Generals Grant, Sheridan, Hooker, and Sherman. But undoubtedly the most illustrious customer was Lincoln, for whom Brooks made, among other things, an overcoat for his Second Inaugural. On the quilted lining was an embroidered eagle holding in its beak a pennant inscribed "One Country, One Destiny."

The march uptown continued with successive stores, until 1915, when the main store's present loca-



tion was selected at Madison and 44th Street.

In March, 1946, the firm was bought outright by Julius Garfinkel & Co., the Washington specialty store. It was a tense moment for Brooks customers, but reassurances came swiftly from Winthrop Brooks and John C. Wood, who was installed as president. Mr. Brooks announced that the store's hallowed traditions would remain intact. And Mr. Wood added that he would sooner be seen wearing a zoot suit on Times Square than tamper with Brooks policies.

"They call us conservative," Wood declares, "but we think that our styles are simply lacking the bizarre. We deal in what a man should wear, not what some women think he should wear."



Brooks firmly believes that the old is as new as tomorrow, providing it is correct. Tyrone Power, the film star, found this out when he was preparing for his role in *The Razor's Edge*. He dropped in to see Mr. Brooks and asked if the store had some photographs which would give his studio's tailors an idea of what the correctly dressed man wore in 1914. Mr. Brooks showed him a picture on the office wall of Yale University's famed Whiffenpoof singing club, taken about that time. Power was delighted; the clothes were just what he needed.



“All right, young man,” Mr. Brooks told the actor as he led him to the door. “Take the elevator to the second floor, see one of our salesmen there, and buy our No. 1 sack suit. That’s what all of us have on in that picture, and it’s still sold at Brooks.”

Coronet

September, 1950

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